

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

Dating relationships typically emerge in early to middle adolescence, and are considered to be important learning experiences in the development of a sense of identity and the ability to establish meaningful intimate relationships for the future (Brown, 1999; Erikson, 1968; Feiring, 1999). For many adolescents dating relationships provide the primary context for experimenting with and expressing their developing sexuality. In learning to negotiate new relationships with peers, particularly intimate partners, adolescents also need to learn to negotiate healthy and consensual sexual relationships. Thus the transition to dating also presents a time of heightened vulnerability for adolescents, as limited knowledge and relative lack of experience in negotiating relationships may lead to nonconsensual or unwanted sexual experiences (Levy, 1991). More recently, in the field of adolescent sexual health and well-being, there has been growing concern about the extent to which adolescent relationships are characterised by violence and sexual coercion.

Sexual coercion is defined broadly as the act of forcing or attempting to force a person through violence, threats, verbal insistence, deception, cultural expectations or economic circumstance to engage in sexual behaviour against her or his will (Heise, Moore, & Toubia, 1995). It also involves sexual experiences when a person is unable to consent due to intoxication or mental status (Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Unwanted or nonconsensual experiences range on a continuum from kissing or touching to sexual penetration. Unwanted sexual experiences may also include the denial of the right to use contraception or protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Jewkes et al., 2002).

Sexual coercion is a worldwide phenomenon (Heise et al., 1995; Jewkes et al., 2002). While coercive experiences occur across various stages of life, adolescents appear to be especially vulnerable. For example, according to the *World Report on Violence and Health*, studies in countries as far-a-field as Cameroon, Ghana, Mozambique,

New Zealand, Peru, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, and the United States reveal that between 7% and 47.6% of women and between 0.2% and 31.9% of men have reported forced sexual initiation during adolescence (Jewkes et al., 2002). Although sexual coercion takes place in different contexts, for example, between dating and marriage partners, acquaintances, family members, or strangers, evidence from the *Report* suggests that for adolescent women in particular, experiences of coerced sex are likely to have involved a dating partner or acquaintance.

In South Africa, the concern regarding sexual coercion in adolescent relationships is relatively recent. In an attempt to contain the spread of HIV infection, research into the dynamics of young people's sexual relationships drew attention to coercive sexual practices (National Progressive Primary Health Care Network [NPPHCN], 1996; Varga, 1999; Wood & Jewkes, 1998; Wood, Maforah, & Jewkes, 1998). These studies have been instrumental in providing some insight into the circumstances of sexually coercive practices, highlighting the operation of male dominance and control in heterosexual dating relationships. Since then a few survey studies have provided estimates of the extent of the problem (e.g. CIETAfrica, 2000; loveLife, 2000) with the latter study also providing evidence of female-to-male coercion. Studies conducted among high school youth in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand have also found that adolescent boys report being coerced into sex by their partners, and adolescent girls report sexually coercing their partners (Bergman, 1992; Hird, 2000; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Poitras & Lavoie, 1995). These studies however, are consistent in revealing that girls are more often the victims while boys are more often the perpetrators of sexually coercive behaviours.

Alongside growing evidence of coercion in adolescent relationships, research suggests that adolescents themselves may not define acts of coercion in a dating relationship as a problem, but regard it as acceptable and normal dating behaviour. For example, some adolescents may perceive coerced sex to be a positive aspect, signifying love (Whitefield, 1999 cited in Eaton, Flisher, & Aarø, 2003). In this respect, researchers have pointed out that young girls especially, due to their relative lack of

experience, may have difficulty in identifying sexually aggressive experiences particularly because of their emotional involvement with the aggressor (Hird, 2000; Lloyd & Emery, 2000). On the other hand, even though young women may recognise abuse in dating relationships they may be more tolerant and accepting of their partner=s behaviour (Lloyd & Emery, 2000; Wood et al., 1998). Similarly, by minimising, justifying or excusing their coercive behaviours young men may not perceive sexual coercion or violence as problematic in the context of a dating relationship (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; NPPHCN, 1996; Wood & Jewkes, 1998). These findings generally point to a social climate of tolerance that supports male sexual aggression in adolescent relationships.

However, even though adolescents themselves may not view coercion as problematic, the literature suggests that coercive sexual experiences can have profound effects on adolescent development, including later intimate relationships (see Miller & Benson, 1999), and contribute to an increased risk for future incidents of coercion and violence (Noell, Rohde, Seeley & Ochs, 1997). Coercive experiences may also expose adolescents, especially young women, to other health risks such as unwanted pregnancies, STIs, and HIV infection and appear to be a key factor in adolescent risk taking behaviours including alcohol abuse, engaging in unprotected sex, and having multiple sexual partners (Heise et al., 1995; Jewkes et al., 2002; Maman, Campbell, Sweat, & Gielen, 2000; Rao Gupta, 2000).

High rates of teenage pregnancies and HIV infected youth attest to the persistent challenge to promote sexual health and well-being among South African adolescents. Findings from the South African Demographic and Health Survey reveal that 35% of women under the age of 20 have been pregnant or have had a child (Department of Health, 1998), and the sero-prevalence survey of women attending public antenatal clinics indicates that 15.8% of those under the age of 20 years were infected with HIV (Department of Health, 2003). Given the high rates of pregnancies and HIV infection among South African youth, Jewkes and Abrahams (2002) argue that understanding and preventing sexual coercion should be a very high public health priority. Despite these concerns, research to inform prevention remains limited, and there appears to

be a paucity in the development and implementation of effective violence prevention strategies in the context of adolescent dating relationships, especially in South Africa.

### **1.1 The aims, scope and rationale of the study**

The present study was undertaken to enhance our understanding of sexual coercion among South African adolescent dating relationships with a view to informing the design and implementation of developmentally and contextually appropriate interventions. Accordingly, the study seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge on sexual coercion in dating relationships.

The material presented in this study was part of a larger international project involving the investigation of HIV/AIDS risk behaviours and interpersonal violence among adolescents living in the United States, Brazil and South Africa, with the purpose of clarifying the possible intersections between HIV/AIDS risk and relationship violence, and the structural issues underlying the intersections (Ricardo, Johnson, Swart & Seedat, 1998; Swart, Seedat, Ricardo, & Johnson, 1999). However, the study presented here is based on the South African data, which consisted of a survey and focus group discussions with adolescents from seven secondary schools in Eldorado Park, south west of Johannesburg.

#### **1.1.1 The quantitative component of the study**

The quantitative component of the study examined the extent of sexual coercion in dating relationships and explored the association between coercive sexual experiences and high risk behaviour. Specifically, both young women=s and men=s experiences of coercion as victims and perpetrators were examined. Male experience of sexual victimisation and female perpetration was included for several reasons. First, little is known about the circumstances of female-to-male sexual victimisation. Second, even though the dynamics are likely to be markedly different when young men perpetrate coercion than when young women engage in similar acts due to gender power disparities (Hird, 2000; Jackson, 1999), such experiences may nevertheless be associated with negative health-related outcomes for males (Shier, Pierce, Emans, & DuRant, 1997). Third, positioning females only as potential victims

and males only as potential perpetrators reifies the societal expectation of male sexual aggression that contributes to a cultural climate of male sexual aggression (Greytak, 2003). Finally, studies also reveal a correlation in the acts of sustaining and perpetrating sexual coercion in dating relationships, with most of the adolescents who reported victimisation also having reported the perpetration of coercion (Harned, 2002; Murray, Henjum, & Robinson, 1993). Thus, while some adolescents may be victims or perpetrators, others may be both victims and perpetrators of coerced sex in dating relationships. This finding raises questions as to whether the meaning of coercion differs across individuals according to victim/perpetrator status (i.e., among adolescents reporting 1) sexual victimisation only; 2) the perpetration of coercion only, 3) both sustaining and perpetrating coercion, or 4) neither sustaining nor perpetrating coercion in a dating relationship). Furthermore, are individuals from one subgroup more likely to engage in high risk behaviour than individuals from other subgroups? Therefore, establishing whether or not the abovementioned patterns of coercion are apparent among South African adolescents may have important implications for the tailoring of prevention programmes.

Accordingly, the objectives of the quantitative component of the study were:

1. To describe and compare differences across sexually experienced female and male learners with respect to the prevalence of sexual coercion, both sustained and perpetrated, in the context of a dating relationship; beliefs about the acceptability of coercion in dating relationships; alcohol use; and high risk sexual behaviours (condom use and multiple sexual partners) and outcomes (STI and pregnancy).
2. To compare differences across victim/perpetrator status for female and male learners, respectively, with regard to beliefs about the acceptability of coercion in dating relationships; alcohol use; and high risk sexual behaviours and outcomes.
3. To examine the association between sexual coercion and high risk sexual behaviour in relation to other risk factors, such as selected sociodemographic characteristics and alcohol use.

Information documenting the prevalence of coercive sexual practices and high risk behaviours can provide support for the need for intervention. In addition, information about the patterns of risk behaviours associated with victim/perpetrator status for female and male learners respectively, can assist programme developers in targeting interventions for specific forms of coercive experiences.

### **1.1.2 The qualitative component of the study**

The qualitative component was designed to inform programme content. Its main objective was to understand why young people employ or tolerate coercion in their dating relationships. From a social constructionist perspective, sexual coercion is sustained by the ways in which young people view, experience, and talk about sexuality and relationships (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Lloyd & Emery, 2000). Understanding the ways in which young people may reproduce, enforce and resist dominant sexual scripts in various contexts is important for addressing and preventing sexual coercion in adolescent relationships (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003). Drawing on feminist and social constructivist theory (Allen, 2005; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Tolman, 1994, 2000) the qualitative component of the study examines the discourses available to young people for understanding sexuality and describes how broader social discourses of (hetero)sexuality (dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity) sustain male coercion in dating relationships. In so doing, the study offers insight into how aspects of the sociocultural context, particularly the peer context, heighten female vulnerability for sexual victimisation and increase male risk for sexually aggressive behaviour.

It was anticipated that the qualitative data would complement the quantitative data by providing insight into the social context in which dating relationships are enacted. Furthermore, while the quantitative data provide information on gender differences with respect to sexual victimisation and the perpetration of coercion, the qualitative data provide information on how gender operates to produce and sustain coercive practices within adolescent (hetero)sexual relationships.

## **1.2 Overview of the study**

The study is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on the development and characteristics of adolescent dating relationships, including sexual behaviour and the prevalence of sexual coercion particularly among South African adolescents, and concludes with an overview of the existing research on the association between sexual coercion and high risk sexual behaviour among adolescents. In chapter 3, the available literature on the risk factors is presented and organised into an ecological framework in order to understand the multiple influences associated with sexual coercion in adolescent dating relationships. Chapter 4 details the aims and methodology used in the study. Chapter 5 presents both the quantitative and qualitative findings, and includes a discussion of the study findings in respect of previous research findings. Finally, chapter 6 consists of the overall conclusion and discusses the limitations of the study with implications for future research, and provides recommendations for the prevention of sexual coercion in dating relationships and improvement of adolescent sexual health and well-being.