

## **GENDER AND AIDS: EXPLORING AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP**

Hunter, Mark (2010) **Love in the time of AIDS**. Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. ISBN 978 1 96914 203 2 pbk. Pages 303.

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**Love in the Time of AIDS** explores notions of love and intimacy among South Africans as a means of shedding some light on the overwhelming rise in HIV prevalence in some areas of the country from one to 30 percent in only 15 years. Drawing the reader through the history of South Africa's political economy from colonialism to the post-apartheid and capitalist era, the book provides a compelling account of the ways in which economic forces have interacted with individual ideas about love and sex to produce what Hunter refers to as the "materiality of everyday sex" – where love and relationships are intimately linked with sex for material benefits.

The book is based on an ethnography of Mandeni, KwaZulu-Natal, where Hunter lived extensively between 2002 and 2005. Women in South Africa constitute 60 percent of HIV cases in the country, and Mandeni is one of the worst affected with an overall prevalence of 39 percent among women presenting in antenatal clinics. The book provides a close and detailed exploration of notions of intimacy in this rural community. This is contrasted and compared with a range of historical material, which lends a particularly intriguing analysis to the role of intimacy in individuals' everyday lives. While this book is clearly anthropological, it will be of particular interest to social psychologists interested in issues of sexuality and the interaction of sexual behaviour with broader historical, economic and social contexts.

In order to begin this task of an historically-rooted investigation of shifting notions of intimacy – which encompasses notions of gender, masculinity, femininity, sex, fertility, pleasure and love – Hunter takes the reader through a history of intimacy during apartheid in part one of the book. He argues that the changing structure of families and households and the rise of HIV cannot be seen as a "degeneration" of family life or as a consequence of apartheid, but rather are part and parcel of the economic and political changes that took place in South Africa during the apartheid period from 1948 to 1994.

Hunter makes several key points to support this argument, one being the role of men's migrancy from the rural areas to the mines and factories during the height of South Africa's industrialisation. While this is a subject frequently referred to in studies of sexuality and HIV in South Africa to point to how men's separation from their wives for long periods contributed to male promiscuity and higher HIV prevalence, it is framed

differently here. By rooting his observations of the shift of men from home-based agricultural subsistence to migrant wage labour within the changing role of relationships between men and women, Hunter explores how migration brought about a shift in the system of marriage from a reliance on *ilobolo* (bride price) being paid by a man's father in cattle to its payment through wages. *Ilobolo* and marriage came to be associated with a largely absent man sending wages back home to support his household. It is through this chain of events that Hunter argues that the notion of "provider love" was introduced – love as a combination of practical considerations represented by both financial stability and emotional attachment.

Hunter makes another, less well-recognised point, about the changing nature of sexuality in South Africa in his consideration of the role of Christian missionaries in defining romantic love as something that exists between one man and one woman in order to counteract the practice of polygamy. By promoting marital choice and the importance of life-long companionship, Christianity succeeded in intertwining romantic love and sex in new ways. A consequence of this, writes Hunter, is that penetrative sex became associated with masculinity and manhood in contrast to previous practices of "thigh sex", a non-penetrative form of sexual interaction that had been used by unmarried couples to prevent pregnancy. Rather than using this example to offer a simplistic explanation of the reason for an increase in HIV prevalence, Hunter uses this change in behaviour to demonstrate how socio-historical influences have brought about changes in ideas about what constitutes sex, notions of love, marriage/ pre-marriage and cultural practice.

Consistent with this focus on the changing notions of love, Hunter explores the role of women as industrial workers during the economic crisis of the mid-1970s. The increasing unemployment of men meant they could no longer support women in rural homesteads. Women represented a lower-wage resource for industry, and since faced with poor prospects of finding a man who could support them, began to move away from rural areas into new jobs in cities and industrial areas. This resulted in a drop in marriage rates and an increasing independence of working women. However, as the recession continued further cuts were made and with rising unemployment these newly independent women began to search for new ways to ensure financial stability outside of either marriage or employment – ultimately contributing to a rise in sex being exchanged for material benefits.

These three observations – the introduction of provider love, the association between masculinity and penetrative sex, and the sexual nature of women's new entrepreneurialism – are used by Hunter to support a more nuanced picture of how sexuality has led to the sharp increase in HIV prevalence than has often been painted of South Africa. The second part of the book delves further into this complex landscape by looking at more recent history to critically examine the consequences of rights-based discourses being promoted by international organisations. In addition to promoting increased condom use among partners, rights-based language has also been appropriated by women to emphasise their right to multiple sexual partners and promiscuity in order to put them on an equal basis with men. This is paralleled by the perceived failure of men to fulfil the socially constructed role of male provider in a climate of mass unemployment, which in turn has often presented itself as domestic violence as men try to assert control. Hunter pulls these sections one and two together in showing how the historical shift in notions of intimacy have set the stage for these

modern appropriations, thus contributing to a perfect storm of social factors for HIV to flourish.

The book does not disappoint should the reader be drawn to it by the alluring title alone. By tracing intimacy through the specific political and economic changes that have taken place in South Africa over the last 50 years, Hunter offers up a laudable thesis that the relationship between intimacy and AIDS needs to be approached as a dialectical rather than influential relationship. Hunter's case study of how intimacy has interacted with the changing history of financial needs and obligations in South Africa points to the inadequacy of models that take political economy only as an influence over the intimate lives of individuals and do not consider the role individuals play in this. Individuals are not carrying out sexual behaviours that have existed for centuries influenced by cultural traditions and social norms, but are constantly reshaping dominant notions of love, sex and relationships. Hunter's strong argument on this subject provides an important contribution to the study of sexuality more broadly.

In the third and final section of the book Hunter draws a detailed account of two interventions that have attempted to address HIV and AIDS in South Africa through rights approaches: loveLife and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). This is the one section where some readers may be left wanting. While his insight into both of these social movements is interesting, a clearer link between these two case examples and Hunter's overall thesis would have filled a gap in the book. The intervention discussion might have been better utilised to show how the lessons arising from a historically-rooted understanding of sexuality and intimacy in South Africa can be drawn on to design programmes that will reduce the still exceedingly high HIV prevalence rates. Instead Hunter leaves readers to draw their own conclusions about the practical implications of his work.

Nevertheless, Hunter's strong writing and ability to ground his theoretical questions in practical and readable examples from his research, makes this book a valuable read for both practitioners looking to address the complex social realities surrounding HIV and AIDS, and theoreticians seeking to develop stronger linkages between sexuality and political economy. Broadly, **Love in the time of AIDS** makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the interface between history, sex, and love in places where HIV and AIDS is a dominant reality.