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"*It's a 50/50 Thing You Know*": Exploring the Multileveled Intersections of Gender and Power Within the Relationships of Young South African Men and Women

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to advance sexual health globally require greater understandings of youth intimate relationship dynamics. Among 38 South African youth (21 women/17 men aged 21–30 from Durban and Soweto) we conducted qualitative cognitive interviews to explore how gender and power intersect to shape intimate relationship dynamics (October 2019-March 2021). Participants discussed perceptions and relevance of each of 13 items comprising the Sexual Relationship Power (SRP) scale, a widely used measure of gender equity, and the influence of SRP on youth sexual health. Data analysis was guided by constructivist grounded theory. The findings were organized using the socio-ecological model, revealing how gender and power intersected at multiple levels to influence youth intimate relationships. Key influencing factors included individual-level gender attitudes, male partner expectations, and women's resistance to dominance; intimate relationship-level power dynamics, consent, and intimacy; family-level household configurations and parental monitoring of daughters; and societal-level traditional gender norms. At all levels, women discussed resisting power inequities through communication and rejection of inequitable relationships. While men also displayed resistance to inequitable power structures, most upheld traditional gender norms through institutional affiliation (e.g. church) and deep-rooted socialized beliefs and attitudes. Efforts to improve youth sexual health require multileveled approaches that address inequitable power dynamics.

Introduction

Adolescence and young adulthood is a transitional time where relationship formation and sexual initiation can introduce sexual and reproductive health (SRH) challenges, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, unwanted pregnancies, and gender-based violence that have implications across the life course (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2021). SRH challenges faced by youth are highly gendered and contextual. For example, in settings with generalized HIV epidemics, such as South Africa, young Black women aged 15–24 continue to face the highest HIV incidence rates than any other age group (1.5% or 66,200 new infections in 2017), with rates three times greater than young men their same age (Simbayi et al., 2019). Beyond HIV, young women in South Africa further experience high sustained incidence of STIs (Kaida et al., 2018) and intimate partner violence (IPV). For example, the 2016 Community Survey found that 15.1% of women aged 18–24 reported any IPV in the last 12 months (National Department of Health, 2019). Moreover, in 2016, 16% of women aged 15–19 had begun childbearing, which has remained unchanged since 1998 despite ongoing efforts to address and improve SRH outcomes for young women. In 2016, women <20 years old were also the most likely age group to report a mistimed birth (64%).

Efforts to advance SRH among youth have historically focused on individual-level programming aimed at sexual behavior change (e.g., sexual abstinence, avoiding multipartners, and condom use) through targets to increase knowledge, and affect attitudes, beliefs, and perceived behavioral control (e.g., self-efficacy) (Closson et al., 2018). Individual-level approaches to prevention do not situate young women within broader relationship dynamics and socio-structural forces (e.g., male partners, parents, institutions, and social norms) that impact their SRH decision-making (Closson et al., 2018; Pulerwitz et al., 2019). This is problematic as SRH challenges experienced by young women interact to exacerbate one another and are fueled by other intersecting factors, including low sexual relationship power (SRP) equity, which inhibits young women from enacting sexual and reproductive agency and decision-making (R. Jewkes et al., 2010; R. Jewkes, 2010). Given these limitations, starting in the mid-late 2000s, feminists, HIV researchers, advocates, and policy makers began to focus attention on "gender transformative" research and prevention efforts that aimed to broaden the scope of SRH efforts beyond individual-level factors (Dworkin, Treves-Kagan et al., 2013; Gibbs et al., 2017; Horgan et al., 2020; Pederson et al., 2015). Much of this work has been influenced by Connell's Theory of Gender and Power which posits that men and

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women develop identities in response to the hierarchical nature of society and hegemonic masculinity that dominates within the context of interest, in turn creating inequitable power dynamics in relationships between men and women (Connell, 1987). The goal of gender transformative programming is to shift engrained socially accepted rules that shape men and women's behaviors and interactions (gender norms) to improve gender relations and in turn the health and well-being of young women and men (Gupta et al., 2019). To date, much gender transformative programming has focused on working with young men to shift gender beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate men's behaviors (e.g., violence, substance use, and multiple concurrent partnerships) that affect young women's SRH outcomes (Casey et al., 2018; Dunkle & Jewkes, 2007; Dworkin, Treves-Kagan et al., 2013), with some programming and research also working with young women to shift their own gender beliefs and attitudes (Ozler et al., 2020; Pederson et al., 2015). However, limited research and programming has included both young women and men to explore gender differences in contemporary gender norms that ultimately impact youth relationship dynamics, sexual decision-making, and SRH outcomes. Moreover, many of the frameworks for evaluating and understanding the theory of change behind existing gender transformative interventions have been developed in the Global North. As such, additional empirical studies that are grounded in community-based approaches are needed to test and expand upon existing frameworks that seek to understand how an intersecting web of factors including social systems, power, and identity influence young women and men's SRH decision-making, behaviors, and outcomes within Global South settings such as South Africa (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2021).

Using cognitive interviews to explore youth perceptions of the SRP scale, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how gender and power intersect to shape youth relationship dynamics that affect SRH outcomes in South Africa today.

Method

Research Paradigm and Theoretical Framework

Transformative paradigm This study was undertaken with transformative epistemologies that acknowledge knowledge is socially and historically located (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2007). The research questions and strategies arose from a lack of narrative to understand the nuances and broader living reality of youth and their intimate relationships. Through a transformative interpretive framework, we sought to reflect upon not only the emerging data but situating it within the historical legacies of the locations in which we conducted the research. This study was also grounded in Connell's Theory of Gender and Power (Connell, 1987) which guided the research questions and study methodology.

Further underpinning the methods, analysis, and data interpretation undertaken in this study was an explicit acknowledgment of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of youth (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 1999), which articulate the right to control one's body, desires, and experiences, including freedom from all forms of sexual or reproductive coercion and harm, freedom to enjoy all modes of sexual expression, including pleasure and satisfaction, without discrimination of any kind, and the right to access information, education, supplies and services necessary to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives (World Assocaition for Sexual Health, 2014). Finally, this study adhered to community-based research principles, whereby members of affected communities (in this case youth) are engaged as equal partners throughout the design, implementation, and dissemination of activities. As described in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, meaningful youth engagement is essential to fulfill youth's right to "freely express their views on topics that affect them, and to have those views listened to" (DFID-CSO Youth Working Group, 2011; Gleeson et al., 2018).

Positionality

The lead author on this work KC is a white Canadian woman, and while she strives to practice allyship in her work, and to ensure the research and data is youth-engaged, she acknowledges that she will never be an expert on challenges facing Black South African youth today. This study was situated within a research program that has been established through a long-standing South African–Canadian partnership, which has been working to establish capacity for research that is done by, with, and for youth disproportionately impacted by HIV and gender inequities that drive the disproportionate burden of SRH inequities among young women. This study was done in close collaboration with two youth researchers CZ and MK. At the time of data collection and analysis CZ was a 27-year-old Black Zimbabwean PhD Student residing in South Africa, and MK was 23-year-old Black Zimbabwean residing in South Africa who had recently completed her honor's thesis.

Study Setting

Youth growing up in modern day South Africa have spent their whole lives in a post-apartheid democratic South Africa. However, despite apartheid ending in 1994, post-colonial and apartheid inequities (e.g., high unemployment, poverty) continue to shape the ways in which young men and women form and experience identities and in turn intimate relationships (Hunter, 2010). This study took place in Durban and Soweto, South Africa, two urban sites situated within KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Gauteng provinces, respectively, and home to the highest proportion of youth aged 18–34 (>35% of the population in 2018) (Statistics South Africa, 2019). In the 2016 demographic health survey, despite having the highest HIV prevalence (30% overall, 37% among women, and 22% among women aged 15–24), the proportion of women who knew where to get an HIV test was lower in KZN than any other province. Moreover, in Gauteng a high proportion of women reported being unable to refuse unwanted sex (35%) or ask their partner to use a condom (26%), and men had the highest mean number of lifetime partners (23.5) than any other province (National Department of Health, 2019). As such these two sites are particularly relevant for understanding the role of

gender and power on youth relationship dynamics that affect SRH outcomes.

Study Design

This study used cognitive interviews to explore participant perceptions of a 13-item SRP scale (with a 4-point Likert-type scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) modified for use among South African youth (Closson et al., 2019). The modified SRP scale was adapted for use in an intervention called "Stepping Stones" conducted among South African youth aged 15–24 in 2006 (R. K. Jewkes et al., 2002; R. Jewkes 2006). However, no published documentation exists on the adaptation process for the widely used South African youth adaptation of the SRP scale, hence motivating our study. Cognitive interviews are typically used to collect participant perceptions, interpretations, and understandings of quantitative survey items (Beatty & Willis, 2007). This form of interviewing is more structured than traditional in-depth interviewing, whereby participants answer survey scale items, and then expand on reasons for their answer and more generally perceptions of scale items, allowing researchers to collect shadow data about social norms related to the construct of interest (Morse, 2015b). By centering participants' perceptions cognitive interviewing has been highlighted as an important tool for community engagement in global health survey development (Scott, Gharai et al., 2020; Scott, LeFevre et al., 2020; Scott, Ummer et al., 2021).

Participant Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited from a youth-centered interdisciplinary, prospective cohort study (2014–2017) entitled "AYAZAZI" conducted in Durban and Soweto, South Africa. "ZAZI" means knowing themselves in Zulu, and AYA represents adolescents and young adults. AYAZAZI has been previously described (Closson et al., 2019; Kaida et al., 2018). In brief, the original study enrolled 425 participants aged 16–24 at baseline (60% female) with a 92.2% retention rate over 12 months. Participants who were sexually active and who identified having a primary sexual partner responded to the SRP scale at 6- and 12-months. AYAZAZI participants consented to being contacted for follow-up research up to 6 years after the completion of the study. AYAZAZI and all subsequent follow-up studies have been conducted under a youth engagement framework, which prioritizes youth-friendly spaces, meaningfully involves youth in all stages of the research process, and trains all staff in youth-adult allyship.

Starting in October 2019, using data from the 6- and 12-month AYAZAZI questionnaire, participants from the original AYAZAZI study were invited to participate in this follow-up qualitative study using purposive and convenience sampling. AYAZAZI participants were sampled from previous participants to ensure a range of perspectives by site, age, and gender. In total, data saturation on themes related to the factors impacting youth relationship dynamics was achieved with 38 (10 young women and 10 young men from Durban and 11 young women and 7 young men from Soweto) previous participants of AYAZAZI, which is in line with estimates of sample size required for grounded theory (Morse, 2015a).

Participants were eligible for this follow-up study if they had previously taken part in the AYAZAZI study, provided written or oral informed consent, and were currently or had recently been in an intimate relationship. As this follow-up study was conducted 4–6 years after the baseline AYAZAZI data collection the age of participants eligible for this study ranged from 20 to 30 years old. Any participant who was not currently in a relationship but who felt they could speak to their most recent relationship as part of the cognitive interview was eligible for participation.

Data Collection

Cognitive interviews took place between October 2019-December 2020 in Durban and December 2020-April 2021 in Soweto. Data collection took longer than anticipated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, because of COVID-19 restrictions and safety precautions cognitive interviews shifted from in-person to telephonic in September 2020.

Wherever possible the study procedures aimed to be youth-engaged. While the budget and timelines for this project did not allow for a new hiring process that would allow youth interviewers to conduct all the cognitive interviews, two of the interviewers were youth trainees at the Perinatal HIV Research Unit (PHRU) in Soweto, which provided a strong youth voice to the project. The two youth interviewers were also vital to the data analysis, interpretation, and dissemination and are coauthors on this manuscript (CZ & MK).

Youth and adult-ally research staff trained in cognitive interviewing methods as well as standard qualitative data methods (e.g., in-depth interviewing techniques) conducted cognitive interviews with gender-matched participants. Cognitive interview guides were developed and piloted with AYAZAZI study staff and asked participants to answer the 13-items in the SRP scale (Supplementary Table S1). Using qualitative interviewing techniques, participants were then asked to give their responses to each item aloud, express their understanding of each item, and state if and how each item was relevant to their own relationship. Results on youth perceptions of the scale have been reported elsewhere (Closson et al., 2022). After the interviewer went through all 13 items, participants were then asked an open-ended question regarding their perceptions of if and how SRP, controlling behaviors, and gender inequity influences sexual decision-making in their relationships. This question was challenging for participants to answer, and so interviewers also probed participants to discuss the role of power inequities, or gender inequity more generally in youth relationships (Morse, 2015b). Throughout the interviews, additional probing and shadow data were collected as we learned from the data, which allowed for participants to discuss the experience of SRP beyond their own experiences, and provided data on youth relationship norms (Morse, 2015b). For example, interviewers may have probed participants who answered that they did not feel power inequities affected sexual decision-making in their own relationships to speak to whether they felt gender and power inequities affected the relationships of their peers.

After each interview, interviewers asked participants how they were feeling and if they wanted to be connected to a resource to support any negative emotions or issues that emerged. Participants requesting these resources were provided a list of free or low-cost counseling and support services and, if necessary, were followed up by a social worker at the research site. Interviews were audio-recorded, conducted in English, isiZulu, Sotho, or a combination, as per the participants' preference, and ranged from 20 to 90 minutes in length. Participants were provided 120ZAR ($10CAD) as an honorarium for their time. Interviews were translated where required and transcribed verbatim and checked by another study staff member for accuracy. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo R1 for data analysis (Ltd, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed as they were collected to continually reevaluate emerging findings. Data analysis was guided by Charmaz' constructivist grounded theory approach and constant comparative techniques that inductively generated codes and themes from the data, while concurrently deductively comparing themes to existing theories on gender and power (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). A pragmatic approach to data analysis was utilized to ensure meaningful youth engagement by addressing and accommodating differing skill levels between members of the coding team (KC, CZ, and MK). Table 1 summarizes the multipronged pragmatic approach to ensuring rigor in the data. In order to become familiar with the data, following each interview, the interviewer provided a summary of the interview, and highlighted their general perceptions of the interview (Morse, 2008). Initial line-by-line coding was done by KC as interviews were being completed. In weekly or biweekly team meetings the interviews and initial codes were discussed at length and additional codes were added throughout the data collection process. The coding team worked together to co-code, double-code, and have in-depth discussions around inductive and deductive codes and emerging themes with randomly selected transcripts. This collaborative approach allowed for an iterative coding process, whereby disagreements to coding were discussed at length and helped to inform the development of the coding frame, overarching themes, and interpretation of the data (Barbour, 2003). During regular meetings and co-coding sessions, emerging themes and sub-themes were discussed, and interconnected concepts explored.

As each member of the coding team brought a diverse and unique perspective to the conversation, this allowed for a rich and dynamic data analysis process. Throughout the data analysis process the coding team reflected on how their positionality and unique worldviews may have impacted the interpretation of the results (Chepp & Gray, 2014). Throughout these sessions the team used abductive reasoning to think through any unanswered or unexplained observations. Conversations about power, gender, and relationship dynamics from each of the three authors' worldviews were shared and discussed to shape the narrative and theoretical framework of the emerging data.

Table 1. Steps for ensuring rigor in the data.

Phase of Analysis	Steps to ensure rigor
(1) Familiarization with the data	• The analysis plan was collaboratively developed by team members in Canada and South Africa. • At least two team members read through all transcripts and discussed findings, with selected transcripts read by all team members. • A summary was developed for each transcript and reviewed by all team members. • Initial reflections about potential codes and themes were recorded.
(2) Generating initial codes	• Codes were developed by the team as they emerged from the data. • Regular team meetings were held to discuss the analysis process and encourage reflexivity.
(3) Searching for themes	• Randomly selected transcripts were double-coded or co-coded as a team. • During regular meetings and co-coding sessions emerging themes and sub-themes were discussed, and interconnected concepts explored.
(4) Reviewing themes and peer review	• Transcripts were re-read to verify themes. • In weekly team meetings with the global team, codes were revised and grouped into one or more themes. • Data were presented to multiple audiences for peer-review and to ensure credibility and confirmability of the data.
(5) Community debriefing	• Themes were compared with themes identified by members of the adolescent community advisory board as part of a community debriefing and knowledge translation and exchange event
(6) Defining and naming themes	• Meetings were held with the global team to refine and discuss the interpretation and definition of concepts related to themes and sub-themes. • Codes were then categorized under themes and sub-themes within the socio-ecological model.
(7) Producing the report	• The team ensures that the analysis process is described in detail, including reasons for methodological and analytical choices, and that descriptions of context is included in all reports.

Codes were summarized as a team and emerging themes were presented to several audiences to receive peer-review feedback and gain greater insight into the implications and interpretations of the data across multiple global contexts. This included a student group in Canada, a South African-based research group comprised of students and faculty interested in gender equity and health, as well as an adolescent community advisory board (ACAB) in Soweto at the PHRU (Closson et al., 2021a; Closson et al., 2021b). The ACAB, established in 2006, is comprised of solely youth representatives aged 17–24, and is responsible for evaluating the impact of the PHRU's adolescent research studies on local community and serving as a voice for both the community and study participants. The workshop with 17 members (9 young women and 7 young men) of the ACAB was used to conduct community debriefing, hear the ACAB's perspectives of the SRP scale, as well as to compare themes identified by the ACAB with themes emerging from our data. Together, these presentations provided opportunities for greater data synthesis and an iterative approach to the data analysis where the team met following each presentation to reflect on the implications of the discussions on the emerging results. Across the different presentations and workshops participants related our results to their own living experiences, supporting validity evidence and the broader generalizability of the data (Morse, 2015b).

This work expands upon qualitative work using the cognitive interview data summarizing youth perceptions of the SRP

scale (Closson et al., 2022) to summarize and theorize on how gender and power intersected at multiple levels to influence youth relationships. An integrated socio-ecological model was used to organize the data and themes into multi-leveled factors that interacted with gender and power to influence young women and men's relationships and SRH decision-making at individual, partner, family, and institutional/socio-structural levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Closson et al., 2021).

Ethical Considerations

All identifying features of the interviews were removed during transcription and audio-recordings were kept in a locked cabinet at the study sites for the duration of the study. The AYAZAZI study and this qualitative sub-study were approved by the harmonized research ethics boards of the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University (H19–00762) and the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa (Ref 140707).

Results

Participant Characteristics

Participants ranged from 21 to 30 years of age (median age = 24). Over half of participants were isiZulu speaking, in a relationship for ≥2 years, and with a partner that was similar in age to them. Three participants (7.9%) identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Table 2).

Overview

Youth responses to items in the SRP scale and open-ended questions about the role of SRP on sexual decision-making raised discussions on individual-level perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of oneself and/or partner that shape and were shaped by norms and behaviors in young people's intimate relationships. These interactions were discussed in the context of overarching family dynamics and larger institutional and socio-structural drivers that ultimately influenced all aspects of youth relationships. Using an integrated socio-ecological model we examined how gender and power dynamics influence young women and men's relationships through a complex array of interconnected factors across individual, intimate relationship, family, and institutional/societal levels (see Figure 1). The figure is encapsulated within male and female symbols to represent how individual level factors are shaped by broader relational and societal levels which are all overarchingly impacted by gender and power. Below we present the main themes that emerged at each level and discuss findings by gender, age, and relationship factors where applicable.

Societal Levels: Institutions, Norms, Roles, and Tradition

Societal institutions, gender norms, roles, tradition, and how young men and women form identities within these societal structures overarchingly influenced all aspects of young women and men's relationships.

Gender and power within schools, churches, and health-care facilities.

Our study provided unique opportunities for young people to discuss topics that are important to them that do not often get acknowledged in day-to-day interactions and institutions (e.g., schools, churches, health care facilities) that young people engage with. By participating in this study, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their own behaviors, their relationships, and gender power dynamics in society more broadly. One young man from Soweto stated:

> I think you guys have done a very great job regarding coming up with good questions. [. . .] Because during the . . . , let's say at school, we never get to be asked those questions. [. . .] And those questions has a reality that we need in relationships. [. . .] So that's why, that's why we . . . , you see the manner in which you asked me these questions It's gonna make me a better person in future. [. . .] I will tell you why I say so. [. . .] It's because of now I see that

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants in qualitative SRP overall and by gender (n = 38).

	Overall	Women (n=21)	Men (n=17)
Site			
Durban	18 (47.4)	10 (47.6)	10 (58.8)
Soweto	20 (52.6)	11 (52.4)	7 (41.2)
Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual	35 (92.1)	18 (85.7)	17 (100.0)
Lesbian, gay, or bisexual	3 (7.9)	3 (14.3)	0 (0.0)
Language			
IsiZulu	23 (60.5)	13 (61.9)	10 (58.8)
Other	15 (39.5)	8 (38.1)	7 (41.2)
Relationship Length			
<2 years	9 (29.0)	4 (21.1)	5 (41.7)
≥2 years	18 (58.1)	11 (57.9)	7 (58.3)
Not in a relationship	4 (12.9)	4 (21.0)	0
Missing	7	2	5
Partner age difference			
Age similar (within 5 years of age from each other)	15 (57.7)	5 (31.3)	10 (100.0)
≥5 years older	7 (26.9)	7 (43.7)	0 (0.0)
Not in a relationship	4 (15.4)	4 (25.0)	0 (0.0)
Missing	12	5	7

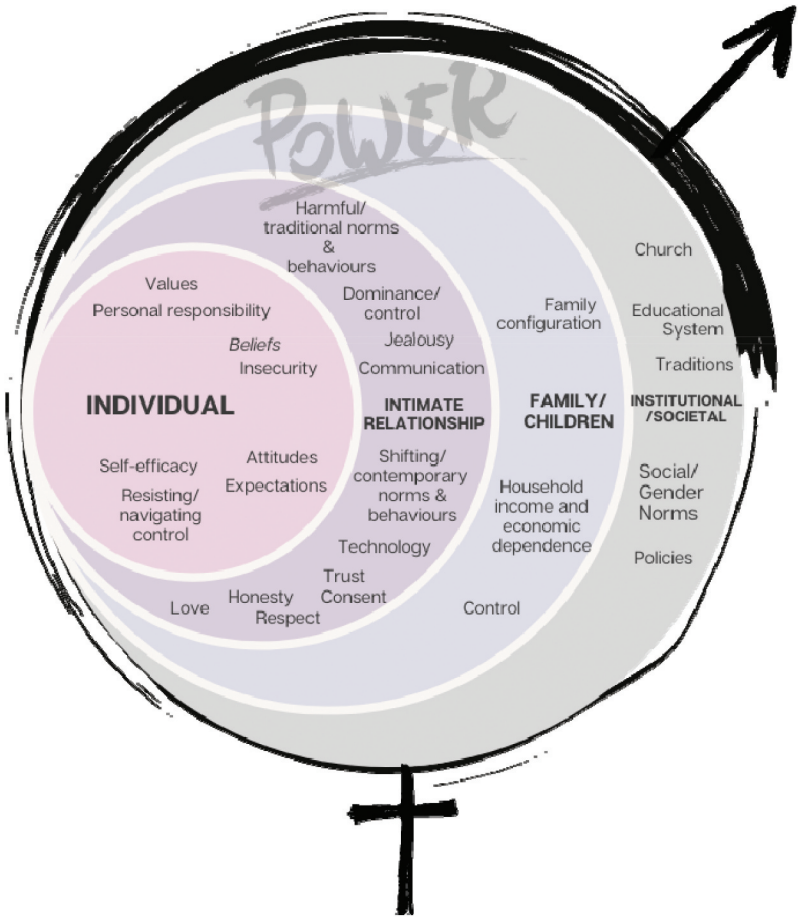


Figure 1. Factors affecting youth relationship dynamics at multiple levels of influence and overarchingly impacted by gender and power.

> violence is rife. [. . .] A man beats up his wife it's because he does not know how to handle a certain type of a person. [. . .] So these questions say if your partner does not like this type of a thing, but you keep on doing it, it means you are disrespecting her and pushing her to the edge to do things that she does not want to do [. . .] Yes, so if you have a knowledge about how a woman or a man behaves in a relationship, things go accordingly. – **Participant 4, <25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, age similar partner**

Engaging young men through research provided a well-received opportunity to reflect on power dynamics, consent, and sexual decision-making in relationships between men and women. After being asked about his thoughts about the interview one young man from Durban stated:

> I think it is very important and informative because it wants to know and making us aware that there are things that we do that most of the time as guys we get away with, but when you have a second look at them, you have realized that actually they are not good, like being dominant of forcing someone to sleep with you even when they do not want to on that particular day and then also with this spread of gender based violence. It starts from here when we are not aware that you want to be bossy and your partner does not want to do things, like you want to have sex with your partner and then she does not want to have sex with you and then you end up saying why are you refusing, you are seeing another man, jealousy arises and all those kinds of things. So, they are very, very relevant and informative questions- **Participant 67, <25 years old, relationship <2 years, age similar partner**

Without the influence and opportunity to have discussions around these important topics in educational or household settings, young women and men may form beliefs and identities regarding relationships through other societal structures and institutions that enforce traditional views of gender roles. For example, religion and the church were discussed by some young men when describing partner expectations and gendered roles within their relationships. For example, one young man from Soweto when discussing his expectations for his wife stated:

> Ahh before, years back, she was not the understanding the thing of the ministry [church] up until I had to introduce her on how to dress in the ministry rather than going to search for another wife, I had to train the one that I have already then I trained her. So, I explained to her that in the ministry this is how you should be wearing, this is how you have to dress, you have to dress yourself so that you can be approachable also, so she had to understand that, but after that now we are in a good eh, good terms, everything goes well, I am very impressed. -**Participant 3, <25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, age similar partner**

This quote highlights how the church advantages men and often promotes patriarchal practices. Practices include normalizing male dominance and control over decision-making such as how a woman should dress and encouraging submissive behaviors among women starting at an early age.

Societal Gendered Power Dynamics.

Overarchingly, male partner control was also discussed in relation to forms of masculine identity and beliefs about gender roles by young men and how these engrained gender norms

and masculine identities influenced the individual-level expectations, beliefs, and attitudes in young men's relationship. For example, one young man in Durban stated:

> But, ahh, as you know I am black and I am a Zulu man, and that is what I am used to, even though I am not married to her as yet, but I do expect her to do things like make me breakfast when I wake up when I am with her or if she is ironing her clothes as well not because I have to go somewhere and she has to iron for me but if she is busy with it, she might as well iron my clothes as well, for example. – **Participant 13, <25 years old, relationship length and age difference unknown**

This quote highlights how young men may not have strict expectations within the current configuration of their household and relationship dynamics, but that these may become more engrained once he has paid lobola (bride price) for his partner.

Social norms that subordinate women removed some young women's ability to enact agency in their relationships. Young women spoke of the influence of engrained patriarchal gender norms on their partners' expectations and how this resulted in dominance and inequitable dynamics in their relationships. This was especially true for younger aged women in long-term relationships with older men, especially if children were involved. For example, one young woman from Soweto stated:

> Ehh you see when we were staying together and I am not working, he is the one that works, so like he expects me to do everything here in the household since I am not working, ja. [. . .] He is also expecting that when he comes back from work, he cannot expect me to tell him that he must cook, so I am the one who has to cook, I am the one who has to clean, I am the one who does the washing for him and make sure that everything is under control. - **Participant 91, <25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, partner ≥5 years older**

This quote highlights how gendered household expectations by male partners may be intertwined within and perpetrated by gendered financial imbalances in relationships, whereby women who are more financially dependent on their partners expressed pressure and were acquiescent to traditional gender roles in their relationships.

Family Dynamics and Children

Young women and men's relationship dynamics and behaviors were influenced by other relationships and commitments including family, mainly parents, and having children.

Family members' influence on youth relationship interactions.

Because most of the participants were not married and were not living with their partners, they often spoke about some items in the SRP scale not being applicable to them because of their family configuration. Family members', especially parents continued to influence the ways in which they could interact with their partners. For example, one young man in Durban in response to the item "*I expect my partner to do things for me like ironing and cooking*" stated:

> Ehm . . . because right now we are not in some sort of ahh, what do I call this, she is not my wife, jah and I still live under my, I still live under my parents' guidance, so, she would not be in any position like that, even if I wanted her to do that. So, she would not be able to do that under my parents' home, so, jah. Maybe if I had my own place, maybe I would have been happier. Maybe I would be more comfortable to ask her to do those things for me, but for now, no. – **Participant 18, ≥25 years old, relationship length and age difference unknown**

Even into participants' late 20s, family configuration and household dynamics continued to influence the ways in which young men and women could interact with one another.

Parental control and monitoring of daughters.

While control and dominance were often a concern for young women in sexual relationships, some young women also spoke of experiencing control and dominance from both partners and parents: For example, one young woman from Soweto stated:

> You know when I'm with him that side, my mother would ask him about me or asking me how did I wake, how did we sleep, how is the baby and stuff like that and I have tried to address the situation to the both of them, but they just didn't care, they are still doing it. If we have problems, he tells my mother that eh we fought about this and that and I would say no, don't do that I don't like it, do not tell my mother, [. . .] Ehm ehm, eh I would say my mother, I would say that eh my mother wants him to control me when I'm that side and then he wants my mother to control me when I am that side, I would say -**Participant 44, <25 years old, partner ≥5 years older**

Children and controlling relationships.

This young woman also spoke about how this situation was particularly challenging because she had a child with her partner. Children and unhealthy relationships/controlling behaviors were often spoken about together. For example, when answering the SRP scale item "*I could leave our relationship if I wanted to*," one young woman from Soweto stated:

> Agree 'cause I don't wanna . . . , for now I would say agree on that one because ehh I can't just decide that I want to move or leave because of my son, because all the decisions that I take it depends, I think it would depend on all the situation, the reason why I want to leave but I always think of him, I would think of him, if I had any reason first before I can but just mostly because of him. - **Participant 111, ≥25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, partner ≥5 years older**

While this young woman agreed she could probably leave, there were some clear hesitations because of her son.

Intimate Relationship Dynamics

Conversations raised by answering items in the SRP scale happened most often at the relational level, whereby young women and men reflected on relationship dynamics and the norms and behaviors that shape these dynamics.

Harmful and traditional relationship norms.

As the scale items focused on inequities and power dynamics, many of the conversations highlighted how harmful and traditional relationship norms and behaviors were common and shaped youth's relationships. Young men were more likely to discuss perceptions of their own power and dominance in their relationship, and how this influenced sexual decision-making as well as broader decisions and power dynamics between

themselves and their partners. For example, in responding to how SRP affects sexual decision-making, one young man from Durban discussed his dominance in his relationship stating:

> Being superior, being superior [. . .] gives power, [. . .] what can I say, it gives, you see when I have power to manipulate my partner [. . .] I can be able to fool her and I can fool her then I can be able to have another partner whom I can have sex with you understand, so, we then be affected sexually because I will be having power above her you understand -**Participant 93, <25 years old, relationship length unknown, age similar partner**

Responses to how SRP inequities affect sexual decision-making were often discussed more broadly about participants' peers or relationship norms in their communities. Young women also spoke of how dominance and control impacted their own relationships and agency in the relationship; however, this was rarely specific to sexual decision-making. For example, one young woman from Soweto in response to the sexual relationship power-scale item "*When my partner and I disagree, he gets his way most of the time*" stated:

> I strongly agree [. . .] because he always gets what he wants every time, he always makes the decisions and I get to say nothing. -**Participant 14, ≥25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, age similar partner**

Shifting power dynamics, consent, and sex positive/supportive relationships.

While the items in the SRP scale were framed most often to explore power inequities and male partner control in youth relationships, responding to the scale items raised several contemporary discussions of shifting power dynamics, consent, and sex positive/supportive relationship qualities that shaped youth relationships. Discussions of shifting gendered power dynamics were raised by some young men who believed that men were becoming less dominant and at times subordinate in their relationships. For example, when discussing the role of control and power on sexual decision-making one young man from Durban stated:

> Ey, it is just that in these times, in older days I would agree, but now a woman is the one leading, she is not longer the assistant. [. . .] She is the one who leads now. If she says no, take that. Why am I saying this? You can have sex with a woman, as a man, even if you are married. If she says no and you force her because she is your wife, she is able to go and open a case against you. So, by law, she is the one who leads now. - **Participant 94, <25 years old, unknown relationship length and partner age difference**

This quote also highlights awareness by younger men regarding the importance of consent within one's relationship as it relates to legal repercussions.

Consent and mutual decision-making were also discussed by young women whereby open and honest communication helped to create supportive relationship dynamics. For example, one young woman in Soweto stated:

> Then we will sit down, and I will tell you my opinion and you will tell me your opinion and if ever it's too much, like they are too different, like we have to come up with something that will accommodate both of us. [. . .] we have to discuss it and reach a mutual decision. -**Participant 9, <25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, partner ≥5 years older**

Social media and trust.

Trust was a key feature for building supportive relationships. However, cellphones and social media were discussed as sources of both breaking and building trust. For example, one young woman from Soweto stated:

> You know ehh, he would give me his phone, to say see, you know, he lets me answer, answer his phone even when it rings, where we are all together, I would say [boyfriend's name] your phone is ringing but he would say answer it, I don't want that, he gives me those ehh ehh what can I say, he gives me those he gives me those platforms, privileges to say go to my phone if you want. – **Participant 44, <25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, partner ≥5 years older**

For this participant, her partner provided access to his cellphone to rebuild trust in their relationship. Other participants also discussed how they discovered infidelity on their partners' phones, thus highlighting how cellphones and social media have raised complex dynamics whereby young people have to navigate the fine line between privacy and secrecy while building trust, honesty, and commitment in their relationships.

Individual Level Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values Influenced Participants' Expectations and Interactions with Their Partners

At the individual level, participants' own attitudes, beliefs, and values influenced their expectations and interactions with and toward their partner. Because the SRP scale asked young men about their perceptions of their own behaviors, whereas young women were asked about their partners' behaviors, individual-level factors were discussed more often among young men. This revealed young men's relationship expectations.

Contrasting male expectations and gender attitudes in relationships.

Within interviews, young men had contrasting expectations, whereby some expected partners to perform and uphold traditional gender roles, while others rejected this, placing the onus on personal responsibility and equality in their relationships. For example, in response to the SRPS item *"I expect my partner to do things for me like my ironing and cooking"*, one young man from Durban stated:

> Ya, to do chores for me, I strongly disagree because [.] I do my own chores, like ironing and cooking, if she wants to do it, it must be her own will to do so, and not because I am expecting her to do so because she is a woman. – **Participant 67, <25 years old, relationship <2 years, age similar**

This quote highlights this participant's value for personal responsibility and demonstrates how personal values, beliefs, and expectations intersect with societal expectations of gender roles, and how this young man felt personal responsibility over household duties, rejecting traditional gender role expectations.

While some young men's responses were indicative of more progressive or equitable gender beliefs, most young men expected partners to perform in gender normative ways, including cooking and cleaning for them and dressing modestly. For some young men, these gendered expectations,

especially regarding how their partners dressed, were fueled by jealousy and young men's insecurities about themselves. For example, in response to the SRP scale item "*I become jealous when my partner wears things that make her look too beautiful*", one young man from Soweto stated:

> Ja, because ei I will just, eh I will feel insecure, ja, insecure.[. . .] Ja 'cause [R laughs] everyone will be looking at her, I don't know what other people think, including her. – **Participant 8, <25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, age similar**

Young women's partners' expectations, insecurities, and relationship impacts.

Given the way that items in the SRP scale were asked, young women were less likely to talk about their own expectations and personal beliefs, and more about how their partner's perceptions affected their relationship. Young women's partners' insecurities were also discussed by some women as affecting their current relationships. One young woman from Durban stated:

> He is very insecure about himself; you know what I mean? [. . .] It happened in his past, like when he was in college, he was dating this girl [. . .] And something happened, I think this girl cheated on him, that is what he would tell me, so she was cheating and stuff like that. So, that is why I feel like . . . I am not that girl, but I feel like he is always comparing me to her. – **Participant 195, <25 years old, relationship <2 years, age similar**

Both young men and young women spoke of men's insecurities, which led to issues of mistrust and often resulted in expectations, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that ensued inequitable power dynamics, including male partner control over what young women wear and who they spend time with.

Young women's resistance to male control in intimate relationships.

While some young women were acquiescent or had limited choice in fulfilling their partners' traditional gender role expectations, others were resistant, striving instead for more modern forms of relationships dynamics. This was more commonly discussed by women reporting being in their primary relationship for over 2 years. For example, in response to the SRP scale item "*My partner expects me to do everything for him*", one young woman from Soweto stated:

> Ehh, ja, so I think ehh like with me right, it's more of a 50/50 thing you know, I am not so submissive type, to say, I am gonna be submissive ehh so it's a 50/50 thing you know, if I don't feel like cooking, he is gonna cook, ehh ja, so no one who expects the other to say you know, these are your duties, you need to do them, ahh ahh [no] that is why I strongly disagree. -**Participant 116, ≥25 years old, relationship ≥2 years, partner ≥5 years older**

This highlights the ways in which young women in long-term relationships discussed self-efficacy to resist male partner controlling behaviors through boundary setting and mutual decision-making in their relationships. Young women who were not in relationships, and thus reflecting on previous relationships during their interviews, resisted male partner control by demonstrating independence and rejecting inequitable relationship dynamics. For example, one young woman from Durban stated:

> Ya. Hay, I think that question, I cannot even say this question is for married people. But, even a husband does not have that right to do that. Hhaybo! We are not married! He cannot expect to find me in the house whenever he comes to check on me. Hhaybo! I am twenty-two. I have my own life that I should live. He should not do that at all. – **Participant 165, <25 years old, not in relationship**

These quotes highlight the complex ways in which young women navigate power inequities in and out of relationships, and how self-efficacy to resist control can be enacted by leaving or refusing to enter a harmful relationship, but also for women in more long-term relationships by navigating gendered expectations and power differentials through communication and mutual agreement.

Summary and Community Debriefing

The socio-ecological model is useful to examine the multi-leveled factors that impact young people's relationships; however, it is clear from the data that power, control, and gender norms and roles cut across all levels to impact the ways in which young women and men form, perform, and experience intimate relationships in modern day South Africa.

During the workshops where we explored the SRP scale items that we conducted with the ACAB, many of the participants highlighted similar themes relating to the SRP scale items. This included key themes of Dominance, Controlling, Trust, Communication, and Abuse that cut across all levels of the socio-ecological model. These conversations with ACAB members helped to confirm and contextualize the results raised by participants in our study.

Discussion

While the individual is at the center, power in the form of male dominance was an overarching and cross-cutting theme that differentially impacted young women and men's lives, decision-making, and relationships. Our findings were in line with existing theories of gender and power highlighting how societal male power and patriarchal societal structures that form and perpetuate hegemonic gender norms and roles cut across all levels to influence participants' relationships (Connell, 1987). This included the influence on societal institutions of marriage and cultural traditions that in turn influence family dynamics and structures, how young women and men are raised, and their interactions with each other in intimate relationships that go on to further influence and be influenced by individual-level attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors. While there were dynamics interrelations between each level, below we discuss important factors affecting youth relationships from broader societal factors to individual-level and connecting back to the overarching influence of gender and power.

In pre-colonial South Africa, heavy values were placed on childbearing and kinship ties between families, which were often upheld by the accumulation of cattle through lobola (bride price) (Wright, 2016). The lobola tradition, while typically a male privilege, was at times acquired by certain elite women (Weir, 2000). Moreover, some royal women of the Zulu and other neighboring Kingdoms and states were said to also hold political power and important leadership positions

in the military (Moagi & Mtombeni, 2021; Weir, 2000), thus negating commonly held narratives that all pre-colonial women in Southern African were oppressed and void of agency (Moagi & Mtombeni, 2021). Lobola and its importance in creating kinship ties and respect between the families of the bride and groom was and continues to be common across many African countries; however, the practice has changed throughout history. Colonial rule and apartheid regimes in South Africa resulted in cultural and literal genocide, disrupted land ownership, agricultural, kinship and strong relational ties. Moreover, the introduction of Christianity brought conflicting ideals surrounding household dynamics, masculinity, polygamy, and views on love and intimacy that continue to influence and shape the relationships of Black South Africans (Hunter, 2010). These histories combined with high levels of unemployment and poverty in South Africa has led to declining rates of marriage, as lobola has become less and less affordable and feasible for most young Black men in South Africa and other African nations (Hunter, 2010). In 2019, among South Africans aged 18–34, 96% of males and 88% of females reported being single, with only 1% of males and 4% of females reporting being legally married (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Despite increasingly low marriage rates among young Black South Africans, the topic of marriage was raised by many of the participants in our study. Young men and women, especially those in longer term relationships, discussed how future ideals of marriage and lobola formed their current and future relationship expectations. Similar to other work conducted in South Africa, some of the women in our study spoke of how they felt disempowered because lobola had been or will be paid for them (Cornman et al., 2011). While young men in our study discussed how they may not have strict expectations regarding the current configuration of household dynamics surrounding cleaning and cooking for them, these expectations are held for when lobola is paid. These expectations for more traditional gender roles by young men are in line with previous research demonstrating how young men form a sense of entitlement over their female partners who they have, or will have, to pay lobola to marry (Manyaapelo et al., 2017).

The lack of opportunity to discuss equitable relationship dynamics within societal institutions including schools and churches was also discussed by younger participants. Young men were especially likely to raise how important and meaningful it was to discuss issues pertaining to their relationships, something that they do not have opportunities to do within school settings. These discussions were in line with previous research that has highlighted how the current sexual education curriculum in South Africa fails to meet the needs of young people (Shefer & Macleod, 2015). Current curricula focus on the riskiness of youth sexual relationships through rigid conceptualizations of gender roles and scare tactics (Bhana et al., 2019; Shefer & Macleod, 2015).

Risk-based messages that vilify youth sexuality are also commonly present in religious institutions (Eriksson et al., 2013, 2014). Mixed messages between the church and evidence-based sexual education have negative implications for youth SRH (Eriksson et al., 2013, 2014). Younger men in our study were more likely to talk about religion and used their faith and connection to the church to justify controlling behaviors in their relationships. These findings highlight the power that institutions have in upholding gender inequities. Thus, institutional efforts in schools and churches aimed at fostering positive relationship dynamics among youth could support more equitable gender relations, increased trust, and positive communication strategies to reduce harmful power inequities that are linked to negative health outcomes among young women and men in South Africa (R. Jewkes et al., 2010; Nduna et al., 2010). The results of this study support youth's desire to discuss intimacy and positive relationship formations with their peers and adult-allies within institutional settings.

Societal structures, historical legacies of apartheid, ongoing epidemics (Hillis et al., 2021; Kidman, 2021; Mejia-Pailles et al., 2020), and inequities faced by many Black South Africans have also shaped family and household dynamics. In 2019, 15% of households had at least three generations in the household, and 4.5% of household were comprised of grandparents and grandchildren (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Among 18–34-year-olds, only 3.8% of males and 12% of females reported being legally married or living with their partner. These statistics help explain the family configuration of many of the participants in our study who spoke of living with their parents, and for some, also with their own child or children. Like issues raised at the institutional level, family and parents may hold negative beliefs about youth sexuality, which prevents communication about relationships and intimacy, and often leads to parents attempting to restrict young people's movement and interactions with their partners (Kuo et al., 2016). Moreover, mothers often uphold traditional gender norms by grooming their daughters to be perfect wife material by being submissive and obedient to male partners. While family dynamics were more likely to be discussed by younger aged participants, family-imposed restrictions were still raised by participants in their late 20s, some of whom were parents themselves. Household dynamics and family configurations played an important role in the ways in which participants could interact with their partners. While living at home at times prevented young men from meeting their partners, family configurations in which young men were provided for by their mothers limited the homemaking expectations of their partners. Thus, family dynamics were relatively inconsequential for young men, but were especially problematic for young women who experienced multiple, and at times interacting, control and dominance by their mothers and male partners, all while concurrently navigating motherhood themselves.

At the relational level, conversations emerging from participants' responses to the SRP scale centered on power dynamics and dominance, which is in line with previous research and theory demonstrating how patriarchal norms translate into dominant and controlling behaviors and interactions within young people's relationships, limiting young women's decision-making power (Heise et al., 2019; Miller, 2018; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). However, discussions raised by participants also highlighted contemporary factors, including conversations centered on shifting gender relations, consent, and the current ways in which young people navigate trust, honesty, and communication. These included the positive aspects of youth's relationships that are too often ignored

within the field of youth SRH (Harrison, 2008). Understandings of gender equity, roles, and norms has historically been framed through negative, risk-based lenses, whereby researchers attempt to explain the negative and harmful attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, which perpetuate gender inequity (Hamlall, 2018). While important, there are gaps in understandings of the positive and strength-based ways in which young women and men interact, form, perform, and experience gender equitable relationships. This includes how women navigate their relationships and resist male partner control and traditional gender roles (Shefer, 2016). Discussions also highlighted the multiple ways in which young women and men form trust and experience intimacy, the importance of communication in relationships, shifting gender relations, and how these positive relationship dynamics help to form love and connection with their partners. Shifting gender relations included narratives of young men feeling subordinate in their relationships due to changing norms around consent and gendered economic power within relationships. Feelings of subordination may have negative consequences, as previous research has indicated that feelings of subordination to women may result in young men enacting dominance through harmful behaviors such as violence to uphold power and masculinity in their communities (Closson et al., 2020). Communication was an important factor for building trust and mutual decision-making, and while cellphones were an important tool for communication among participants, they also created tensions surrounding trust being lost and built by the monitoring of each other's cellphones. While mobile health research is expanding globally, most studies focus on the use of mobiles to support interventions (Dietrich et al., 2020) or the mental health impacts of excessive phone use (Dietrich et al., 2021). The findings from our data are in line with another recent qualitative analysis highlighting the complicated nature of cellphone use within the intimate relationships of South African youth (Gibbs et al., 2021). Given the importance and widespread use of cellphones, additional empirical studies are needed to unpack the ways young South African women and men use cellphones to navigate intimate relationships and sexual decision-making.

Research centered on youth sexuality is beginning to expand beyond the risk-centered lens to acknowledge the importance of relationships based in love and intimacy (Bhana, 2017). Our study contextualizes features of youth relationships that begin to shift the focus from deficit to strength-based aspects of relationship formation among young women and men disproportionately affected by HIV and violence. Future research should further explore the impact of shifting gender roles, the positive and negative impacts of cellphone use on relationships, and how youth form, perform, experience, and maintain intimacy, love, and trust in their relationships. These insights can be used to inform future measures of relationship dynamics among South African youth, as well as couple-based interventions aimed at improving overall relationship dynamics.

Negotiating love, relationships, and power within larger patriarchal structures and institutions often occurs at the individual level; however individuals are intrinsically embedded within the societal structures and social relationships that ultimately form one's identity (Brush & Miller, 2019). Our results at the individual level are thus difficult to discuss outside of the interrelated influence from all the proceeding levels and the overarching influence of patriarchal hierarchies. For example, one important individual-level value held by young men in shorter term relationships was personal responsibility, and while the ability to take care of oneself was discussed as a form of resistance to gendered household duties and roles, this modern masculine identity was displayed only through personal pride and power. Furthermore, young men who displayed less pride and personal responsibility, at times felt subordinate to their partners, which brought out insecurities and increased desires for more direct power over women (Closson et al., 2020). Male insecurities and related controlling behaviors by male partners were also commonly discussed by young women in our study, highlighting the need for efforts to work with young men to discuss and address underlying insecurities. For the young mothers in relationships with older men in our study, economic dependence and feelings of obligation limited their agency not only in their relationship with their partners, but also with parents and caregivers. However, many of the young women in our study were not acquiescent to male partner control, instead resisting dominance through clear communication, boundary setting, and negotiation of respect in their relationships (R. Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). This negotiation and resistance by young women in our study is in line with a growing body of research that acknowledges that women who choose or feel obligated to stay in controlling or violent relationships can and do enact multiple levels of agency within the constraints of inequitable power dynamics (R. Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Willan et al., 2019).

Implications and Future Research

Empowerment efforts are often framed as strength-based solution to gender inequity (Mandal et al., 2017). Given that empowerment within public health efforts have not been well-defined, many efforts have focused solely on individual-level targets that ignore the relationships, societal structures, and hierarchies in which young women navigate their lives (Raj, 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2019). Thus, meaningful inclusion of young men and women, as well as a greater understanding of the ways in which young women can be resistant, resilient, and powerful is critical to develop effective and acceptable programs and policies aimed at improving gender equity and the health and well-being of young people.

Data from this study support the notion that young women are not agentless and many use complex strategies to navigate patriarchal power and control not only in their intimate relationships, but also in their households, communities, and society at large (Bhana, 2017; Harrison, 2008). As financial dependence was a limiting factor in many young women's ability to enact agency, particularly in early motherhood, efforts are needed to improve access and knowledge regarding contraception for young women and support young mothers in becoming financially independent (World Health Organization, 2017). Findings indicate that engaging power holders including institutions, parents, and male partners within gender transformative programs that create and

cultivate safer spaces to discuss power, equity, and intimacy would likely have a positive effect on youth's relationship dynamics and sexual decision-making. With increasing awareness of sexual violence, rape, and the #MeToo as well as other movements to combat rape culture (e.g., #menaretrash, #amInext), young people may be learning more about important topics such as consent through social and traditional media sources (D'Avanzato et al., 2021; Lewis, 2019; Shefer & Hussen, 2020). However, these and broader conversations about the complexity of youth's relationships are not occurring within educational institutions that could allow for evidence-based and facilitated discussions. While the relationship between school attendance and gender equitable beliefs and behaviors is complex due to engrained societal gender biases, educational institutions can be an important setting for disrupting harmful gender beliefs and attitudes through comprehensive sexual education that addresses gender and power and provides safer spaces for youth dialog about intimacy (Chae et al., 2020). Furthermore, gender transformative efforts need to work with young women and men to foster young women's resilience and resistance to patriarchal norms, and also support young men to discuss and address insecurities and shift harmful gender attitudes through a better understanding of contemporary formations of masculinities (Bhana & Anderson, 2013; Dworkin, Hatcher et al., 2013; Fleming & Dworkin, 2016; Fleming et al., 2016).

Finally, the results herein describe a complex array of factors that affect youth relationship dynamics and sexual decision-making. As such, future measures of gender equity and sexual relationship power should consider additional dimensions of gender and power described within this study. This includes how gendered power relations are influenced by history, culture, institutions, and family. Better measurement will ultimately improve monitoring and evaluation of programs and policies to advance gender equity and the sexual and reproductive health and rights of youth. Moreover, future research and youth programming and policy needs to acknowledge historical legacies that drive gender inequity and engage with multiple levels of power holders (such as faith-based leaders, parents, and educators) in efforts to promote healthy youth relationships and sexual health.

Strengths and Limitations

This study used constant comparison, pragmatic, and constructivist grounded theory approaches in order to address some underlying concerns of traditional grounded theory, which is intended to be void of external theory and often ignores or avoids discussions centered on culture (Morse, 2001). As previous participants of AYAZAZI, youth participating in the cognitive interviews were familiar with the survey items, and entered this study having built prior trust and rapport with the study procedures (Morse, 2015b). Moreover, as part of the data analysis and interpretation, youth researchers residing in Soweto and the lead author (KC) engaged with several audiences, including an ACAB to situate the results and to ensure the findings not only reflected the living realities of young people in our study, but young women and men in South Africa more broadly. The cognitive interviewing approach to this study allowed for ease of dialogue between interviewer and participant and supports greater youth engagement as it requires less training than traditional in-depth interviewing approaches (Willis, 2015). While we did include open ended questions about control, power, and relationship dynamics, our research questions and results may have been limited by structuring the interview and youth perceptions of relationship dynamics through the scale items that were framed in a way that men answered as potential perpetrators, while women answered pertaining to victimization and that were developed and validated in a Western context over 20 years ago.

Our results are further limited by challenges in recruiting previous participants of a cohort study that finished data collection several years prior to the commencement of this sub-study. Specifically, we were unable to recruit many young people in non-heterosexual relationships, limiting our ability to explore the understandings and perceptions of youth from diverse genders and sexual orientations. Future research needs to focus on understanding and exploring how gender and power dynamics influence the relationships and well-being of gender non-binary and sexual minority youth. This is an area that is under researched and explored not only in South Africa, but globally. Given that this study was conducted in two urban settings, it is also likely that the results herein do not reflect the experiences of youth living in rural areas of South Africa. While it is likely that the relationship and power dynamics of the participants in our study have changed as they have aged and matured, as we do not have qualitative data from their baseline engagement in the study, we are limited in our ability to compare or understand how youth's relationship dynamics have changed over the course of their engagement with our study team. Future research would benefit from exploring qualitatively how gendered power dynamics shift within and across youth relationships.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the data collection period for this study was lengthy, and we were required to shift interviews from in-person to telephonically. This change in interview format may limit the ability to compare findings before and after the start of the pandemic. Moreover, the change in interview modality was likely gendered as interviewers in Soweto, where all interviews were conducted telephonically, had greater success contacting and interviewing young women than young men, which was not the case in Durban while interviews were being conducted in person.

Conclusion

Our results provide empirical qualitative data on the intersection of gender and power at multiple levels in the socio-ecological model. These data provide guidance into how multileveled approaches that seek to enhance power dynamics in young people's relationships can and should ultimately target individual, interpersonal, family, and societal-level forces simultaneously, while tailoring efforts to address gendered implications across all levels (Pulerwitz et al., 2019). Our findings identified important "power holders" such as educators, faith-based leaders, parents and male partners that need to be considered and engaged

within future gender transformative efforts aimed at young people in the South African setting. Learnings from this study can help to inform SRH programming that fit the needs of young people who actively desire love, intimacy, and relationships free of control and coercion.

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