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A study of sexual relationships as a form of social institution in post-apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

This thesis examines sexual relationships as a form of social institution. Relationships are a growing phenomenon in South African context as there is low rate of marriage and high divorce rate. This trend of relationships poses a challenge on existing structures that are responsible for sustaining society, such as marriage and kinship. Understanding relationships becomes critical as they challenge the basic fabric of the society and also impact on gender inequalities and the transmission of HIV.

The ethnographic study that observed two couples for eight months, conducted in-depth interviews with 19 people, and two focus groups allows me to draw these conclusions:

1. Relationships are fluid, and they cannot be easily defined. Because of this fluidity they provide people with a space to break societal rules, such that they can make their own choices, therefore relationships provide some people with 'freedom'. However, not everyone interviewed preferred relationships.
2. Marriage is valued. Both males and females wanted to get married. However, men postponed marriage to later in life. Marriage provides women with an ability to control men with support from extended families and because of this, many women viewed marriage as providing security.
3. Safe Sex depends on the context of a relationship and the meaning attached to it. If sex is viewed as an act of expressing love not pleasure, the couple is more likely to practice unsafe sex. This research therefore concludes that all social groups in South Africa are at risk of contracting HI Virus.

4. Lastly, the role that a researcher plays in research is critical as it can affect the results and the interpretation thereof.

This research demonstrates that relationships provide people with the space to explore life and can be used as a survival tool. It further suggests that sex qualifies a relationship as it plays a critical role in the definition of relationships. I argue that societal values and the context people find themselves in influence the decisions people make in relationships. This research report contributes to gender, and HIV/AIDS literature as it examines the role of culture in heterosexual relationships.