

Developing a Comprehensive Couples-Based Intervention in South Africa

PIs: Lynae Darbes PhD, Mallory Johnson PhD

South Africa Project Staff: Sibongile Dladla, Xoliswa Behane, Mthokozisi Nhlapho, Hanifa Mtshizana, Dudu Mokhele, Mxolisi Dlamini

Project Description

This project conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with couples (n=20) key informants (n=12), and focus groups (n=4) regarding the feasibility and acceptability of a comprehensive couples-based intervention. Key issues were explored to determine potential interest for intervention content. The research is based at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and the Perinatal HIV Research Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. The primary aims of the project were to:

- Determine the ideal components of an integrated package delivering comprehensive HIV and reproductive health services to heterosexual couples in Soweto, South Africa.
- Explore the feasibility and acceptability of such a program via in-depth interviews with potential target audience members and key informants.



Significance

Preliminary findings from other research by the investigators have shown that a more comprehensive approach may be needed to successfully tackle the multiple issues facing heterosexual couples in sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, the only couples-focused services available in this context are VCT for HIV. Couples are rarely involved in reproductive health services, which focus almost exclusively on women. Preliminary data indicate that VCT counselors who see couples are overwhelmed by the needs expressed by couples - which reach far beyond the training and scope of a couples-based VCT session. Thus, further investigation into comprehensive services for couples is needed. Such information would investigate not only predictors and context of HIV risk behavior, but also HIV treatment, reproductive health, and communication about these issues.

Interesting findings

- Couples from the community perceive that there are few services geared specifically towards couples.
- Men perceived that women received a lot of information and services through the reproductive health sector, which is a place they feel neither welcomed, nor comfortable.
- Both men and women indicated a strong interest in a program focused specifically on couples, and that would include other couples so that they could learn from one another.
- Both men and women indicated a strong interest in learning communication skills, so they could better address difficult issues in their relationships.
- Couples expressed high enthusiasm for a couples-based intervention, and especially one that was not just focused on HIV, but incorporated other topics of interest for their community such as TB, and skills training such as communication and negotiation skills.
- Many key informants from health professions such as nursing or medicine discussed the split between their contact with men and women, and lack of opportunities to work with couples in their services.

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