Parental communication with children about sex in the South African HIV epidemic: raced, classed and cultural appropriations of Lovelines

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Responsive to perceived high risk of HIV infection by sexually active youth, several South African sexual health-promotion campaigns have used media targeting mothers, instructing them on how sex should be talked about with their children to 'risk-proof' them. A Foucauldian approach to the normative apparatus of family–sexuality–risk finds mothers positioned as pivots between 'public' (health, economy, culture) and 'private' (family, childrearing, sex) apparatuses, tasked with appropriately socialising a new generation of sexually responsible, HIV-free citizens. This paper uses a reading of interactive discourse from (racially and gender) mixed groups of parents who, as professionals and postgraduate students in a university context, discussed their own childrearing practices in response to a particular didactic media text about sex-communication. In a way different from traditional media-reception studies, this discourse analytic reading of parents’ engagement with risk-expertise examines how mothers especially are persuaded (or not) to adopt particular childrearing practices in the context of an HIV epidemic. Using a Foucauldian argument about subject positioning, this paper examines how the parents positioned themselves in relation to the expertise offered in the stimulus material, as well as how they positioned one another during the group discussions. The analysis explores the partial buy-in to expert Western psychological techniques concerning talking with children about sex openly and often, and how this appropriation is negotiated in contextual family situations that are gendered, raced, classed and acculturated.

Keywords: communication methodology, communication strategies, discourse analysis, Foucauldian governmentality, loveLife, mass media, mothers, psychology

The family and childrearing in the South African HIV epidemic

‘The family,’ as an object of scattered South African social science interest over the last 50 years, has attracted more recent surveillance through the negative effects of the HIV epidemic on family life, and the apparently armouring effects against HIV risk that come with certain childrearing practices within families. Following implicit structural-functionalist assumptions about families as ‘social glue’ and as havens for children, the literature has almost exclusively documented various erosions of black-African families. Thus, pre-colonial extended kinship and customary arrangements shifted towards uneasy collusion with colonial-Christian and capitalist nuclear family units (Simkins, 1986; Delius & Glaser, 2002). These fragile units were then strained and damaged by apartheid-era labour migration legislation and urban housing policies, and decades of violent resistance against racial oppression (Liddell, Kvalsig, Shabalala & Masilela, 1991; Dawes, 1994; Campbell, 1997). Contemporary studies more often document single-parented and extended familial arrangements that are barely coping with both feminised poverty due to the absence of fathers and male breadwinners (Steyn, 1996; Bozalek, 1997), and the unfolding material and psychosocial effects of HIV and AIDS on children and their custodians (see reviews by Fox, Oyosi & Parker, 2002, and Foster, Levine & Williamson, 2005).

In contrast, macro-sociological survey research involving white families has found that, despite high levels of divorce, nuclear family forms remain normative, which buffers middle-classed domestic units as relatively risk-safe (Steyn, 1996; Ziehl, 2003). It is largely assumed that parenting within these units has followed the psychological standards of child-centeredness typical of the Western developed world (Richter, 1994). Such parenting would ideally incorporate varying levels of autonomy-negotiation and the monitoring of children, as well as communication around a range of events, issues, and values on a daily basis, including schoolwork, career paths, household chores, money, spirituality, sexuality, love, gender, sex and risk.

Risk-prevention literature has recycled various concerns about the negative psychological impacts on raced-black, classed-poor children in adverse social conditions, with concomitant implications of ‘inappropriate’ custodial care, resources and socialisation provided by stretched, stricken or absent parents (Dawes & Donald, 1994). Childrearing within such families has been negatively portrayed as authoritarian and neglectful against the above-mentioned ‘gold standards,’ with the family custodians — usually women — lacking modern or expert parenting know-how appropriate for the risky conditions of rapid social transition...
and an advanced HIV epidemic (Richter, 1994; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001). For example, in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Paruk, Petersen, Bhana, Bell & McKay (2005) documented disintegration of both cultural and parental authority over young people’s lives, particularly in regard to sex, with high levels of punishment of children and a taboo in families around talking about sex or HIV/AIDS.

Such concerns about parenting-deficits have produced various custodian-targeted interventions meant to improve social systems as primary protective shields around children. These interventions have attempted to fabricate ‘parenting skills’ to enhance families’ and communities’ authoritative management and monitoring of children and their effective communication with them (for example, see Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa, 1996; loveLife, 2000a and 2000b; Soul Buddy/Soul City, 2000; Bhana, Petersen, Mason, Mahintsho, Bell & McKay, 2004). While holding in place the underlying need, the well-meaning intent, and (sometimes) beneficent impacts of such multi-levelled parenting interventions, resistance and reservations have flared up.

Social science and public health writing has variously interrogated the guiding models and operational strategies perceived to have failed to effect broad-scale conversion of sexual-health or childrearing practices. These arguments variously blame elements of mass-media intervention, such as inappropriate mediums of persuasion, faulty messaging, or hard-to-reach recipients (Kelly, Parker & Oyosi, 2001; Campbell, 2003; Parker, 2003; Bhana et al., 2004). The ideological critiques within these writings warn of instrumental ‘band-aid’-type solutions to individual family dynamics, while wider social structures, norms, and access to resources reproduce power inequities and limit the scope of risk-negotiation, particularly in poorer neighbourhoods (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001). These significant arguments call for niche materials-based campaigning alongside participatory skills-rich interventions to challenge classed, gendered and acculturated ‘cages,’ and to address interactions, activities, and practices in the lived contexts of families, communities and the HIV epidemic.

Media discourse and Foucauldian critique

My recent Foucault-inflected discourse analytical research covers similar risk-prevention territories, but with different maps, vehicles and destination. This work has critically unpacked discursive assumptions about, and implications of, the Western models of parenting and adolescence which underlie South African mass-media interventions (Wilbraham, 2002). In particular, my analyses have focused on practices of text production, distribution and consumption, embedding Lovelines as a case study of mass-media materials that instruct mothers on sex-communication with young people in the context of an HIV epidemic (Wilbraham, 2004). These didactic texts recycle various institutional and scientific truth-claims about HIV-infection risk and risk-avoidance. My Foucauldian examination of how we are ‘governed’ through such expertise incorporates macrosocio-political apparatuses of ‘public good’ within subjective micro-practices of childrearing in families (cf. Rose, 1990). In other words, good mothers who talk with their children about sex — openly, frankly, frequently, positively, dialogically, democratically — naturalise and normalise sexuality as a young person’s central axis of identity-construction. Through a young person’s responsible sexual affiliations with others and ‘informed choices’ on personal safety and pleasure, effective public health, social tranquillity, and economic security is ensured (Lupton & Tulloch, 1998).

This paper examines talk from racially mixed groups of male and female parents who, atypically, as professionals and postgraduate students in a university context, discussed their own childrearing practices in response to a short didactic text within the Lovelines series, entitled Straight Talk (see production details below). My discourse analytical reading of the discussions unpacks, first, how Straight Talk addresses mothers, and, through expertise, directs them towards particular (Western psychological) communicative practices in order to protect children from risk of HIV infection. Second, my analysis examines how the discussants appropriated expertise into subjective accounts of their own lived parenting practices in particular familial and contextual arrangements. This appropriation was found as a partial, piecemeal, negotiated process, in which classed, raced, gendered and acculturated positions intersect.

Lovelines was a series of short magazine columns on parenting responsibilities amid an HIV/AIDS epidemic, produced in a purposive partnership between Fairlady, a nationally distributed, South African women’s magazine, and loveLife, a South African sexual health-promotion organisation. LoveLife has mobilised multifaceted campaigns, using media and participative community-outreach projects, which, while primarily targeting young people (aged 12–17 years), have also incorporated various elements directed at parents under the campaign-rubric ‘Love them enough to talk about sex’ (see loveLife, 2000a and 2000b). Lovelines/Straight Talk was a small fragment of this parenting campaign, with the strategic partnership with Fairlady magazine intended to utilise the middle-classed and gendered ‘reach’ of this magazine. Fairlady, at the time of publication of the Lovelines series in 2000, had an estimated bi-monthly readership of 725,000, constituted as 74% female, 52% white, 40% employed part-time, 63% mothers, 90% urban-dwelling, and read by a wide range of age-groups in families as a secondary audience (All Media Products Survey, 2000).

At the outset, I clearly state that my reading of the discussions does not pretend to be a formal media-audience-reception study that evaluates the efficacy of Lovelines, nor the wider loveLife campaign or Fairlady magazine, to change knowledge, attitudes or behaviour in relation to HIV and AIDS or parenting. Nor does this paper intend to advocate repair of Lovelines messaging or the discussants’ understandings or practices. Following Foucault (1978), I do not seek to prove the given expertise right or wrong, or to counterpoise it with another, more enlightened truth. I do not advocate that sex should not be talked about in families. My intention is to use different theoretical ideas about the
‘government’ of risk and the regulation of mothering to explore forms of address in, and appropriation of, didactic media discourse on HIV risk-safety. Hence, this paper broadly explores how persuasion by expertise works.

Theoretical frameworks

This section briefly clarifies the theoretical framework/s used in understanding didactic media discourse as a social and subjective practice in the government of mothering. Foucault’s (1991) notion of ‘governmentality’ refers to the regulatory practices of subjectification, or how we become subjects/elves, related to the routine management of the minutiae of our lives. This explains how disciplinary powers of modern government (with a lowercase ‘g’, rather than formal organs of State) work through the regulation of the conduct of our lives, from a distance, through our reliance on facts of scientific research and know-how of expertise (Rose, 1992). Rose (1992) argued that the image of modern scientific progress promises to release us from risk, and it binds us to the regulatory techniques of expertise to achieve this. Thus, the governmental instruction to parents to communicate more openly with children about sex is not a fiction, nor devious ideology, but a ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ fabricated in particular discursive, social and historical conditions (Foucault, 1978). This truth becomes an ‘expert’ strategy for action to ward off risk, which we are drawn to use as moral parental subjects because of the advocated benefits to our children, ourselves and our communities (cf. Dean, 1994).

Rose (1990) has defined the Western ‘psy-complex’ as a historicised assemblage of institutions — with the psy-prefix indicating psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy — which, as ‘intellectual technologies,’ have constructed a hegemonic currency of (normal) kinds of persons, conducts and relationships. This expertise is concerned with ‘the psyche of the individual’ as a science of normative differences, and also as a normalising social science that addresses problems of maladjustment, dysfunction and risk (Rose, 1998). Thus, the psy-complex sees sexual socialisation by parents, and sexualised self-growth and self-discipline, as pivotal processes in the development of children and stable, re/productive citizenship; and self-esteem, self-efficacy and responsible sexual practice become cornerstones of risk-reduction within healthy populations (Rose, 1990).

Feminist and discursive critiques have formulated the regulation and surveillance of mothers through the discourses of childrearing along similar lines, making points about the powerful role of expertise in the normalisation of good-mothering and blaming mothers when child development ‘goes wrong’ (e.g. see Burman, 1994; Alldred, 1996). Increasingly, with the rise of modern institutional government, the psy-complex has driven legal, educational, and social-welfare agendas of child protection and concerns about children’s rights, safety and wellbeing (Stainton-Rogers & Stainton-Rogers, 1992). These shifts move certain qualities and styles of mothering, for instance its responsibilities, deficits, risk implications and training, into plane of sight.

Explicitly using Foucault’s (1977) macro-micro axis of disciplined conduct, Walkerdine & Lucey (1989) position mothers as relay points between ‘public’ (political, economic, social) and ‘private’ (family, emotions, sex) apparatuses of control. With social security as the endgame, mothers participate in the anxieties that drive psy-complex theories about the maximisation of children’s development. Thus, sensitivity to children’s needs, including their sexualities, proves to ward off predicted dangers of rebellious, adolescent risk-taking later on. This paper extends Walkerdine & Lucey’s (1989) examination of public-private apparatuses of control into a context of an advanced HIV epidemic in South Africa. I consider how (Western) childrearing expertise has not only coupled risk-safety to particular practices that are raced, cultured and classed, but also how these persuasive parenting techniques are seen as progressive and enlightened. The regulation of mothering (rather than the gender-neutral, politically correct term ‘parenting’) is centralised in my reading of the explicit targeting of women in the Fairlady/Straight Talk stimulus material, and of how mothers negotiated childrearing expertise in the discussion groups.

Attention to the persuasiveness of mass-media discourse seems to assume that ‘the media have significant effects,’ but there is little agreement on what those effects are (McQuail, 1994). Marxist media theorists, South African sexual health activists, or panicky parents, for instance, vary in their assessment of the extent of media influence (too much or too little?) for different reasons. Media-reception theories have polarised academic-theoretical and activist-practitioner writings into unhelpful binary categories, such as those of ‘media power,’ where subjects are ideologically stuck to certain meanings and actions, or ‘people power,’ where subjects are allowed unlimited interpretive freedom and agency to appropriate what they want, or to refuse, resist, and read against-the-grain (Hall, 1997).

In the instance of purposive health-didactic texts, such as those concerned with HIV-risk reduction, preferred meanings are (supposedly) wittingly encoded with particular reading-subjects in mind, thereby tying together the discursive operations of text production, distribution, and consumption to reach a target audience (Mills, 1994). Fairclough (1992) finds text consumption (that is, reading, understanding and using the text’s message) working through the principle of coherence. A coherent text is one whose constituent parts and preferred positions are encoded so that the text ‘makes sense’ and ‘persuades’ in the advocated way, even though there may be relatively few formal markers of the coercion. Accordingly, Wilton (1997) argued that didactic texts on safer-sex, which target for instance gay men or mothers, are deliberately encoded with the politics of gender, class, sexualities and risk-safety, through forms of address and the packaging of knowledge and actions made available to particular readers. These representations are instrumental to the constitution of subjectivities (as selves) and social norms, because, through them, we mediate the kind of person we are and will/could become.

Against the binary positions in media-reception theory — that reading subjects either are or are not persuaded by preferred meanings (see above) — this paper explores how persuasion and subjection work in discourse practices between text and reader, in partial piecemeal fashion, and
in negotiated interactions with other positions and practices. This method of exploration follows Foucault's (1978) assertion that disciplinary power never totally succeeds or fails, but needs to be constantly re-done to install normalisation and vigilance. This view does not find the power of didactic media discourse located in the 'perfect message' that produces top-down, rule-following puppetry, but as a power located in a matrix of forces of representation and address, and the negotiated appropriation of multiple meanings in particular contexts of use (Mills, 1994; Fairclough, 1995; Miller, Kitzinger, Williams & Beharrell, 1998).

Demarcating surfaces of emergence

Methodologically, this study asked groups of South African parents to read and discuss together a Lovelines text in relation to the parenting practices that they had experienced with their own parents and those that they use with their own children. As suggested above, Fairclough (1992) has drawn attention to the subtle interplay in text consumption between: 1) the text itself, as a particular set of traces and cues; 2) the reader's resources that are brought to text processing (e.g. socio-structural positioning, educational level, habits of media-use and resistance to it); and 3) the context of interpretation, which produces resources for normative, playful, oppositional or acquiescent readings. I briefly discuss each of these aspects to account for how the particular group discussions were set up.

The text

A single Lovelines text entitled Straight Talk was selected for discussion in focus groups (see Fairlady, 5 July 2000, p. 156). The text was not selected based on representivity of discourse within Fairlady magazine or the loveLife campaign, but as material that could cue issues related to risk- and parenting-expertise directed at middle-classed mothers. Attention to a single text focused the discussion within and between groups. The participants were asked to read this didactic text against their own situated experiences of childrearing as children and as parents, and how sex and sexual risk was talked about in their families. This tactic follows media-reception studies that use specific focal material as an aide-memoire to generate in-depth, interactive interpretations and appropriations of, and adversarial struggle over, hegemonic meanings (Hermes, 1995), in contrast to asking about 'spontaneous recall' of media products. Selection of other media/texts would produce different conversations.

The readers/discussants

Convenience sampling set up fairly heterogeneous discussion groups. The five groups considered in this paper involved participants who were all senior postgraduate students and professional schoolteachers or university lecturers registered for a research methodology module at a South African university in the Eastern Cape Province. Most of the participants were parents. Beyond these similarities, socio-cultural and discursive differences appeared between genders, statuses in the university hierarchy, African nationalities, races, cultures and backgrounds.

The reading context

The context of reading the Straight Talk text was a workshop in a postgraduate module on research methodology, taught by myself. The reading of the material was thus set up through my critical discourse analytic interests. The university-context of the discussions produced significant ruptures from 'natural discourse,' in the sense of fabricating interactive talk about media consumption and reflexive criticality. The students and academics were acquainted with one another in ways that established familiarity, trust and (sometimes) adversarial sparring in discussions, rather than simply disclosing 'information' in thematic bytes. To preserve anonymity, I have used pseudonyms in the extracts, withheld biographical descriptions, and changed some details of subjective reference. Marking racial positioning, while offensive, was integral to a post-colonial argument about 'modernisation' and class-mobility in South Africa — as in the comment about sex communication 'becoming white?' (cf. Stoler, 1995).

Mass-media communicative events — like the stimulus text or women's magazines — are monologues that mimic or inform interaction, but are distributed for reading by individuals in the home (Fairclough, 1995). My methodology 're-contextualised' the text by switching its consumption into a public/academic interpretive context of collectivity, interaction, dialogue and oppositional positioning towards persuasion (cf. Fairclough, 1995). Although most of the discussants might be broadly categorised as professional, well-educated and middle class, it is never implied in my analysis that the middle-classed women targeted for Fairlady/Lovelines consumption would read or talk about Straight Talk like these groups did.

Reading subject positioning

My analysis of interactive material is discourse analytic, following those Foucauldian tactics that unpack the work of texts and talk as discursive practice (e.g. see Fairclough, 1992; Hall, 1997; Wetherell, 1998). This paper is particularly concerned with subject positioning, in the explicitly Foucauldian sense of speaking-statuses and spoken-for-subjects (see Hall, 1997). Thus, discourses as domains of institutional knowledge and practice, through their seeking to govern subjects, produce 'modes for speaking' — positions and statuses within discourse — to be taken up or located in, in several sites (Hall, 1997). Such 'slots,' as kinds of person, typical figures or categories of action, are understood to scaffold subjectivity through disciplinary power (Parker, 1992). In my application to didactic media discourse, subject positioning is used as an analytical tool to unpack persuasion by expertise, where relational subject positions are (a) represented in forms of address in the text itself (Fairclough, 1992), and (b) negotiated in interactive discussions between real people (Wetherell, 1998).

Fairclough (1992) argues that the ways in which a coherent, preferred reading is generated for a text speaks to the persuasive work of interpelation (hailing, or hooking in) of subjects through the positions it displays, closes down, transmutes and advocates. Readers are subjected by and to the text, to the extent that they make the preferred links within the text's components and positions, and to
their own lived experience; and, thus, they take up proffered positions, even partially. There is always the possibility of struggle over different readings of texts, and resistances to multivalent subject positions set up in texts. The aim of Fairclough’s (1992) examination of coherence is reader-research around a ‘communicative event’ and lies in attending to how particular readers interpret a particular text. His reader-research is guided by the following analytical questions (see Fairclough, 1992, p. 233):

- How heterogeneous or ambivalent is the text for particular readers, and consequently how much inferential work is needed?
- Does the text produce resistant readings, and, if so, from what sort of reader?
- How does the context of text-consumption serve to maintain normative or preferred meanings, or give creative freedom to contest them?

Fairclough’s (1992) broad rules of thumb for textually analysing discourses that work to contest, trouble subject positioning through resisting, challenging, or inverting the discursive norms that regulate inter/subjectivities, choices, and agency (e.g. gendered power relations, assumptions of maternal responsibilities, psy-complex guidelines). Wetherell (1998) suggests that such analytic work is guided by certain questions, as follows:

- Why these utterances, and how do they work to justify or defend particular subject positions?
- How is subject positioning gendered, raced, cultural or classed, in that particular speakers may articulate and police particular positions?
- How does contextualisation (for example, speakers’ own experience) work to trouble subject positioning through contradiction? And, how is such resistance organised?

**Discourse analysis**

I present analyses of six extracts along four selected themes that structured the group discussions about *Straight Talk*, namely: 1) critical readings of media; 2) cultural and classed stories of parenting experience; 3) problems with adopting racially ‘white’ parenting expertise; and, 4) shifting parental techniques for talking about sex and sexuality. This approach does not summarise the content of the discussion groups, but it works instead to explore a process of negotiated appropriation and subject positioning in relation to *Straight Talk’s* expertise.

*We’re not tricked by media tricks*: critical consumers and docile subjects

The reading task involving the *Straight Talk* text in all five discussion groups produced elaborate ‘positioning’ of the text as explicitly branded *loveLife* material, and as material within a wider South African media context, to discern its aims, slant, reach or target audience, and tactics of persuasion. Such positioning was clearly forged through the particular context of interpretation of this text, as an academic module on critical research, and as intentional interactions between media-literate parental subjects. However, more generally, given past years of apartheid-control of news and health-related media in South Africa, there is a high degree of suspicion about conspiracies, exclusions and hidden agendas in media consumption (Campbell, 2003). Extract 1 captures attempts to position *Straight Talk* in order to produce against-the-grain readings of it. These resistant readings served several positioning tactics in the group discussion itself:

**Extract 1**

Extract 1 begins with a critical explanation of the alleged ‘pro-sex spin’ in *loveLife* media campaigning to a non-South African (lines 3–5), and quickly moves on to interactive discussion of layered and contradictory messaging. First, this incorporated inconsistencies between different elements of *loveLife* campaigning — namely billboards (lines 15–17) versus parenting counsel (lines 20–25). Accordingly, *loveLife*’s billboards have persistently foregrounded the biological inevitability of adolescent ‘sex, sex, sex’ (lines 18–19), which then positions parents as responsible for stopping sex (lines 21–23). Second, such slippages were marked as distinctive from other, more trustworthy and preferred, branded sources of childrearing counsel (e.g. *Fairlady*). Third, prurient Western images and rhetoric about sex deployed by *loveLife* (line 16–17: ‘wrap it up or zip up’) were perceived as disjunctive from what was deemed culturally appropriate in traditional Xhosa-speaking communities (lines 17–18).

Media access to parenting expertise regarding risk was further challenged on the grounds that *Fairlady*’s distribution of *Straight Talk* would unfairly exclude black/poor mothers but would benefit white mothers (lines 8–10). This recycled a Marxist theory of ideological manipulation through privileged or discriminatory media distribution (see Pecheux, 1982), which operates as (almost) commonsensical critique in South Africa, given its colonial/apartheid histories. Articulated by the discussant Toto here, this critique equates simple exposure to didactic media with persuasion and beneficence for whites only. The challenge by Toto also implicitly indicted, as raced-white and biased/racist, my selection of *Straight Talk* as stimulus material for discussion (lines 8–10). I denied this, through defensive qualification of its primary target audience (line 11), and was rescued by a very welcome topic change (line 12).

In a group discussion between parental subjects from heterogeneous backgrounds, ‘critical analyses’ as an opening gambit served to establish common ground between the discussants. While such critical analyses in discussions were undoubtedly performed for me (as their
research methodology lecturer) as a display of ‘good-student’ or ‘good-research-participant’ roles, it served other positioning functions too. The discussants could consensually agree to disagree with Straight Talk’s advocated message, and so avoid threatening disagreement later on about one another’s childrearing confessions as a topic ‘too personal’ or ‘too sensitive.’ In fairly neutral ways, they could include or exclude themselves, and one another, from the normalising regimes of childrearing expertise in Straight Talk (cf. Aldred, 1996). This positioned the discussants in Extract 1 as powerful individual agents who were able to see ‘beyond’ or ‘through’ the text; as privy to media’s partiality and manipulation of childrearing/risk; as aware of slippages of persuasion; and as not duped as other readers might be. As parental subjects capable of rational and critical choices, such positioning tactics disavowed the media’s power over them, and the power of the experts’ imperatives to them. However, as will become clear later on, they all talked to their children about sex along the general lines advocated by Straight Talk’s expertise, in one way or another.

Fairclough (1995) makes the useful distinction in positioning related to consumption of didactic texts, between rhetorical persuasion and ideological interpellation. This idea follows Foucault’s (1978) argument about ideology being deeply embedded in the minutiae of everyday-living practices. Thus, reading-subjects might disagree and dis-identify with the rhetorical positions offered them by didactic media texts — for instance, figures of ignorant or dis-identify with the rhetorical positions offered them by living practices. Thus, reading-subjects might disagree and being deeply embedded in the minutiae of everyday-idea follows Foucault’s (1978) argument about ideology expertise, in one way or another.

In her analysis of resistances to childrearing advice from experts, Aldred (1996) found that British mothers negotiated expertise through complex arguments between competing discourses on childrearing (e.g. cultural, religious, psycho-analytic and feminist discourses). The work of appropriation and resistance becomes rather more fraught in South Africa, where HIV risk has become coupled to ‘inappropriate’ childrearing, such that talking about sex with children in the wrong way is represented as risking their lives due to the risk of exposure to HIV.

‘In my culture’: positions of stasis and mobility
The ‘in my culture’ constructions that routinely appeared in discussions about childrearing experiences are familiar in talk about ‘differences’ between groups of people in South Africa (Kottler, 1990). These constructions have a long colonial genealogy of racialisation, exoticisation and discriminatory exclusion, as well as recycling notions of heritage and ‘naturalness’ (Spiegel & Boonzaier, 1988). In the group discussions, black Xhosa-speaking women frequently told stories about traditional practices and family values entrenched in kinship arrangements within rural peasant settlements or resource-poor communities. In the next extract, Xoliswe performs such acculturated self-positioning through a direct experiential narrative of extended networks of child custody, father-absence, authoritarian

EXTRACT 1 (from group discussion 1)

1 Nokothula: I didn’t know this [text] was loveLife.
2 Abigail: Look here, loveLife [pointing to icon], love life, talk about it.
3 Jay: What is loveLife? [laughter] ... No, man, is it like the ABC campaign? [laughter]
4 Abigail: No, nothing like the ABC campaign, or it’s the ABC with only condoms. They’ve left out abstinence and the be… be what’s it?
5 Be monogamous. So it’s just condomise, a strictly get it on, condom campaign. ...
6 Nokothula: But it says there, Fairlady, it’s that magazine, Fairlady.
7 Lindy: It was written by loveLife and it appeared in Fairlady magazine so it could be read by mothers.
8 Toto: For the mothers that read such a magazine.
9 Lindy: Yes.
10 Toto: That’s white, white mothers, not black.
11 Lindy: Mostly white, but not only.
12 Nokothula: I did not know this was loveLife. I didn’t see this small little thing [icon]. That is how the media tricks you.
13 Lindy: How does the media trick you?
14 Nokothula: It gives information, and then afterwards you see that this information is wrong or it is part of the information, not all. I will not trust it to tell me how I must raise my daughters. I will not trust loveLife information for this. They have done many, many things that are… they are very wrong. They put a big picture outside of the school, everyone can see it: two black kids kissing and they say ‘wrap it up’ or ‘zip up, loveLife’ [laughter]. These are English words that mean nothing in my culture. In Xhosa we don’t say such things with sex, wrap or zip [laughter]. People laugh because it has no meaning or they become upset because it always means sex, sex, sex, all the time sex, sex, sex.
15 Abigail: Ja, I think that’s part of the trickery of loveLife, the ideological control in the sense that every parent just knows and dreads that their kids, however young they are, they’re going to have sex and there’s no doubt about that, and people are shit-scared of AIDS. What parents have to do is try and stop their kids from having sex, that’s the point of it, even when they’re all open and cosy about it, talking nicely and everything. The job of parents is to stop their kids from having sex [laughter], isn’t that true? If you think of this situation in Straight Talk text, is the mother telling the daughter how fantastic sex is in her own experience, so the daughter is going to rush out and get condoms and try it out?
16 Nokothula: She [the mother] will not do that, oh no, never.
styles of childrearing (which regulate compliance punitively), and mention of 'taboo' in regard to talk about sex between children and adults.

Extract 2

In several ways in the discussions the figuring of African traditional-cultural arrangements functioned as pivotal culture-positions for black, Xhosa mothers. First, these culture-positions marked their difference, their saturation by culture, and their authoritative status as carriens, interpreters and brokers of authentic culture. This powerfully controlled how culture was spoken about by the other discussants in the group. As such, this reproduced the colonial notions of settlers and middle-class white South Africans as ‘culture-free’ (cf. Stoler, 1995; Mills, 1997; Swartz, 1998), and consequently positioned whiteness as the invisible, neutral, central term of culture, race or class against which ‘otherness’ was defined (Wong, 1994). Thus, after exotic narratives of sexual repression and corporal punishment by traditional-culture parents, the raced-white discussants spoke hesitantly about their own parents’ vaguely religious or ‘screwed up’ white-liberal conservatives about sex, and seemed uncertain of whether these were valid or defensible cultural practices or not. The white discussants were also drawn into relativist positions that defended — rather than judged or condemned — the otherness, folk wisdom and integrity of (traditional) ‘African culture’ (see Extract 3).

Second, reflexive adoption of culture-positions also afforded well-educated, professional, black, Xhosa-speaking discussants the right to speak against their traditional-culture backgrounds, and so the right to problematise and distance themselves from such practices. In Extract 2, Xoliswe sets up the immutability of ‘how it is in my culture’ (lines 1 and 4), pointing to the recalcitrance of traditional culture towards being ‘disciplined’ by beneficial aspects of Western/modern childrearing. This recalcitrance is seen to reproduce risk-vulnerabilities through silences around sexuality and early sexual activation. Xoliswe’s account of these crystallised contours of risk in traditional culture contexts is borne out by public health activists’ grappling to change patriarchal gender relations, customs of unprotected sex, and authoritarian and neglectful styles of parenting (see Patton, 1992; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Kelly & Ntlabati, 2002).

In Extract 2, Xoliswe’s reflexive culture-position blames ‘elders [who] will not learn new ways’ (line 6); in this way she blames health-didactic media interventions as either culturally inappropriate to, or absent from, rural contexts which need persuasion the most. However, against this recalcitrant cultural surface, it is clear that she has learnt and adopted new ways. Hence, newly wrought middle-classed positioning allows black Xhosa-speaking mothers to step aside from the restrictive cages of traditional culture. They now overlay these cultures with more ‘progressive,’ ‘enlightened,’ ‘Western’ childrearing practices in their own families — evidenced in their (ideological) adoption of Straight Talk’s messaging (see Extract 3). The politics of subjective and social positioning around traditional African culture, namely who may speak for or against it, and how gender, race, culture and class are woven together into positions, practices and persuasions of childrearing, are explored in reference to Extract 3.

Extract 3

Extract 3 picks up interaction regarding Xoliswe’s reflexive positioning later on in the same discussion group that provided Extract 2. Here Ann, a white, middle-class, feminist mother and university lecturer, voiced her resistance towards the Straight Talk text by drawing on a discourse of cultural relativism, as she defends ‘what was good’ in (Xoliswe’s) traditional-cultural childrearing experiences against ‘this lovLife stuff’ (lines 25–26). Ann is objecting to coercive, normalising, Western psychological expertise on (the myth of) mothering risk-free children. Such resistance might be politically correct in post-apartheid, post-colonial or anti-globalisation discourses, but the territory of different-but-equal culture-positions was slippery indeed. Xoliswe’s disclosure of her own pregnancy at age 16 (lines 10–11), and her blame of ‘our culture, we do not talk sex and such matters’ for this apparently unforeseen pregnancy-event (line 18), presents a powerful counter-position. These cultural practices are explicitly marked by Xoliswe as African/Xhosa; and, with the possessives ‘our’ and ‘we,’ Ann is excluded from their operative practices and consequences, authoritative knowledge of them, or the right to speak about them. Ann’s cultural relativist position diverged sharply from Xoliswe’s appropriation of Straight Talk’s expertise as being ‘better than our culture’ (lines 14–15). This opposition was publicly marked by another white discussant (see line 17), and finally meekly acknowledged by Ann herself (see line 25).

Xoliswe’s appreciative appropriation of ‘...advices like this Straight Talk’ (lines 13–16) into her childrearing practices did not indicate that she had been persuaded by the rhetoric of Straight Talk per se. Rather, she construes her motivations to speak up against the backwardness and harm of traditional-culture practices within local discourses about apartheid-liberation and class mobility, and global discourses about modernity, enlightenment, progress and expertise. Xoliswe achieved this positioning through reflexive
interrogation of the closed notions of culture, which draw on emotive then-and-now constructions. For example, the historicised ‘then’ of tribal primitivism (i.e. culture), apartheid oppression (i.e. race) and rural-peasant poverty (i.e. class) was counterpoised against a modern post-apartheid era ‘now,’ characterised with the hapless contradictions of new life-opportunities, such as freer access to education and an HIV epidemic that kills ‘our children’ (see lines 18–24) (cf. Posel, 2004). These binaries figured complexly shifting South African conditions of political, economic and cultural possibility for her childrearing choices and responsibilities.

I have shown how Xoliswe’s appropriation in Extract 3 of ‘advices like this Straight Talk’ wove together lines of racialised, acculturated and classed positioning. This weaving drew its potency from the rapid socio-political transitions in South Africa’s past and present, and from Xoliswe’s own gendered narrative of sexual experience. Her happy alliance with the modern expertise of talking openly about sex with children was strongly racialised through coupling the practice to ‘the ways of whites’ (line 19) — construed as ‘to educate our children properly with sex’ (line 20) and ‘to talk sex properly like the whites’ (lines 23–24) — in order to establish promised risk-safety for unwanted pregnancy or HIV infection. Xoliswe glides fairly easily over the explicit racialisation of this ‘proper white’ sex education; she resorts to racial stereotypy with respect to ascertaining the taken-for-granted presence of talking about sex in raced-white families, and its presumed absence in Xhosa families. These raced constructions were unchallenged, or perhaps unchallengeable, within this group discussion.

**The risk of ‘listening to whites’: coconut positions**

Within the theme of class mobility, wholesale adoption of Western expertise was not always a happy or successful experience for the groups’ black, Xhosa-speaking mothers who were also professional teachers. Extract 4 features Thandi’s narrative about her errant daughter; its length captures the fraught contexts of accountability, surveillance, contestation and defence of Thandi’s modern versus traditional-culture childrearing choices within her home and community, and within the discussion group.

**Extract 4**

In Extract 4, Thandi positions herself as a parent, with her husband, at a nexus of contradictory threads of subjectivity: as ‘educated people’ (i.e. teachers: line 3), and ‘church-going’ and ‘God-fearing’ people (i.e. Methodists: line 7), who live in an urban township characterised by cultural customs of ‘the Xhosa way’ (line 1) as well as the ‘dangers’ of pregnancy and HIV infection (lines 3–5). Several issues leap from this nexus.

Decisions about parenting practices (for example, to talk about sex with children or not, how and when) are not simple, rational, individual choices produced through weighing up or being motivated (or scared) by single sources of scientific evidence or expertise (as it would seem from reading Straight Talk). Such decisions, and sustained practice-changes, are negotiated in complex, interactive contexts of multiple voices, positions and audiences, issues of stake and social capital, and surveillance, within the domestic unit and within wider community systems. For Thandi, these voices/audiences included: a husband who is the father of her children; ‘whites’ as unspecified others and experts beyond her community; both her daughters; her own mother; the priest; various neighbours; schoolteachers...
at her workplace; her daughter’s boyfriend and his family; and the group discussants, including the white lecturer-researcher to whom she gave an account of her experiences. Predictably, the messy real-life context of parenting exemplified in Extract 4 troubled the (ideal) modern, enlightened maternal subjectification preferred by Straight Talk, through counterposing contradictory systems of childrearing knowledge and practice. Enlightened (and again, raced-white) parenting techniques appeared as open and frequent talking about sex as a risk-proofing strategy, as opposed to the traditional culture (Xhosa) parenting technique of avoiding all talk about sex as a strategy to thwart children’s sexual curiosity and experimentation (cf. Paruk et al., 2005). Thandi achieves a negotiation, of sorts, between the open-talk versus no-talk binary positions, by resorting to an alternative, Christian discourse of sexual abstinence/avoidance. Thus, she positions herself as custodian over her daughter’s ‘naturally’ sexualised body/self at menarche, and in an apparently once-off talk-event, she tells her inter alia ‘to stay away from boys for now’ (line 19) and ‘to keep off sex’ (line 20). Such sexual abstinence/avoidance discourse has been documented elsewhere as responsive to the inevitability of early sexual activation, especially in resource-poor settings, where risk-safety for girls is not easily negotiated within gender-skewed power relations and acculturated community norms of unprotected sex (see Kelly & Ntlabati, 2002).

The mere presence of talking about sex was taken in Thandi’s narrative in Extract 4 as choosing raced-white expert advice over local systems of knowledge and risk-avoidance. Thandi recounts the humiliating failure of her chosen talking-technique to achieve the desired effects: her ‘naughty’ daughter ‘did not listen to anything’ and became pregnant at age 15 (lines 8–10). Thandi incurred shame and ridicule within local networks, for (stupidly) ‘listening to whites, the whites that tell you you must talk about sex’ (lines 31–33). Thandi’s middle-classed, raced-white aspirations for childrearing were exposed. It is implied by her representation of the community-audience that she was ‘trying for white,’ as in that post-colonial sell-out, a ‘coconut’ — a person with black skin and supposedly white values (Stoler, 1995).

Thandi’s ‘mistake’ was constructed differently by discussants in the group, and by herself. First, from a speaking

EXTRACT 4 (from group discussion 4)

1 Thandi: I know it is not in the Xhosa way, that cultural custom of my people, the parents do not talk to their children. It is like you [Nkosi] said, but this was not the rural areas, but in Mdantsodi where we lived, that is the township nearby Uitenhage. Me and my husband we are educated people, teachers, and when my daughter menstruated, I said to my husband, I will talk to her, this and this, because it is dangerous with HIV and pregnancy in this community, such things, and she will be protected with that information. I talked, I told her many, many things [about sex], even though my husband said to me, eh, don’t do that, you make her want to try that sex…

2 Lindy: Your husband didn’t agree with this or support you?

3 Thandi: Yes, he is a church-going man, Methodist. Our family is that way, raised in that god-fearing way where sex is for marriage. That is not the Xhosa custom, but it is from the church and the children must know this too. [pause] Ai, she [her daughter] did not listen to anything, nothing that I talked nicely to her, that is how children these days they are very naughty with their parents. She was pregnant when she was Grade 9, 15 years [old] or so. The family of the boy gave money; it was not much, but then we sent him [the baby] to grandmother, my own mother [in rural Transkei], so she [the daughter] could go to school. But her mind was not there for a long time, her mind was with this boyfriend with a job in town and a car. Afterwards, he went to Jo’burg; it was a disappointment for him but it was better at least with schooling. She is 18 years now, very late for Grade 10, but trying with that again.

4 Nkosi: Tch, tch, tch.

5 Leigh: [pause] That is such a painful disappointing experience. [pause] I can say sorry for that.

6 Lindy: [pause] I just wondered, since we’re talking about Straight Talk, if you [Thandi] would feel okay about talking a bit more about how you talked to your daughter, what you talked to her about? Was it the same or [overlapping, inaudible]…

7 Thandi: It was menstruation, the woman’s body things getting ready for sex, which is very natural, but staying away from boys for now. It was almost like the same as Straight Talk, but different, with abstinence from sex, the Christian way, telling her to keep off sex, not with giving the children condoms all the time like this loveLife [laughter].

8 Brian: [pause] I think…or I should say from my perspective, and I’m no expert on this, I don’t have any kids [laughter, inaudible], the kind of talking you [Thandi] did with her is better than no talking at all, but I think… I mean, I just don’t know what girls are supposed to do with [inaudible] the don’t-do-it messages from parents when they hook up with sexy [laughter, inaudible]. Isn’t that what this Straight Talk stuff is on about? That’s where parents make mistakes, sorry…[overlapping, inaudible].

9 Leigh: Brian: [overlapping inaudible].

10 Brian: I don’t want to criticise her.

11 Lindy: Then don’t [laughter]

12 Brian: No, no, seriously, I don’t mean it as personal criticism [laughter]. I just wanted to mention some of the problems with abstinence [laughter].

13 Thandi: I know I made a mistake. My people, the community there in Mdantsodi laughed. They said, haai, you are very stupid to be listening to whites, the whites that tell you you must talk about sex, this and that, and this, and that, this talking sex is white values. It is not of our culture, your husband told you, and now your daughter is pregnant because you did not listen to your husband.

14 Nkosi: It was not your fault as a mother she was pregnant. She would have done sex with this boy if you talked or if you didn’t talk. It was not your fault, but it was her fault…. It is always the boy who is blamed for sex. You think she [Thandi’s daughter] didn’t want to have sex with that boy? She did not want to wait for him, she did, yes, hhm, she wanted that boy with money and a car, that is how girls are now in modern times, it’s not just boys who are naught to want sex; the girls give it. They don’t want to wait. They don’t want to work. They just want the money.
position that accepted Western psy-complex expertise on talking about sex with children as truthful, the discussant Brian explicitly interrogated how Thandi had interacted with her daughter about sex (lines 22–29). This critical position challenged the stereotypical presence-versus-absence of talking about sex, by expressing worry about the qualities of its presence. This position implied that Thandi’s communicative conduct had been inadequate in some way, according to established psychological and/or risk techniques; ‘The kind of talking you did with was better than no talking at all, but I think...’ (lines 22–23). Deploying a skills-based discourse favoured by contemporary sexual health activists, Brian blames parental abstinence/avoidance rhetoric (and by implication, Thandi’s mothering) for failing to prepare girls for inevitable sexualised negotiation in various kinds of social interactions.

The flurry of overlapping interjections, nervous laughter and defences that accompanied Brian’s critical speaking position indicated a ‘moment of crisis’ (see Fairclough, 1992). This conversational crisis marked not disagreement with the psy-complex arguments on parenting-expertise and risk-prevention that were articulated by Brian, but an interactive dilemma in the discussion denoting uncomfortable power dynamics and impolite insensitivity requiring repair. Brian’s speaking position was inscribed with the privileges and risks of standing-apart from, and judging, the messy mothering experiences that were confessed. In multiple shifting and unstable power relations, Brian’s speaking position was, simultaneously, more and less powerful in relation to Thandi’s, as he was white, male, childfree, and a university lecturer. Thus, other discussants quickly responded to acknowledge Thandi’s pain and bravery in sharing her experiences (line 15), to defend her from subjectile sleights within the critical discussion (lines 26–27), and to exonerate her blameworthiness as a mother (lines 34–37). The latter exoneration of mothering — it makes no difference if you talked [about sex] or if you did not talk’ (line 34) — instead blamed daughters for the trouble, through use of an oppositional transactional-sex discourse (cf. Leclerc-Madlala, 2001 and 2002). Through this discourse, modern girls were figured both as ‘wanting sex’ and ‘wanting that boy with money and a car’ (lines 35–38). Both these modern tactics are derogatorily positioned as lazy shortcuts to subjective status and material or classed benefits. However, the above defences did not mean that discussants found Thandi’s mothering practices defensible per se: the vehement critiques about the rearing of her second daughter do not appear in Extract 4.

Second, from a speaking position that roundly rejects expertise of the Western psy-complex on talking-about-sex, Thandi reflexively named her ‘mistake’ as not following the traditional-culture childrearing counsel of her husband and neighbours (see lines 31–33), which she subsequently rectified in relation to her second daughter. She represents this negative judgement of her mistake in the voice/s of ‘my people,’ speaking directly to/for her, as in, ‘They said, haai, you are very stupid to be listening to whites’ (lines 31–32).

Thandi achieves another kind of atonement for her mistaken talking and her first daughter’s mistaken pregnancy. She performs this through positioning herself within a discourse that privileges the rights and opportunities of formal education as the preferred route of social and subjective escape from apartheid’s racialised economic discrimination. Extract 4 figures Thandi and her husband as having succeeded in this class-mobile professionalisation (educated people, teachers’: line 3), and they are now impelled to maintain their class status by inscribing such values on their children. Her narrative systematically removed the derailments and irruptions of her daughter’s pregnancy through getting her schooling back on track: ‘She is 18 years now, very late for Grade 10, but trying with that again’ (line 13).

‘Things are different now’: Learning from childhood and children

Much discussion in the groups focused on flawed rhetorical tactics that failed to hook or engage these readers of Straight Talk through the advocated talking-techniques with children. Following Fairclough’s (1995) conceptualisation of ideological interpellation, these critical speaking positions accepted the truthfulness of Western psychological expertise on talking about sex with children (in principle), though they were not necessarily persuaded by the techniques (practical techniques) advocated in Straight Talk. The discussants found it extremely difficult to name or brand a particular ‘source’ of expertise that was influential for them, or to reflexively identify their general approach to childrearing. From various sources of expertise, and mostly from direct experience within their own families, they appropriated and negotiated practices in ways that ‘worked okay’ and ‘felt right’ for themselves and their children in their particular settings. This piecemeal process of making choices and the subjective imperatives of being ‘good mothers’ was experienced as being or becoming a mature and responsible parent, a rational individual making considered and reasonable choices, and a good citizen (see Rose, 1990).

The parent-subjects in the discussion groups were thus deeply offended by the crude assumptions of parental deficit in the Straight Talk text and its pedantic and evangelical tone. In other words, Straight Talk wrongly represented, addressed, and positioned its audience of middle-classed mothers as stereotypically straight-laced about sex, unconcerned about or uninvolved with their children’s lives, ignorant about the risks their children faced, and unwilling or unable to talk about sex with their children. The text assumed, therefore, that ‘talking about sex’ had to be newly installed as a liberatory technique within their mothering practices. Thus, Straight Talk was preaching to the converted, and so committed fatal didactic mediomessaging errors by (a) not acknowledging what mothers were doing ‘right’ (cf. Kelly et al., 2001), and (b) not offering narrative identification-hooks (subject positions) for diverse alternative talking-techniques in a variety of real families, situations and contexts (cf. Patton, 1996).

The talking-techniques within three mothers’ narratives, as reflexive ‘I’-statements, are evident in Extracts 5 and 6. Those techniques broadly follow advocacy by experts for conversations about sex with children of various ages. Then-and-now constructions within these statements cast these mothers’ own repressive childhood experiences (then) against new South African contexts for parenting and
being children (now), in which they were actively engaged as enlightened talkers about sex. Foucault’s (1978) ‘repressive hypothesis’ warns that pervasive pressures to talk about sex and sexuality, commonly associated with liberation, enlightenment and releasing the ‘innermost truth’ about the self, does not offer escape from power; rather such pressures function as the sticky force-field of disciplinary powers in which we participate as self-realising and self-governing, modern subjects. The mothers’ appropriation of beneficent talking-techniques — meant to normalise sexuality within family life (e.g. Shanti in Extract 5), to provide a safe home-base to discuss real-life issues experienced elsewhere (e.g. Arube in Extract 5), and to respond conversationally to children’s questions (e.g. Nokothula in Extract 6) — are discussed along Foucauldian lines.

Extract 5

Extract 5 contrasts differently positioned mothering imperatives and techniques for, and experiences of, ‘opening up’ conversations about sex and sexuality with young people. Both speakers in Extract 5 formulated explicit resistances to Straight Talk, not because they were defensive or embarrassed about talking about sex with children, but because they were already engaging in such conversational work. Furthermore, although these conversations carefully followed the lines of Western psychological expertise, they were not experienced as top-down instruction or rule-following (Rose, 1992). Thus, Shanti’s narrative of her sex-negative Catholic-convent schooling (lines 3–4) and her mother’s creative misinformation (e.g. ‘babies [are] little baboons with tails chopped off’: line 8) powerfully prefigures how she willingly sets herself up as a different kind of maternal-custodian over the developing sexualities of her children. She had thus learned from her own past, and committed herself to new talking-techniques, information and values ‘that I believe I didn’t have [as a child]’ (line 9).

Shanti was ‘preparing’ her pre-pubescent children for sexualised subjectivity, rather than sex per se (lines 4 and 9), through unfolding conversations about their bodies (in anatomically correct terms: lines 6–7), ‘where they come from’ (reproductive sex: line 7), ‘family life’ and ‘values’ (line 9). Here sexuality appeared as ‘about you as a person and how you discover yourself’ (line 5–6). It was significant that these talking-techniques were construed as intrinsically motivated through Shanti’s reflection about her own experience and positioned values: ‘I’m doing it like this now and I feel strongly about it’ (lines 9–10). The turn-taking speaker Arube challenged this positioning of parental values, volition and choice, through a counter-position of coerced subjection: ‘But I think that parents didn’t choose this change. We are forced to be more open’ (lines 12–13).

Significantly, expertise or didactic media discourse were not directly figured within Arube’s account of ‘forced openness’; instead, her communication with her ‘teenagers’ was positioned as responsive to other issues related to sex and risk. Arube’s argument drew on the hegemonic child-protection discourse: young people are exposed to multiple sexual influences and coercions, competing sources of misinformation, and exponentially expanding risks, which requires custodial guidance, containment, and correction within families as primary protective shields (lines 11–20; see also Wilbraham, 2002). Wyness (2000) finds this type of discourse routinely advocates intra-familial ‘sex education in the home’ and resists extra-familial (professional, informal or experiential) forms of sex education. Such resistances to [Namibian] Life Skills curricula, biology as a school subject (contributing to sex education), and the influences of media and music are apparent in Arube’s account: ‘These [sexual] things are everywhere. You can’t stop it…’ (lines 13–14).

However, Arube’s argumentative position was not simply about the need to reclaim sex-talk as a private family-business, but it articulated a sharp critique against such stereotypical assumptions within the Straight Talk text itself. This critique noted, for example, that Straight Talk (a) sealed off the mother-daughter dyad for intimate sex-talking (e.g. ‘It is not the mother’s work alone’: line 19), and (b) eclipsed other sources or sites of learning and discussion about sex (e.g. ‘But I don’t see the family and Life Skills and media, all those things, in this Straight Talk’: lines 19–20). Thus, Arube firmly positioned the roles of fathers and husbands in reconstitution of ‘the family’ as a safe-base ‘to discuss these issues openly,’ and so that children could ‘come back and ask, ask questions and talk’ (line 18). This follows the (object relations) psychological attachment-autonomy axis commonly used to theorise how young people (should, ideally) use families (developing out of dyadic safety with mothers) as refuges from which their widening social worlds are navigated (Burman, 1994).

The discusssant Arube drew on a social-ownership-of-children discourse to repel nuclear/dyadic intimacies of talk-techniques about sex (see Burman, 2002). This positioning placed families beside other mentoring adults, significant relationships, and social groups that formatively embedded young people, and thus saw the responsibility for communication about sex in a broader way: ‘As adults we all can make it comfortable for them [youth] to talk to us about sex’ (line 20). Discussions not shown in Extract 5 — particularly among speakers who came from African countries where HIV and AIDS has severely impacted on family life — mapped these enabling social networks for young people as being comprised of older siblings and peers, grandparents and extended families, teachers, neighbours, faith community members, youth organisations and so forth. The social-ownership-of-children discourse was explored further, in Extract 6, where multiple inputs and supports are found to empower children to ‘call forth’ new styles of relationships and communication with their own parents.

Extract 6

A Foucauldian genealogy of the forms and functioning of families, and the custodial responsibilities they prescribe towards children, finds these objects/subjects forged within shifting socio-historical conditions (Rose, 1990). Modern selfhood is constituted through the psyche-complex around the central signs of sex and sexuality, which (uncritically) reproduces imperatives for parental communication with children about sex. However, conditions of sexual risk in an HIV epidemic construct sexually-knowing and vulnerable children, who consequently require particular kinds
of parenting, monitoring and intervention (Singer, 1993). While a social-ownership-of-children discourse works to counter the traditional individualisation and isolation of mother-daughter communication in the home by opening up other sites for conversations about sex, this discourse also restructures the ‘relationship space’ between parents and children. In other words, it impels and informs a different style of parenting.

Accordingly, the discussant Nokothula’s maternal subject position in Extract 6 found ‘pressure tilting away from us as parents’ (line 1), in that her role as primary sexual-socialisation agent had shifted. Here raced-black children’s sexualised selves were figured as reinvigorated and empowered through new educational opportunities in South Africa (e.g., ‘these multi-racial schools where they learn a lot’; line 2). This schooling appeared to confer a language of sexual citizenship — positioned as a young subject who was aware of ‘rights’ and ‘rules’ of socially cooperative responsibility, and ‘free’ and ‘unafraid’ to ‘ask questions,’ and was not bowed by (traditional) culture, sex-talk taboo or parental authority (see lines 4–9). The explicit marking of this schooling as a multi-racial one was a way of reiterating that raced-black children were now being (properly) inscribed with the psychology-sanctioned, responsibly middle-classed, sexual subjectivities of ‘whiteness’ and ‘modernity’ denied to them in the past.

The most crucial point brought out in Extract 6 is that youthful subjects are figured as powerful agents of change in the ways that communication about sex has happened in their families. These youthful agents were transforming authoritarian custodianship by ‘calling forth’ a child-centred parent/mother (cf. Dean, 1994). The fearful silences between parents and children in traditional cultures (afraid to ask questions, afraid of punishment: see lines 4–6) were overwritten by normalisation of everyday conversations with children about sex. In Nokothula’s narrative, these conversations appeared as a discussion of ordinary events and issues related to media consumption of American soap operas (see line 11); Nokothula figured that children were leading certain interactions by ‘asking us so many questions’ (line 4), challenging a parent’s behaviour (‘And as old as I am, I became ashamed of what I was doing’: lines 7–8), and ‘telling their parents the [new] rules’ (line 6) that ‘bend the … [old] rules of our culture’ (lines 8–9). A flexible, child-centred parent was figured as responsive to this: ‘We cannot be rigid because it will not work with our kids’ (line 9).

Such a discourse of youth activism, of young people leading subjective and social transition, is not new in South Africa. Raced-black youth activism mobilised in the struggle against apartheid fashioned much-vaunted ‘young lion’ and ‘warrior’ subject positions that were said to have destabilised traditional relations with authoritarian parents in black African families (see Dawes, 1994; Campbell, 1997; Stevens & Lockhat, 1997). Risk-prevention campaigning (such as by loveLife) to rekindle such youth-culture activism in an HIV epidemic in order to fabricate sexually responsible, risk-vigilant young citizens, have met with various controversies (see critiques in Wilbraham, 2002; Parker, 2003; Posel, 2004). At the end of Extract 6, Jay’s cautionary comment hints at (unspecified) troubles with personal, interpersonal and social transitions that are ‘taken over by our kids’ (line 14). There is certainly no escaping the powers and responsibilities of being or becoming a sexual self, even for mature adult-citizens, in conditions of an advanced HIV epidemic (cf. Foucault, 1978).

Concluding comments

A Foucauldian approach to media discourse as social and subjective practice of government explores the fundamentally partial and piecemeal work of (micro) persuasion and (macro) ideological positioning, and within diverse niches of experience and interpretation. This paper has applied this line of thinking to appropriation by mothers of childrear-
them from risk of HIV infection. The group discussions
with parents about the chosen Lovelines/Straight Talk text
were intended to interrogate which talking-techniques were
advocated as ‘risk-proofing’ in the conditions of the HIV
epidemic; how these talking-techniques had transformed
relationships between mothers and children; and how
or why mothers were persuaded (or not) to adopt these
talking-techniques (as natural-seeming conversations) into
their childrearing practices.

(Ideological) subject positioning was found to work along
the powerful, discursive contours of the Western psy-complex.
Thus, ‘talking about sex’ was accepted as a truthful, white-
raced, modern imperative, and most middle-classed mothers
— as opposed to fathers — were actively practicing styles
thereof. Furthermore, the psychological assumptions of
adolescence as a risky time of transition and rebellion, and
the centrality of sex and sexuality to self-making, were often
taken for granted by the discussants, even in the discuss-
ants’ own critical analyses. However, my social theoretical
readings of the discussants’ resistances in this paper — at
the level of the micro-techniques of the kind of talking that
they reportedly deployed in their homes or argued about in
discussions with other parents — questioned the notion of
‘persuasion.’

Accordingly, while subject positioning as ideological and
discursive interpellation tended to hold fast (i.e. talking
about sex with children was the good and right thing to
do), actual conversational practices with young people in
real-life contexts were negotiated more freely. The talking
techniques advocated by Straight Talk were disputed by
the discussants as unpersuasive and impractical against a
complex matrix of other knowledge and know-how appropri-
ated in minute, interactive and fragmented ways, and which
were mostly experienced as individual choices in the reflex-
ive processes of mothering. Using Foucauldian approaches
to subject positioning I have explored what happened in
that appropriative process and exposed the plethora of
dissenting voices, oppositional positions, and judgemental
audiences of surveillance in which mothering — and, specif-
ically, talking about sex with children — was negotiated.

This critical approach undermines studies of media
audience-reception, or evaluation studies, that may
attempt to show the ‘impacts’ of isolated, branded media
products on people’s knowledge, attitudes or practices. This
approach also interrogates parenting-deficit models that
uncritically train mothers to talk to children about ‘difficult,’
‘sensitive’ or ‘risky’ topics (like sex). Subject positioning may
be used to confirm what works persuasively with particular
readers, or not. For example, addressing middle-classed,
well-educated mothers as sexually repressed and unwill-
ting talkers-about-sex with their children is not a persuasive
rhetorical tactic. However, subject positioning powerfully
embraces resistance as an integral part of subjectification
within a disciplinary knowledge-power matrix.

Furthermore, a Foucauldian lens on psychosocial aspects
of the HIV epidemic produces ways to explore ‘dividing
talk’ — for example, in the loaded binaries between theory
versus activism, risk versus risk-safety, media-power
versus people-power, and the presence versus absence of
inter-generational-talking-about-sex. The latter, open-talk-
versus-no-talk binary repeatedly infused the discus-
sions with comments about ‘differences’ between (raced)
cultures (i.e. traditional-black, African and modern-white) in
post-apartheid South Africa, which valorised Western ideals
of sexual socialisation, and ignored how these ideals were
always complexly and partially negotiated in family practices
(even in so-called liberal, white middle-class domestic
units). My analysis of three of the narratives (by discus-
sants Xoliswe, Thandi and Nokothula) in group discussions
has demonstrated how the practices of sex communication
between raced-black mothers and children may become
infused with the desires for class mobility, achievement
through hard work, formal education, and material success
(cf. Rose, 1990), and with the desire to produce HIV-free
citizens who may bolster or boost the family’s future welfare
and class status (cf. Barrett & McIntosh, 1982).

While the women discussants, who were professional
university lecturers, schoolteachers or part-time students,
and mothers also, mentioned their techniques for talking
about sex with their children, they did not reveal how the
minutiae of these everyday conversations were linked to
other childrearing practices related to regulation of a child’s
sexuality, desires or sexualised activities (cf. Burman,
2002). Examples of such micro-regulations include supervis-
ing children’s play, fetching children from school, monitor-
ing young people’s leisure time, vetting friendship circles,
and so on. Invisible and innocuous as these may seem, such assumptions of the effectiveness of risk-proofing vested in talking-techniques per se are middle-classed and raced-white. For example, such assumptions situate young people within economically secure nuclear families and safe communities, as monitored by responsible adult educators/custodians while mothers work, and able to access resources outside the domestic unit to negotiate abstinence or safer-sex activation. Kelly et al. (2001) have argued that it is young people in upper- to middle-class neighbourhoods who are best able to translate the presence or absence of a motherly chat about condoms into the onerous stepwise decisions and strategies involved in using a condom during every instance of sex.

This Foucault-inflected paper has also reflexively interrogated how ‘findings’ on media appropriation were manufactured within a group-discussion and discourse analytic methodology. Mainstream qualitative research based on group discussions as data has produced content-related themes, usually as lists of short, quoted statements, severed from the elaborate ways in which discussions are invariably set up and facilitated, and so eclipse the messy interactive jostling of talk (Puchta & Potter, 2004). This paper self-consciously exposed these seams and deployed ‘talk’ in longer dialogical narratives. This discourse was deliberately staged as middle-classed and maternal-gendered, through selection of a Straight Talk text reproduced in Fairlady magazine, and also as critically inflected discourse by way of its situation in a university-module workshop. The intention was not to generalise these findings as truths related to a wider population, but to delve into the particularities of how these events worked to ‘position’ motherly reading-subjects, and, thus, my own positioned readings of their discourse.

Finally, this Foucauldian-based paper does not offer enlightened scientific progress that promises to fix didactic HIV-risk-prevention media texts such that we are wholly persuaded and ‘saved’ from the mire of discourse and power. I acknowledge that the way through is through the middle/muddle. By way of meta-commentary and critique, this paper may hopefully connect with an active exploration of how media discourse may be ‘used’ to provoke action and sustain ‘becoming’ in multiple, decentralised ways.

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