

Sailing Against the Tide? Sustaining Sexual Abstinence Among Christian Youth in a University Setting in South Africa

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Published online: 21 January 2011
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Abstract This qualitative study sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of abstinence among young Christians in a University in South Africa. Willingness to adhere to Christian teachings of sexual chastity is the primary motivation for sexual abstinence while spiritual, mental and physical health benefits of abstinence as well as enforcement of Christian teachings by members and peers are secondary motivations that help sustain sexual abstinence. Sexual pressures come from desire to satisfy sexual urge, subtle coercion, peer pressure, momentary loss of self-control. There is need for multi-pronged interventions aimed at empowering Christian youth to deal with sources of sexual pressures.

Keywords Abstinence · Christianity · Religiosity · Sexual debut · Youth

Introduction

Sexual awareness and experimentation are common features of young people, defined as those between ages 10 and 24, the world over (Dehne and Riedner 2001). Studies conducted worldwide suggest that age at sexual debut has been on the decline (Manzini 2001; Simbanyi et al. 2004). In South Africa, about half of a sample of 796 girls had already had sex by a mean age of 16 years (Manzini 2001). Dehne and Riedner (2001) argue that sexual vulnerabilities among young people is exacerbated by widening gaps between the age of sexual maturity and that at which sexual relations become legitimate in various societies. Early sexual debut is associated with poor reproductive and other health outcomes, which include early and unwanted pregnancies, majority (80%) of which are terminated by abortion, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and human papilloma virus (Pedlow and Carey 2004; Lacson et al. 1997; Manzini 2001; Nzioka 2001a; Omoteso 2006; Rosenbaum 2009).

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In South Africa, a national survey found an HIV prevalence rate of 10.3% among youth (Shisana et al. 2005). The study also revealed a high pregnancy rate among young people with 19.7% of girls aged 15–19 and 25% of women aged 20–24 reporting being pregnant in the 24 months preceding the study (Shisana et al. 2005). In order to reduce the risks associated with early sexual debut, researchers have underscored the need to promote abstinence or postponement of sexual debut among young people in the country (Singh et al. 2003; Simbayi et al. 2004; Shisana et al. 2005). In this paper, abstinence is used interchangeable with the term; delaying sexual initiation because it is assumed that young people practicing abstinence will someday initiate sex.

Religiosity has been found to be negatively associated with risk-taking among young people (Sinha et al. 2007). In particular, research shows that religious affiliation and religious practice are negatively associated with premarital sex (Odimegwu 2005; Fatusi and Blum 2008). At the core of most religions are moral values that oppose the practice of sex before marriage. This is especially the case with the Christian religion which abhors premarital sex. The Holy Bible, from where the Christian religion derives its teachings and religious instructions for adherents, instructs Christians to reserve sex for the confines of marriage. Apostle Paul in the book of Corinthians, one of the books he authored in the Holy Bible, admonishes Christians to eschew sexual immorality which includes premarital or extramarital sex because it is a sin against ones body (Apostle Paul 2004, 199). Thus, premarital sex is seen as sin and those who disobey this teaching of the Christian religion may receive heavy sanctions from the Church or may even be ostracized from the faith (Garner 2000). One would therefore expect that young people who are affiliated to the Christian religion will be more likely to delay sexual intercourse until marriage.

However, not all those affiliated to the Christian faith carry out all the moral codes as prescribed by the Bible. Therefore, affiliation to the Christian faith alone may not necessarily imply compliance with the instruction to delay sex and many young people who claim to be Christians engage in premarital sex (Garner 2000; Odimegwu 2005; Sadgrove 2007). Researchers have therefore drawn attention to the need to distinguish between those who are merely affiliated to the Christian religion without carrying out religious practices and those who are involved in religious practices such as daily prayer, preaching, church meetings, Bible study and distribution of Christian tracts (Garner 2000; Odimegwu 2005). They argue that those who carry out religious practices will be more likely to adhere to the instructions or codes of the religion. This position is borne out by studies suggesting that young people who participate in religious practices are more likely to be religious and therefore to adhere to Christian teachings than those who are merely affiliated to the religion (Garner 2000; Odimegwu 2005).

Previous research suggests that members of Pentecostal churches are more likely to adhere to Christian teachings of premarital sexual abstinence (Garner 2000). Pentecostal Christians are known for their emphasis on the personal experience of ‘salvation’ also called the ‘born again’ experience, intense appetite for Bible study and prayers and strict personal ethics (Marshall 1991; Garner 2000; Sadgrove 2007). Garner’s (2000) ethnographic study among four church groups that included Apostolic, Zionist, Pentecostal and a church representing the mainline churches (Methodists, Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic) in a township in South Africa shows that only members of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches had a significant reduction in extra and premarital sex. The author argues that the Pentecostal churches are able to achieve this through indoctrination: method and depth of Bible teaching; religious experience: subjective experience of the religion by members; exclusion: setting boundaries between the members and the society at large; and

socialization: monitoring of the domestic aspects of members' lives in order to maintain the set boundaries thereby enforcing the teachings of the church.

Given the relationship between religious practice and premarital sex, it seems reasonable to surmise that young Christians of the Pentecostal faith would be in a better position not only to delay sexual debut but also to sustain abstinence until marriage than would those in the general youth population. Therefore, the practice of Pentecostal Christianity should provide some protection from the risks associated with premarital sex among youth. While this may hold true for some youth, there is evidence to suggest that Christian youth confront a myriad of challenges in sustaining abstinence (Sadgrove 2007; Parsitau 2009). This is especially true for those who are University students (Sadgrove 2007; Ngubane 2009). The university environment has been shown to promote sexual activity among the general student population (Iwuagwu et al. 2000; Petersen et al. 2001; Sadgrove 2007; Ngubane 2009). In South Africa, a recent study conducted by Ngubane (2009) among a purposive sample of female University students which included Christians and non-Christians explicates how participants who resisted sexual pressures and remained abstinent in high school, in keeping with their decisions to delay sex until marriage, reneged on these decisions soon after enrolling in the university. The factors implicated in facilitating sexual intercourse include pressures from peers and partners, new found freedom in a permissive university environment as well as a lack of parental guidance and policing of behaviour. Christian youth within the university environment have been shown to find it difficult to abstain from sex (Sadgrove 2007). Sadgrove (2007) found that despite efforts at remaining abstinent in line with the teaching of their Pentecostal Church, Christian youth struggled to sustain abstinence and that some members of a Pentecostal group engaged in sexual activity.

While abstinence might protect Christian youths from the risks associated with sex, the practice of abstinence is not without limitations. As stated earlier, individuals might not be able to sustain the practice of abstinence until marriage. Thus, Christian youth who engage in sex might experience feelings of guilt and shame. Sadgrove (2007) found that participants who engaged in sex reported guilt feelings and fear of being ostracized, while some were actually ostracized from the Church. This serves to remove Christian youth from the environment that might confer protection from risk of infection, thereby increasing sexual vulnerabilities (Sadgrove 2007). The fact that Churches sanction those who break their rules by having sex and that society holds Christians accountable for having sex outside of marriage (Sadgrove 2007) could motivate abstinence. On the other hand, the shame and guilt that comes with having sex could serve to push those who are unable to sustain abstinence to have sex in secret and therefore less likely to practice safe sex. For instance, studies have shown that Christian youth who engage in sexual relationships, because they are unable to sustain abstinence, are less likely to use condoms (Agha et al. 2006; Sadgrove 2007). This is corroborated by findings that a few of the Christian youth in Sadgrove's study became pregnant. Researchers have therefore argued that these issues tend to reduce the overall protective effects of belonging to these religious groups (Agha et al. 2006; Sadgrove 2007).

With few exceptions (Shisana et al. 2005; McGrath et al. 2009), most studies focusing on youth sexual behaviour in South Africa neglect the issue of sexual abstinence much less the influence of religion on abstinence behaviour. Therefore, it is not clear how Christianity influences decisions to delay sex and how sexual abstinence behaviour might be sustained among Christian university students. This study, therefore, examines the perceptions and experiences of young Christians practicing sexual abstinence in a university setting. The main questions addressed are the following: What are the determinants of sexual

abstinence among Christian youth? What challenges confront Christian youth practicing abstinence? How do Christian youth deal with these challenges? This study could illuminate factors to consider in designing interventions that will help Christian students sustain sexual abstinence and engage in safer sex practices.

Methodology

Participants

This study uses a qualitative research design which allows for a ‘thick description’ of participants experiences (Ulin et al. 2002). Participants for the study were University students drawn from two major networks of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians. Participants were selected purposively if they were registered as University of KwaZuluNatal students; self-identify as practicing members of any Pentecostal/Charismatic Church or Fellowship; self-identify that they had never engaged in any kind of sexual activity (oral, anal or vaginal); were between ages 16–24 at the time of the study; were willing to answer questions regarding influences of religiosity on sexual behaviour. Because issues around abstinence and sexual behaviour are personal and sensitive, those who abstain are not easily accessible. We, therefore, recruited participants using snowball sampling technique. Once the criteria were set, we began by interviewing two people known to two of the authors who met the inclusion criteria. Thereafter, each of these two introduced us to other people in their network who met the inclusion criteria who also introduced us to others (Neuman 2006). Of the total sample ($n = 19$), 11 were women and 8 were men. The students were English (5), Afrikaans (5), Zulu (6) or Xhosa speaking (3), between 18 and 24 years of age. They were in 2nd–6th year of University studies.

Procedure

Ethical permission for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZuluNatal ethical review board. The study made use of a qualitative research design: semi-structured interviews which allows for an open-ended description of experience was seen as suitable for this study because it allows participants to speak about their experience of practicing abstinence (Banyard and Grayson 2000). Semi-structured interview schedules were used to conduct in-depth interviews and contained open-ended questions which gave participants the opportunity and freedom to speak about their experiences. The questions were derived from an extensive review of literature on youth sexuality and on the intersections between Christianity and sex as well as religiosity and sex. Interview schedules covered issues of perceptions of premarital sex, benefits and costs of sexual activity versus benefits and costs of abstinence, challenges in sustaining abstinence and strategies for overcoming challenges. Once ethical clearance was obtained and the sample identified, interviews took place with each participant at a time and venue chosen by the participants. Interviews were conducted in English by two of the authors. Each interview lasted between 45 min and 1 h. Prior to each interview, participants were introduced to the study and those who agreed to participate were requested to give informed consent and were asked for permission to record the interview. All participants gave permission to conduct the interviews and to use tape-recorders.

Data Analysis

Audio-taped data were transcribed by two of the authors. Thereafter, thematic analysis was carried out (Ulin et al. 2002). This analysis makes use of pre-existing themes, such as research questions or interview questions, to structure the process of analysis (Ulin et al. 2002). These questions act as themes under which data are grouped and structured and then discussed (Ulin et al. 2002). Data were coded and a label was attached to each coded statement connecting it to the relevant theme. Thereafter, the coded statements were then grouped under the different broad themes.

Findings

Perceptions of Premarital Sex

Expectedly, participants' views about sex reflected religious teachings about the meaning and value of sex. But they also emphasized the emotional aspects of sex.

I mean its something of showing your body to the person;... even showing your heart.

It's something that's sacred...It's not just a physical act, it's emotional as well.

Similarly, participants' perceptions about premarital sex were shaped by the teachings of the Christian faith. Participants referred to the Bible in stating that premarital sex is sin that could alienate one from God.

In Christianity we are not supposed to engage in sex before marriage.

There is nothing that defiles one's body except a sin...what makes one's body unclean is having sex before marriage. Remember that our bodies are the holy temple of God and so defiling one's body is the end of holiness.

Still drawing on Bible teachings, participants discussed the Christian concept of 'becoming one flesh' with a sexual partner. This means that one becomes spiritually bound to one's sexual partner and that therefore this should occur within the confines of marriage. Both male and female participants hoped to become 'one flesh' with their spouses within the confines of marriage.

I don't believe in sex before marriage because when people have sex they become one flesh and I want that to happen with the person I am married with, the person I would share my life with

Motivations for Abstaining/Delaying Sexual Debut

Participants weighed the spiritual as well as physical costs and benefits of abstinence against the spiritual and physical costs and benefits of sexual activity and all chose to abstain from sex until marriage. This was done in order to reap the benefits of sexual abstinence and at the same time avoid the costs of premarital sexual activity. However, it is noteworthy that participants' narratives mainly centred on the benefits of abstinence and the costs of premarital sex. While a few of the participants made indirect references to the potential benefits of having sex, none made any reference to the cost of abstaining.

Perceived Benefits of Abstinence

Most of the participants indicated that the main reason for abstaining from premarital sex is a willingness to obey God's instructions on sexual chastity. As one participant put it: 'The main thing is just wanting to please God'. The willingness to please God is a common thread in the narratives of the participants who indicated that it was a primary reason for abstinence. Closely related to this are the blessings that participants hoped to receive from God for being obedient.

So, what I would gain is God's blessing I suppose...he would bless it [marriage], just for obeying Him...incredible blessing comes from waiting (delaying sex).

Most of the participants indicated that abstaining from premarital sex would make marriage more blissful because both partners will love and trust each other more than they would if one of them had had premarital sex.

It's really based on my future relationship with whoever...So I think it will enrich the future relationship.

I believe marriage will be a lot better if you abstain until that moment.

Some knew about friends who they felt were reaping the benefits accruing from abstaining from premarital sex and wanted to emulate them.

Also friends...they stayed abstinent and they didn't even kiss and they dated for 3 years...I've never seen a marriage with such love and ah it's amazing. And I kind of, I want that.

Abstinence also provides some with the moral grounds to serve as role models.

I wanted to be an example to my younger sisters that a person can save herself from sexual activities until getting married. To show them that it is a possible...as they can see that I have not engaged in premarital sex and I don't have a child and I'm still continuing very well with my life.

Perceived Costs of Sexual Activity

The fear of punishment for disobeying God emerged as the most salient cost motivating participants to abstain from sex. According to participants, punishment is often meted out to disobedient individuals by God and also by the local church. This serves to deter members from premarital sexual activity.

Once there is no holiness (because of premarital sex) it means the loss of relationship with God. That person is useless in the eyes of God because he has no holiness.

Most religions do not say engage in sex, but there is no punishment. But in my church if they find that you have had sex before marriage, you have to dissociate yourself from the religion (Christianity). So that kind of keeps you away from having sex

Participants, particularly women, were especially concerned about being hurt emotionally if they initiated sex with someone who might end up leaving them. Agreeing to have sex, in their view, would be tantamount to giving ones body away freely to men.

It's also fear of emotional hurt. When you get to a relationship someone will use me but after they have had sex will leave you because most relationships are more about sex and people wanting to satisfy their needs.

I don't want to experience the pain from somebody who will leave me because I have seen from my friends and people around me happening to them.

Unlike the female participants, a male participant viewed the emotional hurt resulting from premarital sex as affecting both sexes. Notably, other male participants focused on personal benefits and not for the opposite sex (partner).

There's a lot of baggage that comes with having sexual intercourse before marriage these days...a person who abstains number one, emotionally won't be damaged and number two, won't be able to damage anyone else and their partner.

There was also the fear of regret or feelings of guilt for renegeing on own decisions and disobeying God.

I don't want to wake up in the morning and think "Oh crap" you know, "What have I done?"...that's my biggest fear.

Participants had also learned lessons from the negative experiences of friends or family members who had not abstained. Some of the female participants had family members who according to them had made mistakes by falling pregnant and they feared that the same predicament might befall them. These personal experiences of costs further reinforced their decision to abstain.

My mom had my brother when she was 18...you see the consequences from someone who you love and are close to, it's definitely like "Whoa, this is a warning thing".

All my friends who now have children...before marriage, most of the time, well it causes stress and pain...that's the last place I would ever want to be, ever.

A male participant also spoke about the negative experiences of siblings.

Most of my siblings have babies, and they ended up breaking up with the other parent. Therefore, I realized that it is not the way I want to live. I wanted to be there fully, at birth and bringing up my children together with the mother of my children.

For a few of the participants, one of the costs of engaging in premarital sex was being judged by non-Christians. One participant indicated that those who proclaim to be Christians are not only being watched by their Church or other Christians but other school mates who expect them to maintain high moral standards which includes sexual abstinence.

Because of my faith I was obliged to separate myself from boys, not really obliged but thought that people were going to judge me because I said that I am a Christian and now I am doing something else (falling in love). So I decided to stay away from that (sex) as I was also not that interested.

While acknowledging occasional desires to satisfy their sexual urge, some participants indicated the costs of falling for such temptations were not only greater than the momentary pleasures derived from sex but also discussed the potential negative effect on themselves and others.

I can not make a mistake only for a momentary pleasure, for example, through attraction as there are people looking up to me and if I make such mistake what picture/lesson would I be giving them?

Although many of the participants acknowledged that abstaining from sex shields one from the risks of STI/HIV, participants felt that the risk of contracting STI/HIV had only a slight impact on their decision to delay sex. None of the participants indicated that they knew or had seen anyone close to them infected with HIV/AIDS but a few claimed to have been involved in AIDS prevention and care and had had contact with non-relatives living with AIDS.

I was on the AIDS committee and...we went to this place once, it was like an orphanage and there were kids with AIDS and I thought, "Gees this is terrible".

Sources and Nature of Sexual Pressures

Participants confront a number of challenges in following the Bible instructions on pre-marital sex and sustaining abstinent behaviour. The fact that some are in love with a boyfriend or girlfriend but cannot have sex with them until marriage creates sexual pressures. Some of the girls who kept their relationships with non-Christians after becoming 'born again' experienced enormous pressure to have sex with their partners.

Men never stop asking...to have sex. You keep on saying No! it is not going to happen, but no, he keeps on trying...he will keep on saying things like 'if you love me then prove to me'

Both male and female participants also reported experiencing pressure from their peers both to have a boy or girlfriend and sex. Among the boys, peer pressure came from sexually experienced friends discussing about the pleasures of having sex with each other in the presence of and sometimes with participants. One male participant talked about how difficult it is to stay abstinent in the midst of sexually active friends and school mates who are constantly discussing sex.

It is not easy because of the environment we live in...guys talk about this thing...saying hey, 'ngamsika' ('I had sex with so and so'), so peer pressure resulted in me wanting to experience sex. And when they talk (about sex) it clicks on your mind that eish! Why am I not trying it? My body even feels sexual excited. It comes to mind and therefore I feel like doing the thing (having sex).

For some, sexual pressures came from seeing attractive girls in revealing dresses. A boy who did not have a girlfriend at the time of the study said:

Seeing girls sometimes it happens that you love one of them. And say oh! My God why can't I try once and feel what people always talk so much about. So that is a challenge. If it happens that you see a beautiful girl and your mind just runs there.

A few of the male participants also indicated that they were pressurized to have girlfriends to prove that they could woo girls. Many girls were pressurized by their friends to have boyfriends in order to justify their own actions. All these pressures came from friends who were not from their core network of Christians. As we shall see later, this invariably puts pressure on them to have sex.

People want you to do what they were doing so they could actually feel that what they are doing is right thing because so and so is doing it.

Most, however, had relationships with other Christians with similar values after becoming ‘born again’. Yet in these relationships, pressures came from being too physically intimate with these boyfriends/girlfriends, spending a lot of time alone together with them, subtle manipulation from a boyfriend and temporary loss of self-control. A few of those who had Christian boyfriends reported being pressured by them through manipulation to have sex.

I had kind of fallen in love with him...I was totally consumed with him, wanting to please him a lot...I think he was kind of subtle in some ways of doing things...he would like make you trust him...and that makes it easier...to kind of open up to them...love is blind—you don’t really see what’s going on...I think I would’ve been manipulated.

One participant had to break a relationship because she felt coerced by her partner.

If I had gone out with him (previous boyfriend) longer he probably would have pushed me into having sex with him. It was a big learning curve for me.

A few participants also talked about the pressures that come from being alone with their partners without anyone to check them. This leads to physical intimacy such as kissing and romancing which in some cases almost led to sex:

Being alone with him most of the time doesn’t help the situation because we get the ideas and stuff! Like doing things that lovers do.

Another female participant said she almost had sex with her boyfriend as a result of getting too intimate.

It was real, sex was probably the next step. It was very close.

Resources and Strategies for Sustaining Sexual Abstinence

Sustaining sexual abstinence behaviour on a daily basis is challenging, and the process for achieving this differed for individuals once the decision to abstain is made. Once outside the church environment where the Bible is taught, family members and peers assisted in keeping them true to their decisions without which some would have initiated sexual activity. In the home environment, most of the participants had parents who were also Christians and supportive of their decision. They assisted participants to stay abstinent through constant reminders and strict rules about their relationship with the opposite sex.

My mom’s quite strict if she sees me hanging too much with my boyfriend...And like, she checks up on me and stuff. Maybe if I was staying on my own...there wouldn’t be much barriers—I wouldn’t be very strict—I’d see him [boyfriend] all the time.

I wasn’t allowed to be out late with a boy...they had to meet him first and you know like the normal traditions.

But there’s definitely accountability like with my dad...if there’s no one at home, my dad’s not too happy with us just being at the house. My dad’s just like, don’t get yourself into those situations.

Once becoming Christians, most of the participants parted ways with or at least kept a safe distance from their former friends who believed that it is okay to have premarital sex. As one put it ‘I don’t mingle with them anymore’. One participant who was in a relationship with someone prior to being ‘born again’ found a way of ending the relationship with his partner in order to avoid being put under pressure to have sex.

I had a girlfriend before I became born again. When ‘Ivangeli’ (word of God) came I kept a distance though we continued phoning each other, but it was difficult for me to tell her that I did not love her anymore but I didn’t go too close to her. After a while she stopped phoning me. That was the end of our relationship.

But participants kept close relationships with Christian friends who were also practicing sexual abstinence.

I have a mostly Christian core friend group...[and] suddenly there’s an expectation from your friends so I know I won’t like ever [have sex] because I know my friends will keep me in line or that’s expected within my group.

When I became a Christian, all my friends thought the same. Like sex was a No No!, a total No No!, like amongst us...I think I found belonging... so I took up the values of that group and I was strong about it.

Some participants reported battling with intense thoughts about sex. Friendship with other Christian students practicing abstinence was therefore important to sustain their decision to abstain because they ensured that their friends attended church or fellowships regularly and provided support in encouraging them to remain abstinent. This provided a good shield against pressures to have sex from other peers.

I can be so grateful for the friends that I have because its so easy to be led astray...by peers and peer pressure...I had pretty wholesome friends at school.

When you’re battling with a thought or other sexual type of actions, you go to people like that (friends) and they help you out.

The influence of the University environment especially in the first year was so strong that some indicated they almost reneged on their decision to abstain from sex. The critical role of peers in sustaining abstinence was underscored by a female participant.

If I have not gained friendship with the girls who are also virgins, and if there was no church in Westville, I would probably have lost my virginity in my first year.

However, some had to rely on resources such as Christian literature as well as own skills in self-discipline and self-control to overcome practical challenges to have sex.

I’ve even read a book on sexual desires and strategies...the author viewed sexual vision...as a sumo wrestler, and the more lust you consume, the fatter the sumo wrestler becomes until it squashes you, and that squashing you represents you...succumbing to those desires. So if you controlled your sumo wrestler...your sumo wrestler would not grow hence you won’t get squashed and fall into temptation.

One participant discussed the strategies he uses to deal with the challenge of attractive girls who wear skimpy dresses.

Training my eyes that if they see a girl not wearing proper clothes I don’t look at her anymore

Some participants who indicated that they were physically intimate (engaging in kissing and romance) with their partners claimed that they were able to maintain self-control to prevent sexual intimacy. Yet, some of the female participants were not able to exercise total self-control as they often went beyond the boundaries they set for themselves, thereby giving their partners a wrong impression that they wanted sex. As it happened, they were able to stop short of having sex.

I told him that if he tries (to have sex) and doesn't succeed, he can't blame me. He shouldn't be trying. Going along with everything that lovers do, does give mixed messages. But I call the shorts; as long as I call the shorts nothing (referring to sex) will happen.

We actually had to stop and discuss it [sex] and sort out the problem before we could carry on [with their relationship].

A few of the participants also mentioned that participating in sports and games helped them keep busy and in the process avoid sexual pressure getting a hold of them. Others highlighted the need to debunk myths that encourage premarital sex.

Boys say that a person who does not have a girlfriend is not normal, I am telling you that we are alive and very normal through Christianity and we are not engaging in sex. If these myths are true, that sex increases intelligence, I still do not agree because we are alive and normal and we do not have sex and we pass like everyone, we get distinctions like everyone.

In summary, the desire to please God by adhering to teachings of Christianity and the perceived blessings that come with obedience is the primary motivation for practicing abstinence. However, participants carried out a cost–benefit analysis on an ongoing basis the outcome of which served to reinforce the primary motivation to abstain. The costs of sexual activity such as the fear of punishment by God or the church (excommunication/sanctions) also strongly influenced their decisions to abstain. The fear of emotional hurt and fear of guilt and shame, fear of pregnancy, fear of being judged by the church and society at large, hope for a blessed and blissful marriage and an opportunity to serve as a role model were the other motivations mentioned.

The main sources of sexual pressures were pressures from peers, partners and subtle coercion by partners. The university environment was also identified as facilitating thoughts about sex, thereby making it difficult to resist sex. Being alone or physically intimate with partners also serves to encourage sex. Nonetheless, participants employed a number of strategies such as relying on parental guidance and policing of behaviour, keeping a distance from non-Christian partners, sticking close to Christian friends who were also abstaining and attending church/fellowships regularly, setting boundaries in relationships and self-discipline and self-control in intimate relationships.

Discussion

Previous studies on the influence of Christianity on sexual behaviour in South Africa have focused on premarital and extramarital sexual behaviour of members of different types of churches (Garner 2000). This study provides new knowledge on motivations for abstinence among Pentecostal youth in a university setting as well as the challenges of and strategies for sustaining abstinence. In addition, the study provides new perspectives on the processes through which Christianity, using the members of Pentecostal churches as case study, influences the decision to delay sex among university-going youth. It also enhances our understanding of other factors facilitating and impeding sexual abstinence among University-going Pentecostal youth as well as how these factors influence abstinence behaviour.

Participants in this study had a mean age of 23 years and some of them were 24 years at the time of the study. It is also noteworthy that some of the participants were in their 6th year of study (postgraduate students). Given that mean age at sexual debut for youth in

South Africa is 16 years (Manzini 2001; Eaton et al. 2003) and the fact that young people find it difficult to refuse sexual advances and sexual pressures (Iwuagwu et al. 2000; Omoteso 2006), study participants could be said to have recorded a remarkably high degree of success in delaying sex with far-reaching implications for reduction of the risks associated with early sex. Writers on the Christian religion point out that a key feature of Pentecostal churches is the strict monitoring of members' sexual behaviour which leads to a reduction in the probability of premarital and extramarital sex among members (Marshall 1991; Garner 2000; Sadgrove 2007). Study findings support this assertion showing that willingness to please God and adhere to Christian teachings on sex is the primary motivation for delaying sex among participants all of whom were hoping to receive blessings from God as a reward for obeying God's instructions. This position is also supported by participants' perceptions of sex outside of marriage as sin which are clearly a reflection of Christian teachings.

The primary motivation for sexual abstinence reinforces and is reinforced by the secondary motivations: participants had to weigh the costs and benefits of having sex on the one hand against the costs and benefits of abstinence on the other. They all came to a decision that the benefits of abstaining far outweigh the pleasures of premarital sex because of the overriding belief that abstinence offered them the opportunity to fulfil their spiritual obligation of pleasing God and at the same time avoiding the emotional as well as physical costs of sex.

Studies have shown that the university environment is permissive; allowing for sexual freedom and devoid of parental control or policing of students' sexual behaviour (Iwuagwu et al. 2000; Sadgrove 2007; Ngubane 2009). Study findings show that participants have to resist pressures that come from the university culture if they are to sustain abstinence. A few male participants report being sexually aroused when in the midst of friends discussing their own sexual escapades, which led to curiosity about sex. Some of them also reported finding it difficult to deal with sexual desires which are also exacerbated by factors in the university environment including prevailing female dress culture. Female participants seemed to experience the greatest pressure to have sex which, in most instances, came from the boyfriends who were not Christians. To be sure, some of those who had Christian boyfriends also reported crossing the boundaries of intimacy that they had previously set for themselves. There were also a few cases of subtle coercion and intense sexual pressures from male partners, which led to a momentary loss of self-control among female participants. This is disturbing when viewed against the backdrop of the fact that most of the perpetrators also claim to be Pentecostal Christians and a previous South African study that showed that close to half of first sex among young people is coerced (Maharaj and Munthree 2007). Most participants seemed to rely on their own skills to deal with sexual pressures. Only a few shared the fact that they were having sexual thoughts or experiencing sexual pressures with their friends. It could be the case that feelings of shame and guilt prevent participants from discussing this issue openly with other Christians.

Sadgrove (2007) indicated that 'born again' Christians who had sex expressed feelings of guilt and shame and were reluctant to share their experiences and seek help for fear of being judged or punished by the church. Parsitau (2009) also reported that Christian youth who had sex were excommunicated from the Church. Our findings on the fear of being judged by society support that of Garner (2000) and Sadgrove (2007). In her study among University students in Uganda, Sadgrove (2007) found that policing of behaviour of Christians by non-Christians students on the University campus was prevalent. Participants in the Ugandan study indicated that it was important to behave true to the values of their Christian faith in order not to be seen as hypocrites by society. Since all the participants in

this study claimed to be abstaining at the time of the study, the possible spiritual or social implications of having sex while still practicing Christianity is beyond the scope of this study. This highlights the need for further studies in this area.

Given reported coercion experienced by participants, the fact that a few of the participants acknowledged that they were struggling to stay abstinent (with some only stopping short of having sex), and the prevalence of HIV in South Africa and among youth in particular, one would expect that participants would see themselves as being at risk of HIV infection. Yet participants stated that the fear of emotional hurt and unwanted pregnancy were more important factors in motivating and sustaining sexual abstinence than the risk of HIV infection. This finding is in accord with that of Simbayi et al. (2004), which shows that avoiding the physical consequences of sexual activity was not a very important reason for abstaining. The low perception of risk of HIV infection has been reported and attributed to feelings of invulnerability in previous studies among youth in South Africa (Anderson et al. 2007). The low perception of risk is disturbing and seems to suggest a lack of knowledge of HIV. It is possible that participants perceived a higher risk of unwanted pregnancy and emotional hurt because they had close relatives who had been heartbroken from unwanted pregnancy and experienced emotional hurt from premarital sex whereas none of their relatives, friends or peers have been infected with HIV. This finding is consistent with the health belief model (Rosenstock et al. 1994), which suggests that personal experience of a health problem might serve as 'cues to action' in preventing risk behaviour.

Most of the parents who were also Christians encouraged their children to abstain and even provided an enabling environment for that to occur. Yet the strongest influence in sustaining abstinence came from friends in the university environment most of whom were members of the same church. This is consistent with findings from a Ugandan study among University students that showed that peers provide the greatest positive influence regarding sexual abstinence among Pentecostal youth (Sadgrove 2007). Garner (2000) also argues that exclusion and socialization are major ways that Pentecostal Christians are able to monitor the sexual behaviours of their members. Further, Garner (2000) argues that high levels of socialization among members of Pentecostal churches makes it possible for them to monitor peers and find out if someone is not adhering to the teachings of the church by having premarital sex. In this case, exclusion is achieved through avoiding close friendship with non-Christians and sticking close to other Pentecostal Christians in order to overcome sexual pressures.

Together our findings highlight the need for interventions that are multi-pronged. Interventions could be developed for Christian youth, which should cover the following areas: HIV knowledge, empowerment in coping skills to handle the pressures that come from the university environment, empowerment with skills to improve self-esteem and self-efficacy in negotiating abstinence, empowerment with knowledge and skills to negotiate and practice safe sex in case they are unable to sustain abstinence and end up having unplanned or planned sex. The interventions should also empower Christian youth with skills to identify and avoid or manage risky relationships as well as circumstances within otherwise harmless relationships which might facilitate sexual activity or coercion. This requires the teaching of skills necessary for negotiating within relationships, as well as skills that promote mutual support by both partners in a relationship in promoting self-control and mutual respect.

Finally, there is need for interventions among Christian youth leaders regarding HIV/STI and sex. These interventions should focus on improving knowledge on HIV/STI, teach skills on how to help youth deal with sexual pressures and assist those who have initiated sex to overcome guilt and shame.

Conclusion

This study shows that participants' willingness to please God enables them to adhere to Christian teachings about sexual chastity and is the most important reason for delaying sexual intercourse. This motivation reinforces other secondary motivations which include fear of emotional hurt, pregnancy and judgement by non-Christians and Christians alike.

Of note is the finding that sustaining sexual abstinence is very challenging for Christian youth mainly due to the university culture of sexual freedom and permissiveness and the absence of parental policing of sexual behaviour. Coercion and physical intimacy also serves as a threat to the sustenance of sexual abstinence. Friends and peers serve to facilitate or hinder sexual abstinence: on the one hand, non-Christian peers, friends and partners are the main sources of pressure to have sex, while, on the other hand, Christian friends and peers are the greatest sources of support for abstinence.

There is considerable pressure to have sex among participants, suggesting that Pentecostal youth practicing abstinence within the university confront formidable challenges of not conforming to popular youth behaviour. Therefore, abstinence until marriage might be unsustainable among some Christian youth. This has implications for sexual risk reduction programming. Interventions should, therefore, be multi-pronged aimed at empowering Christian youth to deal with all the pressures that come from peers, partners and the university environment in general as well as address issues of safe sex for those who succumb to sexual pressures.

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