Let's Talk about Sex, Maybe:

Interviewers, Respondents, Sexual Behavior Reporting, and Social Life in Rural South Africa[1]

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Abstract

When it comes to the topic of sex, analysts are often skeptical. And with good reason: respondents may lie or forget the juicy details of their intimate lives, and interviewers may exercise authority in how they capture it. In between the two lies a more fundamental problem endemic to social life: how people appear to others is never unmediated nor unfiltered. In this paper we use data from a cross-sectional HIV prevalence and sexual behavior survey conducted in 2010-2011 in a rural African setting to explore the broader question of *who says what to whom* about their sexual lives. Preliminary results show a consistent age effect across outcomes-- that respondents report more "moral", responsible sexual behavior to older fieldworkers; and a curious sex effect-- that men report more sexual partners to female fieldworkers. Understanding fieldworker effects on the production of sexual behavior survey data serves both methodological and theoretical goals.

Introduction

When it comes to the topic of sex, analysts are often skeptical. And with good reason: respondents may lie (see Gribble et al., 1999 on reporting bias) or forget the juicy details of their intimate lives (see Fenton et al., 2001 on recall bias), and interviewers may exercise authority in how they capture it (see Randall et al., 2011 on interviewer power). In between the two lies the more fundamental problem endemic to social life: how people appear to others is never unmediated nor unfiltered (Goffman 1959). This poses problems for the collection of data on sensitive topics, like sex, a key variable upon which many researchers depend for understanding a range of demographic outcomes, such as fertility, risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, and the various sexual behaviors associated with it.

In response to this concern, methodologists have looked closely at the various influences on respondents' reporting, including characteristics of the interviewers, such as sex (Axinn, 1991; Becker, Fevisetan and Makinwa-Adebusove, 1995; Catania et al., 1996; Wilson et al., 2002), age (e.g., Ford and Norris, 1997) and ethnicity (Becker et al 1995), the familiarity of the interviewer to the respondent (Weinreb, 2006), and the method of data collection itself (Angotti and Kaler 2012; Hewett, Mensch, and Erulkar, 2004; Plummer et al., 2004; Poulin 2010). Such methodological inquiries are particularly important in a setting like rural South Africa, where an understanding of the sexual behaviors that lead to HIV risk is critical for addressing high HIV prevalence (see Gomez-Olive et al., 2012 for recent estimates), and where our understanding of fieldworker effects on the production of survey data is scant (for exceptions from sub-Saharan Africa, see Bignami-Van Assche, Reiners and Weinreb, 2003; Weinreb 2006).

In this paper we use data from a 2010-2011 cross-sectional study on HIV prevalence and sexual behavior conducted in a rural African

setting by 10 local fieldworkers[2] among a sample of 7,428 individuals aged 15+. Taking key fixed characteristics of respondents and interviewers into account, we test assumptions about social desirability bias to explore the more fundamental question of *who says what to whom* about their sexual lives. Our preliminary results show a consistent age effect across outcomes, that respondents report more "moral", and responsible sexual behavior to older fieldworkers; and a curious sex effect, that men report having more sexual partners to female fieldworkers. Indeed understanding fieldworker effects on the production of sexual behavior survey data serves both methodological and theoretical goals.

The Study Site

Our study site is the Agincourt Health and Demographic Surveillance Site ("Agincourt Unit"), located in the Bushbuckridge sub-district of Ehlanseni district, Mpumalanga Province, in the northeast region of South Africa, close to the country's border with Mozambique. The Agincourt Unit has been monitoring causes of death, births and migration in a population of around 70, 000 people since 1992, information that is updated annually by trained fieldworkers through a household census (see Kahn et al., 2007). Each year, additional modules focusing on specific research and policy issues, such as food security, household assets, health care utilization, labor participation, temporary migration, are included. A verbal autopsy, to determine probable cause-of-death, is conducted on every death.

Although there has been substantial development in the area since democratic elections in 1994, and a standpipe providing clean water and

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[2] In this paper we use the terms "interviewer" and "fieldworker" interchangeably.

an electricity supply to households is available in all villages, the infrastructure remains poor. There is a high unemployment rate, with 36% of the total adult population unemployed and looking for work (29% of men and 46% of women - unpublished data, 2004). As is common in rural South Africa and the region, and reflecting the structure of the regional economy, labor migration is high, especially in men aged 35 to 50 years old of whom 60% live outside the study area for more than 6 months per year.

The *Ha Nakekela*[3] Study

In 2010-2011, we collected data on sexual behavior and HIV risk in conjunction with HIV testing for community-level prevalence. The *Ha Nakekela* study's broader objective was to secure baseline information to calculate and understand HIV/Non-communicable disease prevalence and risk factors in the AHDSS. Calculations previous to the implementation of the study gave us a minimum required sample size of 5,940 to estimate disease prevalence in the community. An additional 20% of individuals were sampled to account for those who we would be unable to find and who would refuse to participate. In total, 7,428 individuals were randomly selected from 2009 Agincourt Census data, stratified by age (15 and up) and gender.

From August 2010 to June 2011, all sampled participants were visited in their homes by a *Ha Nakekela* fieldworker and invited to participate in the study. The *Ha Nakekela* field team was comprised of 10 fieldworkers, 5 men and 5 women[4], ranging in ages from 28-44. As per the requirements of working with AHDSS as a fieldworker, all have at least a secondary school degree and were Xi-Tsonga speakers from the

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[3] In XiTsonga, the primary local language in the study site, *Ha Nakekela* means "We Care". This was the name for the study chosen by the field workers.

[4] Mid-study we lost one male fieldworker, who was replaced with a female fieldworker of a different age group.

study area. Fieldworkers were assigned to participants' households randomly; in the not-too-unlikely event that they had a previous relationship with the respondent, the interview was assigned to another fieldworker.

The home visit lasted approximately 45 minutes and included: consent to participate (or assent for minors); two questionnaires, a behavioral risk assessment survey ("BERIS") and a survey on chronic disease risk factors (adapted from the WHO STEPS and WHO SAGE); anthropometric measurements (height, weight, and hip and waist circumference); and the collection of biomarkers for diabetes, cholesterol and a dried blood spot for HIV ("DBS"). The DBS sample was sent to the Global Clinical and Viral Laboratories in Durban for processing. Test results were made available to participants one month after the home visit at the two health facilities in the area offering antiretroviral treatment (ART), a private center (Bhubezi Community Health Centre) and a public health center (Agincourt Health Centre). Participants with high blood pressure, high cholesterol and/or high blood sugar levels were given a referral letter to the clinic. No material incentives were provided to participants to join the study.

Methods and Analysis

In this study we draw upon data from the "BERIS" survey, which was administered last during the home visit under the assumption that it gave participants the opportunity to warm up to the interaction with the interviewer before being asked the most intimate questions. The BERIS survey focused on respondents' sexual practices over the past 2 years (24 months). For each sexual partner reported by the respondent, interviewers asked approximately 15 questions about the partner, including the nature of the relationship (e.g., casual partner; spouse), the duration of the relationship, and details pertaining to behavioral sexual risk (e.g., knowledge of HIV status of partner, condom use, and sex

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under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol). Additional questions on the BERIS survey included lifetime number of sexual partners, HIV testing history, previous diagnosis for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and circumcision (for males).

To explore the effects of fieldworker and respondent characteristics on sexual behavior reporting we modeled three outcomes:

1. *Lifetime Sexual Partners: What is the total number of sexual partners you have had in your life?*

2. *Condom use at last sexual intercourse: Did you use a condom the last time you had sex with this partner?*

3. *Discussing HIV with each partner: At the time you first had sex with this partner, had you ever discussed HIV with him/her?*

We modeled the number of lifetime sexual partners using poisson regression, and condom use at last sexual intercourse with each partner and discussing HIV with each partner using logistic regression (allowing for correlation among partners of the same respondent). For each outcome we first fit a base model with no fieldworker effects, including covariates of: respondent's age, sex, village, previous migration history, and quintiles of the respondent's household socio-economic status in 2009. We then included fixed fieldworker effects for age (dichotomized as <35 years old and 35+ years old)[5] and sex, and tested interactions with respondent characteristics. We would have considered other fieldworker characteristics, such as education level, marital status, religion and

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[5] Davis et al., 2010 note that one of the problems with studying interviewer age effects is that studies often use different age cut-offs making generalizability difficult, but that they often dichotomize age in such a way that important generational differences are obscured. Our fieldworker age range (28-44) is wide enough to give us some variation for comparison, but not so wide as to have to clump fieldworkers into categories where they do not belong.

ethnicity, but we had no variation on these variables: all fieldworkers have about the same level of schooling (completed secondary), all (except one, to our knowledge) are Christian, all (except one, to our knowledge) are not married (with lobola), and all are XiTsonga-speaking from the study site. However, we believe this is a strength of this study, insofar as since they are similar on other characteristics, we are likely picking up on actual (age and sex) effects.

Preliminary Results

Sample descriptives of respondents and fieldworkers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent and Fieldworker Sample Characteristics, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.

	Proportion (mean/SD)
Respondent Characteristics	
Male	49.2
Age, years	40.9/18.1
Quintiles 2009 SES	
1st (lowest)	12.9
2nd	17.9
3rd	21.6
4th	21.8
5th (highest)	25.8
Previous migration history	59.5
Number of lifetime sexual partners	4.7/8.2
Number of sexual partners in last 24 months	1.5/0.9
Condom use at last sexual intercourse amongst all partners	26.8/0.4

Discuss HIV amongst all partners	20.6/0.4
Fieldworker characteristics	
Male	45.5
Age, years	
Under 35	63.6
35 and over	36.4

∗ Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

Lifetime sexual partners

Table 2 (a) shows the results of the base poisson regression on number of lifetime sexual partners, without fieldworker effects: including age-squared ($p < 0.001$) and age-cubed ($p < 0.001$) significantly improved model fit. Figure 1 shows the predicted number of lifetime sexual partners by sex and age, averaging across the other covariates. Males reported a higher number of lifetime sexual partners across all ages.

Figure 1. Predicted Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners, by Age and Sex, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.
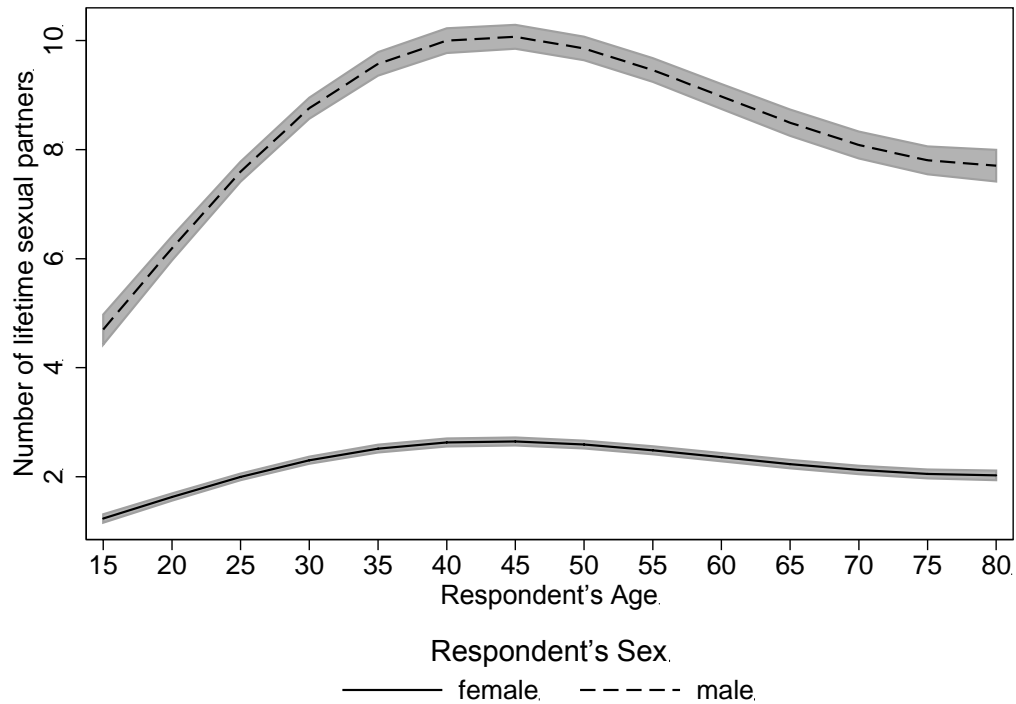

       Table 2 (b) shows the results of the poisson regression including the fieldworker's sex and age. Interacting respondent and fieldworker's sex significantly improved model fit (p < 0.001); further interacting respondent and fieldworker's age significantly improved model fit (p < 0.001) and constituted the final model. Figure 2 shows the predicted number of lifetime sexual partners by respondent and fieldworker's sex and age. For both male and female respondents, having an older fieldworker reduced the number of reported lifetime sexual partners. For male respondents, having a female fieldworker increased the number of reported lifetime sexual partners.

Figure 2. Predicted Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners, by Respondent and Fieldworker's Age and Sex, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.
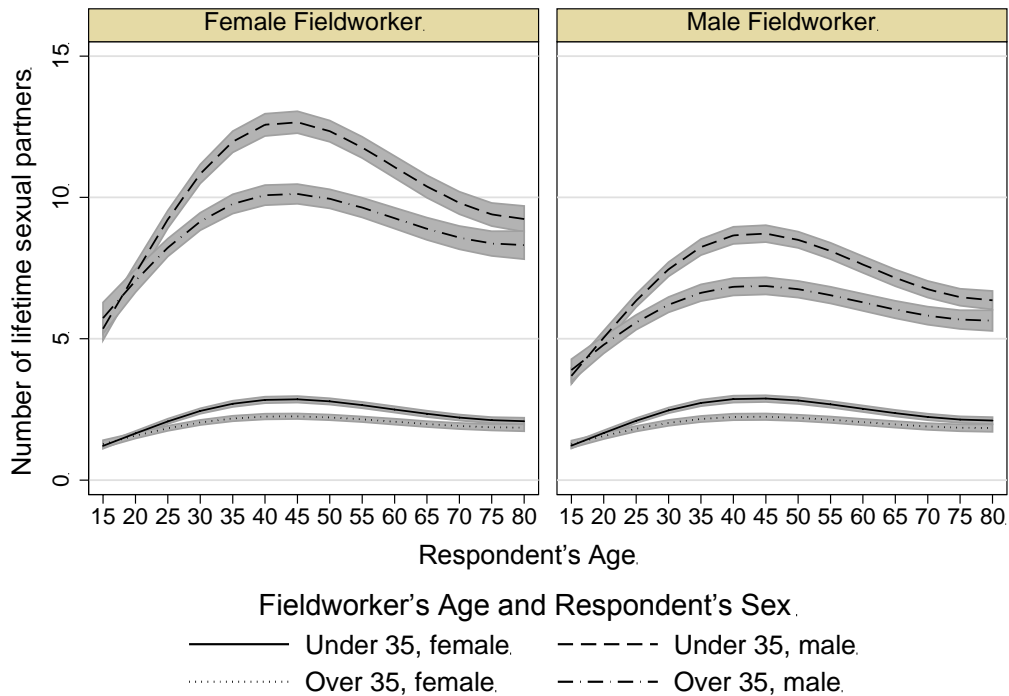
Table 2. Poisson Regression on Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners, (a) Base Model and (b) with Fieldworker Effects, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.

	(a) Base (N = 4467)		(b) With Fieldworker Effects (N = 4467)	
	Beta	95% CI	Beta	95% CI
Village				
1	–	–	–	–
2	-0.398***	[-0.497, -0.298]	-0.353***	[-0.453, -0.253]
3	0.151***	[0.090, 0.213]	0.161***	[0.100, 0.223]
4	0	[-0.072, 0.072]	-0.004	[-0.076, 0.068]
5	-0.019	[-0.094, 0.056]	-0.007	[-0.082, 0.069]
6	0.057	[-0.019, 0.132]	0.076	[-0.000, 0.152]

	(a) Base (N = 4467)		(b) With Fieldworker Effects (N = 4467)	
	Beta	95% CI	Beta	95% CI
7	0.141**	[0.057, 0.225]	0.170***	[0.086, 0.254]
8	0.076*	[0.015, 0.138]	0.095**	[0.033, 0.156]
9	0.048	[-0.020, 0.117]	0.069*	[0.000, 0.138]
10	0.03	[-0.043, 0.102]	0.034	[-0.039, 0.107]
11	-0.056	[-0.117, 0.005]	-0.047	[-0.108, 0.014]
12	-0.081	[-0.176, 0.015]	-0.079	[-0.175, 0.016]
13	-0.140***	[-0.221, -0.059]	-0.118**	[-0.199, -0.036]
14	0.052	[-0.053, 0.156]	0.077	[-0.027, 0.182]
15	0.002	[-0.074, 0.077]	0.027	[-0.048, 0.103]
16	0.013	[-0.055, 0.080]	0.038	[-0.029, 0.106]
17	-0.308***	[-0.414, -0.203]	-0.262***	[-0.367, -0.156]
18	0.258***	[0.137, 0.379]	0.284***	[0.163, 0.405]
19	-0.161**	[-0.274, -0.049]	-0.122*	[-0.235, -0.010]
20	-0.292***	[-0.445, -0.139]	-0.262***	[-0.415, -0.109]
21	0.202***	[0.107, 0.297]	0.217***	[0.122, 0.312]
2009 SES Quintiles				
1st (lowest	–	–	–	–
2nd	-0.260***	[-0.307, -0.214]	-0.261***	[-0.307, -0.214]
3rd	-0.223***	[-0.269, -0.177]	-0.225***	[-0.271, -0.180]
4th	-0.074**	[-0.119, -0.029]	-0.059*	[-0.104, -0.013]
5th (highest)	-0.146***	[-0.190, -0.101]	-0.127***	[-0.172, -0.083]
Male	1.333***	[1.304, 1.363]	1.492***	[1.453, 1.531]
Age	0.118***	[0.105, 0.132]	0.133***	[0.116, 0.150]
Age^2	-0.002***	[-0.002, -0.002]	-0.002***	[-0.003, -0.002]
Age^3	0.000***	[0.000, 0.000]	0.000***	[0.000, 0.000]
Past migration history	0.014	[-0.016, 0.044]	0	[-0.030, 0.031]
Male fieldworker			0.011	[-0.039, 0.062]
Male X male fieldworker			-0.392***	[-0.453, -0.332]
Fieldworker aged 35+			0.565**	[0.161, 0.969]
Fieldworker aged 35+ X Age			-0.044**	[-0.071, -0.017]
Fieldworker aged 35+ X Age^2			0.001**	[0.000, 0.001]
Fieldworker aged 35+ X Age^3			-0.000*	[-0.000, -0.000]
Constant	-0.998***	[-1.204, -0.792]	-1.204***	[-1.463, -0.946]

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

Condom use at last sexual intercourse

Table 3 (a) shows the results of the base logistic regression on the probability of condom use at last sexual intercourse with a partner, without fieldworker effects: including age-squared significantly improved model fit (p < 0.001). Figure 3 shows the predicted probability of using a condom at last sexual intercourse with a partner by sex and age, averaging across the other covariates. Reported condom use declined with age, with males reporting higher condom use than females.

Figure 3. Predicted Probability of Condom Use at Last Sexual Intercourse, by Age and Sex, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.
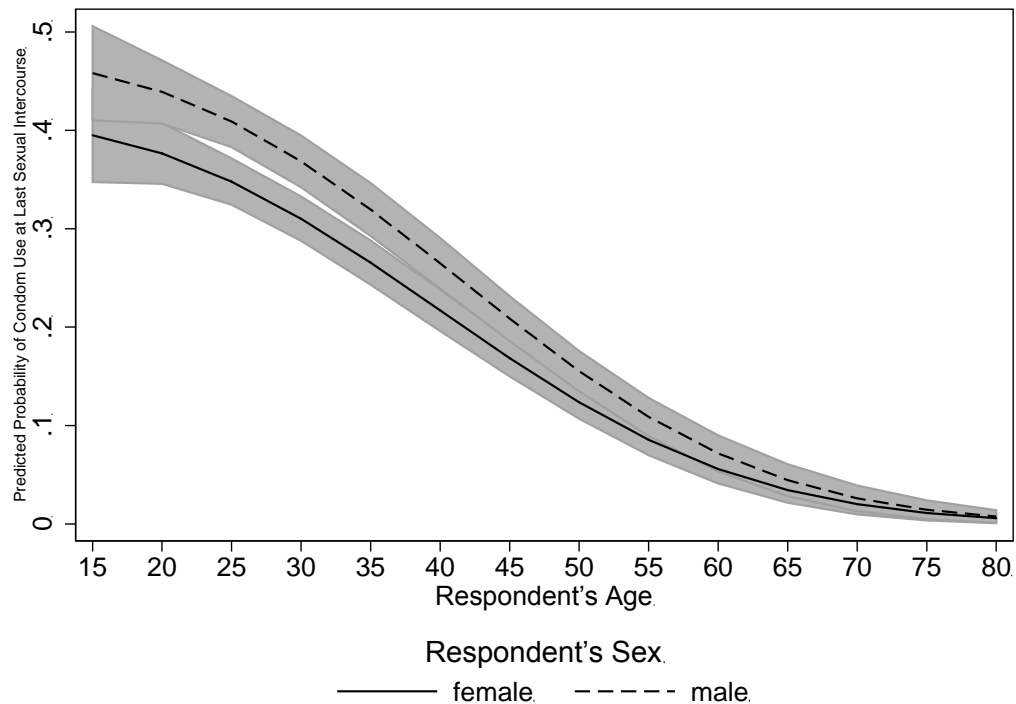

Table 3 (b) shows the results of the logistic regression including the fieldworker's sex and age. Interacting respondent and fieldworker's age significantly improved model fit (p = 0.003). Figure 4 shows the predicted probability of condom use at last sexual intercourse by respondent and fieldworker's sex and age. For both male and female respondents, having

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a male fieldworker increased the probability of reported condom use at last sexual intercourse. Having an older fieldworker increased the probability of reported condom use at last sexual intercourse.

Figure 4. Predicted Probability of Condom Use at Last Sexual Intercourse, by Respondent's and Fieldworker's Age and Sex, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.
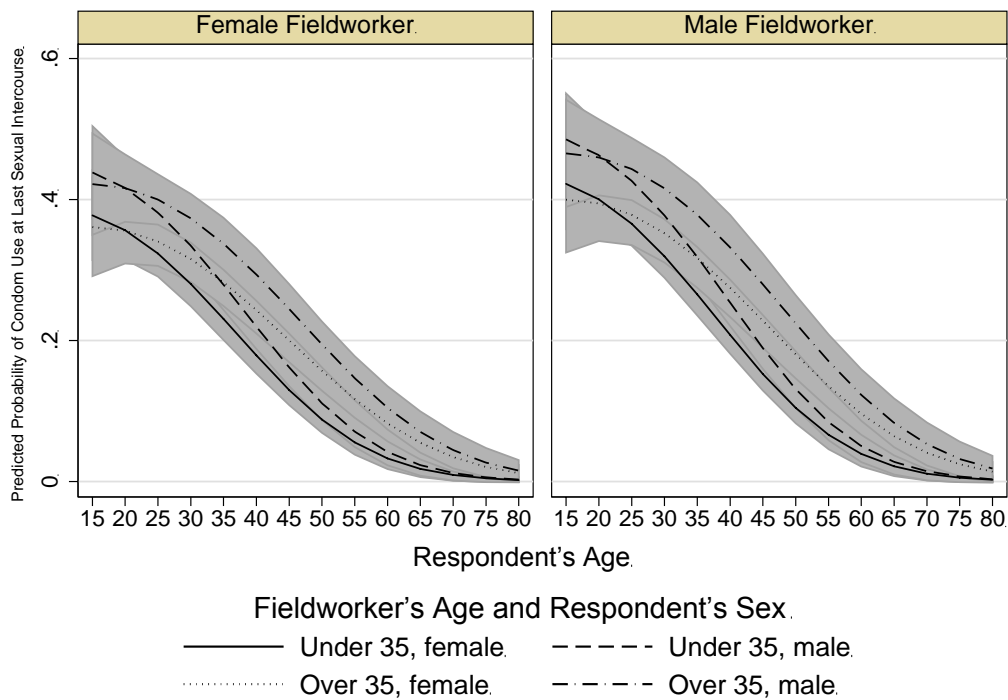

Table 3. Logistic Regression on Condom Use at Last Sexual Intercourse, (a) Base Model and (b) with Fieldworker Effects, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.

	(a) Base (N = 4406)		(b) With Fieldworker Effects (N = 4406)	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Village				
1	–	–	–	–
2	0.604*	[0.381, 0.955]	0.574*	[0.362, 0.909]

	(a) Base (N = 4406)		(b) With Fieldworker Effects (N = 4406)	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
3	1.051	[0.756, 1.462]	1.035	[0.746, 1.437]
4	1.006	[0.686, 1.474]	1.01	[0.689, 1.480]
5	0.665*	[0.457, 0.967]	0.658*	[0.451, 0.962]
6	0.752	[0.519, 1.090]	0.747	[0.513, 1.086]
7	0.811	[0.536, 1.225]	0.818	[0.542, 1.235]
8	0.595**	[0.429, 0.825]	0.586**	[0.422, 0.813]
9	0.717	[0.497, 1.035]	0.703	[0.486, 1.016]
10	0.679*	[0.473, 0.975]	0.693*	[0.481, 0.999]
11	0.85	[0.633, 1.142]	0.845	[0.628, 1.135]
12	0.369***	[0.209, 0.654]	0.363***	[0.205, 0.643]
13	0.706	[0.465, 1.073]	0.692	[0.454, 1.054]
14	0.834	[0.510, 1.365]	0.812	[0.494, 1.333]
15	0.773	[0.539, 1.108]	0.767	[0.534, 1.101]
16	0.700*	[0.499, 0.981]	0.697*	[0.496, 0.979]
17	0.491**	[0.287, 0.839]	0.468**	[0.272, 0.805]
18	0.599	[0.304, 1.178]	0.609	[0.307, 1.209]
19	0.216***	[0.100, 0.465]	0.211***	[0.097, 0.455]
20	0.370*	[0.168, 0.812]	0.358*	[0.163, 0.783]
21	0.787	[0.481, 1.286]	0.798	[0.486, 1.311]
2009 SES Quintiles				
1st (lowest	–	–	–	–
2nd	0.957	[0.740, 1.236]	0.961	[0.744, 1.243]
3rd	1.105	[0.863, 1.415]	1.115	[0.870, 1.429]
4th	1.265	[0.992, 1.614]	1.268	[0.994, 1.617]
5th (highest)	1.225	[0.963, 1.558]	1.201	[0.944, 1.528]
Male	1.253**	[1.085, 1.447]	1.255**	[1.086, 1.451]
Age	1.018	[0.984, 1.053]	1.022	[0.972, 1.075]
Age^2	0.999***	[0.999, 0.999]	0.999**	[0.998, 1.000]
Past migration history	0.885	[0.757, 1.033]	0.891	[0.762, 1.041]
Male fieldworker			1.241**	[1.068, 1.441]
Fieldworker aged 35+			0.788	[0.248, 2.504]
Fieldworker aged 35+ X Age			1.006	[0.940, 1.076]
Fieldworker aged 35+ X Age^2			1	[0.999, 1.001]

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Discussing HIV

Table 4 (a) shows the results of the base logistic regression on the probability of discussing HIV with a partner, without fieldworker effects. Figure 5 shows the predicted probability of discussing HIV with a partner by sex and age, averaging across the other covariates. Reported discussing HIV with a partner declined with age.

Figure 5. Predicted Probability of Discussing HIV with a Partner, by Age and Sex, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.

Respondent's Sex
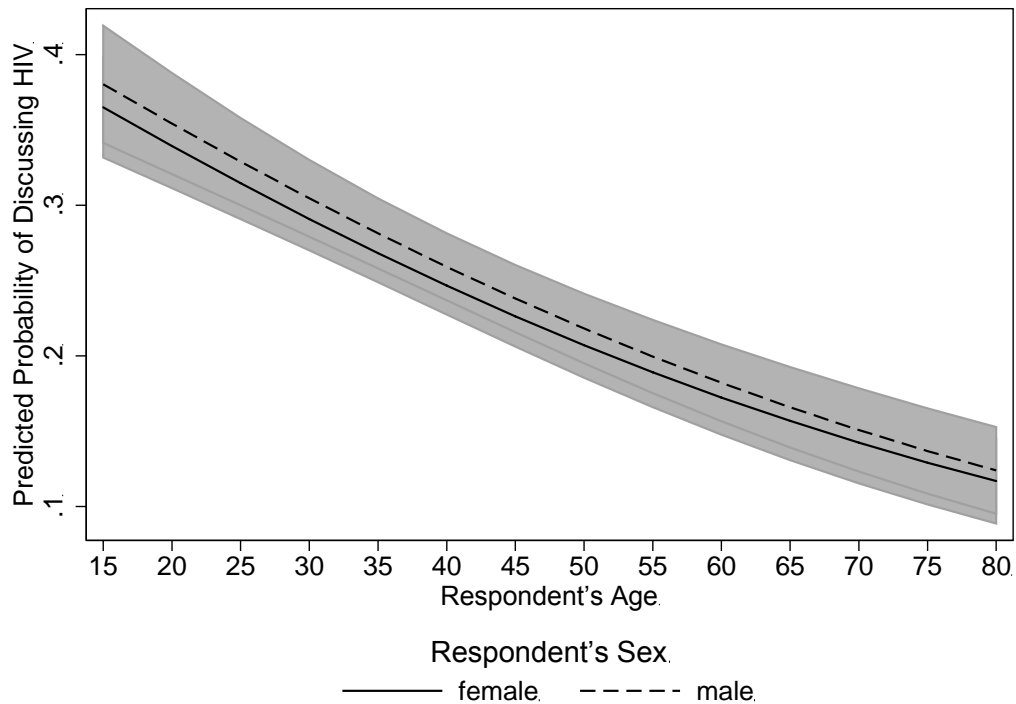
——— female   – – – – – male

Table 4 (b) shows the results of the logistic regression including the fieldworker's age. Interacting respondent and fieldworker's age significantly improved model fit (p < 0.001). Figure 6 shows the predicted probability of discussing HIV with a partner by respondent and fieldworker's age. Having an older fieldworker increased the probability of reporting having discussed HIV with a partner.

Figure 6. Predicted Probability of Discussing HIV with a Partner by Respondent and Fieldworker's Age, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011.
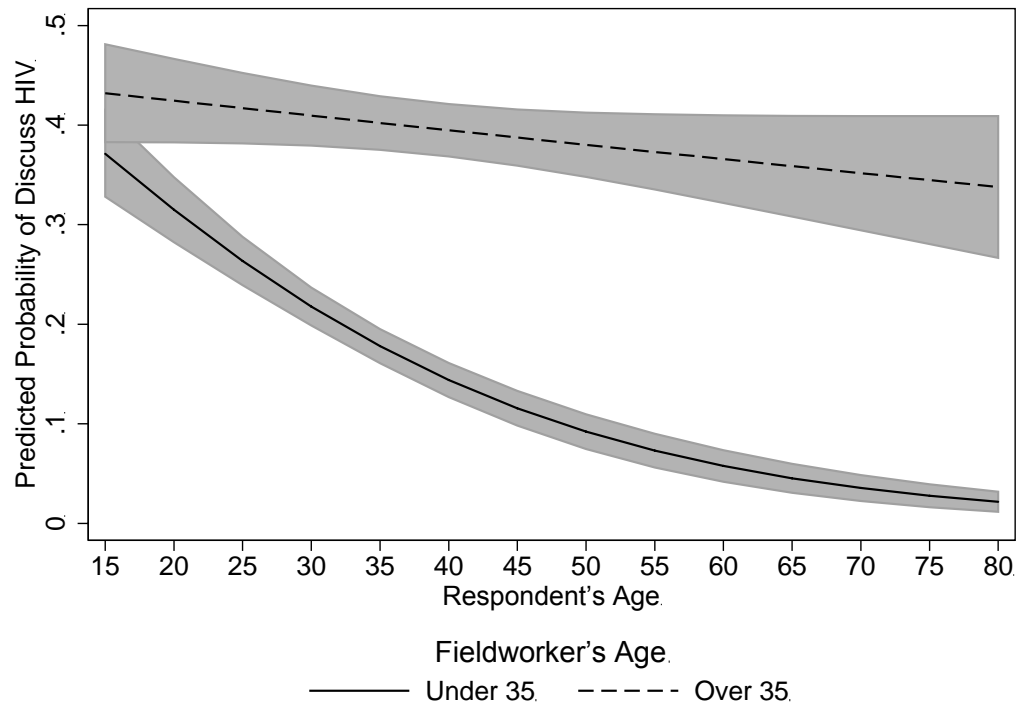

Table 4. Logistic Regression on Discussing HIV with a Partner, (a) Base Model and (b) with Fieldworker Effects, Agincourt, South Africa, 2010 – 2011

	(a) Base (N = 4406)		(b) With Fieldworker Effects (N = 4406)	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Village				
1	-	-	-	-
2	0.605∗	[0.380, 0.962]	0.654	[0.411, 1.040]

3	0.594**	[0.409, 0.862]	0.594**	[0.403, 0.876]
4	0.625*	[0.418, 0.937]	0.640*	[0.421, 0.972]
5	0.732	[0.477, 1.122]	0.784	[0.513, 1.199]
6	0.469***	[0.303, 0.723]	0.542**	[0.341, 0.862]
7	0.505**	[0.311, 0.822]	0.491**	[0.301, 0.801]
8	0.577**	[0.402, 0.828]	0.641*	[0.442, 0.927]
9	0.738	[0.505, 1.080]	0.772	[0.516, 1.156]
10	0.597*	[0.399, 0.892]	0.67	[0.445, 1.008]
11	0.729	[0.528, 1.006]	0.728	[0.520, 1.021]
12	0.443**	[0.260, 0.756]	0.465**	[0.273, 0.794]
13	0.702	[0.451, 1.091]	0.788	[0.492, 1.262]
14	0.411**	[0.232, 0.729]	0.427**	[0.239, 0.762]
15	0.403***	[0.265, 0.613]	0.443***	[0.288, 0.679]
16	0.700*	[0.492, 0.994]	0.813	[0.571, 1.157]
17	0.626	[0.373, 1.048]	0.559*	[0.337, 0.929]
18	0.229**	[0.087, 0.601]	0.292*	[0.106, 0.806]

19	0.324**	[0.166, 0.635]	0.337**	[0.171, 0.666]
20	0.763	[0.402, 1.450]	0.654	[0.341, 1.255]
21	0.665	[0.395, 1.121]	0.85	[0.489, 1.477]
2009 SES Quintiles				
1st (lowest	-	-	-	-
2nd	1.133	[0.854, 1.501]	1.189	[0.891, 1.586]
3rd	1.214	[0.926, 1.593]	1.269	[0.961, 1.677]
4th	1.209	[0.918, 1.592]	1.268	[0.958, 1.679]
5th (highest)	1.403*	[1.073, 1.835]	1.327*	[1.007, 1.751]
Male	1.082	[0.924, 1.267]	1.004	[0.852, 1.183]
Age	0.977***	[0.972, 0.983]	0.950***	[0.941, 0.959]
Past migration history	1.072	[0.906, 1.270]	1.103	[0.925, 1.317]
Fieldworker aged 35+			0.644*	[0.419, 0.989]
Fieldworker aged 35+ X Age			1.046***	[1.033, 1.058]

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Discussion

Our preliminary results show a consistent age effect across outcomes, and a curious sex effect. The age effect suggests a posturing in the direction of "moral", and responsible, sexual behavior: with older

interviewers, respondents appear less willing to share intimate details such as the number of people they have sex with, and then to report more responsible decisions (such as using condoms and discussing HIV) with the ones they do. In a social setting like rural South Africa, where older people play strong social roles as advice givers, and to whom reverence is expected and deference is assumed, these results should not surprise. Older, more "mature" fieldworkers, often purported to handle sensitive questions with greater comfort and ease, may not be the antidotes to addressing concerns about collecting reliable data on sensitive topics like sex.

We also find evidence for a "sex effect" in a direction other than we anticipated: that men report having more sexual partners to female interviewers. We had expected men might "brag" more to other men about their sexual prowess (Kaler, 2003), but evidence from our study suggests otherwise.

Next steps

In the coming months, we will further situate our analysis in the context of rural South African social life by including ethnographic observations from our fieldwork that better ground both our analytic assumptions and the interpretation of our (preliminary) results. We will also test for more interaction effects.

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