Secrecy, stigma and HIV/AIDS: An introduction

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This paper situates the articles selected for this special issue of AJAR within the context of the Sex and Secrecy conference, from which they emerged and within the discourse of secrecy. Secrecy and silence which have characterised the HIV/AIDS epidemic in many societies, have been the focus of limited academic attention. Yet the power of the secret is evident in multiple spheres. This introduction uses the lens of secrecy to enhance our understanding of sexuality. One of the themes which ran throughout these papers was that of stigma and its links to secrecy and HIV/AIDS. The papers reviewed in this introduction highlight an alarming paradox. There is a high level of HIV awareness and unparalleled public attention around matters of sexuality and yet the authors in this special issue all point to the enormity of stigma and its consequences.

Key words: denial, power, sexuality, shame, silence

Introduction

Sex and secrecy are inextricably intertwined. Secrecy and silence have always characterised initiation rituals, same-sex relations, sexual violence and, more recently, the HIV/AIDS epidemic; and have not been the subject of focussed academic scrutiny. Yet, the power of the secret is evident in multiple spheres. For example, in the withholding and revealing of sexual secrets across generations in initiation rituals. And secrets also serve to conceal the nature and extent of violence and abuse, often in a domestic setting which is ironically deemed to be a place of safety. Secrecy thus functions as a mechanism for maintaining unequal relations of power (Herdt, 2003a). But secrets do not only operate to repress and dominate. They can be a resource used by marginal individuals and groups to claim power. This is demonstrated by a case study of traditional healers involved in same-sex relationships (Morgan & Reid, 2003). Sexual relations between women are often criticised in the southern African region as ‘un-African’ — a Western import that is anathema to traditional values. Yet, a lesbian Sangoma may be highly regarded in the community as the vector of ancestral authority. What would be regarded as taboo in one context thus becomes the source of ritual authority and power in another.

Modes of secrecy

Various scholars of secrecy suggest that making secrets and exacerbating silences is a feature of conflict ridden, tense, fragile societies such as this (Canetti, 1988; Ferme, 2002; Herdt, 2003b). An example would be the whisperings and finger pointing associated with witchcraft accusations during times of social upheaval and turbulence. Deborah Posel (2003, pp.19–20) suggests four modalities of secrecy. The first being secrecy as a mode of knowledge. In this instance secrecy entails a selective denial of uncomfortable truths. Posel invokes Stanley Cohen’s work on mechanisms of denial where he argues ‘self-deception is a way to keep secret from ourselves the truth we cannot face’. This is a way of knowing and not knowing because it is a truth that cannot be confronted. Aspects of the secret are thus brought to the fore and others kept hidden.

The second modality she refers to is secrecy as a mode of speech. Here ‘a secret is a particular kind of speech act, a way of speaking as much as a way of knowing. Keeping secrets is a practice of saying some things and not saying others, and in respect of particular audiences.’ (Posel, 2003, p. 19) This is the realm of half-truths, omission and euphemism.

The third modality is secrecy as a site of shame and stigma. In this instance secrecy is born out of a wish to avoid the negative moral and social consequences of stigmatisation and discrimination. The fourth modality is secrecy as a site of power. The reproduction and regulation of what can be known and what must remain concealed through, as Posel suggests ‘regimes of surveillance’ (2003, p. 20).

The power of the secret

Using South Africa as a case in point we ask how these modalities help us to understand the ways in which secrets about AIDS have been produced? AIDS in South Africa has been produced as a site of secrecy, silence and denial in for example, the public declarations, and private acknowledgments surrounding AIDS-related deaths. The euphemistic way in which these deaths are announced in the public sphere is further evidence of denial and shame.
Tuberculosis and pneumonia, for example, have become code for AIDS deaths. The paradox of knowledge and denial is seen in the young man who, despite a high level of awareness about HIV, nevertheless acts in a way that puts him at high risk. Nowhere is this paradox more striking than in the juxtaposition of high HIV prevalence and extraordinary levels of AIDS denialism at the highest level of government. South African President Thabo Mbeki’s insistence that he is yet to meet anyone with HIV/AIDS illustrates this point. Yet it is a public secret that some of his close political colleagues have succumbed to the virus.

In contrast to practices of secrecy and denial, a founding premise of activist groups such as the Treatment Action Campaign insists on the breaking of silences, the naming of secrets, and making public claims to reduce what had otherwise been cast as private shame. According to Caceres (2003) secrecy can also serve as a crucial strategy of resistance for many people, which is clearly more straightforward, general and discrete than a political movement. Similar ‘strategies of resistance’ can be seen in the ways in which some homosexuals may choose to conceal their sexual orientation in order to gain acceptance in a homophobic environment.

These modes of understanding secrecy were elaborated through the themes of the Sex and Secrecy Conference. In Sex and Secrecy we sought to use the lens of secrecy to explore neglected sites of historical and sociological endeavour, in order to enhance our understanding of sexuality. As Lenore Manderson (2003) outlined in her opening address, ‘The intent of this conference is the inquisition of matters sexual and secret and sexual and silenced: the scrutiny of acts, identities, practices, relationships and desires that are illicit and illegitimate, proscribed and hidden. The value of exposing these and of questioning the nexus of sexuality and secrecy is to break the control over individuals whose sexuality and sexual lives are marginalized.’

In the southern African region there are fierce public contestations about HIV/AIDS, sexual violence and homophobia. Moreover the study of sexuality is of particular relevance to a society such as ours undergoing rapid social transformation. As Gayle Rubin (1993, p. 3) argues, ‘To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality. Contemporary conflict over sexual values and erotic conduct has much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries. They acquire immense symbolic weight. Disputes over sexual behaviour often become the vehicle for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress.’

Following Rubin, we argue that there is a particular urgency surrounding matters of sexuality and secrecy in the southern African region. In order to provide an international forum to address these issues the Sex and Secrecy Conference was held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from 22nd to 25th June 2003.

### Sex and Secrecy

The theme of the conference, Sex and Secrecy, stimulated contributions which engaged with pressing concerns emanating from the South African situation while simultaneously resonating with and encouraging international scholarship in the field of sexuality. The conference provided a forum for new ethno-graphic work and theoretical insights from a range of disciplines emerging from diverse social contexts. The scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and sexual violence in the southern African region meant that these were at the forefront of the conference agenda. Extreme homophobia in neighbouring states juxtaposed with constitutional equality in South Africa meant that this was also an area for academic enquiry in the conference.

The conference was not a sex conference in the biomedical tradition. Rather the aim was to look at the social, cultural and historical dimensions of sex, sexual practice and sexuality. In coupling sex and secrecy we aimed to foreground the issues of power, stigma and silence. We needed to understand when sex is secret and why. The conference papers were organised around six main themes that formed the intellectual pillars of the conference. These were: the power of the secret; hidden codes, local rules; confession and taboo; unsettling gender identities; sexuality, sexual meanings and HIV/AIDS; public discourse, private realms and the politics of sexuality.

More than 150 papers were presented at Sex and Secrecy, offering insightful commentary on issues of sexuality in southern Africa and globally. Representation at the conference was thoroughly international with delegates from as far afield as Indonesia, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Vietnam. An important feature of Sex and Secrecy was the strong presence of research-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The aim was to create a dialogue between NGOs and academic researchers working in similar spheres. The issues addressed were of global relevance. These included insights into the international dimensions of gender-based violence and of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The theme sexuality, sexual meanings and HIV/AIDS was a central focus in the conference and the cluster of papers in this journal reflects some of the very important contributions made at Sex and Secrecy. They have been selected for inclusion in this special issue after peer review of papers presented at the conference. One issue of critical enquiry that runs throughout these papers and the conference more widely is that of stigma, its links to secrecy and HIV/AIDS. As long ago as 1987, Jonathan Mann predicted that social and cultural responses to the epidemic, characterised by high levels of stigma and discrimination, could be as explosive and as threatening as the disease itself (Mann, 1987).

According to Parker and Aggleton (2003), stigma is about the reproduction of social difference. They suggest that the limitation in many of the current behavioural and psychological models on stigma has been the focus on highly individualised analyses, which characterise people as having a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1963). Instead they argue for the need to move beyond these models of understanding stigma to reconceptualise stigmatisation and dis-
criminisation as ‘social processes that can only be understood in relation to broader notions of power and domination… stigma plays a key role in reproducing relations of power and control. It causes some groups to be devalued and others to feel that they are superior in some way. Therefore stigma is linked to the workings of social inequality…’ (Parker & Aggleton, 2003, p. 16).

**Engaging Sex and Secrecy**

The social construction of stigma and the modality of secrecy as a site of shame and stigmatisation is a thread that runs through the set of papers presented here. In her plenary address at Sex and Secrecy Eleanor Preston-Whyte shows how silence and secrecy threaten ‘life and the world as we know it.’ More importantly it threatens the structure of social relations and the social order itself through the disintegration of communitas. The first part of her paper addresses the effects of secrecy and silence in the family. Older and younger generations are unable to communicate about sex to the point where they inhabit parallel worlds. Patterns of knowing in the family are also structured through sexual initiation rites and rituals, compounding generational difference. It becomes a divisive mechanism in the family. Preston-Whyte shows the tragic impacts of non-disclosure and social isolation on AIDS care. She makes the powerful point that silence is the enemy of comfort and *communitas*.

Stein poses a series of challenges about how stigma is researched. She points to the serious limitations of quantitative studies in this area because of the problem of measuring something that is hidden. To be seen to be discriminating against people who are HIV positive is no longer socially acceptable. This has the effect of driving stigma underground. Few will admit to prejudice, discrimination or irrational fear of HIV, which does not mean that it does not exist. Rather, to admit to stigma has itself become stigmatised. How then do researchers measure what she calls ‘a hidden truth’? She points to the implications of this for public health efforts and interventions.

In his paper, ‘The young, the rich and the beautiful: secrecy, suspicion and AIDS in the South African lowweld’, Statler highlights the dichotomy between private recognition and public silence around AIDS related deaths. HIV/AIDS is surrounded by conjecture, denial, secrecy and whispered accusations in the South African lowweld. In his study, death is always associated with speculation and conjecture. While there is often a private acceptance of HIV as the cause of death, this is invariably accompanied by public denial. This poses a particular problem for researchers working in the field as the cause of death remains unacknowledged and therefore unknown. One of the ways in which AIDS is spoken about is through rumour and whispered accusations. Underpinning many of these narratives is the idea that women pursue material goods through sex and in this way ‘buy their own coffins’ while men are driven to sexual excess by ‘untrammelled desires’.

Stigma and silence in the education of youth can undermine efforts to intervene appropriately in this most vulnerable sector of society. Pattman and Chege show how the silence of shame around sexuality is often unwittingly invoked by adult educators who themselves feel uncomfortable talking about sex. A striking feature of this research is that children as young as six years old were, given the right environment, able to talk about sex and their knowledge of sexual matters in an uninhibited way. They were careful to keep this secret from judgemental parents and adults. Similarly with adolescents the formal lessons learned from school teachers tended to warn of the dangers and negative consequences of sex while seldom pointing to its pleasures. This created a gap between formal learning and actual experience for young people. Like Stein, Pattman and Chege show that young people are well aware of expected or ‘good’ responses to the questions posed by HIV/AIDS life skills educators that do not necessarily reflect the ways in which they behave in other situations. They demonstrate that with both boys and girls there is a split between public presentation of identity and private feelings. Their research methodology included innovative techniques whereby young adolescents were asked to reflect on their sexual experiences in a variety of settings and through a range of different forms, including intimate diaries and journals. In their study these personal narratives and individual interviews are juxtaposed with the findings that emerge in group discussion. While boys speak negatively and disparagingly of girls in a group, their diary entries often reveal highly romanticised accounts of their relationships with girls. Girls on the other hand, discouraged from expressing sexual feelings in public, may use the diary form to articulate sexual desire.

MacPhail’s study of adolescent boys in KwaZulu-Natal echoes the disjuncture between knowledge and practice revealed in other papers included in this special issue of AJAR. She makes the point that low levels of condom use are not attributable to a lack of knowledge. On the contrary, the young men had high levels of knowledge about HIV transmission and the need to use condoms. The author shows how stories about ‘clean and unclean’ women are used as a subjective way of assessing risk. Safer sex is restricted to liaisons with ‘unclean women’ defined in terms of perceived patterns of behaviour and the fact that they are unknown to the boys in their immediate social circle. She points to the folly of this logic in a context where previous research in this community has shown that HIV infection levels are ‘as high as 24% among young women with only one previous partner and 45% amongst those with two previous partners’. She also shows how patterns of male socialisation inhibit safer sex practices and suggest ways in which educators could create an environment in which alternative masculinities can be promoted.

Turning to the Malawian context, John Lwanda challenges the notion of silence and secrecy about matters sexual in an African public sphere. He turns to popular music which he sees as an ongoing version of a vibrant culture of orality in Malawi. He suggests that in this sphere musicians and poets are able to use a platform for social commentary about topics that are otherwise taboo. This is particularly apparent in the context of Banda’s Malawi (1961–1993) where a strict and puritanical code of conduct was enforced. He shows how metaphor and symbol were used to communicate with the public and criticise the regime. Thus the traditionally subversive nature of popular music has continued
through ongoing commentary on an epidemic that has had a devastating impact on Malawi. In his paper he analyses musical lyrics showing how these offer a detailed and engaged analysis of HIV/AIDS, for the listening public. He also shows that something as seemingly innocuous as giving an official name to the virus in Malawi had a profound impact on popular perceptions of HIV/AIDS and inhibited public health education efforts.

In Sex and Secrecy there was a noticeable silence on HIV prevalence amongst gay men. An exception was Carlos Caceres who spoke about AIDS and male-to-male sex in Latin America. As was the case in other parts of the world, HIV/AIDS in South Africa was initially seen as a ‘gay disease’. This resulted in the double stigma that Caceres (2003, p. 9) refers to with reference to Latin America, ‘For gay men in the region and probably elsewhere, AIDS was dreadful not only because of its lethality, but because of its potential meaning as a self-fulfilled prophecy, as a godly punishment for an abnormal sexuality’.

In southern Africa HIV/AIDS is largely a heterosexually transmitted epidemic and initially gay groups within the country welcomed the de-linking of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality because of the opportunity to avoid further stigmatisation. This has, however, had negative consequences in terms of knowledge and intervention programmes aimed specifically at men who have sex with men.

The effect of the HIV epidemic on gay men was one of the silences at the conference. Other gaps in research and presentation at Sex and Secrecy were highlighted in the closing session. Delegates pointed to the dearth of research presented on heterosexual sexuality, and, especially in a context of HIV and sexual violence, commented that scant attention was paid to sex, pleasure and desire.

Sex and Secrecy was a vehicle for generating and stimulating further research. The intention was to unpack and unsettle existing secrets and assumptions about silence and stigma. Many of the papers at the conference, some of which are included in this journal, have called on us to interrogate the concept of secrecy, to question our use of stigma and how we go about researching and understanding it. Nowhere is this more pressing than in the realm of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. Especially in the light of the proposed treatment plan which profoundly challenges disclosure, stigma, denial and secrecy. Its success is partly predicated on the existence of transparency and **communitas**.

**Notes**

1. In a recent interview in *The Washington Post* (September 2003) President Mbeki is quoted as making this statement.

2. The fourth conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS), co-hosted by the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), the Gay and Lesbian Archives and the Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

**References**


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