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THE BLESSER PHENOMENON:

**Transactional Sex and Intergenerational Relationships in Urban South
Africa**

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Abstract

Relationships between women and typically older men for gifts and money in exchange for sex in South Africa are common, and known as blesser relationships. Their increasing acceptability and accessibility has been linked to negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes among young black African women. Using focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews, this thesis investigates the blesser phenomenon in South Africa through societal perceptions from peers, family and the wider community, and their interaction with motivations and experiences of women engaging in blesser relationships. Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice is used to understand how perceptions and behaviours are formed, recognising the importance of intersectionality affecting the women involved in blesser relationships.

This thesis finds that on the surface societal perceptions are largely negative, with families believed to hold the most extreme views. Community-wide condemnation is considered commonplace, although perceived to be slowly changing. Motivations for involvement with blessees are driven largely by material benefits, and while societal perceptions are influential, they are more prone to result in adaption of behaviour rather than abandonment of the relationship. On closer analysis however, dichotomies in perceptions are revealed and women's motivations and behaviour are more complex than they appear.

Key words: blessees, blessees, sexual and reproductive health and rights, South Africa, transactional sex.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| AYP | Adolescents and Young People |
| CSE | Comprehensive Sexuality Education |
| ESA | East and Southern Africa |
| ESARO | East and Southern African Regional Office |
| EUP | Early and Unintended Pregnancy |
| FPL | Food Poverty Line |
| GBV | Gender-Based Violence |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| HEARD | Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division |
| HIV | Human Immunodeficiency Virus |
| LBPL | Lower-Bound Poverty Line |
| NEET | Not in Employment, Education or Training |
| R | South African Rand |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SRH | Sexual and Reproductive Health |
| SRHR | Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights |
| STATS SA | Statistics South Africa |
| STIs | Sexually Transmitted Infections |
| STDs | Sexually Transmitted Diseases |
| UKZN | University of KwaZulu-Natal |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |

Glossary

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Apartheid | Meaning ‘apartness’ in Afrikaans, it was a legalised system of racial discrimination with its roots in colonial rule, established by South Africa’s Nationalist Party in 1948, lasting until 1994. Based on Afrikaner nationalism in order to elevate whites over non-whites, South Africans were classified by race and it legislated for racial separation residentially, economically, socially and politically, in favour of the white minority (Mhlauli et al., 2015; History.com Editors, 2020) |
| Adolescent | An individual in the 10 to 19 years age group (World Health Organization, 2020) |
| Blesser | A male who gives a female, who in most cases is younger, gifts and money usually in exchange for sexual favours and/or companionship |
| Blessee | A female who receives gifts and money from a typically older male in exchange for sexual favours and/or giving him companionship |
| Food Poverty Line (FPL) | The amount of money an individual will need to be able to meet required minimum daily energy intake (STATS SA, 2018a:13) |
| Informal Settlement | Housing area often illegally built on municipal land, characterised by low quality housing, poor water and sanitation, health and education services, lack of electricity and high levels of poverty (Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 1995 – 2020) |
| LBPL | The food poverty line plus the average amount derived from non-food items of households whose total expenditure is equal to the food poverty line (STATS SA, 2018a:13) |
| Lobola | Also known as the ‘bride price’, a tradition in Southern Africa where a bridegroom’s family makes a payment of cattle to the bride’s family to signify the contract of marriage between the families and to legitimise the marriage. Cattle have more recently been replaced by money, especially in urban areas (Parker, 2015; Collins, 2020) |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Rand | The currency of South Africa |
| Social Media | Any internet communication tool, typically websites and applications, that allow users to broadly share content and engage with the public (The balance, n.d.) |
| Township | Racially segregated area designated under colonial and apartheid rule for occupation by people of non-European descent, divided by black, coloured and Indian. Usually underdeveloped and low-income, based on the periphery of towns or cities (Pernegger and Godehart, 2007) |

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1994 was a turning point in South African history; it marked the first ever democratic election and an end to the apartheid regime. With the lifting of international sanctions the economy embraced neo-liberalism, opening up to globalisation (Zembe et al., 2013). Alongside this, glamorised images of modern, material capitalistic lifestyles arrived which especially appealed to the young (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

Since then, though significant improvements have been made in living standards, with a decrease in poverty¹ and high literacy levels², South Africa remains one of, if not the most, unequal countries worldwide³, with a distinct gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. It bears the legacy of the apartheid system, where the concentration and separation geographically by ethnicity and wealth disparities are still evident, with informal settlements clustered alongside wealthy neighbourhoods and high levels of social exclusion persisting (GCRO, 2018). Unemployment remains high at almost 30% (STATS SA, 2020) and almost half of young people are not in employment, education or training (NEET) (OECD, 2019). Young people and women, especially black Africans, are amongst those particularly vulnerable to poverty (STATS SA, 2017).

One reaction to this economic reality is the existence of particularly young women turning to older men, often referred to as ‘sugar daddies’, to provide the material items that they cannot afford themselves. This can even be simultaneously whilst maintaining more serious relationships with similar-aged boyfriends (Luke, 2003; Hoss and Blokland, 2018). Relationships are commonly understood to be age-disparate when the age gap between partners is 5-9 years, and where the gap is 10+ years, are intergenerational (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008). There is a myriad of motivations for adolescent girls and young women seeking relationships with older men (Ibid.), but a strong correlation exists between such relationships and transactional sex (Maughan-Brown et al., 2016). Transactional sex is typically an

¹ The proportion of the population classed UBPL (upper-bound poverty line) poor (the highest of the 3 rankings used in South Africa and measured as individuals who can purchase both adequate levels of food and non-food items) decreased from 66.6% in 2006 to 55.5% in 2015 (STATS SA, 2017:7,14).

² Most people have an upper secondary level of education or above and this has increased over time; 82% of young adults in 2018, an increase from 73% in 2008 (OECD 2019)

³ It is currently ranked by the World Bank with the highest Gini coefficient, that of 6.3 which was measured in 2014 (The World Bank, 2020)

exchange of money or gifts in return for sex, with financial and material benefits commonly cited as the motivation behind transactional relationships (Luke, 2003).

The motives for engaging in transactional relationships have typically been driven by poverty and young women and girls seeking to meet subsistence needs for themselves or their families (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Hoss and Blokland, 2018). However, increasingly the motives are consumption-driven to enable the women involved to attain a certain lifestyle, image and social status (Luke; 2003; Leclerc-Madlala; 2008; Hoss and Blokland, 2018). Notably in urban areas in South Africa, young people mostly have their basic needs met and therefore transactional sexual relationships are largely considered to be for meeting non-subsistence needs (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). This is considered a mutually beneficial relationship however; from the man's perspective the main motivation is generally considered to be the sexual benefits. Additionally men can gain an enhanced image or status from being seen with younger girlfriends (Ibid.).

The context of these relationships cannot be forgotten as they are occurring against a backdrop of racial, gender and socio-economic inequalities (BMR UNISA, 2018). The concept of transactional sexual relationships is also nothing new; they have merely taken on a new dimension in the 21st century. Age-disparate relationships, multiple concurrent partners and transactional sex can be ascribed to historical cultural norms, although women using their bodies for gain is not unique to the African context (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; 2008). Sex has long been considered to have a value and therefore not something for women to give away (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). The tradition of paying Lobola or the 'bride price' is also still considered common practice in South Africa, with 70% of the population subscribing to its importance in marriage, especially black Africans (Mohlabane et al., 2019). Traditionally payment of cattle was made from the groom's family to that of the bride to not only formalise the marriage but ensure specific rights (Parker, 2015). Whilst still common practice, money rather than cattle is now exchanged, creating the perception of the bride becoming the groom's property (Ibid.). The exchange of money and gifts has also entered into other types of romantic and sexual relationships, more commonly characterised by direct transfer between partners (Luke, 2003).

1.2 The Blesser Phenomenon

In the current era of social media, blesser relationships have taken on a new form with evolving terminology, where older men previously known as 'sugar daddies', are now

referred to as blessers, and the women they ‘bless’, as blessees. A blesser is typically an older male with money, who ‘blesses’, in most cases, a younger female with gifts and money in exchange for sexual favours. While the origins of the terms are unknown they are thought to derive from the concept of men wanting to provide for young girls and women who are perceived as pure and innocent (BMR UNISA, 2018), or that simply the women are fortunate to receive gifts and money. The terms have become prominent in the media only since 2016, with the adoption of the hashtag ‘#blessed’ used on pictures uploaded to social media showing money and gifts women have received from older men (Mampane, 2018; Kinuthia, 2019).

1.3 Problem Statement

Blesser relationships involve not only age disparity but can represent a power disparity. Although they are considered mutually beneficial, this power disparity can mean the women involved in them are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and can experience negative impacts on their mental and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) (Hoss and Blokland; 2018). South Africa has the highest number of HIV infections globally, with approximately 7.5 million people living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2019) and young, black African females suffer a significant burden of this in comparison to males and other races⁴ (HSRC, 2018).

Social media has been implicit in the emergence and growth of the blesser phenomenon. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and websites dedicated to matching blessers and blessees (BMR UNISA, 2018) have been a result of and have facilitated the phenomenon. They connect blessers with young women and girls and blessees posting how they have been ‘#blessed’ encourages others to aspire to such a lifestyle. It also pressures young women and girls into conforming and gaining status with their peers (BMR UNISA, 2018; Mampane, 2018). Accompanying this is the influence of ‘celebrity’ blessers such as Serge Cabonge⁵, who in most cases are married but despite this flaunt their blesser lifestyle over social media (BMR UNISA, 2018). Such mainstream presence is seen to not only glamorise the phenomenon but to legitimise and assimilate transactional sexual relationships into popular culture (Hoss and Blokland, 2018; Mampane, 2018), as well as to greatly increase their accessibility to anyone with a smartphone or computer. This has at times had deadly

⁴ Race refers to population groups based on self-identification and each racial category encompasses a number of different ethnicities and nationalities. This term is used throughout this thesis as race rather than ethnicity is the focus and it is the classification used in official statistics (World Elections, n.d.).

⁵ <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/morning-live-blesser-interview-leaves-bitter-taste-in-many-mouths-16389336>

consequences, for instance the case of 15 year old Keleabetse Seleka who was murdered by a ‘blesser’ she met through a blesser Facebook group (The Citizen, 2019).

The blesser phenomenon is growing in accessibility and acceptability. Although the topic of transactional sexual relationships has been covered extensively in the literature⁶, there has been limited attention on the emergence of blesser relationships in an urban context and the social media era. What research exists however prompts the need for further investigation. There is a clear need to combat the growing popularity and harmful effects of blesser relationships (BMR UNISA, 2018; Mampane, 2018). It is intended that this research will therefore contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon, in order to inform on strategies and interventions; the ultimate aim being to improve women’s mental and SRH in a country with entrenched race, class and gender divisions.

1.4 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to investigate the blesser phenomenon in South Africa by examining the motivations and experiences of women engaging in blesser relationships. These experiences are situated in the context of societal perceptions of these relationships from peers, family and the wider community, and the interaction between these perceptions and the women’s decisions. By wider community it is understood to be anyone not included in peer or family groups, such as those in the communities where these relationships are occurring and the general public.

The aim has been divided into three research questions:

1. What are the societal perceptions of blesser relationships and do they differ between peers, family and wider community?
2. How are women’s motivations in engaging in relationships with blesser in urban South Africa influenced by societal perceptions?
3. How and why do women in blesser relationships disregard societal perceptions with respect to these relationships?

⁶ For example Luke (2003); Leclerc-Madlala (2003; 2008; 2010); Shefer et al. (2012); Maughan-Brown et al. (2014; 2016; 2018)

The next chapter will contextualise the research questions, reviewing the literature focused on the blesser phenomenon, its consequences and perceptions. Next the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis will be outlined, followed by the methodology and data collection, including the study sites. Finally, an analysis of the data in the context of the theoretical framework will be presented, with concluding comments summarising the findings, implications for the development agenda and suggestions for future research.

2. Background and Literature Review

This chapter focuses on the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the link with blesser relationships, specifically in relation to young women. It places SRH outcomes within the wider development context and examines literature on blesser relationships in South Africa in terms of their impact, portrayals of the women involved and perceptions of the relationships.

2.1 Sexual and Reproductive Health

The 1994 Cairo Declaration on Population and Development, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action 1995, acknowledged internationally the importance of SRHR in ensuring future development, especially for women (Barroso, 2014; Choonara et al., 2018). Further commitments were laid out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030; SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing and SDG 5 on gender equality explicitly call for universal access to SRHR and services (U.N., n.d.). On the African continent there have been regional commitments to SRHR with Agenda 2063 and the Maputo Plan of Action (Choonara et al., 2018). In addition, in 2013, 21 Eastern and Southern African countries affirmed their commitment to scaling up SRH services for adolescents and young people (AYP) through the ESA Commitment (UNESCO, 2018).

In South Africa, advances have been made with a 13% decrease in new infections of HIV (2013-2017), the highest rate of condom use in the region (72.5% in 2016), and an increase in the rate of condom use at last sex (Ndoondo, 2019). Nevertheless its relatively low adolescent fertility rate regionally is significantly higher than the world average, equating to almost one million births annually (Africa Check, 2019; The World Bank, 2019). Also, whilst it has the third highest population in the region (World Customs Organisation, 2019), it records the highest number of new infections of HIV among AYP. Young women and girls disproportionately suffer the burden of SRH (Beh and Diamond, 2006); are more susceptible to acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than males; are less likely to be able to negotiate safe sex, and experience the negative consequences of early and unintended pregnancy (EUP) far greater than males (Beh and Diamond, 2006; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Ndoondo, 2019). In South Africa the ratio of new HIV infections for females to males is 2.4 and black African women suffer the burden of HIV prevalence by a significant margin (See Table 1) (HSRC, 2018). Fewer females than males also report using a condom at last sex

and unacceptably low levels of comprehensive HIV prevention knowledge prevail among AYP (HSRC, 2018; Ndong, 2019).

Table 1: HIV prevalence (%) by sex and race (2017)

| HIV Prevalence (%) | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---------|-------|
| HIV Indicator | | Females | Males |
| Race | Black African | 20.6 | 12.5 |
| | White | 0.9 | 1.3 |
| | Coloured | 5.8 | 4.7 |
| | Indian/Asian | 1.3 | 0.4 |

Source: Adapted from HSRC, 2018

2.2 The Consequences of Blesser Relationships

One reason attributed to females’ and especially female AYP’s higher rates of HIV infection in South Africa is the common practice of age-disparate and intergenerational transactional sexual relationships, currently known as blesser relationships. The intersection between age-disparate or intergenerational relationships and transactional ones compounds young women’s and girls’ vulnerability.

2.2.1 HIV infection and EUPs

The risks for female AYP engaging in these relationships are significant, as HIV prevalence among men peaks later than that of women, in the 45-49 year old age bracket (HSRC, 2018). As such, not only are older men more likely to be HIV positive than their younger counterparts, but women typically become infected approximately ten years earlier than men (Mampane, 2018; Maughan-Brown et al., 2018). This is compounded by the reality Maughan-Brown et al. (2016) found, where young women in such relationships are far more likely to report unprotected sex than those with similar-aged partners. Men in age-disparate relationships with younger women also confirm this trend. Such relationships are also characterised by concurrency of partners by men, thus further increasing the risks from unprotected sex (Ibid.). This is reflected by women reporting age-disparate relationships having higher rates of HIV than those who do not (Maughan-Brown et al., 2018). Not only are women more prone to EUP if they are having unprotected sex, numerous studies have found that if a man’s younger partner becomes pregnant, he typically denies responsibility and abandons her (Luke, 2003).

2.2.2 Power Disparities

Power in South Africa is gendered, with males exerting power over women in relationships as the prevailing norm established from childhood (Thorpe, 2002). It is not surprising that this dynamic is played out in blesser relationships. Beyond a greater risk of HIV transmission therefore women are vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) in the form of sexual or physical abuse in blesser relationships, especially if they challenge the power balance in situations such as condom use (Zembe et al., 2013). GBV can also result from attempts to end a relationship or any behaviour not deemed acceptable by the blesser (Wood et al., 1998).

The economic asymmetry and dependence of transactional relationships can also increase women's exposure to condom-less sex for fear of risking the financial benefits of the relationship (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008). The higher perceived value of condom-less sex also leads women to report low levels of condom usage, with the decision-making firmly with the male partner (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). Of note however is that neither transactional sex nor unequal power dynamics are exclusively limited to blesser relationships but can also be found, to a lesser extent, in same-age relationships (Luke, 2003).

In their study into blesser relationships among secondary school students in a traditionally black township, Hoss and Blokland (2018) claim that adolescent girls may be further exposed to abuse if they feel unable to confide in a parent. In addition they may also suffer academically, impacting their future opportunities (Ibid.). This can therefore also have consequences for their mental health. A study carried out by BMR UNISA (2018:15) found that young girls involved with blessters tended to perceive themselves as sex objects, exhibit low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness.

2.3 Victim versus Agency

In their literature review across sub-Saharan Africa, Luke and Kurz (2002) found the existence of dichotomous representations of the young women and girls involved in blesser relationships. Whilst Hoss and Blokland (2018) link these representations to power disparities, they are distinct. The first portrays young women and girls as victims; powerless passive actors compelled into such actions through exterior forces such as financial needs, peer pressure and social norms. They are also vulnerable to coercion, domination and abuse by the men, who are framed as aggressors (Luke and Kurz, 2002; Hoss and Blokland, 2018), manifested in the consequences of such relationships. Thorpe (2002) supports this portrayal in his examination of the wider power dynamics operating between young boys and girls in

same-age relationships. He claims that although girls may benefit materially from the relationships, they are in no position to exert control and if they attempt to, would suffer negative consequences.

The opposing representation is women and girls as active social agents, for example having multiple or concurrent partners as a challenge to social norms and a representation of sexual equality and the modern age (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). Although still restrained by certain social norms, they are asserting themselves and recognising sex and their sexuality as a commodity on which they can capitalise for economic gain: “a man should not expect a woman to give it away for free” (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003:220). In these instances, the young women and girls are seen as taking measured choices (Luke and Kurz, 2002). They are negotiating these relationships and exploiting men in order to provide financial security and access to a costly modern urban lifestyle. They may even be furthering their own interests in terms of education, employment and current or future aspirations (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; 2008; Hoss and Blokland, 2018).

Blessees’ agency is also reflected by their ability to decide when to enter into a relationship and with whom, as well as when to end it (Hoss and Blokland, 2018), whilst measuring the perceived risks against the ‘rewards’. These rewards can also include non-tangible items such as increased self-esteem and self-confidence through enhanced status from being seen living a luxurious lifestyle and gaining recognition, for instance through social media (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; BMR UNISA, 2018). Sharing photos or videos of the material benefits of these relationships indicates that the blessees are not ashamed or trying to hide their involvement and on the contrary are proud of them.

It is crucial that context in terms of time, place, individual or group be taken into consideration and women and young girls appear to occupy the space somewhere between the two representations (Luke and Kurz, 2002). A dearth of literature since the emergence of the current incarnation of these relationships in terms of blessers in an urban context, however, means that a contemporary portrayal of blessees is lacking.

2.4 Perceptions

Sexual relationships between young women and older men are commonplace both historically and currently in South Africa. There is a lack of evidence that they go against prevailing social norms and as such are not considered taboo (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008). Furthermore Leclerc-Madlala (2002; 2003) asserts that transactional sex is commonplace and

even receives support from a culture where exploiting sexuality for economic gain and status is the norm. This is reflected in the openness of social media's role in facilitating these relationships, as well as the attention that blessees receive through social media and from their peers. She further states that blessees also attempt to portray these relationships as normal, particularly for young urban women who are unmarried. In part she claims this is through the women framing transactional sex for consumer needs in the same context that legitimises survival transactional sex (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

It seems that where prostitution evokes a negative reaction, these relationships do not share this reaction (Luke, 2003). The women themselves do not self-identify as sex workers as they have 'boyfriends' rather than clients. This may also lie in the absence of a one-off encounter, instead tending to be longer term arrangements (Zembe et al., 2013; Mampane, 2018). This is reflected in a study which found a change of attitude initially from disapproval, to an admission of considering becoming involved for 'the right price' (BMR UNISA, 2018).

The perception that blesser relationships are not classed as prostitution however is contested. Despite blessees not self-identifying as sex workers it seems that they are perceived as such by some (BMR UNISA, 2018; Mampane, 2018). The development of these relationships into focusing on attaining a consumer lifestyle appears to have changed attitudes towards the women involved in them. They are now considered to have unreasonable expectations of what they consider they need or want (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). This is reflected by young men feeling unable to attract women their age because they are not able to provide them with the material benefits that women expect (Ibid.). Blessees can also be portrayed as predatory, actively seeking out men as their blessers whilst the men are passive actors, unable to resist these women (Ibid.). This can be linked to gender norms where women are considered promiscuous if they 'request' sex, in comparison to a demonstration of males' masculinity to do so (Thorpe, 2002).

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework applied in this thesis. It employs Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice, utilising the concept of habitus to understand societal perceptions of the field of blesser relationships and the interplay between habitus, doxa and capital on women's motivations to engage in these relationships.

3.1 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice aims to understand human behaviour hinging on the key concepts of habitus, capital and field, which result in practice (Power, 1999). Practice can be understood as an agent's actions, defined as "unconscious behavior that is in conformity with our interests and that aims at achieving our objectives" (Walther, 2014:15). Such behaviours are focused around a struggle for power reflected by ownership of and control over resources in the form of capital (Navarro, 2006; Walther, 2014). Bourdieu proposes that one's practices are shaped by and a result of the interaction between habitus and capital within a certain field (Maton, 2014), illustrated below:

Figure 1: Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1984:101)



3.1.1 Habitus

Bourdieu applies the concept of habitus to examine practices in terms of the factors which underlie and generate them. Conversely, by examining practices, the structures of the related habitus can be revealed, as habitus is only evident by its effects on the subsequent practices (Maton, 2014). Habitus can be conceptualised as operating in the subconscious, formed by one's past experiences which manifest in the present through perceptions, feelings and actions as well as belief in abilities and self-esteem (Crossley, 2001; Dumais, 2002; Walther, 2014). As such, it is formed by and reflects an agent's position in the social structure which has been internalised by the individual. This in turn shapes an individual's perception of the world and how they act in it, including the formation of appropriate aspirations and hence practices based on the individual's beliefs of what is realistic for their life (Power, 1999; Dumais, 2002).

Habitus is considered a product of social structures and contributes to the generation of practices and social fields as well as reproducing them (Power, 1999; Crossley, 2001; Walther, 2014). Thus society not only shapes individuals but is created and shaped by their actions (Crossley; 2001). Habitus is acquired and developed through primary and secondary socialisation, with the primary habitus more enduring as it develops during childhood, and the secondary habitus building upon the primary (Power, 1999; Navarro, 2006). Gender and social class are particularly important aspects of habitus resilient to change as they are deeply-rooted, formed essentially from birth (Krais, 1993; Power, 1999). Walther (2014) outlines primary habitus as originating from the family and results in an internalisation of the parents' own habitus. Secondary habitus is a product primarily from an individual's education as well as life experiences, and consequently can also be formed by the varying groups to which an individual belongs (Crossley, 2001). However primary and secondary habitus operate as one.

Habitus is reinforced and evolves and modifies based on the current context and experiences, having the ability to change across time and place (Navarro, 2006; Walther, 2014). However, the habitus may not fit or does not adapt to the current social world. This can either prompt change or result in the hysteresis effect, manifested for instance as a generational conflict where perceptions of the same practices can be viewed as acceptable and unthinkable across the generations (Navarro, 2006; Walther, 2014).

3.1.2 Field

Habitus does not determine practices alone, but through its relationship with field (Maton, 2014): "Involvement in a field shapes the habitus which, in turn, shapes the perceptions and actions which reproduce the field" (Crossley, 2001:101). Field is the boundaries within which habitus operates and therefore within which all interactions occur (Navarro, 2006; Walther, 2014). Different fields can be identified and subdivided (Walther, 2014). Each field has a distinctive "logic of practice" (Thomson, 2014:68) comprised of its own norms and rules, which differ between fields and subfields and the agents within a field share a belief in the "rules of the game" of that field (Crossley, 2001; Thomson, 2014). Bourdieu claimed that people occupy a common social space comprised of multiple fields referred to as the field of power. They occupy more than one field at a time and some fields within the field of power exert dominance over others, and the practices in subordinate fields often depend on those in other fields (Thomson, 2014).

Each field is related to and organised around specific types of capital. Value is only attributed to capital through its relation to a field and by the agents in that field (Crossley, 2001; Dumais, 2002). As a result, fields are arenas of struggle for control over capital which in turn determine actors' positions within the field, resulting in dominant and subordinate agents (Dumais, 2002; Navarro, 2006). Agents' practices are therefore rational and intentional in order to maintain or improve their position (Maton, 2014).

Dominant agents have significant control over what happens within the field. Similar types of dominant agents tend to occur across fields, as do the propensity for regular and predictable practices. However Thomson (2014) claims that both agency and change can still operate within this structure. Not only can changes occur due to factors within a field but also as a result of external factors, including advancements in technology (Thomson, 2014:72).

3.1.3 Capital

Fields cannot exist without capital. All agents have a 'portfolio of capital' which determines their position within the social space or field along with their abilities to transform one form of capital to another (Power, 1999; Crossley, 2001; 2014). Consequently, capital influences an agent's capacity to act in relation to their position in the field (Crossley, 2001). There are four main types of capital; economic, cultural, social and symbolic (Crossley, 2001; Navarro, 2006). Economic capital is the most apparent form, consisting of money, income and assets (Power, 1999). Cultural capital is present in various forms including cultural objects and qualifications (Navarro, 2006). Social capital can be understood as connections and networks including institutionalised relationships, for instance in the family (Power, 1999). Finally, symbolic capital is interpreted as status, recognition or legitimacy which can have a tangible form such as awards, however typically it is manifest in how someone is perceived (Crossley, 2001). A sub-category of cultural capital is physical capital; how certain qualities of the body are considered desirable. In the context of blessing relationships this is the blessee's appearance such as expensive weaves⁷, nails and make up. Albeit the physical capital gained is rooted in conformity to male-defined ideals (Shilling, 1991; 2003).

Economic capital is considered the most valuable in terms of power and status and most versatile due to the cross-cutting existence of the economy (Crossley, 2001). But all forms can be used by agents to maintain or gain power, particularly cultural capital; qualifications

⁷ Weaves are a type of hair extension made from synthetic or human hair which is fixed into the hair by sewing or gluing and popular among black women. The best quality human hair weaves can have a high cost and are the most desirable (Unruly, 2018; Merriam-Webster, 2020).

can be exchanged for economic capital through the transfer to paid employment (Crossley, 2001; Dumais, 2002; Navarro, 2006). In general however cultural, along with social and symbolic capital are commonly linked to a specific field and therefore have limited transferability, and power afforded through possession of capital may not transfer to another field (Crossley, 2001).

3.1.4 Doxa

Interlinked with habitus, field and capital is the concept of doxa, representing unquestioned beliefs taken for granted within the context of the field, in the form of shared reality, rules and opinions (Deer, 2014). This in turn sets boundaries and limits an individual's actions and belief in what is possible, resulting in apparently 'natural' practice (Deer, 2014; Walther, 2014). Doxa is rooted in the field in the form of symbolic power. It shapes the field and reproduces itself within institutions and structures as well as behaviours and expectations, provided those who ascribe to it do not question its legitimacy (Deer, 2014). Where habitus and field complement and thus reinforce one another, the power of the doxa is consequently strengthened (Ibid.) with the ultimate balance being achieved when "your habitus matches the logic of the field, [and] you are attuned to the doxa underlying practices within that field" (Maton, 2014:56).

3.2 Operationalisation of Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework will be operationalised in accordance with the research questions. Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice will be applied to research question one, with specific focus on the concept of habitus as it shapes an individual's perceptions within the fields of peer groups, the family, local community and society as a whole. The role played by doxa will also be considered. Research question two will examine the motivations for women engaging in blesser relationships, within the context of habitus, the field of blesser relationships and the role of capital. Finally question three will operationalise the Theory of Practice to understand how and why its inter-related components lead to women's practices regarding blesser relationships which disregard societal perceptions.

Applying Bourdieu through a gender lens to focus on the importance of gender influencing women's habitus, fields and capital and the relation with doxa is crucial. Although Bourdieu has attracted criticism from feminist scholarship, he acknowledges the importance of gender; it is intrinsic to an individual's habitus and permeates through and influences every experience (Skeggs, 2004).

4. Methodology and Data Collection

This chapter presents the methodology for this study, first outlining the research strategy and design, philosophical standpoint and the circumstances shaping the choice of data and study sites. Next the research methods and data are presented, including data analysis techniques, concluding with reflections on ethical considerations, limitations and data reliability.

4.1 Research Strategy and Design

A qualitative strategy has been adopted as the most appropriate for dealing with the perceptions and motivations of blesser relationships. Exploring individuals' interpretations of their social world is the aim, rather than statistical generalisations from quantifiable data (Bryman, 2012:36). A multisite case study research design further confirms this choice as case studies are qualitative in nature. Various data sources are drawn upon to give in-depth understanding of the real-life ongoing case of blesser relationships (Cresswell and Poth, 2018) using common methods associated with qualitative research (Bryman, 2012), in the form of focus group discussions (FGDs), individual interviews and a key informant interview.

4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Position

This research examines differing motivations, perceptions and experiences and acknowledges that multiple realities can exist and are constructed and shaped through individuals' experiences and interactions. Social phenomena are social constructions and construction of such realities occurs even between the researcher and researched (Bryman, 2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018). However, a 'weak' social constructionist position is adopted as it calls for placing the individual within their social, historical and cultural context (Kitzinger, 2000).

This position is complimented by a post-colonial feminist standpoint, rejecting the assumption of homogeneous experiences of women in the Global South and the perception of the 'average third-world woman' (Mohanty, 1988). It draws on intersectionality as a tool to understand the importance of acknowledging how gender cuts across identities and oppression is based upon characterisations including race, class, gender, and age (Collins, 2000; Shields, 2008). This is especially important in the post-colonial context of South Africa and legacy of the apartheid system, where young urban-dwelling black women are subject to an intersection of identities.

4.3 Access and Challenges

This study was carried out across multiple sites and access was achieved through a variety of means. This was due to practical reasons and challenges faced when accessing sites and respondents.

4.3.1 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Sites

The FGDs were facilitated by and carried out in Gauteng Province under the auspices of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), with whom I was interning. Access to respondents was secured through two organisations with which there was a pre-existing relationship established directly or through the South African UNFPA country office. Both organisations work on SRHR with the AYP of black African townships.

4.3.2 Challenges Accessing Interview Respondents

Due to the stark disparities in wealth in Gauteng and the common practice of blesser relationships it was also chosen as the site for individual interviews with women currently or previously involved with blessers. Snowball sampling (Moser and Korstjens, 2018) was planned through referrals from FGD participants. Unfortunately this did not generate any referrals and illustrated the challenge with gaining access to and participation of respondents (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The strategy was adapted to use snowball sampling through blesser Facebook pages and groups and personal contacts. Unfortunately they required remuneration for participating, did not reply or were not willing to assist.

4.3.3 Access to Interview Data

The need to adapt the data collection plan led to the discovery of a Facebook page⁸, linked to the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Durban. Contact was made with HEARD and interviews had already been carried out with blessees but the research had not yet been analysed. An agreement was reached to provide interview transcripts for this study in return for sharing the final analysis. A Memorandum of Understanding was drawn up to clarify expectations and terms and conditions for use of the data, essential for such collaboration (Hammett et al., 2015).

⁸ 'Understanding 'Blesser' & 'Blessee' Dynamics'
https://www.facebook.com/pg/BLESSEResearch/about/?ref=page_internal

4.4 Study Sites

Three study sites were included; Tsakane township and Tshwane Municipality (Pretoria) in Gauteng Province and Durban in KwaZulu-Natal Province (KZN) (see Figure 2). The UNFPA's regional office is located in Gauteng and UKZN is in Durban and therefore were chosen partly for convenience.

Figure 2: Map of South Africa



Source: Maps of World (2020) adapted by author

4.4.1 Tsakane and Tshwane

Gauteng is the smallest yet most populous South African province⁹ and accounts for over a third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (STATS SA, 2006; 2018b). Although it experiences the lowest provincial level of poverty¹⁰, this amounts to almost 30% of its adult population (STATS SA, 2018a).

Tsakane is in Ekurhuleni Municipality, commonly considered part of the Greater Johannesburg area. Johannesburg is South Africa's largest city¹¹ and financial capital, where household income is on average 57% higher than the national average (STATS SA, n.d. a; City of Johannesburg, 2018; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020a). Tsakane has an almost 100% black African population. Most residents live in formal dwellings, with around 13% living in informal dwellings, and almost 50% of the population is under 25 (STATS SA, n.d. b).

Tshwane Municipality is 62km North East of Johannesburg. It has approximately 3.3 million residents and includes the city of Pretoria, the country's administrative capital (GCRO 2018; Yes Media, 2012-2020b; CDP Worldwide, 2020). It is a significant contributor to the economy and shares a similar demographic profile to that of Tsakane, although with a lower proportion of black Africans (75.4%). There is also a higher proportion of the population living in informal settlements (19.3%) (STATS SA, n.d. c).

4.4.2 Durban

Durban is the third largest city in South Africa and site of South Africa's main cargo port serving much of Southern Africa. Despite KZN having the second largest economy, over 60% of the adult population lives in poverty¹² (eThekweni Municipality, 2011; STATS SA, 2018a; 2018b; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020b). As Tshwane, Durban has a predominately black African population (73.8%) and similar proportion living in informal settlements (18.5%) (STATS SA, n.d. d; Yes Media, 2012-2020c).

4.5 Data Collection Methods and Sampling

This study uses qualitative primary data collected in the form of focus group discussions, in-depth individual semi-structured interviews and a key informant interview (see Table 2).

⁹ 25,8% of the population in South Africa live in Gauteng Province (STATS SA, 2019a)

¹⁰ Measured by UBPL (upper-bound poverty line) explained in chapter one

¹¹ It is estimated to have a population of around 5 million which accounts for 36% of the Gauteng province population and 8% of the South African population (Yes Media, 2012-2020a)

¹² See footnote 10

Table 2: Overview of methods

| Method | Number | Total Number of Respondents | Dates Carried Out |
|---------------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Focus Group Discussions | 2 | 18 | November – December 2019 |
| Individual Semi-Structured Interviews | 16 | 16 | June 2017 – October 2018 |
| Key Informant Interview | 1 | 2 | January 2020 |

Source: Author’s construction, Primary data (2017-2019)

The FGDs and individual interviews were conducted in English because the majority of South Africans attend English medium schools¹³ and it is the most commonly spoken language outside the home (STATS SA, 2019b). This also negated the need for a translator which itself would have posed an issue due to the number of different languages spoken. The key informant interview was also carried out in English as their research was published in English.

The sample population was limited to black African women as they are the most affected by poverty; almost 50% of black women are living below the poverty line compared to less than 1% of white women (STATS SA, 2017). As previously cited they are also the most vulnerable to HIV incidence and there is the highest prevalence of age-disparate relationships within this racial group (Maughan-Brown et al., 2018).

4.5.1 Focus Group Discussions

FGDs were chosen to explore peers’ perceptions of blesser relationships and their perceptions of how families and the wider community view these relationships. They were also used to supplement the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. FGDs are ideal for investigating how “individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it” (Bryman, 2012:540). They also offered the opportunity for a variety of opinions to be expressed and for particular issues within the topic to be brought up and discussed (Bryman, 2012), possibly ones which had not been anticipated.

A total of two FGDs were carried out with nine participants each. The first focus group (FGD 1) was conducted as a pilot in Tsakane with women only. It was used to inform on changes and improvements, in terms of the interview guide and practicalities of the FGD (see Appendix 1 and 2 for interview guides). The second focus group (FGD 2) was carried out in central Pretoria with 6 women and 3 men from various townships in Tshwane Municipality.

¹³ There are 11 official languages in South Africa however Matric, the grade 12 secondary school certificate, can only be taken in English and Afrikaans. Due to the wider use of English both in South Africa, regionally and globally, it is the preferred choice (Taylor and Coetzee, 2016).

Female-only and mixed FGDs were chosen in order to capture both women's and men's perspectives.

Access to respondents was obtained through gatekeepers in the form of local organisations who mobilised respondents based on the selection criteria. Therefore purposive sampling was applied to access respondents able to inform on the research topic (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). FGD 1 participants were recruited by one of the members of the FGD who had prior involvement with the organisation, however none of the other participants did. The FGD 2 participants all had a pre-existing involvement with the organisation.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- i. 20 to 24 years old¹⁴
- ii. Black African
- iii. Speak and understand English
- iv. No prerequisite to self-identify as being in a blesser relationship currently or previously

Additional FGDs were planned but not carried out. One was arranged but later cancelled by the partner organisation. Many organisations were closed for up to a month over the Christmas period, with limited operations before and after the closure. One organisation was only able to mobilise minors who therefore did not meet the participant selection criteria. Logistics were also a challenge due to the large area covered by Johannesburg, lack of public transport infrastructure and safety issues, limiting the number of accessible locations. Data collected from the pilot FGD was therefore included partly due to not carrying out as many FGDs as planned but also as it was itself a rich source of information.

The discussion was facilitated by myself, the researcher. Also in attendance was the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Specialist from the UNFPA. The organisation representative through whom the FGDs were organised was present during FGD 1 but not FGD 2.

As the participants volunteered their time, an appropriate reciprocity for the 'intrusion' (Marshall and Rossman, 2016:125) was provided in the form of refreshments and condoms.

¹⁴ This is the most at risk age group for new HIV infections (Ndondo, 2019). One participant was 26 years old however she was not excluded as she was considered to be in the same peer group.

4.5.2 In-depth Individual Semi-structured Interviews

16 women were interviewed individually to gain insight into their firsthand experiences of the blesser phenomenon, along with their motives and societal perceptions of their involvement. Only women were included as the focus of the research is female blessees with male blessers. The interviews were also used to strengthen the data regarding societal perceptions collected in the FGDs. Three pilot interviews were carried out and used to adjust the interview process accordingly (see Appendix 3 for interview guide). All interviews were carried out by researchers from HEARD at UKZN either at the university or at an alternative suitable venue nominated by the interviewee.

Purposive sampling was applied through contacting women directly in the Durban area who were openly seeking blessers through blesser Facebook groups. They were offered an incentive of a R100¹⁵ voucher to participate. Recruitment of participants however was a challenge and therefore the sampling strategy was changed to target students at UKZN through advertising on the university's daily email bulletin (Appendix 4). Initially the R100 voucher was advertised however this was later removed by request of the university's administration and resulted in no further recruitment of participants. Snowball sampling was also utilised through referrals from interviewees.

There was no language requirement for interviewees however sampling was done in English only. Many of the interviewees were university students and English is the preferred medium of tertiary education (Olivier, 2014). The only criteria applied were that interviewees were female and had previously or were currently involved in a relationship with a blesser. There was no age requirement besides being 18+ years old, however as many of the respondents were university students, they were in a similar age group to the FGD participants. There was no criterion related to race.

4.5.3 Key Informant Interview

Juliane Hoss and Linda Blokland, authors of a recent research article¹⁶ on the blesser phenomenon in South Africa, were interviewed by telephone to learn more about their research including their findings and participant access and sampling (See Appendix 5 for interview guide).

¹⁵ This is equivalent to ≈US\$5.50

¹⁶ Sugar daddies and blessers: A contextual study of transactional sexual interactions among young girls and older men <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2361>

4.5.4 Profile of Respondents

Table 3: Profile of FGD and Interview Respondents¹⁷

| Method | Location | Total Number | Sex | | Age | Race | Highest Educational Level Completed | Currently in Education |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|------|--------|-------------|---------------|--|------------------------|
| | | | Male | Female | | | | |
| FGD 1 | Tsakane Township, Gauteng | 9 | 0 | 9 | 20-26 years | Black African | 9 – Grade 12 Matric ¹⁸ | 1 |
| FGD 2 | Pretoria city centre, Gauteng | 9 | 3 | 6 | 20-23 years | Black African | 6 –Matric 3 – Post-Secondary Qualification | 6 |
| In-depth interviews | HEARD, UKZN, Durban | 16 | 0 | 16 | 21-49 years | Black African | 6 –Matric 9 – Post-secondary 1 – unknown | 9 |

Source: Author’s construction, Primary data (2017-2019)

Although there was no stipulation regarding race for the interviews, all interviewees were black African. The median age of interviewees was 24 but the range was much wider than for the FGDs. The older interviewees were not excluded as they could still provide valuable insights and some had had blessers at a younger age. The educational level of the interviewees was high, unsurprisingly as most were recruited through UKZN. This is reflected by the participants of FGD 2 but in contrast to FGD 1, where only one of the participants was in post-secondary education. However the time and location may have influenced this as it was during the academic term so students would have been away at university.

4.6 Data Analysis

The FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed manually verbatim, with a number allocated to respondents based on the order in which they spoke. The interview recordings were transcribed by a third party¹⁹, some verbatim and others lightly edited, omitting fillers and repetition. Respondents were anonymised during the process.

Emerging and common themes were identified from multiple listenings to the FGD recordings and readings of the interview transcriptions. The transcripts were then manually coded in NVivo 12 data analysis software. Sub-theme codes were grouped under the themes

¹⁷ See Appendix 6 for detailed demographic information of the FGD respondents and Appendix 7 for interview respondents

¹⁸ Matric is how the National Senior Certificate qualification gained in Grade 12 on completion of secondary school is commonly referred to (Department of Basic Education, 2019)

¹⁹ Transcription was carried out by three PhD students from the University of Massachusetts Boston, with whom there is collaboration with HEARD on the analysis and publication of the interview data

of peer, family and wider community perceptions and blessees' motivations, and additional themes were included in line with the analytical framework.

The key informant interview was also audio-recorded and detailed notes were taken during the interview. These were combined with additional notes taken from the recording, and specific references to the codes from the FGDs and interviews were noted.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Whilst all research has an element of value bias (Hammett et al., 2015), reflecting on this especially in the form of researcher positionality is essential. Being a white female from the Global North, from a country with a colonial history with South Africa undoubtedly shaped my relationship with the participants. In addition, carrying out the FGDs under the umbrella of the UNFPA with a representative present during the discussions may also have influenced the responses, including the possibility of social desirability bias²⁰. While these identities could neither be changed nor obscured, it was essential to create a safe, non-judgemental space where the respondents felt able to share their opinions freely. I also acknowledged my outsider status (Geleta, 2014) with the participants, indicating that they were the ones with the knowledge from whom I would learn, and reflected on this throughout the research process. The positionality and differing identities of the researchers who carried out the individual interviews are factors to be considered, where they either matched those of the interviewees; a young black woman, or differed; an older white man, and the influence this could have had (May, 2011). This is especially pertinent in the South African context where race and gender are defining factors in terms of power and socio-economic status.

The study was carried out according to LUMID ethical guidelines, including the exclusion of any vulnerable groups, specifically children. The purpose of the study was explained to participants, that participation was voluntary and there was the option to withdraw at any time without any consequences. It was also explained that they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable with. For the FGDs if they wished to share personal information or experiences they did not have to attribute it to themselves. The purpose of the study was also explained both in writing and verbally to the local organisation contact before the FGDs were arranged.

²⁰ Social desirability bias occurs when respondents provide answers which are not a true reflection of their actual attitudes, values or behaviours (Larson, 2019)

Written and verbal consent was obtained from the partner organisations facilitating the FGDs and an agreement made to share the FGD data (Appendix 8). Individual written consent was obtained from all participants of the FGDs and individual interviews (Appendices 9 and 10). Consent was also discussed and obtained orally to ensure the participants fully understood and consented. Interview and FGD transcripts were anonymised and recordings stored on password protected devices. Ethical approval for the in-depth interviews was obtained from UKZN (Appendix 11) and the FGDs were carried out under UNFPA ethical and research permissions.

4.8 Limitations

Self-reported data may experience reporting bias particularly when related to sexual behaviour, as has been found in previous studies (Dupas, 2011). In addition, the use of snowball sampling and advertising can result in self-selection (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002). Accessing FGD participants through ‘gatekeeper’ organisations with a focus on SRHR is a limitation in terms of potential bias of the respondents selected. In particular, where respondents were already engaged with the organisation, they may have a greater awareness of SRHR issues than other young people. Nevertheless these were the most appropriate methods within the time and resource parameters and to gain access to the harder to reach survey population of blessees.

Using interview data which I did not collect meant no involvement in the design process or data collection. This necessitated working with data that was available which did not necessarily fit the exact needs of this study. It also meant unfamiliarity with the data and context of its collection, missing subtleties which may not have been reflected in the transcriptions. It is possible that the transcribers were not familiar with the accent or the context, which could have affected their interpretation and comprehension, reflected by missing or incorrect text. This also relates to not being present during data collection or having access to the recordings for verification. Nevertheless it is advantageous using data collected by experienced researchers.

Inevitably group dynamics meant that not everyone in the FGDs spoke and shared their opinions equally, with some dominating the discussion. In FGD 2 there was also an uneven ratio of men to women. In an attempt to mitigate this, the quieter participants were encouraged to contribute. However, the responses may have been skewed in favour of the more dominant participants and the males’ perceptions may have gone unrepresented. Linked

to this could be the respondents' confidence speaking in public, including in English. Language greatly influences the data produced (Hammett et al., 2015) and collecting it in the respondents' native languages may have resulted in variations in the data. Although translation itself has a number of implications which were thus avoided (Crane et al., 2009). This may however have resulted in sampling bias through the exclusion of those who did not have a conversational level of English. Also through focusing recruitment for the interviews at UKZN, interviewees predominantly educated to tertiary level were recruited.

Family and community perceptions were obtained from the FGDs and interviews rather than directly from families or members of the community. Although the respondents are also community members, ideally perceptions would have been collected from community members of differing ages and positions and also from parents. Unfortunately this was not possible within the timeframe of the study and is reflected in the analysis.

4.9 Reliability of Data

Due to the use of a non-probability sampling strategy and sample size it is not possible to use the data to make generalisations (Bryman, 2012). Nevertheless it can contribute to existing research and the broader picture of blesser relationships. Reliability is enhanced by using a mix of qualitative methods and key informants as a strategy of validation through triangulation of the study data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Previous research is also a source of comparison.

Audio-recording the FGDs and interviews decreased the probability of missing or losing any information. The limitations of more than one transcriber for the interviews must be considered as impacting the degree of reliability (Kvale, 1996).

5. Analysis

In this chapter the empirical data is analysed in relation to the theoretical framework presented in chapter three, organised around the three research questions. The societal perceptions of blesser relationships are examined in terms of peers, family and the community. Next follows an investigation into what motivates women to engage in these relationships and how societal perceptions influence this. The chapter ends with a focus on how and why women disregard such perceptions.

5.1 Societal Perceptions

Societal perceptions are dealt with firstly, with peer perceptions drawn directly from the FGDs and to a lesser extent from the individual interviews. Family and wider community perceptions are expressed indirectly by the FGDs and individual interviews.

5.1.1 Peer Perceptions

All FGD participants knew of someone who had had a blesser and their perceptions were formed based on what they had experienced directly with their peers, in their communities, and through social media. The overwhelming feeling towards blesser relationships was negative, with participants expressing general disapproval, numerous associated negative impacts and a concern for them to stop. Harmful consequences identified included EUP, physical and emotional abuse, having to become a different person, negative sexual health outcomes and breaking up families²¹. Beyond more tangible risks, the feeling in the FGDs was that these relationships manifest an imbalance of power.

Female blessees

Opinions about the women involved in relationships with blesser were rather negative and judgemental. The women were perceived as driven by a desire to achieve a certain lifestyle rather than necessity for basic needs, supported by Leclerc-Madlala (2003). Participant 6 (FGD 2) illustrated this when describing her friend's motivations: "*The one I know was for money and the clothes and...the nails and yeah, that's what she wanted*". However this attitude changed when discussing the motivation of blessees to 'upgrade' themselves,

²¹ All consequences were associated with the blessees apart from breaking up families which was related to the situation where a married blesser's involvement with a blessee leads to the breakdown of his marriage.

especially though getting their tuition fees paid by their blessers. When looking at positive long term goals rather than short term gains the perception was even complimentary:

Maybe pay tuition fees, or to complete your schooling...If you're one of the smart girls...you'll do that with the money...you know to upgrade yourself in life so that you'll be able to stand on your own two feet and not be always dependent on this guy to do things for you. (Participant 7, FGD 1)

Under these circumstances therefore the participants understood that blessees are striving to increase their portfolio of capital to improve their position not just economically but socially, and future gains of capital through qualifications.

Despite these motivations, respondents felt that blessees' aspirations to live a lifestyle beyond their means led them to enter blesser relationships rather than working to achieve it themselves. One participant even attributed this to an issue amongst young women in general: *"we're very ignorant, we don't wanna get informed but we want to have the money, we want to live the lifestyles that the people that...are on that level worked for"* (Participant 4, FGD 1). This apparent 'bad attitude' was also associated with blessees' involvement with married blessers, which one participant stated was driven by their lack of respect for other women.

Furthermore, respondents presented blessees at times as fully conscious of their actions, even calculating. This was illustrated when discussing the scenario of a women not receiving what she feels she deserves from her blesser, either accusing him of rape or in the case of a high profile blesser, exposing him on social media. Conversely, as Luke and Kurz (2002) found, an opposing narrative emerged, framing blessees as victims of circumstance. Though disapproving of their actions, participants empathised with them: *"I mean anyone can be tempted into that, anyone...[there's] gonna be a point when you're gonna be tempted into that way. Anyone can fall into it"* (Participant 1, FGD 1). Notably the male participants were less vocal in their criticism and portrayed the women as lacking agency due to gender inequalities, including decision-making in practising safe sex: *"there's things we [men] can take decisions on. They can't because they're more overpowered the female."* (Participant 2, FGD 2). It appears therefore that while the FGD participants separated themselves from blessees, they expressed conflicting perceptions, implying that they have similar habitus leading them to identify with blessees, but a distinct difference which has shaped their typically negative perceptions.

Male blessers

Whereas perceptions of blessees were mixed, those of male blessers were overwhelmingly negative. Participants regarded them as the driver behind blesser relationships for egocentric purposes, exploiting their money to attract women. Other motives included fulfilling sexual desires with little consideration of female pleasure and avoiding emotional attachment in a scenario where there are no rules. Among the female participants especially they felt that men are responsible for perpetuating women's expectations of material benefits from their partner and therefore the cycle of transactional relationships. Participant 5 (FGD 2) felt strongly about this in response to the male participants: *"do you see where this culture comes from? From them! They are teaching our younger sisters and our nieces that, please give me"*.

Power and control were recurrent themes not only in terms of men's motivations but also integral to the relationship dynamics. Use of money in particular to exert control over blessees was mentioned:

If you have someone you're blessing, and you'll be able to control them in whatever they do. 'I'm not gonna give you money because you don't wanna go here' ...and then they have to follow whatever you are saying in order to get what they want. (Participant 4, FGD 2)

Furthermore, the participants linked control to the common age disparity which blessers utilise to further exert control:

That's more of them practising masculinity over a younger person because they know that they are very vulnerable. Whereas in their age group, they probably would have someone that's gonna challenge their thoughts, challenge their power. (Participant 4, FGD 1)

Thobejane et al. (2017) also found this preference for younger women due to their interest in material items, whereas older women are more independent and financially secure and thus harder to control. It is apparent therefore that male blessers' actions are perceived as being influenced not only by their higher status from their greater possession of capital. Their age and gender result in a higher accumulation of capital over time and greater social and symbolic capital in South African patriarchal culture, which bestows on them a higher position and thus power which they use to their advantage. It is likely therefore that the

participants' habitus has formed such negative perceptions of males through their experience living in a male-dominated culture where gender inequalities and GBV prevail²².

Condom use was also regarded as a site of power disparity. Opinions varied as to whether blessers used condoms as there was recognition that some, especially married ones, would want to avoid unplanned pregnancies. However condom use was deemed as undesirable by blessers who use their economic capital as a bargaining tool to control the sexual dynamic:

If I tell you to use a condom and you tell me 'no, I don't like using condoms' and now I'm like 'then I'm not gonna have sex with you' and he's like 'I'm not gonna give you money'. So I think that they scared of not getting their salaries anymore.
(Participant 5, FGD 1)

Transactional Sex

A commonly held expectation was of transactional sex, without which these relationships would not fit the category of blesser relationships: *"I give you sex you give me money... 'cause if there's no sex he's not gonna give me money"* (Participant 1, FGD 1). The perception seems therefore that transactional sex is normative in blesser relationships and thus represents the doxa of such relationships. Interlinked was the perception of blesser relationships as a form of prostitution. Participants expressed a shared understanding of prostitution and made the connection with blesser relationships but in a more nuanced sense. For example, one participant described blesser relationships as *"indirect prostitution"* (Participant 6, FGD 2) implying that they did not classify them as prostitution in the conventional sense. Moreover, along with the expectation of sex was the perception of a fear of pregnancy by blessees whilst at the same time a disregard for STIs. Participants accorded this to a change in habitus where HIV is no longer considered a deadly virus to be afraid of, multiplied by a lack of knowledge from the family: *"this is what black parents teach also, that don't get pregnant. They don't tell you about STIs, STDs and all that"* (Participant 5, FGD 2).

²² Females have higher poverty rates than males with black African females experiencing the highest levels in South Africa (49.2% were living below the lower-bound poverty line (LBPL) in 2015) (STATS SA, 2017). GBV especially intimate partner violence is persistent and widespread, with one in four women being victims of it (NDoH, STATSA SA, SAMRC and ICF, 2019). Father absenteeism rates are also high, with 40.8% of children living with their mother only (Institute of Race Relations, 2018).

Peer influence

Peer influence was considered significant in women's involvement with blessers, ranging from peers not being against it, to actively encouraging it. In particular they saw it as widespread among students, a finding shared by Shefer et al. (2012). Hence the groups that women belonged to were anticipated to influence, typically encouraging, their association with blessers. Peer pressure in the form of a desire to 'fit in' was also cited as a major reason for women's motivation especially for those moving from less affluent areas:

Someone who'll be moving from Limpopo²³ and they would come here. The moment they come here, it's very hard, especially when you're a student and you're seeing people are having clothes and stuff and...where you come from...you don't have enough. (Participant 5, FGD 2)

The most common reason cited for peers' approval was if they would benefit from the relationship, for instance Interviewee 8 explained that *"every time if they [her friends] were with me, he give them money for transport such as 200 Rands"*. It seems therefore that peers' shared habitus was expected to result in acceptance of such relationships, encouraged by the desire to receive capital benefits but without the expectation of offering anything in exchange.

Social media

Social media was perceived as responsible for promoting positive images of blesser relationships, while hiding the potential negatives of such a lifestyle. It encourages women to seek the blessee lifestyle and offers the means of finding blessers and blessees. Participants identified Instagram as the main platform used by blessees for self-promotion and indirectly for attracting blessers and finding blessees, in addition to various Facebook groups. Participants also felt that everyday presence on social media was normalising these relationships. Participant 5 (FGD 2) asserted that their increasing popularity was due to *"its promotion on social media the way that we have accepted it and...has become normal...everybody wants to live a very nice life"*. Not only did participants highlight the importance placed on economic capital but also blessees seeking to gain symbolic capital through publicising their physical capital online.

²³ Limpopo is the northernmost province in South Africa and borders Gauteng. It is predominantly rural with the economy based on agriculture (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020c).

Despite recognising the power of social media, the participants felt that blessing relationships would occur regardless, as these relationships existed long before social media. They did however believe that social media has changed them in the current era, making them more popular and visible, widening their geographical reach. Social media was also seen as another source of peer influence and pressure, impacting on young people's aspirations and self-esteem and thus their habitus. However, as Participant 5's comment above highlights, the aspiration for a certain lifestyle was considered a universal and thus shared aspiration amongst all.

Wider impacts

Participants felt that blessing relationships had wider reaching impacts beyond those directly involved in them. They believed that transaction in relationships is ingrained from an early age, laying the foundation for blessing relationships and impacting on 'normal'²⁴ ones. The male respondents were aggrieved at prevailing norms that no money equalled no girlfriend and how that perpetuates the cycle of age-disparate relationships: *"it's frustrating at times, so you end up going either for older or for younger 'cause you can never go for someone your age"* (Participant 3, FGD 2). This may to some extent explain the mixed perceptions of blessing relationships, as FGD participants drew parallels with 'normal' relationships in terms of many of the disadvantages which exist. In FGD 2 there was debate over whether condoms were used even within non-blessing relationships and Participant 6 felt that,

Even whether it's a blessing relationship or a normal relationship, there's always the consequences, the disadvantages. Abuse happens either or and also, you can expect...maybe your husband to give you money and they don't.

A lack of positive role models, especially female ones to replace the negative peer influences was also seen as contributing to women's involvement, especially where women abandon their communities upon achieving success. They felt that this compounded the lack of open discussion of sex and relationships within the family and lack of awareness of the negatives through exposure only to glamorous images. However participants recognised the economic reality in South Africa and shared experiences of peer pressure, so empathised with the existence of these relationships whilst not appearing to condone them: *"we have a lot of*

²⁴ The distinction made between blessing relationships and those the participants considered as normal was the presence of love and not being motivated by material gains, as well as being a monogamous relationship between partners of similar ages.

graduates who are unemployed, so what's the use of going to school now when I can just get the money from someone who has it?" (Participant 6, FGD 2).

5.1.2 Family Perceptions

Family perceptions, in line with peers were also considered to be generally disapproving, whilst at times varying. The reactions from interviewees' parents in particular were anticipated to be negative. When asked whether her family was aware of her relationship, Interviewee 1 responded: *"my parents, hell no. Like my mother, no, like I'm just an innocent soul"*. Religion was expected to play a key role in families' perceptions, as one FGD participant explained, the more religious the family, the more extreme the reaction:

If it's a family and your father is a pastor or your mother is a pastor, they, it's going to become a problem...I think that's what pushes most of the time for the parents to disown you or to have a distance relationship with you. (Participant 5, FGD 2)

In general, the FGD participants felt families' reactions were contingent on whether or not they saw the blessee or even themselves benefitting from the relationship. Moreover, some individual interviewees felt that some family members, especially those of a similar age, were not as critical and maybe even held positive views. In one case, the approval of an interviewee's sister led her to enter into a blesser relationship herself. However on the whole, much as with peers, positive perceptions from interviewees' families confirmed the FGD view that approval was linked to benefits, as Interviewee 1 explained:

You know when you are in a circle of your friends and your cousins, they could see my shoes or any of my expensive bags, then they take them. They start liking him for the stuff that he buys for me that they can take for themselves.

Differing perspectives which appear to follow generational lines could be indicative of the hysteresis effect with differences in habitus between the generations, implying a shift in prevailing perceptions. This is illustrated whereby family of a similar age or generation are generally neutral or encouraging of blesser relationships, whereas the expectation of parental opinion is wholly negative. However, this is also linked to doxa of the family and the expectation of parents fulfilling a protective role and holding certain desires for their children, in combination with the influence of economic capital and the degree to which religion is present in their families' habitus.

5.1.3 Wider Community Perceptions

Power

The belief was expressed that men in positions of power abuse their status to manipulate and control women in blesser relationships, including politicians and police officers. The police were also seen as not protecting women if they were victims of abuse, instead victim-blaming and not offering them legal protection: *“Police especially wouldn’t care. I hear stories of girls who report physical abuse and then police would be like ‘you were aware when you dated him’”* (Interviewee 2). This goes against the expectation that the police should protect victims of crimes. Although in South Africa they are often criticised as corrupt and incompetent (Olutola and Bello, 2016), which raises the question of whether the doxa within the field of the police is in fact that of impunity and exploitation of power.

Social norms

Use of power is also evident within a culture of victim-blaming and established social norms. Much as peers indicated the impact of transaction in relationships upon them, the issue of society-wide gender roles of males as providers and the source of financial security, emerged. This expectation was expressed in both FGDs and the interviews as justification for blesser relationships and how they blur the line with ‘normal’ relationships. This supports Shefer et al.’s (2012) findings where students recognised the difficulty of distinguishing between the two. As Interviewee 7 was clear on her experience: *“it’s not something new. A man has to look after a woman. It’s something that we grew up being told and believing in that”*. The key informant interview also highlighted an indoctrination of gender roles from an early age playing a role in perpetuating blesser relationships.

Such norms and expectations including transactional sex were recognised as deeply-rooted within a historical context, reflecting South African society described by Morrell et al. (2012), as highly patriarchal with ingrained gender inequalities. Linked to the peers’ perception of male blesser was that men are using social norms and gender inequalities to exploit younger females. Thus the reality of changing these norms is a challenge: *“I think that started traditionally from way back. The thing of like lobola and what not. It makes the mindset of saying they can more or less have a demand”* (Participant 6, FGD 1).

Acceptance versus Blame

Contrasting views in the community were highlighted, with some FGD participants recognising the link between the normalisation of blesser relationships and communities becoming more tolerant, as Participant 5 (FGD 2) explained: *“it's something that has...become acceptable. People are like, ‘okay, this...the way that you have led your life so this is how you're going to live it so we accept it’”*. Conversely the opposing view was that of a judgemental community, blaming women for any consequences, as opposed to peers’ perceptions typically placing the blame on men. One participant related this in particular to involvement with married blesser, reaffirming the peer narrative of women as victims and a victim-blaming culture:

You are the one who will...take the consequences of the whole thing and yet you didn't start it. Yes you fell into the trap but you didn't go to the older guy... but at the end of the day the society will...crucify you as if you entered everything, as if you started the whole thing...you're left with scars, name-shaming. (Participant 1, FGD 1)

Disapproval and stigma were also confirmed in the individual interviews, including Interviewee 8 sharing a reaction she received when out with her blesser: *“guys working over there made comments about me being with him, like ‘this older guy, what is he doing with her?’”*.

5.2 Influence of Societal Perceptions on Blessees’ Motivations

In order to address how societal perceptions are influencing blessees, their motivations for engaging in blesser relationships are examined, followed by a discussion of how perceptions are influencing them.

addition, another benefit was meeting the blessees' basic needs, as one mentioned how her blesser provided both: *"he'd pay for my rent, he'd pay for my [university] registration, buy me groceries"* (interviewee 16). The goal-driven, ambitious nature of the interviewees and their use of blesser relationships to achieve their ambitions both materially and career-wise may be linked to their education and their belief in what is realistic for their lives; most had achieved post-secondary education, far above the South African average²⁵.

Several interviewees also mentioned being motivated to benefit others, especially to support their families or alleviate financial dependency on them. Although using money from blessers for their other 'normal' relationship was also mentioned. Therefore whilst the motivation was financial, it had a more altruistic purpose, and although often for immediate use, the interviewees with children were especially concerned for their children's futures. When Interviewee 4 discussed having a bank account with money from her blesser, she explained: *"this one is for my kids and I, it's for emergencies. Anything can happen. I don't want my kids to suffer. As I do this, I need to leave something behind for my kids, they will gain"*. This indicates a value on family present in their habitus and for the mothers, the desire to replicate a stable upbringing or avoid their own unstable childhood.

5.2.2 Influence of Perceptions

Seeking a lifestyle

The perception that women are seeking to live a certain lifestyle beyond their means or investing in their future applied to several interviewees. Some admitted to wanting material items they were unable to afford themselves and as Interviewee 13 admitted, she would not date someone of a similar socio-economic level to herself. However some were using the relationships to fund their studies and had aspirations of being independent in the future and as such did not see them as long term options: *"I am not really comfortable. I don't see myself with a blesser in two years' time because yes I must get a job obviously"* (Interviewee 6).

²⁵ Only 9% of females in South Africa have completed some education post-secondary and education levels are higher in urban as opposed to rural areas, where all interviewees lived (NDoH, STATS SA, SAMRC and ICF, 2019).

Disapproval

A number of interviewees admitted to keeping their relationship private, including lying in order to conceal it, due to anticipated disapproval from family or the community. This often meant not going out in public with their blesser or visiting places they may be recognised, such as Interviewee 7:

Here you go to The Pavilion²⁶ where you see your aunt or your mother's friend and whatnot so you can't really be going out doing things because you don't know if someone who knows you from back home is going to recognise you and go back and tell your family.

It seems therefore that although they are willingly involved in blesser relationships, at some level embedded in their habitus they perceive them as wrong both within the family and in wider society. However some interviewees were also in 'normal' relationships therefore their motivation for occulting the relationship was also to maintain it secret from their partner.

Interviewee 11 stated *"I have a daughter now and I don't want her [to] know that her mum was drawing money from such activities"*. This feeling of disapproval also included interviewees who were concerned about their children's opinions of them or did not wish to expose them in case they also entered that lifestyle, despite benefitting from the relationships. Interestingly this applied to mothers of both boys and girls, not wanting their daughters to follow in their footsteps, or their sons to become blesser. These interviewees therefore appear to be experiencing a conflict between providing for their children and their means of achieving it. They clearly ascribe to the doxa of the family that parents should provide the best life possible for their children which is influencing their practice. However their method of achieving this conflicts with their notion of what is acceptable. But as they recognise their own and their children's fathers' limitations, they have placed their children's needs above their own.

Choice of 'blessings'

Related to concealing the relationships was an influence on the types of 'blessings' interviewees received. They would not accept anything too expensive or travel with their blesser if it would raise the suspicions of their family or partner: *"he was buying me expensive gifts but not that will make my family suspicious...like he couldn't buy me an*

²⁶ The Pavilion is a shopping centre in Durban.

iPhone because they would ask 'how did you get the money to buy this?'' (Interviewee 7). This was also mentioned in connection to gifts over a certain cost triggering an expectation of sex or feelings of prostitution due to the incidence of unambiguous transactional sex. This therefore led interviewees to act strategically in terms of how they chose to be blessed.

Peer influence

The overriding responses from the interviews were how peers either had little influence or actively encouraged the interviewees' involvement in blesser relationships. This included witnessing the lifestyle of friends with blessers and succumbing to peer pressure from them or from friends who are benefiting from the relationships, and the desire to fit in with their peers. Interviewee 11 explained how this affected her:

The lifestyle my friend was living, the things she had. I also wanted to have that for myself...yes it was driven to have money at that time but also my friend influenced me. I must say that you have to be strong enough not to be influenced by those around you.

As the FGDs suggested, peers can play a significant role in influencing women's involvement in blesser relationships, despite the FGD participants expressing general disapproval. Peer pressure was also a significant factor highlighted in the key informant interview, with girls typically responsible for recruiting younger girls into blesser relationships. Approval could therefore depend on the specific peer group or, as the BMR UNISA (2018) study found, while expressing disapproval there was admission of being tempted by 'the right price'. This could be indicative of a shift in peers' habitus to greater acceptance, suggesting development of the hysteresis effect between generations' perceptions. Contrarily however one interviewee attributed her friend's positive influence on her to ending her blesser relationships. Thus peer influence has the potential to work in both directions.

Social norms

Several interviewees expressed conscious and subconscious conformity to prevailing social norms in influencing their motivations, and none expressed a desire to change such norms. As primary habitus is formed in part by enduring characteristics including gender and parents' habitus, and gender norms are established from an early age, it is unsurprising that the interviewees conform to normative behaviour in a patriarchal society. This manifested in

opposing experiences, from either growing up in an unstable environment such as an absent father and seeking a male provider, or in the case of Interviewee 13, aspirations to recreate her upbringing with her father as provider and source of stability: *“I want someone who’s like my dad...my dad had money for days, so he always provided everything for me”*.

5.3 Disregard of Societal Perceptions by Blessees

Despite the influence that societal perceptions have on blessees’ engagement in blesser relationships, they are simultaneously disregarding these perceptions, leading now to an examination of how and why this is occurring.

5.3.1 How and Why Perceptions are Disregarded

Continuing blesser relationships

A number of reasons were cited as to why interviewees had ended previous blesser relationships, however perceptions of them personally or of blesser relationships were not evident. It seems that although they were aware of negative perceptions, this did not influence them to the point of ending their involvement. The reasons varied, including not seeing a future together, feeling exploited and not receiving the ‘blessings’ they wanted or expected. Most commonly however the main impact resulted from a change in self-perception, attitude or priorities:

I am in a stable relationship and now have a daughter. I have completed my graduation and planning to go back to school, advance my studies, and work hard and to go further in life instead of going back where I was. (Interviewee 11)

Negative perceptions however influenced how interviewees conducted their relationships. This included concealing the relationship and not being seen in public, not only due to disapproval but also out of embarrassment especially due to the age disparity. Interviewee 5 described justifying her gifts to her family: *“I’m a very intelligent person so I’d tell them, scholarship money”*. However occulting their relationships from their partners was linked more to continuing multiple relationships. They appeared to assume their partner would disapprove of the blesser relationship, leading to the breakdown of their ‘normal’ relationship. Although it is presupposed that this relates to their partners’ values regarding multiple partners, rather than disapproval of blesser relationships per se.

Expectation of transactional sex

Shefer et al. (2012) found an expectation among students that if men provided material benefits to a woman she would offer sexual favours in return. Hence the doxa of blessing relationships including transactional sex seems common knowledge and despite this appeared to have little impact on the interviewees for various reasons. Some interviewees entered blessing relationships despite full knowledge of the expectations, as the receipt of 'blessings' outweighed this aspect of the relationship: *"obviously sometimes you are required to do sex but then obviously you have to convince him for a lot of money"* (Interviewee 6). Other women did not recognise that they were entering a blessing relationship initially and therefore were not influenced by perceptions surrounding them. Alternatively, others' experiences did not reflect the perceptions. Some reported to not having sex at all with their blessing, waiting some time or not feeling an expectation. However at times this behaviour was a strategy to avoid sex: *"He used to say to me 'let's go to a hotel' and I replied, 'no I have to go home and babysit my cousin's child'"* (Interviewee 12).

Yet most interviewees accepted that sex was the blessing's ultimate goal and it was inevitable, so refusing it would lead to the blessing seeking it elsewhere. Hence reflecting transactional sex's place within the logic of practice of the field of blessing relationships. For interviewees whose habitus did not align with such expectations, it resulted in them leaving the field of blessing relationships. Thus changing such embedded norms appears unlikely as blessings will always find a woman who will accept the arrangement of transactional sex.

STIS and pregnancy

Several interviewees expressed concern for their sexual health and awareness of the risks from STIs, especially HIV. This undermines the perception that they are only focused on preventing pregnancy, or that they reflect the increasingly blasé attitude towards HIV. This had varying outcomes in the women's practices, such as taking measures to protect their sexual health, even insisting; having the knowledge but not taking any precautions; or lacking the knowledge on how to protect themselves. Most interviewees however reported using contraception against pregnancy and STIs with varying degrees of willingness from their blessing. Interviewee 14's experience was generally positive: *"before it happened, so I was like 'dude, we have to protect'. He was actually cool about it"*. The key informants found in their research however that condoms were not being used at all in blessing relationships. As

their respondents were high school girls, this contrast indicates the likelihood of a difference in agency due to age and greater vulnerability of adolescent girls.

Power

Related to safe sex was the perception that blessers exert their power to control blessees, including not practising safe sex. However, the interviewees appeared to disregard this perception, as most were aware of it and either practised safe sex regardless or accepted their blesser would control the relationship, usually through manipulation or in exchange for money. As we have seen also, for varying reasons, several of the interviewees' blesser were also concerned about condom use. Also despite some interviewees confirming the idea that blesser are egocentric seeking emotionless relationships, others reported that they were treated well or feelings were involved from either or both sides. Interviewee 10 explained how her feelings influenced her pursuit of material benefits:

With XXX since he wants me to commit to him and I don't want to yet so I don't ask him for more money but with other two I don't care as such about them because there are no feelings attached so I can ask them whatever I want.

Therefore, if interviewees' experiences contradicted the negative perceptions, they disregarded these perceptions. But each interviewee's experience was distinct, making generalisations between them unfeasible, indicating a more nuanced reality of the doxa of blesser relationships.

With regards to abuse of power and potential for the occurrence of GBV, although some interviewees indicated involvement with high-profile blesser, none reported being the victim of abuse or involvement with police officers. Some interviewees showed an awareness of abuse in blesser relationships but it did not appear to affect their own relationships. The 'level' of blesser which the interviewees were involved with were wealthier than police officers. Therefore the responses could be different if sampling women with blesser at the level of police officers.

Prostitution

The perception of blesser relationships as a form of prostitution was largely disregarded by the interviewees as they did not self-identify as prostitutes. Supported by Luke (2003), this seems a prevailing feature. Interviewees distanced themselves from the socially unacceptable practice of prostitution through their definition of it and construction of their relationship. As

with the FGDs there was the concept of a traditional form of prostitution which interviewees used to distinguish their relationships from, as Interviewee 11 expressed: *“prostitute knows she is a prostitute. She stands on the street. In this relationship both boy and girl are in agreement for a certain amount of money. In prostitution money is not fixed”*. Upon closer analysis however, some interviewees who were no longer involved in blesser relationships admitted that they are a form of prostitution, implying that blessees share the same perception as their peers and society, but due to the taboo of prostitution they do not acknowledge it: *“I come to you, you pay me. It’s like, silently, people don’t want to admit that I’m getting paid for sex”* (Interviewee 9). What is unclear is whether there is a change in habitus when women end their involvement or it remains the same and they consciously or subconsciously disassociate themselves from their actions.

Social media

Self-promotion via social media was identified as a motivation by the interviewees for many blessees and as such, the desire for symbolic capital linked to peer perceptions and gaining status amongst their peers: *“trust me, they wanna be known, they want you to see them that I’m living this. Even on Instagram, they wanna be seen that I am a blessee”* (Interviewee 2). However no interviewees admitted to aspiring to such exposure as most expressed the need to maintain their relationships secret. Also all of the interviewees described alternative methods of meeting blesser which did not include social media. Though for some this was how they learned about the concept or how to attract a blesser.

5.3.2 Variations in Influence

The effect of some perceptions varied between the interviewees, impacting some and not others, making it impossible to identify a pattern. With regards to multiple partners and infidelity, some of the interviewees had partners who were unaware of their blesser relationships and married blesser were common. Conversely, other women expressed unwillingness to have multiple partners or date a married blesser, as Interviewee 15 explained: *“I found that he was not separated from his wife so actually that was a cause of concern. We spoke about it and I didn’t see it going forward”*. This therefore influenced their interest in these relationships as they ascribed to the doxa of relationships which presupposes monogamy. Other interviewees did not share this belief, however blessees in concurrent relationships without the knowledge of their partners, indicated they were aware of the expectation of faithfulness but chose the benefits of the relationships instead. Alternatively

they did not equate this to cheating and were not troubled by having a partner who was unaware of their other relationship.

6. Conclusions

Young black African women in South Africa are disproportionately affected by negative SRH outcomes, in particular HIV, and their involvement in blesser relationships is cited as one cause. To contribute to a greater understanding of the phenomenon of blesser relationships, this thesis has drawn on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to frame an examination of how blesser relationships are perceived within urban South African society, and to what extent these perceptions are impacting women's involvement in these relationships.

On the surface societal perceptions are largely negative with families believed to hold the most extreme views. Community-wide condemnation is considered commonplace although is perceived to be slowly changing, indicative of changing habitus. However on closer analysis dichotomies emerge in support of Luke and Kurz's (2002) findings of the differing victim versus agency portrayals. Peer perceptions fluctuate and there is acknowledgement that peers can encourage a woman's involvement with a blesser, depending on her peer group. Family perceptions are also more intricate, with a family's reaction anticipated to typically depend on whether they see benefits (usually financial) of the relationship. This implies either differing habitus or a decision to prioritise financial benefits over any perceived disadvantages. The issue of power however permeates the perceptions as a critique of men abusing their positions of power and embodied in power disparities between blesser and blessee. Such disparities are attributed to age, socio-economic status and gender, with their roots in ingrained social and gender norms.

Motivations for women to become involved in blesser relationships exhibit a clear link to economic capital for immediate gratification, at the same time reflecting longer term planning. This supports previous studies on transactional relationships which highlight consumption-based motivations, although undermines the assumption by earlier research (see Luke, 2003) that only certain groups of women are typically involved in transactional relationships. These relationships are becoming commonplace especially amongst tertiary-level students.

These motivations are clearly influenced by societal perceptions and blessees adapt their behaviour as such, underlined by their consumption-driven aspirations and ascription to prevailing norms. The opinions and reactions by others play significantly on their motivations, with peers exerting typically negative influence, and family disapproval in

particular leading women to occult their relationships. Where shared habitus, whether with peers or family, influences these women's motivations, they exhibit concurrently a disregard for any such societal perceptions in shaping their actions. Ultimately, regardless of how blesser relationships are perceived, this does not deter involvement in them, including any of the associated risks to sexual, physical or mental health. In part this is explained by the perceptions not aligning with the women's lived experiences, therefore enabling them to disregard perceptions such as self-promotion through social media, as this was not their motivation. Most significant is the distinction between women still involved with blesser and those who have left that lifestyle, and the degree of self-reflection which they exhibit. It requires further investigation whether this can be attributed to a change in habitus.

Although certain trends can be identified, there are cases where the degree of impact of societal perceptions varies along with the rationales for behaviour. The intersecting identities and motivations of women involved in blesser relationships must be recognised, situated within their individual circumstances alongside the wider context, in acknowledgement of the multifaceted influences affecting these women. The linkages between these relationships and SRH is one area where variations are apparent and many women testify to having agency to protect their SRH. This contradicts much of the research on age-disparate relationships where condom-less sex is reported more often, suggesting a need to consider factors such as age and education.

Until now the focus has been on the SRHR implications of blesser relationships and public health campaigns focusing on HIV prevention and practising safe sex. This research has highlighted a lack of open discussion surrounding sex and relationships. Breaking down the barriers to this and informing and educating young people on healthy relationships would enable them to make informed decisions. Sexuality education has been on the South African school curriculum since 1996 (Govender et al., 2019). However it must be in the form of effectively delivered comprehensive sexuality education in order to contribute to creating a culture where issues of SRHR can be openly discussed both at school and in the home. Undoubtedly this must occur within an improved economic situation, striving towards gender equality and combating harmful social norms reflecting the synergies between the SDGs and their interconnected nature.

This thesis has touched upon the complexities of blesser relationships and how women's choices to enter them are shaped by varying influences. As this topic is a recent phenomenon

despite the long existence of age-disparate and transactional relationships, it has received limited attention in its current incarnation and therefore offers up numerous possibilities for further research. Several topics emerged which warrant further examination such as female blessers or male blessers who have sex with men, in light of black African males experiencing the highest HIV prevalence among males (HSRC, 2018). The mental health impact on women was revealed as a significant consequence and calls for further investigation. The wider societal implications such as the effect these relationships are having on young men could enrich the context within which blesser relationships are occurring. Further studies can explore the impact on young men including being in a relationship with a blessee as the 'non-blesser' boyfriend, and their inability to find similar-aged partners and its contribution to them entering age-disparate relationships.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Focus Group Discussion 1 Pilot Interview Guide

1. What can you tell me about blesser-blessee relationships in South Africa as someone relatively new to the country? Specifically in this area?
2. Is it something new / recent?
3. Is there a 'typical' blesser/blessee?
4. How would you describe a typical blesser / blessee? (age / marital status / ethnicity / nationality /place of residence)
5. Is it always a younger woman with an older man or is it ever the other way around? Why do you think it is/isn't?
6. What is a relationship usually like with a blesser? (long/short term / amount of time spent together / exclusive or open)
7. How common do you think it is?
8. Why do you think women want to have a blesser? If you have to choose one reason, what would it be?
9. Why do you think men want to be blesser? If you have to choose one reason, what would it be?
10. How do people typically find themselves a blesser / blessee?
11. What are the advantages for blesser / blessees?
12. What are the disadvantages / negatives for blesser / blessees?
13. What do you think women can do to protect themselves from the negatives of these relationships?
14. What image do you think women who have blesser have amongst their friends / family?
15. What role does social media play in this phenomenon?
16. Does it exist because of social media or would it still happen if social media didn't exist?
17. How does social media portray blesser / blessees and what image does it give of these types of relationships?
18. Do you know anyone who has had previously or currently has a blesser?
19. If yes – why do you think she got one? What was he like? How did he treat her/what did he give her?
20. What do you think will happen in the future? Do you think this will continue to as it is / become more/less popular?
21. Should anything be done to reduce these kinds of relationships? Why/why not?
22. What do you think would need to happen/change to reduce women's motivations for having a blesser?

Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion 2 Amended Interview Guide

1. What can you tell me about blesser-blessee relationships in South Africa as someone relatively new to the country? Specifically in this area?
2. Is it something new / recent?
3. How common do you think it is?
4. Is there a 'typical' blesser/blessee?
5. How would you describe a typical blesser / blessee? (age / marital status / ethnicity / nationality /place of residence)
6. Is it always a younger woman with an older man or is it ever the other way around? Why do you think it is/isn't?
7. What is a relationship usually like with a blesser? (long/short term / amount of time spent together / exclusive or open)
8. Why do you think women want to have a blesser? If you have to choose one reason, what would it be?
9. Why do you think men want to be blessers? If you have to choose one reason, what would it be?
10. How do people typically find themselves a blesser / blessee?
11. What are the advantages for blessers / blessees?
12. What are the disadvantages / negatives for blessers / blessees?
13. What do you think women can do to protect themselves from the negatives of these relationships?
14. Is contraception being used in these relationships?
15. What image do you think women who have blessers have amongst their friends / family?
16. Is it seen as a form of prostitution?
17. What happens if a woman has sex with a blesser and he doesn't 'bless' her?
18. What role does social media play in this phenomenon?
19. Does it exist because of social media or would it still happen if social media didn't exist?
20. How does social media portray blessers / blessees and what image does it give of these types of relationships?
21. Do you know anyone who has had previously or currently has a blesser?
22. If yes – why do you think she got one? What was he like? How did he treat her/what did he give her?
23. What do you think will happen in the future? Do you think this will continue to as it is / become more/less popular?
24. Should anything be done to reduce these kinds of relationships? Why/why not?
25. What do you think would need to happen/change to reduce women's motivations for having a blesser?

Appendix 3: Interview Guide for In-Depth Individual Interviews

“Being blessed”: An in-depth interview guide on questions around the motivations of women engaging in transactional relationships in Durban

Hello, my name is [NAME OF INTERVIEWER]. I am an interviewer on the practice that has become known as ‘blessing’ in South Africa. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. If it is okay with you, the interview will be voice-recorded. This interview is informal and conversational. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. I am interested your thoughts, feelings, and experiences in your own words. Everything we talk about will be kept strictly confidential. We will not mention your name on the tape and it is not written anywhere on my form. You can stop the interview at any time and you may skip questions if you do not want to answer them. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Question Guide: 5 June 2017

| Primary questions | Follow up questions (probes/prompts) |
|---|--|
| 1. Tell me about yourself | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Education • Current occupation/what are you studying • Current Relationship Status |
| 2. Who introduced you to the concept of a Blesser and what were your initial expectations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you know anyone who was in a blessed relationship • Did you make a decision to look or be open to being a blessee • Describe what it means to be blessed • What’s the difference between a Blesser and a boyfriend? |
| 3. Why do you need or want to be in a ‘blessed’ relationship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your current expenses • Where do you get money from • What things/experiences would you like to have • What motivates you to be in such a relationship or look for a Blesser |
| 4. What do you look for in a Blesser? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you determine someone’s ability to give you what you are looking for? • What concerns you about potential Blessers i.e. what do you watch out for? |
| 5. What does a Blesser look for in a woman? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do Blessers want from this sort of relationship? • Do they have age preferences? • Sexual Willingness • Availability • Someone to be seen in public? |
| 6. What has been your experience of being a blessee? Describe each relationship? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did you meet? • How long did the relationship last? • What prompted you to leave your Blesser (if applicable) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you receive from the Blesser? • Feelings towards the Blesser? • In what ways is he in your everyday life? • What activities do/did you do with the blesser • How often do/did you speak and meet the blesser (Daily, weekly etc) • If currently with a Blesser: what does the future hold? What are you future expectations. • Are you open to a Blesser who could provide more – and what more are you looking for? |
| 7. How did you negotiate expectations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you specific in what you want/expect • What have you received to date, how often and what is the estimated value of the material goods received to date • What does the Blesser want in return • How is sex negotiated |
| 8. Describe the ‘Blessers’ you have been in a relationship with? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Job/income if known • Married • Other partners • Feelings towards you? |
| 9. How are Blessers rated? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it based on how wealthy they are or on what they are willing to give to women? • What are the levels of blessers? |
| 10. Where are you usually meeting blessers? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel safe meeting and being intimate with somebody new? |
| 11. Who knows you have a Blesser and how have they reacted to you having relationships with Blessers? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe: family, friends, community, school environment • Are they aware? • Do you talk about it with them? • Are they encouraging or discouraging your relationship(s) with Blessers? • (If applicable) Does your boyfriend know? If not, how do you keep the relationship a secret? • (If applicable) Does your Blesser’s wife/partner know of your relationship? How does he keep it a secret |
| 12. How do you feel about having a Blesser | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the relationship(s) impacted on how you see yourself? • How does having a blesser impact on a woman’s freedom? (talk about #moralitymustfall versus talk #antiblessers, i.e. is being blessed form of emancipation) • Do you feel you are cheating on your boyfriend (if applicable)? • How is this relationship different from prostitution? |
| 13. Describe any negative experiences that come to mind. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some of the issues which emerge in the relationship |
| Questions regarding sexual risk | |

| | |
|--|--|
| 14. Do you have other sexual partners? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are they different from your Blesser (exchanges, feelings)? |
| 15. Where do you usually engage in intercourse with the Blesser? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your household? In his? In a hotel or elsewhere? |
| 16. Are those encounters often accompanied by alcohol or other drugs? | |
| 17. How do you react if your partner asks you to engage in sexual acts you do not want to engage in? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you been in a situation where that became difficult to get out of? |
| 18. How do you feel about proposing condom use? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you use condoms? • Have you suggested condom use to a partner before? • How have partners reacted when you proposed condom use? |

This is the end of the interview. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing all this with me. Most of the questions were quite personal and I appreciate you taking part in this research project that will help us understand the decision making of women like yourself better. Do you have any questions at this stage?

Appendix 4: Advert to Recruit Individual Interview Respondents at UKZN

HEARD seeking study participants

HEARD are looking for UKZN female students who have been or who are in a relationship with a ‘Blesser’ to participate in a qualitative research study

HEARD is undertaking research exploring the nuances that render the relationships between a ‘blesser’ and ‘blessee’ as an indicator of social shifts within South African society and the social meanings and aspirations attached to the recently conceptualised, controversial and often times misunderstood phenomenon. In so doing, the following broader four open-ended research questions will be explored using in-depth interviews with willing participants:

1. What is the nature, extent and distinctive characteristics of a ‘blesser’ and ‘blessee’ relationship?
2. What are the aspirations and motivations for young women to enter into these relationships?
3. What are women’s experiences of the ‘blesser relationship’ (actual) and how do women perceive and enact agency in such relationships?
4. What are the familial and social expectations concerning ‘blesser relationships’ that foster or discourage the arrangement?

HEARD are therefore looking to recruit female students who have had or who are currently involved in a relationship with a ‘Blesser’.

Study Details:

- This research study has been granted ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSS/1745/016). Should you wish to contact them their contact details are: 031 260 4769 or 031 260 3587.
- The research study is being conducted by researchers from the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- We would like you to participate in a one-on-one interview with a researcher from HEARD, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal or an alternative suitable venue.
- The interview will take roughly 60 minutes in duration and will be conducted at an agreed upon venue. The researcher will ask your permission for the interview to be recorded with an audio recorder.
- If you participate in the study, you will be allowed to participate on an anonymous basis. This means you will not give us your name or any identifying details. We will not share any information you provide us to any third party. The research reports and publications from this study will not reveal any identifying characteristics of those who participated in the study, as, again, we will not collect identifiers such as your name. The recordings from the interviews will be stored in a secure location and only the study researchers will access them.

Female students interested in participating in this study or who have any questions or queries about the study should please contact the researcher, Dr Gavin George on 031-260 1476 (office), 083 331 3070 (cell/whatsapp) or email: georgeg@ukzn.ac.za

Appendix 5: Key Informant Interview Guide

1. Please tell me about your research
 - a. How come you came to collaborate together?
 - b. Why did you choose this topic?
 - c. How did you choose the research location of Tembisa?
 - d. How did the partnership with the local organisation come about?
 - e. How did you secure access to the respondents?
 - f. What were the main characteristics of the relationships? Did you look at whether they were longer term ones or short term / multiple partners more common?
 - g. Did you explore how these girls found blessers? Apart from at clubs were any other ways/places mentioned? Where/how?
 - h. What was the reason to conduct the interviews in local languages rather than English? What influence on the responses do you think it had?
2. I have had a lot of challenges accessing respondents. Do you have any insights as to why and suggestions on how I could have either in-country or online?
3. What was your biggest challenge?
4. Was there anything that you found from the research that surprised you or you didn't know/expect going into the interviews?
5. What do you think would need to happen/change to reduce girls/women's motivations for having a blesser and conversely men's motivations to become blessers?
6. Did any of the girls express an interest in wanting to end their involvement in these types of relationships?
7. What gaps do you think there are within the research around this topic or potential further areas of research?
8. Did you find any particular publications such as journal articles, reports etc or data which you would particularly recommend I access or that you can share with me?

Appendix 6: Focus Group Discussion Respondents' Demographic Information

| Participant | Age | Sex | Highest Level of Education | Currently in Education / Employment |
|---------------------------------|-----|--------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Focus Group Discussion 1 | | | | |
| 1 | 24 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 2 | 24 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 3 | 22 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 4 | 22 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 5 | 26 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 6 | 24 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 7 | 20 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | Yes |
| 8 | 24 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 9 | 24 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| Focus Group Discussion 2 | | | | |
| 1 | 22 | Female | National Certificate in Public Management (post-secondary) | No |
| 2 | 20 | Male | Grade 12 Matric | Yes |
| 3 | 21 | Male | Grade 12 Matric | No |
| 4 | 23 | Female | National Certificate in Public Management (post-secondary) | No |
| 5 | 23 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | Yes |
| 6 | 21 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | Yes |
| 7 | 20 | Male | Grade 12 Matric | Yes |
| 8 | 23 | Female | Diploma in Education | Yes |
| 9 | 21 | Female | Grade 12 Matric | Yes |

Appendix 7: Individual Interviewees' Demographic Information

| Interviewee | Age | Highest Level of Education | Currently in Education / Employment | Marital Status | Number of Children |
|-------------|-----|--|--|--|----------------------|
| 1 | 25 | Undergraduate degree | Employment – works at the municipality | Long distance relationship | None |
| 2 | 22 | Matric (dropped out of university due to financial reasons following parents' divorce) | Employment – retail | Relationship | 1 |
| 3 | 49 | Matric | Employment – consultant | Single | 2 and one grandchild |
| 4 | 35 | Undergraduate | Employment | Married | 3 |
| 5 | 28 | Undergraduate | Yes – postgraduate degree | Relationship | None |
| 6 | 27 | Undergraduate | Yes – Master's | Relationship | None |
| 7 | 30 | Undergraduate | Yes – Master's | Single | None |
| 8 | 23 | Matric | Yes – undergraduate | Unclear | 1 |
| 9 | 28 | Unclear | Yes | Relationship | None |
| 10 | 24 | Matric | Yes – undergraduate / works part time | Single | None |
| 11 | 21 | Graduate diploma | No | Unclear – states both single and in a relationship | 1 |
| 12 | 23 | Undergraduate | Yes – Master's | Relationship | None |
| 13 | 24 | Matric | Yes – undergraduate / works as a teacher | Single | 2 |
| 14 | 22 | Graduate diploma | Employment – admin and operations | Single | None |
| 15 | 23 | Graduate diploma | Employment – admin and operations | Relationship | None |
| 16 | 24 | Matric | Yes - undergraduate | Relationship | None |

Appendix 8: Focus Group Discussion Partner Organisation Release Form

Organisation Release Form

Focus Group Discussion with Young People (18 – 24 years)

UNFPA would like to thank [Organisation Name] for inviting us to share in their programming and shared vision for adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights.

By signing this release form, I hereby grant UNFPA the right to use the data generated from the group discussion regarding inter-generational transactional relationships and UNFPA and [Organisation Name] agree to share said data.

Print name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Organisation _____

Appendix 9: Focus Group Discussion Participant Consent Form

Informed Consent

Focus Group Discussion with Young People (18 – 24 years)

Please take your time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please ask.

Your signature on this consent form means:

- I have volunteered to participate in a research project about my views on blessing relationships led by Jo Palfreman
- I have been given the chance to ask questions before I sign
- I have been assured that my identity will remain confidential
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw my participation in this study at any time without giving any reason
- I have agreed to have our discussions recorded for the purposes of record keeping and analysis

Print name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Age _____

Thank you very much for your participation!

Appendix 10: In-depth Individual Interviews Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Research Project: Implications of a ‘blessed’ relationship

1. **Study purpose** We are asking you to take part in this research study to help us understand, from your perspective, the concept of a ‘blessed relationship’ and specifically the perceived roles of the ‘blesser’ and ‘blessee’.
2. **Ethics approval granted** This research study has been granted ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Should you wish to contact them their contact details are: 031 260 4769 or 031 260 3587.
3. **This is a UKZN study** The research study is being conducted by researchers from the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
4. **We would like to interview you:** We would like you to participate in a one-on-one interview with a researcher from HEARD, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
5. **Interview duration, location and compensation** The interview will take roughly 60 minutes in duration and will be conducted at an agreed upon venue. The researcher will ask your permission for the interview to be recorded with an audio recorder. At the completion of the interview, you will be given a DISCHEM voucher to the value of R100 to compensate for your time.
6. **The study is minimal risk** If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to share your views and experiences on several topics including your views and experiences of being in a relationship or seeking a relationship with a ‘blesser’. The interview will cover sensitive topics such as sexual behaviour, contraception, monetary and gift exchange, STIs and HIV/AIDS. You will not be forced to share any sensitive information you do not want to reveal.
7. **Your participation is voluntary** Participation in the interview is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any stage. You can also decide not to answer certain questions that might make you feel uncomfortable. You will not be disadvantaged or penalised should you not want to participate in the study.
8. **There are no direct benefits of participating in the study** Your participation in the study will help us to understand concept of a ‘blessed relationship’ and specifically the perceived roles of the ‘blesser’ and ‘blessee’. The study also intends to identify any risky behaviour associated with these relationships with the expectation to inform sexual risk prevention efforts to assist young women in HIV prevention, not only in South Africa, but in Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly.
9. **Your name will remain anonymous** If you participate in the study, you will be allowed to participate on an anonymous basis. This means you will not give us your name or any identifying details. We will not share any information you provide us to any third party. The research reports and publications from this study will not reveal any identifying characteristics of those who participated in the study, as, again, we will not collect identifiers such as your name. The recordings from the interviews will be stored in a secure location and only the study researchers will be allowed access to them.

10. **Questions can be directed to Dr George** Should you have any questions or queries about the study please feel free to contact the researcher, Dr Gavin George, **031-260 1476** or email: **georgeg@ukzn.ac.za**.
11. **Informed consent means agreement to participate and to be interviewed** Signing your name on the following page means you agree to participate in this study, anonymously, in keeping with the conditions specified below.

| Please indicate whether the following may be used during the interview for the purpose of data collection | YES | NO |
|---|-----|----|
| Audio-recorder | | |

Participant Informed Consent Form

I give my consent to participate in the study described above. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, that my identity will not be reported in any publications or reports and that I can withdraw from the study at any time. If I have any questions after today I can call **Dr. Gavin George (031-260 1476)**. Please write 'I agree to participate' on the line below to give your consent to participate in the study.

Participant's anonymous consent

Date

Appendix 11: In-Depth Individual Interviews Ethical Clearance



11 April 2017

Dr Gavin George 1081723
Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD)
Westville Campus

Dear Dr George

Protocol reference number: HSS/1745/016
Project title: 'Being blessed': Evaluating the meaning and motivations of women who aspire to or who have engaged in relationships with a 'blessor'.

Full Approval – Committee Reviewed Protocol

With regards to your response to queries received 05 April 2017 to our letter of 22 December 2016, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the above mentioned application and the protocol has been granted Full Approval.

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project; Location of the Study, Research Approach/Methods must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully


.....
Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/px

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

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Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville