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The sexual scripts of Kenyan young people and HIV prevention

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Abstract
The scripting of sexual encounters among young people in Kenyan is described using results of 28 focus group discussions conducted with young people attending primary school standard 7, from four different ethnic groups and living in 22 different communities. Sexual encounters were described as both mundane and inevitable and followed a predetermined scripted sequence of events and interactions in which girls and boys played complementary roles. These scripts were set within discourses of force and the exchange of gifts for sex. The gendered nature of the script and its social and cultural foundations are discussed. Potential strategies for developing HIV prevention programming are discussed from the perspective of existing sexual scripts.

The sexual scripts of Kenyan young people and HIV prevention

The AIDS epidemic is increasingly recognized as affecting young people. This is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) where 13 of the 29.4 million infected with HIV are under the age of 25 (UNAIDS 2002a). At the end of 1999, the estimated prevalence of HIV infection for Kenyans 15–24 years of age was 11–15% for women and 4–9% for men (UNAIDS 2000), with the majority of young people infected through sexual contact (UNAIDS 2002b). These statistics support arguments that prevention interventions need to target young people, ideally before they become sexually active (Dowsett and Aggleton 1999).

As in many countries in the region, there is scarce research on the nature, patterns and context of young people's sexual activity, with studies focusing largely on numbers of sexual partners, age of sexual initiation, and condom use (National Council for Population and Development 1998). While this research facilitates identification of population subgroups that are at risk of exposure to HIV, it has been criticized for not providing information on

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how sexual activity occurs, or on its gendered patterns and cultural contexts (Amaro 1995, Dowsett and Aggleton 1999, Gausset 2001). As a result, it is of limited use in designing strategies for HIV-prevention.

This paper uses scripting theory to develop an in-depth understanding of how sexuality is experienced by Kenyan young people and to examine the socio-cultural contexts in which it is embedded. Data from focus group interviews with young people and in-depth interviews with teachers and community leaders form the foundation for this research.

Scripting theory

Scripting theory, developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973), is rooted within the symbolic interactionist and social constructionist perspectives in sociology. Sexual activities are understood as constructed from the interplay between cultural messages about sexuality, identification of situations as sexual, and interpersonal negotiation (Maticka-Tyndale 1991). Sexual activity is theorized as the end result of a codified sequence of events which is much like the script of a play (Frith and Kitzinger 2001, Gagnon and Simon 1973). Scripts become the templates used to interpret and respond to situations as sexual (Maticka-Tyndale 1992, Rose and Freize 1993, Simon and Gagnon 1986). While it would appear that an infinite number of scripts would be operational, only a limited number are followed with regularity (Epstein 1987, Vicinus 1993). Scripting theory allows room for variation and modification within the scripts that pre-dominate in each culture, while recognizing that even in such variation the presence of the dominant norms and scripts are recognized and accommodated.

Since its introduction, scripting theory has been used to explore sexuality across different populations and contexts (Frith and Kitzinger 2001). Examples include sexual miscommunication (Frith and Kitzinger 1997), sexual decision-making (Gilmore *et al.* 1996), the social context of rape (Jackson 1995), transgenderism and homosexuality (Gagnon and Simon 1973, Plummer 1998), gender differences (Hyde and Oliver 2000), construction of personal safe-sex scripts (Maticka-Tyndale 1992), condom use and contraception (Maticka-Tyndale 1991), the scripting of extramarital liaisons of Thai men (Maticka-Tyndale *et al.* 1994), and sexual partnering in unique contexts (Maticka-Tyndale and Herold 1997).

Young people and sexual scripts in Africa

In traditional African cultures, the scripting of sexuality includes rites of passage performed around the age of puberty which include formal instruction in sexual and gender matters. Marriage and parenthood follow soon after. While customs and scripts have varied across tribal groups, common themes include: friends or relatives negotiating eventual marriage and sexual partnerships (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976), payment of a dowry or 'brideprice' to a girl's family (Gulliver 1963, Mbiti 1992), and sexual activity regulated by norms of courtship and marriage (Ankomah 1999; Smith 2000). Sex is primarily for procreation and continuation of the family, clan and tribe with scant attention to notions of intimacy or pleasure (Davison 1989, Prazak 2000). In some cultures, polygyny is common and marriage binds families, symbolizing and contributing to their wealth (Mbiti 1992, Orubuloye *et al.* 1994). Until recently, adolescence, or a distinct and prolonged period between childhood and adulthood, was not recognized (Caldwell *et al.* 1998).

Colonization and modernization brought Western educational systems and modes of employment and with them the postponement of marriage, rejection of many of the

traditional ways by colonial governments and Christian and Muslim religious institutions, urbanization, increased geographical mobility and exposure to a multiplicity of cultural groups as well as to mass media (Ankomah 1999, Mensch *et al.* 1998). Included among the various consequences has been the development of a distinct adolescent stage with sexual scripts unique to Africa (Caldwell *et al.* 1998). These scripts manifest a complex mix of traditional beliefs, norms and expectations; Western values, ideas, and modes of interaction; and a changing set of social expectations (Ankomah 1999, MacPhail and Campbell 2003). Companionate male-female relationships and marriages and the emotional intimacy of a romantic or love relationship between mates have been noted as distinctly modern customs brought to sub-Saharan Africa by Christian missionaries and colonial governments (Caldwell *et al.* 1998). In fact, such relationships continue to be referred to as 'Christian marriages' to distinguish them from traditional relationships. Although marriage is now often postponed, many of the traditional norms associated with marital and sexual relations have become part of the sexual scripting of boy–girl relationships (Ecker 1994, Nzioka 2001).

The existing literature notes cultural differences in the expression of sexuality and in the traditions and customs regulating them. However, three factors cut across this cultural diversity: gender dynamics, the commonality of coercive sex, and the role of the family in perpetuating existing sexual systems (e.g., Jejeebhoy and Bott 2003, Longfield 2003, Mensch *et al.* 1998, UNAIDS 1999). The imbalance of power between girls and boys, expectations of female acquiescence to male authority, and the acceptance or lack of opposition to sexual coercion are seen as root causes of what is described as an inability of young girls to negotiate sexual relations with boys and men. Rather than providing support and protection for girls, the family, as the primary institution for socialization and perpetuation of traditional systems is described as complicitous in creating a situation where boys are expected to be sexually aggressive to the point of coercion and violence and girls are expected to comply (Caldwell *et al.* 1998, Jejeebhoy and Bott 2003, Longfield 2003, Mensch *et al.* 1998, UNAIDS 1999).

While this literature discusses sexual acts and events from within the context of gender dynamics, it tends to address particular sexual events in isolation rather than as part of a culturally determined set of meanings, events and interactions in which young men and women play prescribed roles. This paper moves away from a focus on specific acts by placing them within the context of the scripting of girl–boy sexual relationships. It uses what young people from Nyanza and Rift Valley say about boy–girl relationships and how sexual encounters occur within them to describe their sexual scripts and the contexts and norms within which they are embedded and maintained. The motivation for this analysis derived from results of surveys conducted with Nyanza young people aged 11–16 years as part of research that preceded the introduction of a school-based HIV prevention programme. A significant proportion of these young people reported being sexually active (56% of a sample of over 4000 boys and 50% of a sample of over 4000 girls) and having experienced sexual force, with the median age of first intercourse being 12 years (Maticka-Tyndale 2002, Maticka-Tyndale *et al.* 2002b). This led us to ask how sex happens for these young people.

Methods

The findings reported here come from research conducted as part of the Primary School Action for Better Health (PSABH) HIV/AIDS prevention programme being implemented

in more than 2000 schools in Kenya (Commonwealth Secretariat 2003). Questionnaires were completed by upper primary pupils and teachers from 220 communities and focus group and in-depth interviews with pupils, teachers and community representatives in 22 of these communities. The research protocol was found acceptable by the University of Windsor, Canada, Ethics Review Board.

This paper draws primarily on the discussions in 28, single-sex focus groups conducted in 22 communities in March and July 2002. Respondents were aged between 11 and 16 years (most were 15 and 16 years), attending standard 7 (upper primary school). Information from in-depth interviews with teachers ($n=44$) and male ($n=22$) and female ($n=22$) community leaders is referred to when it specifically addresses the sexuality, sexual scripting and boy–girl relationships. Communities were chosen for participation to ensure representation of two regions (Nyanza and Rift Valley), both rural and urban communities, the four dominant ethnic groups (i.e., Luo, Kisii, Kikuyu and Kalenjin), and the academic standing of the schools. Teachers assisted in the selection of focus group participations, approaching those who were generally more outspoken in class to ascertain their willingness to talk about issues related to HIV/AIDS and sexuality.

Focus groups were chosen for data collection because they replicate the same-sex, near-age-mate groupings that are the common settings for discussions of boy–girl relationships and sexuality in these regions. Focus group discussion guides were created to explore perceptions of HIV/AIDS, personal risk, dating, and sexual activity and expectations. Data were collected by trained, multilingual facilitators, whose gender matched that of focus group participants from a private, Kenyan research company. Each focus group and interview was conducted in a mixture of English, Kiswahili and the local dialect. Permission was obtained to tape all focus group discussions.

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were transcribed and then translated into English by the interviewer with transcription and translation checked for accuracy by supervisory staff in Kenya. Data analysis followed an iterative process with three research assistants reading text and checking each other's interpretations and coding. Differences in coding and interpretation were discussed and periodically referred back to field staff members in Kenya who were familiar with local language and culture to insure reliability of coding and validity of cultural interpretations. Comparisons were drawn across the different voices in the transcripts and groups before drawing any conclusions.

All textual data were first coded based on the original focus group questions. Text was then reread and recoded into thematic groupings and the themes and connections between them were elaborated in order to identify cross-cutting processes and scripts. The themes, scripts, and contexts that were drawn from the transcripts were presented to several different groups in Kenya. Members of these groups confirmed that the analyses produced descriptions consistent with local events, meanings, understandings and interpretations. They were also reflected back to young people in a second set of focus group discussions where they similarly confirmed the credibility of the descriptions and interpretations.

Results

Sexual scripts

There were strong commonalities in all four ethnic groups in the descriptions of sexual encounters, their scripting and the norms in which they were embedded. Sexual encounters were typically the end result of an elaborately scripted sequence of events that proceeded

from expression of interest, typically by a boy, through to playing sex.[1] While there were several places where the sequence could be stopped or redirected to follow an alternative route, strict adherence to the scripted sequence was the most common and expected course of events and redirection was noted and treated as an exception and violation of the prescribed pattern. This created a sense of inevitability and a lack of personal responsibility among young people for the sexual act that ultimately resulted.

First contact

Scripted sexual encounters were most often part of what young people described as boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Commonly it was the boy, through letter writing or a mediator, accompanied by an exchange of gifts or money, who conveyed interest in such a relationship.

> They write letters to each other and send it through a third party … [and] at times the third party breaks the news … like now if I have a boyfriend I will send him a letter through Mary. Sometimes Mary visits me at home and … brings me money from the boy and I receive it. (NyanzaGirls 4: 65–73)

Mediators were peers or slightly older young people who were viewed as having persuasive powers and some knowledge and authority on sexual matters. Their primary responsibility was to secure the sexual relationship.

> He talks this girl [mediator] into … helping him … [and] gives her something [for doing this] … the girl will tell the boy to be ready, 'I [the girl mediator] will bring for you that girl'. (NyanzaBoys8: 931–938)

Payment was expected for these services even when the mediator was a relative of the girl or boy.

> After introducing the two … the brother gets the fee because he has done for her a good thing. He tells the sister to go and finish with the friend!
> *Q*: What does he tell his sister?
> He tells her to go and finish with that boy and to talk nicely with the boy. He tells the sister to use that boy, maybe offer sex once in two weeks but eat a lot. (NyanzaBoys13: 650–660)

While it was boys who typically played the overt role in initiation, girls were described as covertly initiating the sequence by signalling their interest or availability. Signals included type of dress, grooming style and certain gestures, movements or actions.

> If she sits down and opens her legs purposely.
> *Q*: They sit that way intentionally?
> There are some who do that intentionally. There are some who open [their legs] … This is a sign to show that she wanted. (RiftBoys12: 1985–1987).

Negotiating sexual contact

The first discourse in which the sexual script is embedded is that of exchange with money or the exchange of gifts central to the negotiation of most sexual encounters. At times, these were accompanied by promises and claims of love and desire.

> They [boys] normally talk to us 'oh my dear friend, I am thirsty. I cannot stay like 2 days without playing sex with you. So, let us go'. When they go they start to play [sex]. (RiftGirls2: 605–607)

It was commonly understood that when a boy offered a girl a gift (either directly, or through a mediator) he was 'asking' her to play sex.

> She knows what you mean when you buy her chips. (RiftBoys12: 1415)

The giving of gifts was often described as signifying love and accompanied by proclamations of love. However, references to emotional attachment or intimacy in association with this love were not prominent in the discourse. Love often appeared as an alternative expression for sex and was associated with the sexual contact it garnered.

> If a boy has given a girl money then they can have sex and they will love each other very much. (NyanzaBoys15: 269–270)

> Sometimes a boyfriend gives the girlfriend money, he buys her lotion and other things. He tells her that anything you want I will give you. I love you so much. (NyanzaGirls10: 201–205)

In the interviews with community members, terms such as 'love', 'lover', and 'love affair' were commonly used to describe a 'sexual relationship.' Further discussions of their meaning led to the conclusion that they rarely signified an emotional or psychologically intimate attachment (Maticka-Tyndale *et al.* 2002a, b). When this description of love was reflected back to young people in later focus groups, they too confirmed this meaning.

The amount or size of gift was not an issue since this was merely a signal of sexual intentions. Sweets, pastries, fruit, pens, pencils, petroleum jelly, powder and small amounts of money were common. Both boys and girls spoke of gifts as they would a market exchange. Boys felt girls tried to get as much as they could, and often debated strategies for paying as little as possible.

> Boys give 200 [Schillings] … Girls even take 10 [Schillings] … some girls are so cheap they even take 10 Shillings. (NyanzaBoys13: 447–448)[2]

Girls spoke of how much they could get, of strategies for increasing the value of gifts, and of selecting partners based on potential material gains. Adult men were prized over adolescent boys because of the size of gifts they offered.

> They go for the old boyfriend because he is rich and if she … will be given 500 shillings, the girl really wish for it she can buy … cosmetics and things like this. (RiftGirls2: 290–293)

The obligatory nature of sex as a 'pay back' for gifts was central to discussions in all focus groups.

> Maybe the girl has taken too much of his money and when the boy starts demanding his money the girl decides to agree to play sex so that she can clear her way. (NyanzaGirls14: 835–837)

Throughout this series of exchanges and negotiations, there was only limited verbal communication between the boy and girl. Proclamations of love were highly stylized, typically scripted and delivered by the mediator, and often following popular media scripts verbatim. Boys and girls alike spoke of their discomfort and reluctance to speak to each

other without a fixed script. They relied instead on non-verbal cues, innuendos, or other people. Mistrust and uncertainty were common, with the term 'cheating' often used in describing how sexual encounters occurred.

> He can cheat her to come and collect a book on Saturday when she comes he will tell her to play sex. (NyanzaBoys6: 682–683)

> Some people also cheat you and then they give you money they sleep with you and you get it [HIV/AIDS]. (NyanzaGirls1: 617–618)

> She will cheat you and take your gift but then refuse you [sex]. (RiftBoys3: 223).

Dating and the place of playing sexual

Community leaders described dating and boyfriend-girlfriend relationships as relatively new phenomena, perhaps only a generation old in rural areas. Some were puzzled about how these relationships worked and commented that when they were young, after initiation ceremonies were completed families turned their attention to marrying their sons and daughters. In the focus groups, sexual activity was described as part of dating and young people often spoke of 'dating' and 'playing sex' synonymously. Any other activities were merely preludes to playing sex.

> *Q*: What do boys and girls who are dating do together?
> Sex
> *Q*: And what else do they do apart from sex?
> Just talking, talking about love, and then they play sex. (NyanzaGirls1: 63–68)

> They talk as they walk home and when they arrive at the boy's house he tells her to remove her underwear. They both enter the bed. (NyanzaBoys7: 110–119)

Sexual encounters were described as emotionally uncharged, hurried events. At times they took place in a boy's or girl's home, but most often out-of-doors going to or from school, while engaged in routine chores such as fetching wood or water, or at beaches or marketplaces. It was suggested, by young people and adults alike, that playing sex was part of the natural order of events in one's life, a mundane event that resulted from sexual desire, which came naturally with puberty.

> *Q*: What do they say makes them play sex?
> Some people say that this is part of life. That's why we are doing it… (NyanzaGirls1: 99–103)

The primary concerns expressed by parents about the sexual activities of their children were that a girl might become pregnant, necessitating that she leave school, or that either partner might contract HIV. While sexual activity was frequently described by parents as displaying 'bad manners', it was also something that parents expected and did not know how to change. In fact, parents or other family members at times sent girls on errands to get fish, milk or meat, expecting them to pay by playing sex in exchange.

> Sometimes families are poor they cannot afford even a loaf of bread so … Young people from those families … when they are sent for bread, they accept to play sex. (RiftBoys9: 470–473)

Refusing to play sex

Custom did not permit girls to immediately consent to play sex. It was understood that girls would initially refuse. This had the dual function of preserving the girl's reputation as chaste and bringing more valuable gifts from boys. Girls often spoke of how they waited and manipulated boys into providing them with more or better gifts. If persistent promises and testimonials, gifts, and, at times, the threat of leaving, failed to convince a girl to play sex, the boy resorted to insults, tarnishing the girl's reputation, or threatening assault, rape or death.

> He can threaten her that he will rape her … he can even tell her that he will get her … in a dark corner. (RiftGirls4: 500–507)

> He tells you [the girl] I will kill you. (NyanzaGirls9: 600–602)

In some cases, the threats of physical violence were acted on. This was particularly true if a girl refused to play sex after a boy had presented her with what was considered a suitable gift. In this case, the girl was expected to know she must pay her obligations the boy would force her to play sex.

> He will beat her maybe even break her hand; so that if they try again [to play sex with the girl] she will not refuse. (RiftGirls2: 451–452)

> He can ask. If she refuses he will throw her down, tear her clothes and force her to play sex. (NyanzaBoys7: 318)

In none of the focus group discussions did boys or girls describe a situation where a boy merely accepted 'no' from a girl. Instead, forced sex was described as a common consequence of a girl's persistent refusal.

> Many boys force girls to play sex with them. They can even tear their cloths. (NyanzaBoys6: 303–304)

> *Q*: What exactly happens between a boy and girl when the boy is the one who wants to have sex and the girlfriend is refusing him?
> He rapes the girl. (RiftGirls10: 429–431)

On occasion, forced sex was described as a group effort where a boy who was refused rounded up his friends to either beat or rape the girl.

> What happens when his girlfriend refuses to sleep with him?
> He beats her.
> He forces or drags [rapes] her.
> He looks for many boys to carry her to their place. (NyanzaGirls9: 577–596)

And boys were known to threaten girls if they told anyone they had been raped.

> After raping her he tells her that if she ever tells somebody, he will do something bad to her. (NyanzaGirls16: 438–439)

Pressure and force

In focus group discussions, it was clear that the meaning of force was multifaceted and ambiguous, that there were many sources of force, and that both girls and boys felt forced

to engage in sex. Boys felt forced by their sexual urges, their peers and by what they perceived to be the expectations of girls and of their parents and community. Girls felt forced by material needs, their peers, requirements of reciprocity and familial obligations, and by the actions of boys. These beliefs were confirmed in interviews with adults from the same communities, in the presentation of these interpretations to groups of Kenyan adults, and to young people in follow-up focus groups.

Persistent across focus group discussions (and in interviews with adults) was the assertion that boys could not control their sexual urges when they reached adolescence. Boys and girls alike maintained that these urges forced boys to play sex.

> When he is in puberty stage it forces him beyond control … He cannot be patient to wait or stop to play sex because when he has reached that age it forces him. (NyanzaBoys7: 283–291)

Beliefs about negative consequences of remaining abstinent were numerous. Boys, for example, expressed concern that if they were not involved in playing sex at a young age they would not be able to impregnate a wife when married.

> Boys believe that if they don't play sex now when they will be married they will be unable … some also think that if they start now when they are young their sperms will mature and … they can be able to make someone pregnant. (NyanzaBoys12: 769–774)

The fear of being excluded, stigmatized and rejected by their peers for refusing to play sex was also interpreted as forcing boys to play sex. Boys described being taunted by both their male and female peers.

> He is a weakling if he refuses sex but the girl wanted [offered].
> He does not want this nice things or behaviours.
> They may insult him.
> It means that you are weak and you do not even know how to talk to a girl.
> *Q*: Apart from weakling, what else they [his peers] might say?
> That you are impotent, castrated.
> They may stop you from hanging with them, they may beat you, ask you how can we give you a girl and you refuse? (NyanzaBoys13: 541–550)

All of these factors worked against a boy refusing or abstaining from playing sex. In only a very few focus groups did boys acknowledge possible methods that could be used to resist sexual urges.

> Just get hold of a jembe [a hoe] and dig hard. By the time you are through with digging the sex feelings will have disappeared. (NyanzaBoys11: 587–592)

Most often, however, boys were clear, and adults typically agreed with them, that a combination of physical and social factors 'forced' them to play sex and that most of them had no choice or control.

Factors that were described as forcing girls to play sex were similar to those of boys with the addition of the need for material goods for self and family. Once girls were past puberty, they were physiologically ready and *should* play sex.

> *Q*: What kind of things can pressure young people to play sex?
> Adolescence stage … they now feel … I am a girl my hips have grown, I have breasts so what else is remaining let me have it. (NyanzaGirls3: 712–718)

Beliefs that a girl must be sexually active or her 'vagina will be blocked' reinforced the sense that puberty marked readiness for sex. These, together with the possibility of gifts or money, and boys' promises and threats, combined to make girls feel it was impossible to abstain or refuse.

> If you do not … [have a boyfriend your friend will not] … want to walk with you. Then if a boy wants you or proposes, you readily accept. (NyanzaGirls4: 478–484)

Age and gender norms

Age and gender norms figured prominently in young people's sexual scripts. Eleven to fifteen years of age was cited repeatedly as the 'natural' and expected age for initiation of both dating and playing sex. Boyfriends were at least two, and more often four or more, years older than their girlfriends.

The age difference related to the roles and expectations of boys and girls in the scripting of sex. Girls described older boys and men as better partners because they were a dependable source of financial support and more accommodating of a girl's needs than same-age peers. Boys described younger girls as better because they were 'fresh', innocent, and unknowing, all of which have been identified as desirable characteristics in a woman in much of sub-Saharan Africa (Ulin 1992). Younger girls were also described as unable to 'think far' and quick to give in to sexual persuasion or small gifts.

> Let us say I am older and my girlfriend is in class 4 or 5, now she will just follow my order. (NyanzaBoys8: 184–185)

> A younger girlfriend is easy to convince and can easily get persuaded into playing sex. She can easily get convinced through gifts. (RiftBoys11: 208–210)

Girls reported little or no control over how, when and where playing sex occurred. Boys viewed girls as readily available to satisfy their sexual needs. They felt playing sex was their duty, an expectation of their friends, kin and society. Girls described sex as just an ordinary part of life, an obligation to boys and men.

Boys' expectations of an available and compliant partner were evident in their rejection of sex with adult women. Although women were seen as potentially more enticing, boys were uncomfortable because they lacked power and control over these sexual encounters.

> She [older woman] grooms herself in a manner that when you look at her you just accept. (NyanzaBoys12: 253–254)

Women were also considered less able to provide physical pleasure because their vaginas were wider and looser; something considered less satisfying in a culture where 'tight women' and 'dry sex' were valued (Brown *et al.* 1993).

> The one who is older now has been opened … Maybe someone else has already played sex with her and opened her up … some people like those who are not opened, they are the ones to open for themselves. (NyanzaBoys12: 200–209)

These gender roles were deeply embedded within the cultural norms in all four of the ethnic groups represented in this research. While there were some differences across the

groups, in all cases, gender roles dictated differences in mobility, economic access, sexual power and agency, family responsibilities, and personal resources. Each of these intersected with the scripting of sexual encounters. Mobility, for example, was tolerated, and at times required, for boys, yet forbidden for girls. Girls were kept close to home and worked in the family compound. Boys' activities were away from home (e.g., tending grazing animals) and often with groups of peers (e.g., team sports).

There is an interesting paradox here. Girls were contained to protect them from playing sex and pregnancy. Their containment meant they had no way to earn money. Boys were not contained, and consequently, had money from jobs. Girls' only access to money was from boys and men. These boys and men expected them to play sex in exchange for this money. Consequently, the containment to protect girls from sex actually induced them to play sex.

Discussion and conclusions

Young people in this study organized their knowledge of sexual behaviour according to a temporally ordered script grounded in the social, cultural and interpersonal norms and contexts of their present lives and the traditional scripting of male-female sexual relations. The script described by young people in this study closely paralleled the script reported by young people elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Ankomah 1999, Dowsett and Aggleton 1999, MacPhail and Campbell 2001, Nyanzi *et al.* 2000, WHO 1992). It also resembled aspects of the traditional adult system of sexuality. Common across cultural groups in a number of African cultures are: the belief that sexual release is natural and necessary once sexual maturity is reached; the market-like nature of the exchange with a focus on material gain for girls and social and sexual gain for boys; a discourse of force where physical force is intertwined with and undifferentiated from social and biological pressure; and the absence of an overt discourse of sex for pleasure, fulfilment, or emotional bonding (Ankomah 1999, Luke and Kurz 2002, MacPhail and Campbell 2001, Meekers and Calves 1997, Nnko and Pool 1997, Nzyuko *et al.* 1997).

There was also an intermingling of traditional and contemporary views of sexuality. Traditionally puberty marked entry into adulthood and readiness for sex, reproduction and marriage. Cultural groups accommodated the recognition of sexual maturity in various ways. From initiation ceremonies onward young people spent most of their time in same-sex, age-mate groups. This relative segregation from the opposite sex also helped to forestall early sexual liaisons. For girls, the time between sexual maturity and marriage was relatively short. Boys were more likely to postpone marriage until they were more economically secure, but often had culturally sanctioned access to sexual partners prior to marriage. Today, prolonged education and economic changes has led to postponing marriage and the creation of adolescence. Schools place girls and boys in close proximity and, as several community leaders, teachers and parents noted, they created a situation where non-marital, sexual liaisons are likely. The belief that puberty 'awakens sexual desire' continues to dominate. The traditional norms and procedures for accommodating that desire are only practiced by a minority. Western images of companionate, romantic, love relationships mingle with beliefs that sexual desires cannot, and, for many, should not be contained. Traditional expectations of a bridewealth have become gift-giving to gain sexual access. Girls speak of being 'worth something' and expecting to receive something.

Considering the nature and patterns of sexual interaction described here, it is not surprising that approaches to HIV prevention that assume personal control of rational

decision-making have had little demonstrated impact in SSA (Gallant and Maticka-Tyndale 2004). The results of this research highlight the complexity of sexual interaction and support the contention that HIV prevention programmes need to pay attention to cultural forces, social norms and patterns, situational factors, gender roles, and the perception that sexual encounters are impulsive and physiologically driven (e.g., Amaro 1995, Dowsett and Aggleton 1999, Gausset 2001). Strategies to deconstruct the sexual script, revealing sexual encounters to be socially grounded and modifiable, and highlighting examples of young people who have activated alternative scripts may provide a mechanism to help identify junctures where the script can be redirected to curtail transmission and acquisition of HIV.

There was evidence in focus group discussions that young people are open to deconstructing and redirecting their sexual scripts. Girls in one focus group rejected the biological necessity of playing sex, repeating what they had learned from a teacher that, 'Boyfriends and sex are not like air. They are not necessary to life'. In several instances young people spoke of strategies to avoid situations that were scripted as leading to sexual encounters. These strategies included engaging in activities that kept them away from sexually charged situations (i.e., situations where sexual contacts were common). Adult supervised sports, drama, debating and clubs were prominent examples of activities which were not sexually charged and were contrasted with going to the market, beach, or movies. Girls spoke of going places in groups to avoid both casual, unplanned sexual encounters, and rape. Religion and the beliefs and activities associated with an active religious life were discussed as providing alternative interpretations of adolescence, gender roles, and life goals, as well as providing activities which were consistent with abstinence from playing sex.

The 'force' of economic need and girls' dependence on boys to meet their material desires and needs was recognized as problematic. Some young people (and adults) spoke of a need to create alternative methods for income generation, especially for girls. Others spoke of encouraging an evaluation of virginity and celibacy as worth far more than what boys could offer in exchange.

In most focus groups, young people were already sceptical about common cultural beliefs that 'a girl's vagina will be blocked' or a 'boy's sperm will be destroyed' if they do not play sex soon after puberty. They expressed doubts about such beliefs, but were not prepared to reject them outright. The recitation of such beliefs by adults as well as young people demonstrated how embedded they were in local cultures. Culturally appropriate use of media, involvement of opinion leaders and community members who are considered to have authoritative knowledge, have been useful in helping to dispel similar local myths in some countries and could prove effective here (e.g., Maticka-Tyndale *et al.* 1994)

There are limitations to this, as to all, research. Findings here represent the experiences of young people from four ethnic groups and two major regions of Kenya. The young people who chose to participate were outspoken about their sexuality and experiences. This is unusual in cultures where such conversations are not common. We expect that our use of same-sex, near-age-mate groups rather than interviews, facilitated the discussions since they approximated the culturally appropriate settings in which sexuality is a topic for discussion. The validation of the scripts described here and the interpretations of what young people said by both adults and young people from the same and from other communities, when they were reflected back to them, contributes to our belief that we have obtained relatively accurate descriptions of young people's experiences. Surveys completed by over 9000 standard 6 and 7 pupils from 220 communities (of which the 22 selected for

more qualitative research approaches are a part), demonstrated that between 30% (in Rift Valley) and 50–56% (girls and boys in Nyanza Province) of young people in these age and school classes were already sexually active (Maticka-Tyndale 2002, Maticka-Tyndale *et al.* 2002b). This suggests that the scripts described are likely to already be the realities of a sizable minority of young people in these regions.

This analysis of focus group discussions with young people has led to the articulation of a sexual script that makes playing sex appear necessary and inevitable for Kenyan young people. Importantly, however, girls do not appear to be as powerless nor do boys appear as powerful as portrayed in some research (e.g., Jejeebhoy and Bott 2003, Mensch *et al.* 1998). Knowledge of the content of the sexual script and the points where alternative directions can be taken provides insights into potential strategies for developing HIV prevention programming. Placing such programming within the context of existing scripts may support young people in developing new normative patterns of sexual encounter which may decrease young peoples' vulnerability to HIV infection.

Notes

1. Playing sex is the term used by adults and youth alike to refer to sexual intercourse.
2. The amount of 200 shillings was well beyond the means of the boys in this group. They made it clear that this figure was merely used to illustrate what girls might want. US$1 is approximately 75 shillings.

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Resumé

L'élaboration de scripts de rencontres sexuelles chez des jeunes kenyans est décrite grâce aux conclusions de 28 groupes focus menés avec des collégiens du niveau le plus élevé de l'école primaire, issus de quatre groupes ethniques et vivant dans 22 communautés différentes. Les rencontres sexuelles étaient décrites à la fois comme terre à terre et inévitables. Les rencontres sexuelles suivaient une séquence d'évènements et d'interactions selon des scripts prédéterminés, dans lesquels filles et garçons avaient des rôles complémentaires. Ces scripts étaient construits au sein de discours de force et de rapports sexuels échangés contre des cadeaux. Le caractère sexué du script et ses fondements sociaux et culturels sont discutés. Des stratégies potentielles d'élaboration de programmes de prévention du VIH sont discutées à partir des scripts sexuels existants.

Resumen

Se describen los patrones sexuales entre jóvenes de Kenya a partir de 28 grupos de discusión llevados a cabo con jóvenes de la escuela primaria (11 a 16 años), de cuatro grupos étnicos diferentes y que viven en 22 comunidades diferentes. Estos jóvenes describieron los encuentros sexuales como triviales e inevitables. Los encuentros siguieron una secuencia predeterminada de acontecimientos e interacciones en los que las chicas y los chicos desempeñaron papeles complementarios. Estos patrones fueron definidos dentro de discursos de fuerza e intercambio de regalos por sexo. Se analiza cómo la naturaleza del patrón se define según el sexo y sus bases sociales y culturales. Se analizan las estrategias potenciales para prevenir el contagio de VIH desde la perspectiva de los patrones sexuales ya existentes.