Author's response to reviews

Title: Masculinities and condom use patterns among young rural South African men: a cross-sectional baseline survey

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Author's response to reviews: see over
The Editor,

BMC Public Health

Re: Requesting to publish and conflict of interest statement

Dear Editor,

We thank you for the feedback from the reviewers. As you will note, we have attempted to address all their concerns and taken their suggestions into cognisance as best we could. We understand that there were a number of queries pertaining to the terminology used in the article as well as some typographic errors. We trust that the version that we are re-submitting will be a substantial improvement of the previous work. Kindly note the following responses:

Reviewer 1:

We appreciate the comments expressed here and have noted the following areas of concern or clarification:

Reviewer’s comment: The use of Connell’s concept masculinity is appropriate, but this concept also has many documented limitations, which are not explored here. One is that the concept is usually used to refer to negative or destructive behaviours, but some aspects of hegemonic masculinity may also have ‘positive’ effects. For example, assertiveness may be positive or negative in different contexts. I think the discussion section should try to engage more with the concept of hegemonic masculinity while taking care not to assume it is necessarily associated with negative or destructive activities.

Authors’ response: We noted the concern above and ensured that we revised the paragraph (Page 7) by drawing on Connell’s assertions that while hegemonic masculinity can be expressed in negative light through use of force and even violence, this is not always a common manner of expression of male ascendancy in many settings, thus implying that hegemonic masculinities possesses some constructive elements, which should be pointed out. However, we trust that the paper will be viewed from the perspective that in the current era of a high HIV prevalence in South Africa, there may be some destructive elements of hegemonic masculinity that need to be addressed, and we propose that, inconsistent condom use is an important negative element, due to increase of young men’s HIV risk.
Reviewer’s comment: ‘Conservative’ beliefs are referred to throughout but it is not clear how conservative is defined here. For example, conservative may have a political meaning or be defined in social terms. I might think of someone who has conservative beliefs as someone who attends church regularly, but that may not be true of the cohort examined in the paper. In some contexts, conservative beliefs are associated with groups which have power, but the groups involved in this study would not appear to fit with this stereotype. As such, how are ‘conservative’ beliefs and/or practices to be explained? The concept needs to be better defined, given its significance in terms of the findings.

Authors’ response: examples of conservative beliefs have been provided in page 6 as it proved difficult to provide a proper definition in the body of the paper. We trust that this is satisfactory and also helps to provide clarify to readers at large.

Reviewer’s comment: The ethnicity of the study population is not discussed in detail, but I presume they are ‘black’ South Africans who are relatively marginalised in terms of employment etc. How, then, might this relate to the masculinity being played out? Some mention of how ethnicity, class and, even, rurality plays out with masculinity would strengthen the arguments here.

Authors’ response: we also took these comments into account and made additions to reflect the participants’ context including their socioeconomic background. However, we also would like to caution that this was a group that was mainly school-going, so we felt that it was not possible to emphasise the level of marginalisation of these young men as such. Looking at the range of the age distribution, a majority of the participants were less than 20 years and there are very few participants above that age. We hope that our edits here are acceptable.

Reviewer 2:

Reviewer’s comment:
1. The paper requires some language editing. There are a number of instances where the tense of the paper changes and sentences that don’t completely make sense. I have specifically indicated the worst of these but the entire paper should be checked for these issues. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: attention has been paid to the use of language and tenses, we hope that it reads much better than it was before. We also apologise for the mistakes in the previous manuscript.

Reviewer’s comment:
Abstract:
2. Opening sentence is very long and should be revised to make for easier reading. There are a couple of instances of change tense in the abstract and some strange word choice that should be revised. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this has been taken into account and we edited the first line of the abstract to attempt an improved and concise statement.

Reviewer’s comment:
Background:
3. A lot of literature is presented in the Background section but this is not really compared to the study findings later in the Discussion section. I would suggest reducing the length of the Background and moving much of the discussion of literature to the Discussion where it could be used to make more substantive comments. There are later comments made in the conclusion section that should also be taken into account when improving the discussion section. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: the connections between some of the literature discussed in the introduction and the discussion. However, we have retained some of the examples of the ecological model as we make reference to how it applies in condom use as well. We hope this is satisfactory.

Reviewer’s comment:
4. Page 6, para 1, line 5-6: the sentence “. . . and the association of trust with suggested condom use significantly distinguishes any condom use from no condom use.” It is unclear what the authors are attempting to say here. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this was deleted to take into account the point the reviewer made in the previous comment.

Reviewer’s comment:
5. Page 6, para 1, line 9: the sentence “Condom use can be irregular . . .” contains two complete contradictions. If there is contradiction in the literature then the authors would be better served to explicitly state that there is contradiction. At present the sentence doesn’t really make sense. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: we replaced the ambiguous sentence with a much clearer one that points out that condom use can be practices irregularly with certain partners whereas more consistently with others.

Reviewer’s comment:
6. Page 6, para 2: I’m sure that you have thought about this issue but I was curious as to your choice of variable as your reference. To me it makes more sense intuitively to have no condom use as the comparison variable. More so because it would make discussion of the results that you saw simpler. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: we have considered that comparing non-condom use against those who use condoms inconsistently and consistently could be a good direction, this was the initial step during analysis. However, we found that there were fundamental similarities among never and consistent users and when the analysis was used to explore how inconsistent use was different, it proved to be point quite a contrast between inconsistent users versus the other two, and it was easier to explain. We trust that this shows a lateral way of showing different patterns around condom use.

Reviewer’s comment:
Methods:
7. Page 7, para 3, line 1: at the start of the methods section you state that data collection was conducted with 1219 sexually active men. In other places in the paper you note that this was a
sub-sample of a larger study. I think that the paper would benefit from having the total n of sexually active and non-sexually active men mentioned at least once. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this has been resolved and there is no other reference to sub-sample of a larger study.

Reviewer’s comment:
8. Page 9, para 2, line 2: although you reference the main Stepping Stones paper for additional details about variables measured, I would suggest that you include a little more detail in the current paper to ensure that readers are able to interpret your data correctly. A case in point is the measure of socio-economic status – it would be useful to know how this scale was measured, mean, minimum and maximums so that there is some context in which to interpret the score that are provided for the three groups of men. I would suggest that you provide much the same level of detail as you have provided for the gender attitudes and partner control scales. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: tertiles of SES have been included in the text to accommodate the clarity sought by the reviewer and we hope that this is satisfactory (Page 10).

Reviewer’s comment:
9. Page 10, para 3, line 4: it seemed strange in the paper to have the first reference to a table be for Table 2 rather than Table 1. I wonder whether you can’t get around this by using wording that doesn’t include the table number? [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: this has been corrected.

Reviewer’s comment:
Results:
10. Page 11, para 2, line 3: “...the majority of them were poorer...” – this statement doesn’t make sense as one would like expect to have reference to who they were poorer than. Are they poorer than the general population, older men etc? [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this sentence has been rephrased and results of the tertiles calculated for SES have been included to provide clarity.

Reviewer’s comment:
11. Page 11, para 2, line 11: the sentence “18.2% had raped...” is confusing. Perhaps here (or in the Methods) you could provide some brief information about the information in the scale. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: this has been addressed in the methods section under the ‘explanatory variables.’ We added information about how the variable was defined. Pardon the omission there.

Reviewer’s comment:
12. Page 12, para 1, line 3: where do the n presented in the following lines come from? They are not presented in the tables and I can’t understand how there could be an n that is not a whole number. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: thank you for pointing this out, and we have deleted it.

Reviewer’s comment:
13. I would suggest that since you have used inconsistent condom users are the reference category it may be useful to have a sentence summarising their major characteristics. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this has been addressed in the first paragraph of the Discussion.

Reviewer’s comment:
14. Page 13, para 2, line 3: there is a sudden mention of mental health problems here, although this is not in any of the tables and has not been previously mentioned in the methods section. I would suggest removing this reference to mental health. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: please pardon the inclusion of mental health, the variable has initially been measured and analysed in the regression model but it did not hold. All mention of mental health has been removed from the paper.

Reviewer’s comment:
15. Page 13, para 2, line 10-11: in the discussion and conclusions there is a lot of reference to a ‘kinder and safer masculinity’ – I feel that this term is used without true reference to the measures that have been used in the analysis. I would suggest that at some point in the paper the authors define what they mean but this type of masculinity so that it appears a more objective measure. In reality, the measures used in the analysis do not consider ‘kindness’ and therefore this term should not be used in describing men in the study. This comment should be addressed for all instances in the paper where this term has been used. [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: we have rephrased references to kinder and safer masculinity throughout the document. We understood the connotations, however, we feel that explaining the similarities with never and consistent condom use, there is a level of these participants expressing a benign (in terms of violence) and less sexually risky practice that is different to their inconsistent counterparts, who were very violent and hypersexual. We hope our changes will be acceptable.

Reviewer’s comment:
16. Page 14, para 1, line 4: the sentence starting “In attempting to understand...” is rather convoluted and should be rewritten for clarity. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this was omitted.
17. Page 15, para 2, line 9: the sentence starting “While we acknowledge that only a small proportion . . . “ is a very awkward sentence and it is difficult to determine the intended meaning. I suggest that this is simplified. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: this was also revised.

Reviewer’s comment:
18. Page 16, para 2: I suggest that the authors insert a heading ‘Limitations’ at the start of this paragraph. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: a heading has been added. Thanks.

Reviewer’s comment:
Conclusions:
19. Page 17, para 2, line 1: in previous parts of the paper the authors have noted that causality is not possible given the cross-sectional nature of the data and yet the opening sentence of the conclusion states that the study findings support the hypothesis that gender and relationship constructs determine men’s condom use. I would suggest that this statement be qualified by reminding the reader that the data is cross-sectional. [Discretionary Revision]

Authors’ response: we have added a few words to clarify the context within which we make the conclusions in the first line.

Reviewer’s comment:
20. At present the conclusion is a little disappointing – the authors might think of improving it with reference to the many different programmes that are attempting to address gender norms and their influence on condom use, violence against women and HIV risk. There are numerous international programmes, but South Africa specifically has been the site for both programmes by Engender Health and Sonke Gender Justice. It seems remiss not to at least mention the work that is being done in this area. Do these existing programmes focus on condom use? Can condom use be successfully integrated into existing programmes? What are the approaches that the authors suggest would enable men to explore new ideas of successful manhood? [Minor Essential Revision]

Authors’ response: Point well taken. The changes have been made in the last paragraph of the discussion and in the conclusion. Thanks you.

We hope that the reviewers’ comments have been addressed to their and the editor’s satisfaction.

Sincerely,

Nwabisa Jama Shai