

The role of HIV/AIDS awareness on the process of partnership formation in Africa: Results from the 2004 Courtship and Condoms study in rural southwestern Uganda.

Dorothy Akurut, Brent Wolff, Samuel Biraro, Heiner Grosskurth

Medical Research Council Programme on AIDS in Uganda

Social science project

P.O. 49

Entebbe, Uganda

Email: Dorothy.akurut@mrcuganda.org

I. Introduction

There are four major HIV prevention strategies accessible to rural populations at the present time: abstinence, partner reduction, condom use, and HIV testing which may reinforce motivation to adopt the other three. The logic of the study design rests on the assumption that the decision to adopt or maintain these preventive behaviours are largely made around key transition points in what might be called the partnership cycle from first sex through the end of relationships. The first event is transition to first sex with a given partner, starting from initial attraction through subsequent ‘courtship’ phase, broadly defined, to ultimate initiation of sexual relations.¹ Changes in patterns of abstinence and partner reduction, which have collectively been termed ‘primary behaviour change’ (Green, 2003) necessarily involve changes in this first stage of partnership formation.

Recent policy debates in the U.S. and elsewhere have questioned the wisdom of alternative ‘risk reduction’ strategies such as condom use and the (hopefully) imminent development of microbicides, since they either inadvertently or inherently undermine efforts to promote primary behaviour change. It is difficult to advise people to avoid risky sex while advocating methods specifically designed for this purpose, the argument goes. Sceptics of risk reduction approaches have seized on the experience of Uganda, where reductions in HIV incidence began before widespread availability of testing or condom promotion, to show that primary behaviour change alone can be effective in fighting the epidemic (see Green 2003).

The current study is set in a population study cohort in a rural area in southwestern Uganda established and maintained by the Medical Research Council (MRC) Programme on AIDS in Uganda. Since annual serosurveys of the resident adult population began in 1989, steady and significant declines in HIV prevalence and incidence have been documented (Mbulaiteye et al, 2002). The Courtship and Condoms study is an ongoing qualitative MRC social science study that began in June 2003. Its overall goal is to investigate the influence of HIV awareness on the process of partnership formation in this setting on the negotiation, adoption and maintenance of preventive behaviours at different stages of partnership development. In the first of two papers from this study submitted to the IUSSP World Conference, we propose to focus specifically on the role of HIV awareness on the initial stages of partnership formation. A separate submission addresses the issue of risk reduction within early relationships using the same data. The two specific objectives of the first analysis are:

- To document the process of initial partnership formation from ‘courtship’ through first sex in this rural cultural setting
- To document how AIDS awareness is expressed in the context of contemporary partnership formation in a high prevalence setting.

¹ We restrict analysis in this study to consensual partnerships falling within accepted social norms.

To the extent that primary behaviour change has played a role in HIV reductions in this setting, we expect to find evidence of a role of HIV awareness in the process of partner selection and courtship leading to first sexual encounters. HIV awareness is conceptualized according to the Prochaska transtheoretical model of behaviour change (Prochaska et al., 1992). This model posits a trajectory of five stages of behaviour change corresponding to levels of 'awareness' employed in this proposal: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Progressive stages correspond to higher levels of awareness that lead increasingly toward adoption and maintenance of risk avoidance behaviours. The trajectory is not one-way; Individuals may move backwards and forwards along the scale from risk-averse to risk-insensitive and back again. The model is appropriate for this study because it does not view 'awareness' as a single or static quality relative to behaviour over time. It also incorporates the element of time that can be linked to partnership formation process.

The second theoretical foundation of this study is sexual script theory developed by Simon and Gagnon (1987), which postulates that relationship behaviour is rooted in normative expectations that begin prior to the beginning of actual relationships, and are modified through a process of negotiation and communication afterwards. Social expectations about behaviour and prior relationship experience are important subjects for qualitative investigation in this study.

II. Methods

In the 2003-4 annual serosurvey of all resident adults aged 13 and over in the study area, a screening form was included to identify respondents who had a new sexual relationship within the last 12 months, and whether condoms had ever been used with these partners. Oral consent was obtained from eligible respondents to be approached at a later date for in-depth interview by a social science interviewer, while formal written consent is obtained at the time of the first social science interview. The target of the study is to interview 60 individuals with recent relationship experience, divided equally between men and women and those who have and have not used condoms with their new partners. Interviews began in January 2004 and are expected to be complete by December 2004.

To assess stage of HIV awareness according to the Prochaska model, sexual life histories are collected documenting the development of knowledge about HIV and its influence on behaviour up to the present time. In-depth interviews collect a broad range of information about general attitudes about relationship behaviour and gender norms, and specific information about the development of the most recent relationship and how HIV awareness consciously influenced the process. Each informant is interviewed twice, first to obtain sexual histories, and second to ask about the first and most recent relationship. Calendar methods are used to construct sexual life histories and HIV awareness levels.

All interviews are conducted by long-term social science interviewers resident in the local community and translated into English. Coding and analysis are assisted by NUDIST NVIVO software programme.

III. Analysis plan and preliminary results

To understand the influence of HIV awareness on partnership formation, it is necessary to establish prior social norms governing this process. We analyze historical anthropological accounts of partnership formation among the dominant Baganda population, and analyze contemporary social norms from a series of 12 focus groups conducted in the formative stages of this study.

The primary objective of analysis is to obtain a careful descriptive account of the process of relationship formation in this setting, what are the primary considerations in this process, and to what extent concerns about HIV have an influence.

Secondly, we use the interviews to investigate how social actors in this setting rationalize different avoidance strategies *before* transition to sexual relations, whether partner reduction or condom use, to know to what extent the two are competing or complementary in practice.

Thirdly, while the study design does not allow us to know whether our informants are more or less risk averse than a similar selection would be before the rise of HIV awareness, it should provide insight into the diversity of avoidance strategies reflected in contemporary partner selection, and the appropriateness of different prevention strategies.

Full analysis of these data is planned in the following months, but some preliminary results from focus group analyses are available. HIV awareness in this population is extremely high, both from the presence of MRC outreach work and from the fact that there are few families in this community who have not been directly affected by the death of one or more members. While abstinence is considered the most effective protection against the risk of HIV, for many the social and economic advantages of having sexual partners often overrides such concerns. Few consider waiting until formal marriage as a realistic possibility. Instead, young people, when choosing new sexual partners, attempt to 'screen' based on prior reputations. Among educated youth, condom use is widely accepted, even normative to the extent that they would not trust a partner who would not like to use a condom. Many plan to combine abstinence and condom use strategies, waiting until they finish school and insisting on condom use afterwards. In-depth interviews investigate in detail the interplay of social, economic, and health concerns in the most recent partnership.

References

- Green, Edward (2003). *Rethinking AIDS prevention*. Westport, CT: Praeger Press, Greenwood Publishers.
- Mbulaiteye, S.M., C Mahe, JAG Whitworth, A Ruberantwari, JS Nakiyingi, A Ojwiya, A Kamali. (2002) Declining HIV-1 incidence and associated prevalence over 10 years in a rural population in south-west Uganda: a cohort study. *Lancet*, Vol 360, July 6: 41-46
- Prochaska, James, Carlo DiClemente, and John Norcross. (1992) In search of how people change: applications to addictive behaviours. *American Psychologist*, 47(9):1102-1114
- Simon, W. and Gagnon, J. (1987) Sexual Scripts. In J. Geer and W.T. O'Donohue (eds.) *Theories of Human Sexuality*. (London: Plenum Press).