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“Because he has bought for her, he wants to sleep with her”: Alcohol as a currency for sexual exchange in South African drinking venues

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Abstract

Previous research has documented the practice of transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa and its association with gender-based violence, gender inequalities and HIV risk. At the same time, it has been suggested that women may use transactional sex to obtain a greater sense of control over their lives and their sexualities, and to garner access to resources. The aim of this study was to better understand the practice of exchanging alcohol for sex in alcohol-serving venues in a township in Cape Town, South Africa. Data were collected between June 2009 and October 2010. Six venues were included and observations were conducted in each for four one-week periods over the course of a year. In-depth qualitative interviews included 31 women and 13 men whom interviewers had observed as regular venue customers. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 24 respondents to explore emerging themes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Using a grounded theory approach, Atlas.ti was used to code transcripts, field notes, and analytical memos written about each document. Results revealed that alcohol was commonly used as a currency of sexual exchange in this setting, and both women and men understood that accepting alcohol from a man implied consent for sexual favors. Women reported a sense of agency in participating in the transactional sex dynamic, especially when they were able to manipulate it to meet their own ends without fulfilling the men's sexual expectations. At the same time, data revealed that the norm of transactional sex reinforced the undervaluing and commoditization of women. As identified elsewhere, transactional sex put both women and men at greater risk of HIV through multiple

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partners and inconsistent use of condoms, and the possibility of rape. Interventions are needed to address sexual risk behaviors and substance use within this context to prevent new HIV infections.

Keywords

South Africa; Transactional sex; Alcohol; Sexual behavior; HIV; Gender

BACKGROUND

HIV interventions in South Africa have yet to curb the spread of the epidemic in a country where 18% of the adult population is infected (UNAIDS, 2010). Limitations of current interventions are due in part to the failure to address the social context of risk behavior, which includes poverty, gender inequality and substance use (Dworkin & Ehrhardt, 2006). In particular, participation in transactional sex, or the exchange of sex for material goods, has consistently been associated with sexual risk behaviors (Dunkle et al., 2007; Wamoyi et al., 2009) and HIV serostatus (Dunkle et al., 2004; Pettifor et al., 2005) in South Africa. Alcohol-serving venues are sites where people meet sex partners (Goldenberg et al., 2011; Morojele et al., 2006) and engage in high risk behaviors (Morojele et al., 2006; Wolff et al., 2006), and deserve attention as sites of HIV risk and intervention. There is evidence that alcohol may be used as a currency for transactional sex in alcohol-serving venues (Townsend et al., 2011), but the norms and practices around this behavior require more understanding.

Although commercial sex work has received considerable attention for its contribution to the HIV pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa (Plummer et al., 1991), formal sex work represents only a small proportion of transactional sexual relationships. Data from South Africa suggest that nearly a quarter of young women have had sex in exchange for material goods or money (Dunkle et al., 2004), and a study of bar-goers in Cape Town found that 12% of men and women had exchanged sex for goods or money (Kalichman et al., 2008). The definition and prevalence of transactional sex is complicated because exchange in relationships may be normalized within a cultural context (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Poulin, 2007), and relationships can range from single-night engagements to semi-permanent affairs, including transfer of resources as broad as money, rent, school fees, alcohol or drugs (Wojcicki, 2002). It has been suggested that women engage in transactional sex to meet their basic needs (Wamoyi et al., 2010; Wojcicki, 2002), but recent qualitative work suggests that poverty is only a partial driver of transactional sex. Women engage in transactional sexual relationships not just out of necessity, but also for social status, to obtain nonessential commodities (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001), and to get alcohol and drugs (Mataure et al., 2002; Morojele et al., 2006; Townsend et al., 2011). Further, recent studies challenge narratives of victimhood by suggesting that engaging in transactional sex often provides women with a sense of agency and autonomy in a male dominated society (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Wamoyi et al., 2010).

Transactional sex may be an important, albeit often overlooked, driver of the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa (Dunkle et al., 2004). Participation in transactional sex has been associated with HIV serostatus (Jenness et al., 2011; Pettifor et al., 2005) and with sexual risk behaviors including more lifetime sexual partners and lower rates of condom use for both men and women (Dunkle et al., 2007; Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001). Women engaging in transactional sex are more likely to be victims of gender based violence and rape (Dunkle et al., 2004; Wood et al., 2007), which further contributes to HIV risk (Maganja et al., 2007; Maman et al., 2000). Transactional sex has been linked to alcohol use (Jenness et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2009; Townsend et al., 2011), suggesting that couples who engage in

transactional sex often do so in a setting where alcohol is consumed. A study among bar-goers in Cape Town found that problem drinkers were more likely to have once-off sex partners, often characterized by transactional relationships (Kalichman et al., 2008). Combining transactional sex with alcohol consumption may heighten HIV risk, as there is substantial evidence that alcohol use is associated with HIV sexual risk behaviors in sub-Saharan Africa, including frequency of sexual activity, more casual sex partners, unprotected sex and STIs (Woolf-King & Maisto, 2011).

Alcohol consumption in South Africa is reported to be episodic and heavy, occurring primarily on the weekends (South African Department of Health et al., 2007). In the Western Cape province, patterns of hazardous drinking can be traced, in part, to the 'dop' system, where laborers in surrounding wine farms were paid in the form of alcohol (London, 1999). In townships surrounding the Cape Town urban core, alcohol is consumed in informal drinking establishing ('shebeens') and larger, more formal taverns. Historically, these venues were established exclusively for men, with the only female attendees being sex workers, but over time have become more accessible to women. Recent studies have documented that venues remain places where people go to meet new sexual partners (Kalichman et al., 2008; Townsend et al., 2011; Weir et al., 2003). The combination of heavy drinking and the desire to meet new sex partners nested in an environment of poverty and gender inequality provides a conducive setting for risky transactional sex. Townsend and colleagues (2011) explored the dynamic interaction between alcohol and transactional sex in Cape Town townships through interviews with men who have concurrent female sexual partners. Their research revealed the centrality of alcohol in these men's social lives and how alcohol served as a currency for securing sexual partners. Qualitative research on the alcohol-sex exchange from other parts of South Africa have centered on the perspectives of women who report involvement in sexual exchange relationships (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Wojcicki, 2002). These studies highlight the normality of the alcohol-sex exchange, in which a woman who accepts alcohol from a man is seen as accepting a sexual relationship. While these studies have identified the exchange of alcohol for sex as an area of concern in South African communities, and a factor that may contribute to HIV risk and spread, more information is needed about the physical and social context in which this exchange and risk-taking occurs.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether and how alcohol is used as a currency for sex in a sample of alcohol serving venues in a township in Cape Town, South Africa. Unlike previous published research, this study sampled patrons from alcohol-serving venues, regardless of any self-reported exchange behavior, and incorporated the views of both men and women. Although transactional sex and alcohol use have both been linked to HIV risk, a better understanding of the nuances of transactional sex in this setting may help to inform HIV interventions in a high risk environment.

METHODS

Setting

This study took place in Delft, a peri-urban township located 15 miles northeast of downtown Cape Town. The township was established in 1990 as a subsidized housing project for Blacks and Coloureds, making Delft more racially diverse than other South African townships. The area is growing rapidly in population, which appears to undermine the sense of community stability. In the 2001 census, 44% of Delft residents reported no formal or informal employment (South Africa Census Bureau, 2003) and 58% of Delft households lived below the poverty line (South Africa Census Bureau, 2003). In a cross-sectional survey in Delft, nearly half of households reported receiving a government grant (predominately child or disability grants, approximately \$125 per month and \$40 per month,

respectively), which for many households served as their only income source (The Kuyasa Fund, 2005). There is little commercial infrastructure in Delft and few general community resources, including opportunities for recreation and job training, especially for women.

The qualitative data presented in this paper are part of a mixed-methods study to examine gender and HIV risk behavior in the context of alcohol-serving venues in Delft. The overall study included observations of the venues, cross-sectional surveys of venue patrons, a cohort of female venue patrons followed over the course of a year, and in-depth interviews with a subset of the cohort participants and with select male venue patrons.

Study sites included both *shebeens*, small unlicensed venues, and *taverns*, larger licensed venues. Venues were identified through 210 key informant interviews, where informants were asked where people go to drink in the community. Eighty-eight venues were identified and visited, and 24 were eligible. Eligible venues had seating for patrons, reported >50 unique patrons per week, had >10% female patrons, and were willing to participate in the year-long study. The final six venues were purposively selected to include diversity of size and geography, and to have balance in primary ethnicity of venue patrons. Three of the venues had patrons who were predominantly Black African (Xhosa speaking), and three had patrons who were predominantly Coloured (Afrikaans speaking).

The fieldwork team included six South Africans (two Black African women, one Black African man, two Coloured women, and one Coloured man). These individuals conducted both the observations and the interviews. All six had some post-secondary school training, and four of the six had previous qualitative research experience. Prior to commencing research, the team received a week-long training in qualitative methods, working with the observation and interview guides and doing practice exercises. In addition, the team received frequent debriefing and retraining from the site PI (third author).

Observation data

The fieldworkers (matched by language and ethnicity to the dominant venue patrons) conducted participant observations in the six venues over the course of one year (June 2009 – October 2010). Every four months (a total of four times) they visited the sites for a minimum of 4-hour blocks during peak hours every day over a one-week period. During the observation periods, they used a fieldwork guide to make detailed notes about the physical environment, social interactions, and behaviors of patrons. After each observation period, the team met with the local PI (3rd author) to share and discuss their impressions. These meetings were recorded, transcribed, and became part of the fieldwork notes.

During the observation period, fieldworkers gained familiarity with the setting and became known to patrons. The insight and rapport gained during observations informed the sampling, conduct and interpretation of the in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews

Based on the venue observations, the research team decided whom to approach to participate in in-depth interviews. Individuals were selected because they were regular patrons of the venue and, based on their interactions with fieldwork staff, seemed to have rich experiences and/or insight into the venue environment and social norms. All women who were asked to participate were already enrolled in the study cohort of female patrons, and were therefore approached about the interview during their cohort assessment. The cohort women were originally identified by the fieldwork team because they were observed as regular attendees at the venue. Men were identified and approached by a male fieldworker in the venue. The fieldworker explained that the purpose of the study was to explore HIV risk-taking behavior in the bar environment, and discussed the procedures for an in-depth interview. All

individuals approached agreed to participate and were scheduled to come to the study office, centrally located in Delft. After providing consent, participants were interviewed in a private room in the language of their choice (generally Xhosa or Afrikaans). Interviews were audio-recorded with participant's permission. A grocery gift card in the amount of \$15 was provided as compensation.

Interviewers were matched to respondents on gender and race/language. To facilitate the interviews, interviewers were trained on the use of a semi-structured guide, which included opening questions and additional probes. Areas of questioning included the context of the bar, alcohol use and impact, sexual behavior, HIV, gender power and violence. To elicit information about transactional sex, interviewers were advised to avoid direct questioning and instead ask questions such as "How do you get money to buy alcohol at the bar?"; "Tell me about how men and women interact in this bar"; and "How do people meet sex partners in this bar?" After preliminary analysis of the first round of qualitative data, we followed an "intensity sampling" approach to identify for follow-up 24 "information-rich cases" who represented our topics of interests, but not to an extreme (Patton, 2002). Follow-up interviews included more in-depth probing around specific experiences, actions and processes.

Demographic probes were included as part of the interviews, but not all questions were asked systematically across participants. In order to describe the female respondents, we extracted from the cohort database their demographic (age, education, relationship status, employment) and substance use data (frequency and quantity of alcohol use, hazardous drinking using the AUDIT measure (Saunders et al., 1993) and alcohol dependence using the CAGE assessment (Ewing, 1984)). Study procedures were approved by the ethical review boards of Stellenbosch University, University of Connecticut, and Duke University.

Analysis

Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed in English, with simultaneous translation from the interview language. Codes were established based on careful readings of the transcripts and discussions among the study team. Authors MW and DS coded the transcripts in Atlas.ti. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), each transcript was summarized in a 3–4 page memo that identified key themes. Memo writing was done by the first two authors, and each memo was discussed to ensure inter-memo reliability. The authors were careful to remain true to the data and reflect the respondents' words and phrasing. To facilitate analysis for this paper, memos were coded to identify sections that reflected context about the dynamic of transactional sex in the venues. Both coded transcripts and coded memos were reviewed to identify primary themes around transactional sex. Field notes from the observation data were typed and collated across observers. The first two authors used the observation data and transcripts from the debriefing meetings to write analytic memos about each venue. The observation data was used to contextualize the interview findings, identify differences across venues, and confirm the validity of our interpretations. The fieldworkers who conducted the observations and in-depth interviews provided feedback on the manuscript to further verify the authors' interpretations.

RESULTS

Description of the sample

The sample included 31 women and 13 men who regularly attended the study venues (Table 1) and was fairly evenly split between Black Xhosa-speaking and Coloured Afrikaans-speaking. The ages of participants ranged from 18–55 years, with an average age of 33 (sd=10.5) and no significant differences in age between men and women. Almost all women

(87%) but only a quarter of men (27%) were unemployed. About a third of the participants were married, but the majority had young children, often from multiple partnerships. Women in the study reported heavy drinking, with the majority meeting screening criteria for alcohol dependence and hazardous drinking.

The practice of the alcohol-sex exchange varied by venue and patrons, being most commonly discussed in (but not limited to) the larger venues and among younger patrons. However, the fieldwork team confirmed that the norms and expectations around this exchange were consistent across all six venues. The data revealed five primary themes: 1) alcohol-serving venues as gendered settings that created a context for the exchange of alcohol for sex; 2) the accepted norms of the alcohol-sex exchange (“Because he has bought for her, he wants to sleep with her”); 3) women’s expressed agency in engaging in the alcohol-sex exchange (“I know how to play my game”); 4) the undervaluing and commoditization of women related to norms around the alcohol-sex exchange (“They already decided I’m a whore”); and 5) the challenges of mitigating HIV risk in the context of these relationships (“Understand that you used his money, but you are concerned about the disease”).

Alcohol-serving venues as gendered settings

Alcohol-serving venues were important social sites in this setting, and their gender and economic characteristics created a context where exchanging alcohol for sex was both common and accepted. Fieldworkers observed that venues were male dominated, with women attending primarily on weekend evenings. Women were more commonly observed in Black venues, with the exception of a small Coloured venue that attracted primarily women who came to drink “Jackpot” (a concentrated low-quality alcohol that came from local vineyards). In interviews, both women and men talked about going to the bar to be “entertained” and because they were “bored at home” and “looking for attention.” Women reported going to the bar to drink, spend time with friends, and meet men, which women described as “fun” and “a way to relieve stress.” Women in particular voiced that going to the bar was a respite and opportunity to escape from social pressures in their homes and communities, including unemployment, poverty and violence. In smaller venues with more regular patronage, women talked about finding support and a shared understanding in the venue.

Observations revealed that the venues had a sexual charge. Dancing and flirtation were commonly observed, and it appeared that the bar setting, and alcohol use in particular, gave both men and women permission to defy traditional social norms prescribed in the community. Women talked about how alcohol gave them “confidence” and made them “unafraid”, and men talked about how drinking made it easier for them to approach women. Both men and women expressed how alcohol increased sexual desires. As one woman explained, when people drink, they “don’t love each other, they crave each other.” At the same time, sexual harassment was common at the venues. Fieldworkers described men at one venue as “predators waiting patiently to attack [female patrons],” and said they (as female fieldworkers) “felt like a piece of steak... so uncomfortable.”

Alcohol use in the venues was heavy, with both women and men often drinking to intoxication. Fieldworkers frequently observed overtly drunken behavior (e.g., slurring, arguing, aggressiveness), and many participants talked about problem drinking (e.g., blackouts, hangovers, cravings). Alcohol addiction seemed to be more common among Coloured women. For example, many women talked about needing alcohol in order to relax, sleep or forget about their problems. In one small Coloured venue where women attended regularly and drank heavily, several women spoke explicitly about addiction. For example,

one woman stated: “That perfect person is now gone with my drink. I drink basically to get started, but if I started with two beers then it asks for more and more.”

Drinking in the venues required money, and both the amount consumed and quality of the drinks was seen as a marker of status and financial ability, particularly in larger Black venues. Women in particular expressed that they struggled for resources to drink, and were aware that buying alcohol “wastes money” needed for issues of livelihood, including supporting their children, and acquiring items of status, such as clothing or cell phones.

“Because he has bought for her, he wants to sleep with her.”

Transactional sex evolves from and contributes to the social context, in which alcohol consumption is a means of social participation and may also be related to addiction, but alcohol is often difficult to afford in the face of poverty and unemployment. In this setting, a woman’s sexuality serves as a currency to secure access to alcohol. Participants often expressed that buying alcohol for a woman was associated with an expectation of some degree of sexual access, as expressed in this woman’s experience: “One time a guy came to sit next to me at the bar and bought me a beer. He offered me a glass and when I took it, he started to touch me.” Both men and women expressed strong narratives about, and acceptance of, the alcohol-sex exchange. When describing what women get when they meet sexual partners at a bar, one woman said, “being bought alcohol of course... being bought alcohol before [sex], being bought alcohol after [sex].” A man described the interaction as reciprocal: “You drink from me, and I also drink from you.” In her observation fieldnotes, a researcher wrote that the exchange is “like a culture, it’s a custom... It’s a game [women] all have to play apparently.”

The social script around the alcohol-sex exchange shaped sexual interactions in the bar. To attract sexual partners, men made an effort to impress and attract women by demonstrating wealth through their ability to buy drinks. Women, in turn, sought out men who displayed wealth and could buy them alcohol. There was intentionality on both sides. Men procured sex with alcohol: “They [men] want a woman to sleep with them. When they buy you alcohol, they already have made a decision that after the alcohol they want to leave the venue with you.” Women procured alcohol with sex: “I don’t have money, I am dressed up, I am going to get a boyfriend for the evening who can entertain me.” Although some women reported receiving money from a man for sex, this appeared to be much less consistent and expected than receiving alcohol. Rather, the financial exchange often came in the form of “keeping the change” from purchasing drinks or money for transportation home after a sexual encounter that began with alcohol. Although there were accounts in the interviews and observations of “sugar daddy” relationships, the norms around alcohol-sex exchange seemed to be much more ubiquitous, with younger men and older women also participating.

Respondents described how couples made a connection at the bar, an encounter that could be initiated by either the man or the woman. Flirtation was generally followed by an implicit agreement that the man would buy alcohol and the woman would “agree to be enticed.” After drinking, they may leave the bar to have a sexual liaison. Fieldworkers’ notes revealed several observations of couples borrowing friends’ house keys to have a private place to go with a new partner. This practice appeared to be expected and accepted, and was observed in the bars by the fieldworkers.

“I know how to play my game.”

Women who spoke about their own participation in the social script of the alcohol-sex exchange often acknowledged experiencing a feeling of personal agency. This mentality was far more common among Black women, who saw the procurement of alcohol as a way to be

part of the social scene. By being the initiators, women were able, at least initially, to set the terms of the encounter. As one woman described, “We are not invited, we are inviting.” Women spoke about knowing how to “play my game” and understanding “how the mind of the man works.” In other words, women who understood the assumptions and expectations of the alcohol-sex exchange felt they could use it to their advantage.

In the largest venue in our sample, several young women described how they worked together as a group to get alcohol from men, and then shared the fruits of those encounters with each other. If one woman caught the eye of a man, she would insist that he buy drinks for the table. Therefore, only one woman put herself at risk, but everyone benefited with alcohol. Further, by going to the bar as a group, women protected each other from men who wanted to claim their perceived “rights” to sex after buying alcohol, and women appeared to feel more confident to stand up to a man and refuse sex.

Several women talked about how they intentionally used the expectation of the alcoholsex exchange to their advantage. These women recounted how they flirted with men and insinuated that they would repay with sexual favors in an attempt to secure alcohol, but would then “find a way to run away.” Women used words such as “psychologically playing men,” “hassling,” “crisscrossing,” “milking,” seeking “victims”, and “parasitic moves” to describe how they procured alcohol without fulfilling the man’s expectations of sex. This often involved acting as a group of women to protect an individual, “escaping” from the venue, or leaving with a male friend who served as a protector. The deliberate manipulation of men reflected a sense of control of the situation and gave women a certain power over men. A woman elaborated: “You tell yourself that you want this guy just to buy you alcohol. After he buys you the alcohol, you sit with him for a while until you are a bit tipsy. After that, you leave the venue as if you are just going outside and coming back. You leave him sitting there with all the alcohol because he’s betting on the fact that you won’t leave the alcohol behind. That’s how you dump him.”

“They already decided I’m a whore.”

Although many women felt they could use the transactional exchange to their advantage, they still functioned within a male-dominated gender dynamic, which put them at risk for both derogatory labeling and violence. Men talked about a distinction between “good” and “bad” girls, with “bad” girls being the ones who propositioned them for alcohol. One man described how “bad” girls manipulated men and were a “turnoff”. Nevertheless, while he looked down on them, he also sought them out for sex. “You’ll find a girl wants you to buy her alcohol, promising to sleep with you. The girl is taking advantage. Obviously I’ll leave with her, but I’ll ask myself one thing, how many guys buy you a [drink] the same way?” Men described women who flirted, accepted their drinks and then slept with them as being “easy,” “sex objects,” “door mats” and “whores.” Men particularly perceived women as “bad” when they were observed moving around the bar and approaching multiple men, as one man described: “If she chats with us, then moves to another table, and moves from there to another, and then returns to chat here... The first thing I see is that she’s a whore.”

Men talked about women as out to take advantage of them and trick them into buying alcohol, faking love and emotion, but only really interested in what can be bought for them. The general suspicion that women had financial motives led men to express that they “find it hard to trust women.” One man elaborated: “[Women] are gold diggers. The girl would like to end the weekend drunk, no matter how she gets drunk. They just want someone with money.”

The suspicion of women’s motives and the perception of trickery led some men to feel justified in physically or sexually violating women. Men talked about “payback” for buying

drinks and the belief that they were cheated out of an agreement if they did not receive sexual favors. One male participant explained, "People will say a guy who lets a girl who has used his money get away is stupid," an attitude that led some men to rationalize using force to get what they believed they had purchased. A man said that if he bought drinks for a woman and she ran away, "[if] I saw where she ran to, I would follow her and I would do things like raping her." Similarly, a woman described how men react after realizing they have been "set up" and that the woman has no intention of sleeping with the man who bought her alcohol: "Sometimes the guy would grab one of her friends and tell her, 'You are not going anywhere unless so-and-so comes back' or else I'm going to sleep with you and beat you.'" The comment reflects not only the norm of violence, but also how women were seen as interchangeable commodities.

Women felt that neither the community nor the police offered protection against this type of violence and felt they did not have recourse for rape under these circumstances. During the observations, a female patron described how she left with a man after he bought her drinks, and he forced her to have anal sex without her consent. She felt she did not have the right to report him to authorities because she felt she had put herself in that situation by accepting drinks and leaving the bar with him.

"Understand that you used his money, but you are concerned about the disease."

The alcohol-sex exchange contributed to sexual risk behavior through forced sex, as discussed above, and also through multiple and concurrent partnerships and inconsistent condom use. Sexual risk occurred in the context of heavy alcohol use, which women said decreased their inhibitions and made them either unwilling or unable to negotiate for safer terms of sex. Both women and men in this setting reported multiple sexual partners. Women took on new partners in order to have someone who could "entertain" them and buy them drinks. In some cases, these partners were in addition to a regular boyfriend. One woman referred to a guy she met in the bar as a "roll on (deodorant), something you hide under your armpit" because he is not her primary boyfriend. In addition, respondents described women who were "passed around" among multiple men who bought for her, and groups of women who "shared" a single man who bought for all of them. For men, alcohol was a means to obtain multiple partners, a behavior that was acceptable and a status of masculinity among men, even for those who were married. As one man recounted during the observation period, "It is easy to get a woman if you got money... You just have to buy a few drinks and there you go."

Although most women and men talked about the importance of condoms with new partners, they also acknowledged the challenges of condom use in relationships characterized by exchange and heavy alcohol use. In particular, the gender and power dynamics of the exchange made it difficult for women to negotiate condom use because the woman was perceived to have promised herself to the man by accepting his drinks, thereby giving the man the control over the terms of the sexual encounter. One woman said, "At times men just refuse to use a condom despite all your pleas. What can you then do? I mean, you did use their money." This same woman explained that if a man wanted to use condoms it would just be "good luck." In addition, the drunken, sexually charged atmosphere of the venue made it difficult for both women and men to prioritize condom use. One participant justified not using condoms with sex partners met at the bar because "everyone is now drunk." She implied that the sexual passion is so high that people do not think about using protection. "A person knows that I don't have a condom and I want this thing (sex), and they want to do it." She added that "people like risk," alluding to the thrill of the flirtatious "game" surrounding meeting sex partners.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the practice of using alcohol as a currency for sexual exchange in six alcohol-serving venues in a single township in Cape Town, South Africa. In-depth interviews with male and female patrons revealed dominant norms around the trade of alcohol for sexual favors. While not all patrons spoke about their own participation in this exchange, it was recognized by both genders and across ages, racial groups, and settings as a common practice and expectation. While sexual behavior within the context of South African bars has been studied before (Morojele et al., 2006; Townsend et al., 2011; Wojcicki, 2002), this paper sheds further light on the implicit and universal norms of both women and men around the exchange of alcohol for sex in alcohol-serving venues, and the resulting vulnerabilities to gender based violence and HIV risk behaviors.

It has been suggested that transactional sex may be viewed as a “logical” reaction to a socio-economic environment (Singer et al., 2006). Observations in this study, combined with narratives of alcohol-sex exchange, provide further evidence of the perceived “logic” of transactional sex. Alcohol-serving venues provided a space to foster social identity and to deal with boredom that came from lack of employment and recreational activities. For many of these women, engaging in the “game” of the alcohol-sex exchange served to some extent as a form of entertainment, both in the procurement of alcohol and related socialization in the venues. Gender inequality and poverty provide a context in which the alcohol-sex exchange is “logical.” In this setting, a woman’s sexuality has value (Wojcicki, 2002) and is perhaps her only resource to barter in a context of high poverty and low employment. A woman’s sexuality therefore serves as her currency to participate in the social milieu and secure access to alcohol, a motivation which, for some women, may be related to alcohol addiction.

Alcohol use was heavy in this setting, as evidenced by observation data, in-depth interviews and women’s accounts of drinking behavior from the cohort assessment. Over 70% of our sample reported that they typically consumed three or more drinks on a single occasion, and over three-quarters met criteria for problem drinking on the CAGE assessment. This is far higher than the general population, where according to the most recent South African Demographic and Health Survey, just 5.5% of women drink three or more drinks per occasion on a typical weekend and just 10% meet criteria for problem drinking on the CAGE (Parry et al., 2005). Transactional sex has been linked to alcohol use (Jenness et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2009; Townsend et al., 2011), but the connection with alcohol addiction merits further investigation. The sex work literature identifies alcohol abuse as a contributor and motivator for the formal exchange of sex (Mimiaga et al., 2009), and it is likely that addiction is an even greater driver of less formal exchange of alcohol.

Many women who engaged in transactional sex expressed personal agency and power in the situation, a notion that has come up in other explorations of transactional sex (Maganja et al., 2007; Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001; Wamoyi et al., 2010). Women’s sense of agency appeared to be associated with their ability to meet their perceived needs, feelings of autonomy in using their sexuality to their advantage, and perceptions of equalizing power in sexual relationships. There were multiple examples of women who found ways to use the expectations of transactional sex to their benefit, by accepting alcohol from men but disappearing before they were expected to reciprocate with sex. For women, this behavior evoked a sense of power and control because they were able to manipulate a social expectation to meet their own needs, and exemplified an effort to reshape or challenge a female identity in which women have less power than men. Ultimately, however, the expression of agency happened within, and reinforced, a masculine power dynamic. Men stated that they felt tricked and even robbed in these situations, reinforcing their notions that

women could not be trusted. A study of transactional sex among Tanzanian adolescents similarly found that practices of sexual exchange led to deep suspicion of women and their motives in relationships, and supported attitudes that justified rape and violence against women (Maganja et al., 2007).

Our study findings clearly point to how norms and practices around the alcohol-sex exchange in this setting fuel and justify gender-based violence. In other studies in South Africa, engaging in transactional sex has been associated with experiences of gender-based violence (Dunkle et al., 2004) and less equitable gender attitudes (Dunkle et al., 2007). In the current study, both men and women accepted the expectation that buying alcohol implied an agreement to have sex, and if sex was not reciprocated, then violence was possible and in some cases justifiable. The “rules of engagement” concerning the amount of alcohol that affords a man degrees of sexual access did not emerge in our findings, but it is possible that those perceived rules differed among individuals, thereby leading to conflict and violence. Violence as retribution, including both physical and sexual assaults, appeared to be tolerated at a community level, as has been previously identified in South Africa (Wojcicki, 2002). Women who accepted drinks from men were seen as entering a mutually agreed upon relationship, and the community did not feel compelled to intervene on a personal and private issue, a challenge that has been discussed extensively in the gender based violence literature (Kelly, 2003).

Previous research in South Africa has highlighted how transactional sex is associated with HIV sexual risk behaviors (Dunkle et al., 2004; Pettifor et al., 2005). In this study, HIV risk was present in concurrent partnerships, difficulties negotiating condom use, and forced sex. Unlike transactional sex arrangements where women receive gifts or resources after sex, in the alcohol-sex exchange, women receive their compensation (alcohol) prior to sex. As a result, women who accepted alcohol from men were seen as consenting to sex, and therefore had little ability to refuse or negotiate the terms of sex. The presence of alcohol creates additional vulnerabilities, because alcohol has been associated with decreased inhibition and less likelihood of condom use (Kalichman et al., 2007; Woolf-King & Maisto, 2011).

The qualitative approach used in this study allowed us to explore the dynamic of transactional sex in greater depth than previous quantitative studies, and to move beyond the debate about how common transactional sex is as a practice to explore underlying norms and expectations among men and women. As with all qualitative inquiry, our analysis is influenced by subjective interpretation, although every effort was made to remain true to the data. Our fieldworkers’ presence in the venues over long periods of observation allowed them to develop trust and rapport with the venue patrons, and to confirm findings from the in-depth interviews. At the same time, social desirability bias remains a concern, and may have been heightened due to relationships formed during the observation period. This connection likely influenced how people talked about “others” and general norms to a greater extent than they spoke about their personal experiences. It is therefore not possible to say with any certainty what proportion of the participants were actively engaged in the alcohol-sex exchange or endorsed the norms and attitudes presented in our results. For male participants, social desirability and fear of repercussions likely limited their willingness to report their own engagement in coercive sexual practices. Alcohol addiction was not assessed clinically, nor was experiences of addiction included as a specific probe in our interview guides. The role of addiction in motivating transactional sex arrangements in our sample is therefore only speculative, and warrants further investigation. Finally, the study has limitations to generalizability. Participants in the study were recruited from alcohol-serving venues, and purposively selected because they were regular patrons, and therefore cannot be seen as representing the community as a whole. The uniqueness of the Delft

community as a mixed-race and fairly recently established township may limit generalizability to other township settings in South Africa.

The study findings have important implications for future research and interventions. The data clearly points to transactional sex happening within and contributing to a clustering of HIV risk behaviors, including multiple partnerships, inconsistent condom use and alcohol use. Future analysis of our multi-methods data will focus on ways in which alcohol use contributes to HIV risk behaviors among women in this setting. Future qualitative research on this topic should move beyond norms to focus on resilience to take part in transactional sex, and to also expand the analysis to explore the range of roles that alcohol plays in sexual negotiation, not only as a commodity similar to cash, but also as part of consensual relationship formation. Social support, self esteem and gender identity may be important issues that help individuals to resist engaging in this normative behavior and thus should be incorporated into interventions in this population. Our findings clearly point to transactional sex occurring within a context of masculinized power dynamics. Gender norms therefore need to be taken into consideration when developing interventions, which should include men as a focus and address gender power imbalances more broadly (Higgins et al., 2010). These interventions should be culturally tailored, since norms and expectations likely differ across racial/ethnic groups. It is essential in this setting to address the reasons why women drink, which included boredom and coping with distress. In addition, treating alcohol addiction may be key to preventing risky sexual behavior related to procuring alcohol (Cooperman et al., 2005; Woolf-King & Maisto, 2011). Finally, structural interventions are sorely needed in communities such as these and should focus on giving women other outlets of entertainment and productivity, providing opportunities for skill building and employment, and securing access to mental health services and substance abuse treatment to assist women to effectively cope with the hardships they face in their lives.

Highlights

- Explores the exchange of alcohol for sex in South African drinking venues through individual interviews and observations.
- Highlights accepted norms around expectations that receiving alcohol implies consent for sexual favors.
- Exposes contradictions in women's sense of empowerment in transactional sex and their vulnerability to violence and HIV.
- Identifies the need for structural interventions that include alternative social outlets and substance abuse treatment.

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TABLE 1

Description of the 44 individuals who participated in in-depth interviews

	Women (N=31)	Men (N=13)
Age (s.d.)	34.4 (10.6)	32.6 (10.5)
	Range 16–55	Range 23–52
Race		
Black	17 (54.8%)	7/13 (53.8%)
Coloured	14 (45.2%)	6/13 (46.2%)
Relationship Status		
Married	9 (29.0%)	4/12 (33.3%)
Have Children	22 (71.0%)	9/10 (90.0%)
Employed	4 (12.9%)	8/11 (72.7%)
Highest level of education		
< Standard 8 (no high school)	14 (45.2%)	
Standard 8—10	16 (51.6%)	
> Standard 10	1 (3.2%)	
Frequency of alcohol use		
Monthly or less	8 (25.8%)	
2–4 times per month	10 (32.3%)	
2–3 times per week	9 (29.0%)	
More than 4 times a week	4 (12.9%)	
Number of drinks on a typical occasion		
1–2 drinks	9 (29.0%)	
3 to 4 drinks	7 (22.6%)	
5 to 6 drinks	7 (22.6%)	
7 to 9 drinks	4 (12.9%)	
10 or more drinks	4 (12.9%)	
How often drink 6+ drinks in a sitting		
Never	2 (6.5%)	
Less than monthly	9 (29.0%)	
Monthly	7 (22.6%)	
Weekly	13 (41.9%)	
Alcohol dependent (CAGE = 2)	20 (77.4%)	
Hazardous drinking (AUDIT >10)	24 (64.5%)	