

Theoretical Perspectives on Female Sexual Behaviour in Africa: A Review and Conceptual Model

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ABSTRACT

A major drawback of research on sexual behaviour in Africa is the separation between theories and empirical work. This paper reviews three major theoretical perspectives on female sexual behaviour in Africa, and constructs a conceptual framework in which various hypotheses deriving from these theories can be empirically tested. This framework, which draws from Coleman's model of social capital, shows the linkages between sexual behaviour and key factors of (1) patrilineal bias, (2) rational adaptation, and (3) social disorganisation theories. It is suggested that, as a dynamic process, sexual activity and its key covariates must be measured and analysed within event history models. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 1997;1(2): 67-78)

RÉSUMÉ

Les perspectives théoriques des comportement sexuels des femmes en Afrique: Un passage en revue et un modèle conceptuel

L'un des handicaps majeurs dans la recherche sur les comportements sexuels en Afrique est le décalage entre les théories et le travail empirique. Ce journal passe en revue trois perspectives théoriques principales en matière de comportement sexuel des femmes en Afrique et construit un cadre conceptuel dans lequel divers hypothèses dérivant de ces théories peuvent être testées de manière empirique. Ce cadre, qui découle du modèle de "capital social" dit de Coleman, montre les liens qui existent entre les comportements sexuels et les facteurs clés de (1) la prédisposition des lignées males, (2) de l'adaptation rationnelle, et (3) des théories de désordre social. Il a été suggéré qu'en tant que procédé dynamique, l'activité sexuelle et les variables qui lui sont propres, doit être mesurée et analysée en rapport avec des modèles qui ont marqué l'histoire. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 1997;1(2): 67-78)

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with the reasons advanced above about the conceptualisation of family background variables within the African context, the second interaction term should be the combined effect of human capital and individual educational attainment. This interaction is important in determining whether young people's education "frees" them from elders' control. The third interaction is sought between education and social capital. It is expected that the effect of education on female sexual behaviour will also depend on the number of children in the household, or social capital.

Summary

Family background variables are key factors of socialisation and social control, especially in the area of female sexual behaviour. The conceptual framework proposed here is based on Coleman's work which defines three types of family resources, or capital, which are assumed to affect children's socialisation: financial capital, human capital, and social capital.⁴² Financial capital is essential in testing assumptions of the rational adaptation theory.

Human capital is a good, but partial, measure of the social disorganisation hypothesis. A fuller assessment of the social disorganisation theory requires the consideration of respondent's education, urban background, and mass media exposure. To the extent that it decreases the "amount" of financial and human capital per child, social capital is introduced in the framework of female sexual behaviour as a control variable. Initially conceived for the American type of family, these three types of capital must be adapted to the African context of extended families.

It has been suggested here that kinship system, measured as type of lineage, can be used in the model of female sexual activity in Africa. Use of this variable offers the possibility of testing the patrilineal bias hypothesis suggested by Goethals³⁰ and others.^{10,28} The inclusion of religiosity in the equation of female sexual behaviour will probably underscore the religious effect, which previous research failed to identify. Since the transition to sexual activity is a dynamic process, its

major predictors need to be conceived and measured within a life history framework such as the one proposed here.

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NOTES

- a Many social scientists have used the word "dowry" inappropriately to refer to marriage payment. Dowry, which refers to marriage payment made by the bride and her family to the groom's family, is virtually non-existent in Africa. To the contrary, it is the groom and his family who make the marriage payment. The latter, however, does not represent an economic transaction in the Western sense. The African man does not buy his wife.³¹
- b In many societies of Africa, the notion of income can be misleading. Even when correctly reported, income does not usually represent the unique or main source of revenue. Many families rely on agriculture and informal sectors for living. Under such circumstances, household amenities seems a better measure of financial capital.
- c Financial capital refers to the household's ownership of some durable goods which can range from a radio to a motor vehicle. The advantage of this conceptualisation is that it gives an index of financial capital which is not affected by family size.⁵⁷

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