

**A Context of “Non-Marriage”:
Non-marital Unions in the Transition to Adulthood in South Africa**

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Introduction

Marriage has long received attention in demographic studies as a key demographic event, serving as a near-universal marker of entry to adulthood and customarily the point at which childbearing commences. In most of sub-Saharan Africa, marriage is part of the lifecourse of the majority of adults (Bledsoe and Pison, 1994). Marriage often occurs at young ages; DHS data from the 1990s show that half or more of all women in sub-Saharan Africa aged 20-24 had married by age 20, although the proportion of women married before age 20 has declined over time. This trend toward later marriage is strongly linked to urbanization and achievement of secondary education (Singh and Samara, 1996). Although demographers have traditionally looked at marriage as an event or a point in time, a fixed boundary between adolescence and adulthood, African marriage is in reality often a fluid process that occurs over a number of years, often involving payment of bridewealth and an extended engagement period (Mensch, Bruce and Greene, 1998).

In contrast to this picture, one of the most notable features of South Africa's contemporary demographic profile is the relative absence of formal marriage. In South Africa, according to Demographic and Health Survey data, the median age of marriage is 26.8 years, about a quarter of adults aged 18 and above are married, and almost half of those aged 40-44 have never been married [Department of Health, 1998]. While levels of marriage have fallen among all racial groups since the 1950's, this "flight from marriage" is most pronounced among the black African population¹. Unlike other low-marriage settings, such as Western Europe, non-marital cohabitation is not common. Yet levels of fertility remain high. Two-thirds of women report at least one birth by age 25, although only 14 percent of

¹ Although the term 'African' is problematic, it is used here with reference to historically established racial categories in South Africa: African (black); Coloured (mixed-race); Indian; White. Most statistical data is still collected according to these categories.

women are married by the same age. Most teenage pregnancy in South Africa is non-marital and unintended (Nash, 1990; Preston-Whyte, 1993). Recent research has highlighted the presence of a “bi-modal” pattern of fertility, consisting of pre-marital childbearing among young women in the late teens and early twenties, followed by a much-delayed birth of a second child until later (Garenne, Tollman and Kahn, 2000; Kaufman, deWet and Stadler, 2001). This reflects a low incidence of contraceptive use prior to the first birth, a low abortion rate, and high contraceptive prevalence after the first child. Yet in spite of high levels of fertility in the teenage years, overall fertility has declined to a total fertility rate of 2.9, the lowest on the African continent. This unusual pattern of fertility challenges the conventional wisdom that early fertility inevitably implies high fertility. Also, many South African women who have a first child in the teen years return to school, which contributes strongly to the delay of a second child (Kaufman, deWet and Stadler, 2001). These trends have changed the nature of the association between marriage and the start of childbearing, with fertility largely delinked from marriage for young South African women. The context of non-marriage is thus important not only as a demographic phenomenon, but for the changes in the processes of family formation that have accompanied it.

What are the reasons underlying such high levels of ‘non-marriage’ in South Africa? And, importantly, what are the types of partnerships – or non-marital unions – that arise in place of marriage? What is the role of fertility and childbearing both in shaping – and being shaped by – the type of unions that young people engage in? While various reasons for low levels of marriage have been offered, little research has examined the topic of non-marital unions – and the ways that these unions intersect with fertility - in South Africa. This paper examines the question of why marriage is so delayed, or foregone altogether, in contemporary South Africa, and what the implications of this are for the overall process of

union and family formation. First, previous scholarship on this topic is reviewed, with attention to historical perspectives. Second, findings based on data drawn from ethnographic research with young people in KwaZulu/Natal province are presented. This paper is intended to lay the groundwork for a longer term research endeavor aimed at examining the dynamic processes related to the formation, evolution and dissolution of young women's sexual and romantic partnerships over the young adult lifecourse, in the context of South Africa's severe HIV epidemic.

Is Non-marriage a New Phenomenon?

Debate surrounds the extent to which 'non-marriage' is a recent phenomenon. Changes in marriage are not unique to South Africa: the age of marriage is rising throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and marriage patterns are recognized to be changing (Bledsoe and Cohen, 1993). These demographic trends, along with rapidly changing social norms, have created an extended period of adolescence, as young people stay in school longer, marry later, and move away from home to seek work, often in urban areas (Mensch, Bruce and Greene, 1998). Yet an age of marriage delayed into the late 20's is a demographic feature unique to southern Africa, and South Africa represents a unique case even in this context [Bongaarts, 2006; Mensch, Singh and Casterline, 2005].

In South Africa, public perception focuses on changes in marriage as a response to recent economic stresses, while popular discourse decries the "loose morals" of today's young people, who bear children before marriage or who do not marry at all. In reality, the story is somewhat more complex. The fluidity of marriage and family structures among South Africa's black African population represents a long-established pattern. In the colonial period, factors such as legally mandated changes in traditional marriage structures were introduced, along with changes in male employment in the wage sector, which

fundamentally altered the nature of African households (Guy, 1997). Hunter has noted the ways in which colonial administrative decisions forced men into the monetary economy and changed the terms of bridewealth (*lobola*) payment, making marriage a much more difficult proposition. Men often resorted to numerous, less stable partnerships as a result (Hunter, 2003). Subsequently, movements of the black population began on a major scale, beginning with labor migration in the late 19th century, and continuing through forced removals from land in the 1970s and '80s. Today, population mobility remains high, particularly between rural and urban areas, in the context of high unemployment. As a result, family life and living arrangements have been severely disrupted over long periods of time, and the context of family formation is often characterized by disruption and upheaval rather than cohesion. The instability and fluidity of contemporary partnerships – both marital and non-marital – can thus be seen to have a historical basis. In their 1993 work on adolescent fertility and childbearing in sub-Saharan Africa, Bledsoe and Cohen noted the complexity of marital and family arrangements in southern Africa, stating “the fact that stands out is that for much of the region, the demands and opportunities created by massive labor migration are making childbearing – and even childrearing – largely independent of marriage. The resulting gap between physiological maturity and economic viability, especially for men, likely extends the period in which any children they father are likely to be born in premarital unions (Bledsoe and Cohen, 1993). Extending this into the present period, “premarital” unions are now often replaced by completely “non-marital” unions, in patterns which are now entrenched socially as well as economically. Yet little investigation of these non-marital unions has been undertaken.

All of these factors have contributed to low levels of marriage historically among the African population. Recent work by Hunter (2007) compiled census data from various

sources until the present, noting that levels of marriage (including both civil and customary forms) have declined significantly over time. In the 1936 census, for example, 56 percent of African adults over age 15 described themselves as married, compared to 30 percent in 2001. The category of non-married rose from 38 percent to 54 percent in the same time period.

Definitions of Marriage

Marriage is a long and complex process in Zulu society, and has been well documented in the anthropological literature (Krige, 1950; Gluckman, 1950; Ngubane, 1981). While this older scholarship is mainly descriptive and does not capture the fluidity of social institutions such as marriage, it is important for the detail it provides on social practices in historical perspective. Historically, marriage consisted of the formal stages of *lobola* (payment of bridewealth). Many aspects of these marriage practices have been carried forward, with various adaptations, into contemporary society. The marriage process began with *qoma*, an informal engagement in which a young girl accepted a lover. Following *qoma*, it is clear that a girl intends to marry, after which marriage negotiations begin. Formal engagement (*ukucela*) occurs through negotiations by the young man's father or his representative. Following this, negotiations over *lobola* begin, during which time various formal visits and gift exchanges between the families occur. Typically, *lobola* is paid in cattle, with twelve cattle the official bride-price. Fewer cattle, often seven, may be paid if a girl's reputation or chastity is in doubt, or in some cases if a child has preceded the marriage. In historical perspective, the practice of *lobola* was intended to give a husband's family the right to his wife's reproductive abilities, and is thus usually accompanied by rituals performed by the girl's father to the ancestors to ensure her fertility (Ngubane, 1981). Marriage integrates a woman into her husband's family (descent group), and she thus becomes an ancestor through his lineage.

The Zulu anthropologist Harriet Ngubane wrote about the meaning of marriage to a Zulu woman (Ngubane, 1981). As Ngubane notes, “the word ‘marriage’ is not translatable into *isiZulu*, because its indigenous meaning is not that of a contractual union between the spouses as in the case of the English term.” A Zulu woman ‘goes on a long journey’ (*enda*), in a process known as *umendo*. A man, in contrast, takes a woman into his home (*thatha*), where she is expected to be productive and continue the patrilineal line. Some customs, such as the language of over-respect toward her father-in-law (*hlonipha*)—in which a woman adopts a new language in relation to household items and other daily items, so that she refrains from mentioning anything associated with her father-in-law’s name—are retained as long as she continues to bear children.

In South Africa, marriage has become more fluid over time, owing to high levels of social instability, increasing urbanization, higher levels of secondary education, and the expense of marriage, all of which combine to delay marriage well beyond the teenage years. Yet the definitions and expectations surrounding marriage have also changed. Although it is still common to categorize marriages as either ‘traditional’, civil, or Christian, in reality these categories are blurring, or overlapping. For example, a middle class marriage often requires both forms – a traditional marriage, represented by completion of the payment of bridewealth (*ilobolo*), and a Christian marriage, represented by a church wedding. A person who had not completed both marriage ceremonies might categorize himself as non-married. But the implications of these nuances in definition have been little discussed, and there is little understanding of what difference these different marital definitions make in terms of overall levels.

Reasons for Non-marriage

More recent historical evidence regarding marriage patterns is provided in the work of the anthropologist Eleanor Preston-Whyte, who examined the social context of pre-marital fertility in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Her research suggested that children conceived out of wedlock were accepted within families because of a strong positive value placed on children and also the importance of a young woman providing “proof” of her fertility. More recent scholarship has challenged this hypothesis, noting that this may be changing as other opportunities, such as education and employment, emerge for young women. Still, fertility among young women remains high, a situation that has coincided with weakened links between reproduction and marriage. Some young people – particularly more urbanized youth – do not consider marriage a goal, in part because of the economic cost levied through the payment of bridewealth (Kaufman, deWet and Stadler, 2001).

The less noted aspect of Preston Whyte’s work is her documentation of the high levels of ‘non-marriage’ among urban women in the city of Durban who migrated from rural areas in the province of KwaZulu/Natal (formerly Natal), as well as the dynamic family groups and domestic arrangements that resulted. Noting the emergence of a new category, ‘families without marriage’ in the mid 1970s, Preston-Whyte described the lives of these urban migrant women, focusing on the changes in the management of fertility for unmarried women. Clearly, even twenty years ago, marriage, although still valued as a social institution, no longer served as the ‘only arbiter of birth’ (Preston-Whyte, 1978; 1993). One consequence of a pre-marital birth was often to render marriage even more unlikely, as economic resources would have to be devoted to raising the child rather than securing the marriage through payment of bridewealth (*ilobolo*). In fact, this work noted the reluctance of some families to arrange a marriage even in the face of a young woman’s pregnancy, as the

long-term consequences of a hastily-arranged marital alliance would be far greater than a child born out of wedlock (Preston-Whyte, 1993).

Writing twenty years apart, Hunter and Preston-Whyte provide some common explanations for the prevalence of non-marital relationships, mostly structured around the needs of economically needy and somewhat marginalized women. The racially based system of economic deprivation described in Preston-Whyte's research in the 1970s has given way to a world of neo-liberal economic policies in which unemployment levels are 40 percent and more among black South Africans, curtailing opportunities in the face of raised hopes and aspirations (Hunter, 2007). In the 1970s, many of the migrant women studied by Preston-Whyte survived by combining formal and informal employment, and through the establishment of sexual relationships with townsmen and male migrants. Paradoxically, these relationships often rendered them "unmarriageable", as migrant men often preferred rural wives (Preston-Whyte, 1993). Similarly, in present-day South Africa, Hunter describes women's mobility, social contacts and sexual networks as intertwined, with multiple boyfriends and a series of non-marital relationships often serving an economic function in terms of providing for a woman's basic needs (Hunter, 2007). While certain advantages may accrue to women through such networks, the high risk nature of such relationships is painfully obvious in the context of South Africa's severe HIV epidemic. Now, as among the women described by Preston-Whyte, economic constraints strongly influence the possibility of marriage for a young couple. Payment of bridewealth, which is set by law at twelve cattle or its monetary equivalent², is nearly impossible for most young men in a severely constrained labor market. Thus, as Hunter notes, marriage has increasingly become a middle-class institution. In such economically straitened circumstances, the occurrence of a

²1 cow costs about 1,000 South African Rand, approximately \$150 at current rates of exchange.

pregnancy can pose serious financial problems for a young couple. According to Zulu custom, young men are required to pay damages (*inhlawulo*) to the family of the girl who has “fallen pregnant”, equivalent to the price of one cow (Preston-Whyte, 1993). This is often financially impossible for a young man, and also represents a setback in terms of future goals, such as marriage. Young people frequently attribute young men’s unwillingness to accept responsibility for a pregnancy (known locally as “denying paternity) to these factors (Varga, 2003).

Other research has offered other explanations for South Africa’s low levels of marriage, including ongoing processes of modernity and change. This includes both an increase in the number of educated women who wish to work, and also attitudinal changes toward marriage among young, particularly urban, South Africans themselves. Some have also suggested that HIV/AIDS itself may affect marital structures through increased mortality and consequent lessened availability of partners [Quisumbing and Hallman, 2003].

What do we know about Non-Marital Partnerships?

To date, there has been relatively little research on the types and meanings of non-marital unions in South Africa. Using survey data, a separate paper by this author provides a descriptive analysis of non-marital partnerships among young people aged 15-24, examining partnership type according to standard definitions, duration, sexual frequency and numbers of partners (Harrison et al., unpublished paper). That research found most young men and women to be in regular, established partnerships, with little marriage. Approximately one-third of men reported a casual partnership, ≥ 3 partners in the past three years, and concurrent partnering. In contrast, 15 percent of women reported ever having a casual partnership, and one-quarter had partners >5 years older. Somewhat surprisingly,

given the young age of the population studied, relationships were of long duration, on average more than one year for men and women.

Similarly, in a smaller, qualitative sample of 47 young adult men and women aged 18-24, the mean duration of a primary relationship was 3.1 years, with women reporting longer durations (mean = 3.94 years) than did men (mean = 2.07 years) (O'Sullivan et al., 2006). Secondary partnerships, although typically considered casual (76%) rather than committed (24%) were of shorter duration (Mean = 1.0 years). Twenty-one men (84%) and twelve women (48%) had secondary partners. Seventeen men (68%) reported three or more current partners. Women were much more likely to have sexual encounters with their primary partners: women had 86% of their sexual encounters with their primary partners compared to 59% of men's encounters. Men also reported more lifetime sexual partners (mean = 9.1) compared to women (mean = 2.6). Secondary partnerships were also of long duration, with a mean length of 1.4 years for women and 0.7 years for men. Almost half of the women (48%) had at least one child. Only one man in the sample reported that he was the father of a child.

Research Setting

KwaZulu/Natal, one of South Africa's largest provinces, is located on South Africa's eastern seaboard. This study was conducted in a rural district two hours north of the large port city of Durban. KwaZulu/Natal, with a population of more than 8 million, is also one of the country's poorest provinces, with an annual household income in many rural areas under US \$1000 (Statistics South Africa, 2006). The area is severely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, having consistently experienced the highest HIV prevalence among South Africa's nine provinces (Department of Health, 2005). In 2003, 14.1 percent of young people aged 15-24 were HIV infected (Pettifor et al., 2005). The site for this study is typical

of many rural areas, with few employment opportunities, high levels of out-migration for labor, and a high degree of social isolation. During the country's social and political transformation over the past decade, the lives of rural residents, particularly youth, have changed, due to improved mobility and transportation, access to mass media, including television, and the advent of cellular telephone technology in rural areas. Still, fewer than half of rural young people complete secondary school, a key to success in South Africa's increasingly globalized economy.

Data and Methods

The findings presented here draw on several years of fieldwork in KwaZulu/Natal, South Africa. Between 2000 and 2003, three qualitative studies related to adolescent sexuality in the context of HIV/AIDS were conducted by the author and various research collaborators in a sub-district in rural northern KwaZulu/Natal. These studies addressed different age groups within the broad range of 12-24 years, effectively spanning the adolescent lifecourse. The largest study, an in-depth investigation of the social dynamics of adolescent sexual risk and protective behaviors, included youth aged 13-19 years of age. The second study focused on gender and HIV risk in young adults aged 18-24. The third study, focused on very young adolescents, examined the role of social instability in enhancing risk-taking behaviors. This paper draws on data from the first two studies, those involving adolescents in the early stages of their sexual lives (the adolescent study), and young adults who were in more established relationships (the young adult study).

In the adolescent study, qualitative data were collected via peer group discussions (PGDs), a method similar to standard focus groups, but comprising repeat sessions with the same group. Like focus groups, PGDs rely on discussion generated among homogeneous groups, and are useful for identifying and clarifying group norms, values and beliefs

(Kitzinger 1995). The peer groups were single sex, and were divided into groups of older (16-19 year old) adolescents, and younger (13-15 year old) adolescents, to emphasize homogeneity. The groups included 5-10 participants each, and met weekly over a three month period. Each group discussed a prescribed set of eight topics related to gender and sexuality, relationships, sexual initiation, and risk and protective behaviors. The PGDs explored three key areas of relationships: the types of partnerships engaged in, the meaning of those partnerships, and the normative context in which partner selection and relationship formation occur.

In the young adult study, in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured question guide. This format permitted exploration of a range of related areas, including (1) relationship histories and sexual interactions, (2) preventive behaviors with primary and other partners, (3) the meaning, value, and significance ascribed to each partnership reported by participants, and (4) views relating to gender and power relations underlying their sexual relationships. These interviews followed a three-week diary study involving the recording of daily sexual interactions with any and all sexual partners. This method was employed to collect prospective sexual history data. The in-depth interviews were designed as follow up to the sexual interactions diaries, and allowed interviewers to ask more detailed questions about recent sexual interactions. Thematic coding and analysis of qualitative data yielded three main themes within a larger domain of “relationship type and meaning”. These were 1) meaning of partnerships; 2) relationship power and gender dynamics, including condom use and negotiation, and 3) relationship context.

Research Findings

In this rural setting, young women begin their sexual lives strongly influenced by conservative social norms surrounding sexuality. For younger women, particularly those in

the teen years, sexual relations with even one partner are frowned upon, with the result that relationships are often secretive. The younger teen women who became involved in relationships risked the strong disapproval of family and other community members. Reflecting the social mores of the broader community, the younger teen women often regarded their involvement in relationships and sexual activity as wrong, as in the following reason given for breaking off a relationship: *“I realized what I was doing was wrong because I was still young.”*

Marriage Aspirations

Even in this context of non-marriage, an important aspiration of the young people interviewed was finding a partner and marrying. In an in-depth interview, one young woman described her hopes for the future: *“He always says that maybe by the end of this year he’ll be working and ... [then in five years] ... we’ll be married.”* (IDI, 17 year old teen woman) Even young women who had known boyfriends for only a short time often referred to a future together. However, due to the strongly negative community attitudes toward young women’s sexuality, entry into a relationship was viewed both with anticipation and fear. The idea of marriage served two main purposes in young people’s minds: first, as a way to legitimize a sexual relationship, and second, as the achievement of their romantic aspirations.

Proposing Love

Both young women and men expressed strongly romantic ideas of relationships. Being “in love” is an important development in a young person’s life, and the romantic aspect of relationships coexisted and contrasted with perceptions of relationships as inappropriate. The phrase “proposing love”, which is the process of initiating a relationship, sums up the very idealistic and romantic notions that young people – both men and women – hold with regard to relationships. “Proposing love” is subject to certain socially approved

guidelines, clearly understood within the peer group of young people. Young men are responsible for “proposing love”, which can range from light-hearted courtship to the initiation of more serious relationships. In their strategies for “proposing love”, the young men emphasized romance and courtship.

Partnership Type

Young people described two main types of relationships. The term *ukujola* refers to a relationship for fun (from the South African word to “jol”, or have a good time). The term *ukuqoma* refers to a serious and committed relationship (from the isiZulu word, *qoma*, meaning “to commit”). According to Zulu custom, *ukuqoma* represents the initiation of the marriage process, in which a young man and his family visit the woman’s home for the first time. Because of this, *ukuqoma* relationships are generally sanctioned by the community. However, since formal marriage usually occurs in the late twenties or later, an *ukuqoma* relationship would appear to represent a lengthy interim step on the road to formal marriage. Further, it seems likely that many of these relationships may break up over time, although many young women had aspirations to marry their partners.

Ukuqoma relationships were valued by young women, because they could be brought into the open and accepted by a young woman’s family and community. Young women’s frequent references to “bringing a boyfriend home” reflected their interest in developing an *ukuqoma* relationship, a relationship that was “known” to their families. As one teen woman described:

N: ‘*Ngiqomile*’ [I am committed]

Facilitator 1: If you say you are ‘*qomile*’, what do you mean?

N: It’s not a hidden relationship. ... I would say it’s a serious relationship.

Facilitator 1: Why do you say that?

N: First of all, I am not ‘*jolaring’*, *ngiqomile* [I am committed]. So whatever we have done is not a secret, we did everything openly and it’s clear to everyone.

(IDI, 16 year old teen woman)

Being in a “serious” relationship was used by many young people to justify or reconcile the idea of becoming sexually active. Importantly, a pregnancy that occurred within an *ukuqoma* relationship would be accepted, whereas young women who became pregnant with an unknown boyfriend risked being thrown out of their homes.

In contrast, none of the young, teenage men in this study mentioned participation in an *ukuqoma* relationship, most likely due to their relatively young age. Instead, the young men most often spoke of *ukujola* relationships, which were considered more acceptable for young men. While for women these relationships often remained hidden, young men could get away with this behavior, and often received peer pressure to do so.

Meaning of Partnerships

By the young adult years, many men and women are involved in multiple partnerships. Symbolic meanings associated with primary partners were similar for both women and men. Primary partners were associated with love, trust and intimacy, and both men and women often had future aspirations for their main partners. Primary relationships were characterized by romantic discourse and constructions of love for both men and women. As one woman said of her partner, “*He wants us to be together for the rest of our lives*”.

Secondary partners were common for both men and women, although men were more likely to have a current secondary partner. These partnerships were usually casual and not associated with love or romance, a point that was emphasized in particular by the men. Casual partners were viewed by some respondents as a form of security, to ensure that one has a partner. Other than these commonalities, however, reasons differed by gender as to the reasons for having a secondary partner.

For men, multiple partners are socially acceptable and even encouraged. In keeping with cultural constructions of masculinity, secondary partners were viewed as important to

fulfill sexual need, to provide a sexual outlet in the event of infrequent contact with a main partner, or because of peer pressure, usually from other males. In spite of these seemingly important reasons for having a second partner (or more), men were very clear about distinctions between primary and secondary partners. Not only were relationships with “secondary” partners completely dissociated from love and romance, but their feelings toward these women were sometimes quite negative, as in the commonly expressed sentiment: *“She is not someone I love”*.

In most cases, the women’s views of additional partners coincided with the sentiments of their male peers: secondary partners were generally not objects of love and romance, nor were these relationships valued as highly as those with their primary partners. However, women had a much more utilitarian and practical view of the reason for having a second partner. Generally, these partners filled specific needs and, in contrast to the men, were not viewed as being “just for sex”. Two main reasons were most often cited for having a second partner: financial and material support, or filling emotional needs. The first category, provision of gifts and economic support, was common among all women. However, among women with children this reason was cited without hesitation or embarrassment, as they viewed a second partner as a necessary means to obtain money to support a child.

Among the young adult women, the presence of multiple partners was so common that they were often able to talk about these relationships without embarrassment, in spite of frequently expressed views that this partner “is the one for me”. The following passage is typical:

We are very committed to our relationship both of us, as we are might have future together.

Interviewer: Future together in which way?

Respondent: Although he has not put it point blank and has not given anything to my family , but I can see that he is preparing to pay lobola at home.

Later

Interviewer: Do you currently have any other partners besides the one we have been talking about?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: How many other partners do you have at this time?

Respondent: One.

Thus, although love and romance were expressed as the most important aspects of a relationship, young people's circumstances often demonstrated otherwise.

Relationships and Fertility

Second partners are common where the father of the child is absent, but is still considered the primary partner. In fact, many women who had children were no longer in an active relationship with the child's father, but still considered him to be the primary partner due to his paternal role. Women cannot ever truly "leave" that relationship, since that partner is the father of her child and it would be socially unacceptable to do so. Yet often, the effective demise of such a relationship would serve as the catalyst for a second partnership to develop. In only a few instances did women report having a second partner because it was "fun" or to fulfill romantic or sexual needs.

The complex intersections between non-marital partnerships and fertility are well illustrated in the following story:

Interviewer: What type of relationship is this?

Respondent: We are very committed in this relationship however I am not sure whether, we will end up getting married. I just do not know whether to say it has developed or not because now I have this problem. My being pregnant is not important, it is putting me in trouble because here I am, still at school. Yes, we are committed to our relationship and I have been introduced to his home same like he is known by my parents, but I am not happy about the whole situation.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the whole process of introducing both of you in both families?

Respondent: I was introduced by the way of letting them know about my pregnancy. My parents actually drove me to his family, like the way it is done when a girl is pregnant. My mother was dying of anger to the extent that I was sacked from my

home, until the boyfriends family brought something to pay for the damages. Then I was returned home since then.

...

Respondent: I just got disappointed in this relationship because while I was saying that everything was coming alright, things got worse by falling pregnant. Now, I am not sure it is this relationship which is important to be in.

Interviewer: Does this partner support you financially?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: What type of support is provided?

Respondent: He gives me money if he has got it.

Interviewer: And what about you, do you?

Respondent: No, I do not have money, so I do not do anything for him.

Relationship Context

The relationships described by young men and women are fluid and changing, with the broader context of relationships characterized by geographical mobility. Although relationships are of long duration, they are often conducted at a distance, with infrequent contact between partners. Because both men and women move around both for work, to seek jobs, or to visit family, partners are often located in different areas. This high mobility increases the opportunity for secondary partners for both men and women. Many of the women, in particular, described their relationships as “visiting relationships”, with varying degrees of contact between partners. As one respondent stated: *Maybe in a month we see each other four times, and that is over the week ends only.* Longer separations were also common, as in the following interview:

Interviewer: Is it a visiting relationship?

Respondent: At times, he comes home after three months and stays for about a week and if he is on leave, he stays at home maybe for about a month.

Almost all the young adult sample, both men and women, described their relationships this way.

Discussion

These findings provide some initial insights into non-marital partnerships and their social context among rural South African youth. Notably, marriage was an important goal for many of these young people, but economic circumstances dictate long delays in achieving this. At the same time, the meaning of marriage and relationships appears to have changed. While on the one hand expressing ideas that marriage is normative and in keeping with accepted cultural and religious practice, these young people also viewed it in modern terms, with respondents emphasizing the importance of love, romance and emotional fulfillment.

At the same time, a contrasting idea of relationships pursued in order to fulfill basic needs was evident. These needs were often economic, especially among young adult women. Not infrequently, this could be to provide for a child. Multiple partners were common – as “security”, both economic and social – if one partner disappears or the relationship breaks up, another one could take his place.

The historical patterns elucidated by earlier scholars, as well as the patterns of union formation emerging through this research, highlight the important role of structural factors in shaping the context of marriage, or more accurately, ‘non-marriage’, in contemporary South Africa. Longstanding and extremely high levels of economic uncertainty and social fluidity have perpetuated a pattern of family and living arrangements that appear to work against the establishment of long-term partnerships. In the face of this, young people have evolved new types of unions – or new interpretations of old types of unions, as in the case of *ukuqoma*. Clearly, although these relationships were viewed as commitments, the expectation of marriage has become much less clear than in previous generations.

Yet the real paradox surrounds the high levels of non-marital fertility. Non-marital relationships and fertility are closely intertwined, and – as has been noted in other African

settings – fertility plays a central role in the development of relationships (Smith, 2004). But it is not clear why such high levels of non-marital fertility continue to occur. Substantial research documents young people’s aversion to pregnancy prior to the end of schooling (Kaufman, deWet and Stadler, 2001; Varga, 2003). Yet many of these studies have focused on teenage – rather than young adult – women, and their aspirations. Given the rapid increase in fertility between the ages of 18 and 25, a time period that demarcates the period between the end of schooling and entry into formal adulthood, it seems likely that a significant portion of this fertility is in fact wanted, if not actually intended. Perhaps, in contemporary South Africa, the emphasis is no longer on “proving fertility”, as Preston-Whyte hypothesized a quarter century ago, but rather on securing a relationship. In this sense, a pregnancy would help to secure an attachment, simultaneously fulfilling expectations of love and romance, and also economic security. However, in contemporary South Africa, this is often a false reality. Ultimately, a non-marital pregnancy may represent a financial burden to young women and their families, often without the support of a partner, who may have no interest or ability to acknowledge the child.

At this stage of this “work in progress”, the intention is to raise questions as much as to answer them, with the aim of developing a longer-term research agenda. The existing research provides an initial assessment of the types of non-marital unions that prevail among young people in South Africa, as well as the motivations for entering them. Further research is needed to study young people’s relationships longitudinally, with the use of panel data to gain an understanding of how non-marital unions change and develop during the course of the transition to adulthood. Additionally, such research will provide the important addition of a prospectively examined lifecourse perspective, rather than cross-sectional snapshots of different age groups.

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