Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 26 April 2012

Reviewer: Catherine MacPhail

Reviewer's report:

I have ordered my comments according to paper sections and then labelled them as either major, minor or discretionary.

General comments:

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]

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]

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]

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]

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]

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]
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]

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]

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]

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]

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]

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]

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]

14. Page 13, para 2, line3: 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]

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]

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]

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]

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

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]

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]

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests