Qualitative Sociology
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-020-09457-w

Modernizing Marriage: Balancing the Benefits and Liabilities of Bridewealth in Rural South Africa

Christie Sennott[1,2] · **Sangeetha Madhavan**[2,3] · **Youngeun Nam**[1]

Published online: 23 July 2020
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020

Abstract

The payment of bridewealth or lobola is a longstanding cultural practice that has persisted in South Africa despite significant societal shifts over the past two decades. Lobola has always been a complex and contested practice that both reinforces gender inequalities and, at the same time, provides status to women and legitimacy to marriages. In this paper, we describe rural South African women's perceptions of lobola, their experiences related to marriage and lobola, and how they reconfigure lobola to fit within modern life course aspirations and trajectories. We draw on interviews with 43 women aged 18–55 in rural South Africa to examine desires related to lobola and the meanings of lobola given current social, economic, and health (HIV) conditions in rural areas. Our findings indicate that lobola offers women a complex set of benefits and liabilities. Although women value the support, social status, and respectability lobola offers, they also lament how lobola curtails their freedom to pursue education and limits their autonomy from husbands as well as in-laws. Women also view lobola as offering a sense of security amidst the uncertainty of the local political economy and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We conclude that the way women incorporate lobola into their desires and plans reflects tension between the expectations and aspirations of "modern" women in a post-apartheid context in which rights feature prominently but economic security is not guaranteed, and cultural scripts reinforce longstanding gender norms but also ensure social support.

Keywords Marriage · Bridewealth · South Africa · Culture · Political economy

---

✉ Christie Sennott
csennott@purdue.edu

Sangeetha Madhavan
smadhava@umd.edu

Youngeun Nam
nam49@purdue.edu

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction

The payment of bridewealth or lobola—the provision of money and gifts by a prospective groom to the bride's family—is a longstanding cultural practice that has persisted in South Africa, albeit in contested and varied forms (see Ansell 2001; Shope 2006). Even though "white weddings" formalized in the Christian church have increasingly become a desired part of a modern marriage, particularly among the Black South African middle class, there is evidence that lobola remains a valuable and highly desired practice (Hunter 2016; James 2017; Parker 2015; Rudwick and Posel 2014; Shope 2006). At the same time, extant research on marriage processes across sub-Saharan Africa suggests that bridewealth limits women's agency and autonomy, especially in reproductive decision-making (Ansell 2001; Frost and Nii-Amoo Dodoo 2010; Horne et al. 2013). Though much research on bridewealth in sub-Saharan Africa has focused on the negative consequences for women, some studies have highlighted the positive role lobola plays in relationships and the ways in which women may benefit from this longstanding cultural practice (Rudwick and Posel 2014; Shope 2006; Walker 1992; Yarbrough 2018). In this study, we examine how lobola figures into South African women's marriage aspirations and lived experiences in the context of social change and structural disadvantage.

Over the past two decades, South Africa has undergone projects of reconstruction, reconciliation, and globalization in the aftermath of apartheid. Most notable in this process is the disjuncture between the aspirations for upward mobility of Black South Africans experiencing freedom from oppressive apartheid era laws, and the reality, which has not delivered on these expectations. One reason for this is the economy, which has shifted from a system highly reliant on Black men's migration from rural to urban areas to work in mines or commercial agriculture, to a more precarious situation marked by temporary, underpaid, and uncertain employment for both men and women (see Blalock 2014). At the same time, major transformations have occurred in gender relations, marriage, and childbearing. Indeed, one dominant narrative questions whether marriage in South Africa is a "dying institution" (Posel et al. 2011, 102), due to the dramatic declines in formalized marriages and concomitant increases in both non-marriage and long-term cohabiting relationships, especially among Black South Africans (see Hosegood et al. 2009; Statistics South Africa 2018b). However, as we show in this paper, marriage aspirations for Black women are alive and well, as are cultural practices related to formalizing marriage.

The inherent complexity of social, economic, and health (HIV) conditions in post-apartheid South Africa is exemplified in the perceptions and reality of lobola. In this paper, we show how rural women are reconfiguring lobola to fit within modern life course aspirations and trajectories (see Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2004, 2006). Building on past work, we conceptualize "modern" aspirations and trajectories to include practices such as white weddings, relationship norms that privilege egalitarianism and monogamy, and expectations of achievement in higher education and career trajectories (Frye 2012; Hunter 2010; Mojola 2014; Smith 2009; Wyrod 2016). We draw on in-depth interviews with 43 women aged 18–55 from a variety of relationship statuses to explore: (1) women's desires for their partners to pay lobola; (2) what lobola means for women across the life course; (3) women's ideals regarding lobola versus the reality of what they are willing to accept given current social, economic, and health conditions; and (4) the implications of lobola for women's emotional and social wellbeing. In so doing, we illustrate the complex nature of marriage and lobola by highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of this cultural practice for women in rural South Africa.

Our analysis contributes to debates around modernity by showing that the adoption of modern marriage practices, such as white weddings or civil ceremonies, need not necessitate the shedding of traditional practices such as lobola (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Hunter 2010, 2016; Smith 2007, 2009). Rather, we offer a view that considers how people selectively integrate traditional cultural practices into their conceptions of modernity. Our analysis illustrates how women navigate the contradictory scripts surrounding marriage and lobola, and the processes through which lobola becomes incorporated into women's views of modern marriage and family life in the context of social change. Moreover, by explicitly recognizing the local political economic context that offers both opportunities and constraints (Hunter 2007), we are better positioned to appreciate the material, symbolic, and practical dimensions of lobola. Finally, this work advances understandings of the extent to which marriage may serve as a protective institution for women. While there have been a number of studies examining the marriage-HIV connection in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Bongaarts 2007; Clark 2004; Glynn et al. 2003; Parikh 2007), less attention has been focused on union formalization processes such as lobola (see Wojcicki et al. 2010 for an exception), which can function as a pathway through which risks and benefits may be accrued.

Literature Review

Marriage in South Africa

"Marriage in Southern Africa…seems to be both normal and unattainable at the same time" (Pauli and van Dijk 2016, 260). This statement is an accurate reflection of both the change and continuity that mark the South African context, which has been profoundly shaped by its apartheid history. Marriage rates have historically been much lower than the rest of the continent (Budlender et al. 2004; Garenne 2016) and have continued to decline (Hosegood et al. 2009). By 2008, only 24% of Black South African women aged 20–45 were married, compared to 38% in 1995 (Posel et al. 2011). Additionally, the age at marriage in South Africa has increased substantially over the past several decades (Garenne 2004; Hertrich 2017): the median age at first marriage in 2016 was 34 for men and 31 for women (Statistics South Africa 2018a, 2018b). Moreover, there is notable variation in union formation processes across racial groups; for example, compared to other racial groups, Black South Africans are the least likely to be formally married and the most likely to be in non-marital partnerships and cohabitations (Budlender et al. 2004; Posel and Rudwick 2013). As marriage rates have declined, non-marital partnerships in which couples have aspirations for marriage have become more common, though these relationships are more likely to be secondary, concurrent partnerships marked by instability (Harrison and O'Sullivan 2010; Hosegood et al. 2009). Marriage in South Africa is patrilineal, and couples typically reside with the husband's family in extended family arrangements that may include adult siblings and other paternal relatives (Junod 1912; Niehaus 1994). However, due to frequent labor migration, co-residence is not always a defining feature of married couples (Hunter 2016). Additionally, non-marital first births are increasingly common among Black South Africans (Garenne et al. 2001; Sennott et al. 2016), and fathers and their children born from non-marital relationships often do not co-reside, as these children typically stay with the mother and her family (Madhavan et al. 2013). Despite these changes, kin identity, norms, and cultural obligations to kin groups remain important factors in the arrangement of family life, including marriage (Madhavan et al. 2013) and the provision of care (Knight et al. 2016; Madhavan et al. 2017).

Shifting marriage patterns can be attributed in part to high unemployment, which undermines men's marriageability (Hunter 2006; Posel et al. 2011); changing gender relations due to the advancement of women's rights, women's increased labor force participation, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Dworkin et al. 2012; Sennott and Angotti 2016; Solway 1990); changing expectations of marriage (Cole and Thomas 2009); and enduring hegemonic masculinity norms that support men's multiple partnerships (Hunter 2005; Wyrod 2016). Moreover, the risk of HIV infection has further elevated the status of marriage in order to protect physical health through monogamy and to preserve moral order (van Dijk 2013; Wyrod 2016).

Marriage and Lobola

Lobola (bridewealth) also plays a significant role in marriage patterns and practices in South Africa. It usually is comprised of money and gifts given by the prospective groom to the wife's family as a way to solidify the couple's union and the relationship between the two families (Kuper 2016). Lobola also signifies the acquisition of the wife's future earnings and reproductive capacity by the husband's family, thereby rendering the couple's children part of the husband's family lineage (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Steyn and Rip 1968). Though historically this exchange occurred between families, it is now often an individualized process where the husband is responsible for negotiating the amount and completing the payments (Ansell 2001; James 2017; Yarbrough 2018). Traditionally, the main commodity exchanged took the form of cattle (Goody and Tambiah 1973); however, lobola has become increasingly monetized over time, resulting in typical costs ranging from ZAR10,000 to ZAR25,000 (approximately \$700–\$1800 USD[1]). These amounts are often out of reach for men living amidst high unemployment and low wages, especially in rural areas (Casale and Posel 2010; Hunter 2010, 2016; Posel and Casale 2013; Posel et al. 2011). If men are unable to pay up front, payments may extend over long periods of time (Ansell 2001; James 2017; Yarbrough 2018), leaving men in an endless cycle of financial obligations and debt to their in-laws (James 2017; White 2016). The struggle for men in paying lobola is largely due to the political economic conditions in which they form relationships and the linkages between norms about masculinity and the imperative for men to fulfill a provider role in families and households (Hunter 2006; Townsend 1997; Wyrod 2016). Monetization has also fed into a perception that lobola renders women the property of men and, perhaps, more vulnerable to abuse by husbands and in-laws (Parker 2015; Shope 2006). This is compounded by the expectation that a woman and her family will pay back the lobola if a marriage ends, which can curtail a woman's ability to end the relationship (Rudwick and Posel 2015).

These trends suggest that marriage has effectively become a mechanism of social stratification, similar to what has been observed in the United States (Cherlin 2010; McLanahan 2004). Thus, though it is still held up as the ideal, many South Africans will never formally marry through the payment of lobola (Hunter 2016; Posel et al. 2011). Moreover, white weddings, which are now considered the norm among (those aspiring to) the middle and upper classes, have become lavish affairs, the costs of which render formal marriage further out of reach (van Dijk 2017; Hunter 2016; Pauli and van Dijk 2016). Nonetheless, even for couples who can afford an expensive ceremony, lobola remains essential to legitimizing the union. In fact, having both lobola and a white wedding might be considered the highest form of status attainment through both traditional and modern means, though open to only a select few who have the financial resources. Therefore, long-term relationships in which partners live together without lobola are likely to reflect economic disadvantage in that men in these relationships have fewer resources than men who are able to pay lobola (Posel and Rudwick 2012). Despite the economic challenges in formalizing unions through lobola, research suggests that formal marriage (i.e., having lobola paid) remains an important aspiration among Black South Africans (Harrison and O'Sullivan 2010; Posel and Rudwick 2012; Rudwick and Posel 2015).

---

[1] This amount is based on exchange rates as of May 13, 2019. See https://www1.oanda.com/currency/converter/.

Implications of Bridewealth for Women

Studies from across sub-Saharan Africa have shown that bridewealth is associated with power inequities that disadvantage women in marriage (e.g., Ansell 2001; Frost and Nii-Amoo Dodoo 2010; Horne et al. 2013; Rudwick and Posel 2015). For example, research from Ghana has shown that gender norms tied to bridewealth constrict women's reproductive autonomy (Adjei and Mpiani 2018; Frost and Nii-Amoo Dodoo 2010; Horne et al. 2013), and in Uganda, bridewealth has been shown to influence women's reproductive behavior by curtailing their contraceptive use (Dodoo and Nii-Amoo Dodoo 2017). Research has also linked the payment of bridewealth to unequal power in marriage and intimate partner violence against women in Ghana (Adjei and Mpiani 2018), Papua New Guinea (Eves 2019), and Uganda (Hague et al. 2011), which limit women's autonomy and ability to leave a marriage (see also Ansell 2001; Rudwick and Posel 2015).

At the same time, relationships in which there is no plan for lobola are looked down upon in South Africa (Moore and Govender 2013; Posel and Rudwick 2012), indicating the value lobola still holds. For example, recent research by Yarbrough (2018) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa found that women who supported both lobola and gender equality in relationships associated men's payment of lobola with their willingness to value ideals such as intimacy, autonomy, and equality. Others have found that lobola can solidify bonds of intimacy and reciprocity between partners and families and contribute to relationship stability (Ansell 2001; Hunter 2016; James 2017; Parker 2015; Shope 2006). Additionally, lobola can serve as a form of symbolic capital for women, conferring dignity, respect, and status in families and communities, and for children from the union (Rudwick and Posel 2015; Shope 2006; Walker 1992). Thus, the custom continues to be viewed as a valuable cultural practice for formalizing a relationship and remains widely supported among both men and women in South Africa. Our work builds on this research by highlighting how the positive and negative aspects of lobola are often intertwined in women's views and experiences.

Conceptual Framework

To understand women's views and experiences related to lobola in rural South Africa, we draw on Johnson-Hanks's (2002) theory of vital conjunctures. *Vital* refers to key demographic events that constitute life course transitions, such as getting married and having a child, and *conjunctures* is taken from Bourdieu's approach to linking structure and agency. Johnson-Hanks argues for shifting our view from seeing key life events as the things that "organize socially made lives" to a view that prioritizes institutions and aspirations, with the recognition that aspirations are multiple, complex, and evolving (2002, 867). In the case of the present study, women's desires related to the institution of marriage and the practice of lobola are tied up in their aspirations for the future and ideals about what a modern relationship and life course ought to entail. Additionally, particularly relevant for this analysis is the emphasis on "indeterminacy" (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 865) in characterizing key life events. We extend this framework through our view of marriage as a vital conjuncture that is neither fixed nor predetermined but rather processual. Moreover, the payment of lobola is characterized less by strict rules of conduct—or using Johnson-Hanks's term, an "authorized transition" (2002, 865)—and more so by the intersection of social and economic circumstances and individual desires that renders the various stages of marriage and lobola fluid, uncertain, and contingent. Structural factors, such as high unemployment for Black men and women and the quest to maintain cultural practices, complicate the pursuit of modern aspirations such as independence from kin, egalitarian relationships, and upward mobility through education and employment (see for example, Hunter 2010; van der Vliet 1991; Wyrod 2016). Lobola, therefore, becomes an ideal issue to examine, given its significance in the process of union formalization, but one that is actively being reconfigured to address the high levels of uncertainty in the contemporary South African context.

Uncertainties surrounding work, marriage, and family life due to shifts in the political economy, gender relations, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic are likely to influence women's desires and experiences related to lobola. Views of marriage and lobola may therefore reflect the contradictions and ambivalence women experience as they navigate the changing landscape of political, economic, and social change in South Africa (see Pike et al. 2018; Smith 2004). In sum, the contradictions and indeterminacy of lobola reflect women's understanding of their roles as modern women and how they view their future aspirations amidst social and economic insecurity. Echoing Hunter (2010), Black women in post-apartheid South Africa are caught between their newly accorded rights that open up aspirations for upward socioeconomic mobility, modern markers of status, and empowerment, and the fulfillment of cultural obligations amidst challenging health conditions, which may inadvertently close these same possibilities.

Methods

Study Setting

The study is nested in the Agincourt Health and socio-Demographic Surveillance System (Agincourt HDSS) site in the rural Agincourt sub-district of Mpumalanga Province in northeast South Africa. The Agincourt HDSS incorporates 110,000 individuals in 21,000 households in 31 villages and has been conducting an annual census to collect demographic and health information from all residents since 1992 (see www.agincourt.co.za). Agincourt residents are primarily members of the Shangaan ethnic group and one-third are of Mozambican origin. The area is a former apartheid-era "homeland," which was established through forced resettlement of Black South Africans who endured multiple hardships, including inadequate healthcare, employment, education, and infrastructure (Worden 2007). Many of these substandard conditions remain today (see Kahn et al. 2012). Every village has a primary school and some have secondary schools; however, educational quality is poor, leaving the bulk of the population poorly equipped to attain stable employment. Formal employment options are limited to the education, health, and tourism sectors. The lack of jobs and poor educational options serve as push factors for men and increasingly women to migrate for work. In addition to the challenges of the local political economy, HIV prevalence is nearly 20% among adults, with a much higher prevalence among women (24%) than men (11%) (Gómez-Olivé et al. 2013). These factors have implications for the timing of relationship formation, childbearing, and lobola.

Data and Sample

The study was designed to explore rural South African women's views and experiences related to relationship formation, marriage processes, gender equality, and health and wellbeing. We draw on in-depth interview data collected in 2015 from 43 Black women aged 18–55. Interviews were conducted in the local language (XiTsonga/XiShangaan) by a research team comprised of the first author and three local female interviewers with experience conducting research in the study site. Participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study. Interviews lasted one to two hours, were audio-recorded, and translated and transcribed by the research team. The findings drawn from the interview data were supported by the first two authors' extensive experiences working in this area of South Africa. The study received ethical approval from institutional review boards in the United States and South Africa, and from the Mpumalanga Province Department of Health. We use pseudonyms to identify all people and places to protect the confidentiality of study participants.

Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling methods. To determine study eligibility, we employed a quota sampling criteria to recruit women into three groups based on their current relationship status. The first group of women were in formal marriages with partners who had paid lobola ($n = 13$, 30% of sample). Formal marriage is based on lobola because few marriages in the research site are formalized through civil registration, and none of the women in the study reported officially registering their marriage. The second group of women were in long-term cohabiting relationships with partners who had not paid lobola (n = 13, 30% of sample). Women in this group either described their partners as their boyfriend (*makwapeni or xigangu in Shangaan)* or their husband (*Nuna*), which highlights the processual and indeterminate nature of marriage and lobola in this context. All of the women in this group wanted their partners to pay lobola, but they were unable to do so due to the high costs and the lack of stable, well-paying jobs. Thus, these couples remained in a state of ambiguity and liminality in their being in a long-term relationship that was not formally recognized due to the lack of lobola. The third group was comprised of women who were not currently in a union, defined as those who were neither formally married nor in long-term cohabiting relationships ($n = 17$, 40% of sample). Many women in this group had a boyfriend; however, none lived with their partners.

Study participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 with an average age of 34. Nearly 70% had finished secondary school, yet only 26% were working in the paid labor force. Additionally, one woman was in school, one was volunteering at a local preschool, and one was in the process of starting a small business selling fruit. Study participants had between zero and nine children, with nearly three children on average, and one woman was pregnant at the time of the interview.

Illustrating the complex and processual nature of marriage and lobola in rural South Africa, we found variation within each group of women in the sample based on their experiences related to lobola. For the women in formal marriages with lobola, one participant's (Alice) husband had paid lobola but subsequently died. Although she had a boyfriend (similar to most of the women who were not in a union), she was distinct in her experience of being widowed. Additionally, five women in formal marriages with lobola (Aris, Blessing, Etta, Ripfumelo, and Sana) described the payments as only partially fulfilled, though the process had already extended over years and their relationships were widely recognized as formal and legitimate. Three women who described themselves as in long-term cohabiting relationships without lobola (Devotion, Gift, and Rhanzdu) were divorced from men who had paid lobola. Among women who identified as not in a union, three (Dream, Cynthia, and Hlekani) had previously been in long-term cohabiting relationships without lobola and one (Olive) was divorced from a partner who had paid lobola. All but one (Xongisa) of the women who were not in unions had current boyfriends. We draw on these complex relationship trajectories and positions vis-à-vis lobola to provide context to women's views and experiences.

Analysis

We used a combination of deductive and inductive coding methods to analyze the interview data (Charmaz 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). We first engaged in structured coding by interview question, focusing primarily on two questions related to lobola: (1) what are the good things about lobola?, and (2) what are the bad things about lobola? We also analyzed several interview questions focused on women's overall wellbeing, happiness, and their views of their relationship with their partner. We analyzed these items by group to determine whether there were systematic differences in women's wellbeing based on their relationship status and desires related to lobola. Through the coding process, the complexity of lobola as conferring a mix of benefits and liabilities emerged as important and is thus the focus of this paper. Based on this emergent theme, we returned to the data, re-analyzing and coding each transcript. The quotes presented below reflect the most prevalent themes that emerged across interviews. To aid in the readability of the quotes presented below, we made minor edits to grammar and include brackets to denote clarifying words.

Findings

Echoing extant literature on the enduring importance of lobola (Rudwick and Posel 2015; Shope 2006), most study participants (88%, $n = 38$) regarded lobola as an essential part of formalizing a union, even if the payment process has become protracted and, in many cases, impossible due to local political economic conditions. That is, most women recognized the difficulty men face in paying lobola because of employment precarity. Yet, lobola was highly desired because it was seen as conferring dignity and respectability and ensuring social support. At the same time, these potential benefits were paired in women's narratives with the difficulties marriage and lobola can bring, including the end of one's educational pursuits, a partner's infidelity, and the traditional expectation that a *makoti* (daughter-in-law) will unfailingly sacrifice herself to serve her husband and in-laws. In the following sections, we discuss three themes that illustrate how women navigate the complexities of modern marriage: (a) cultural expectations and respectability; (b) sexual morality and HIV; and (c) social support and relationship stability.

Cultural Expectations and Respectability

Lobola confers dignity and a route to respect for women in their communities in a context in which education and employment are difficult to obtain and offers a tenuous sense of status at best (see Sennott and Mojola 2017). The most common refrain from women, when asked about the good things about lobola, was that it provides dignity. For example, Ellen, a 46-year-old woman who has been in two long-term cohabiting relationships (neither of which included lobola) said:

> I think the importance of lobola is that your husband will respect you, and he won't abuse you time and again, as he will know that he bought you through the lobola money. I think that is important. His family too won't play with you [cause you problems], as they know that they paid money. But if lobola is not paid, they are doing what they like. In everything they are saying or doing, what they want is to treat you bad.

As reflected in Ellen's quote, lobola may provide women with dignity within the relationship as well as the larger family as compared to women in long-term relationships without lobola, who are in a more tenuous and disadvantaged position in negotiating these social relationships.

However, this view was complicated by women's depictions of formal marriage as difficult because of the gender norms regulating the behavior of *makotis*. Olive, a 41-year-old woman who is divorced from her ex-husband (who paid lobola) and currently dating a long-term boyfriend, highlighted these challenges:

> In marriage you will be treated like a domestic worker. Everybody in the family is expecting you to take care of them as if you don't have blood [you are not a human being]. Sometimes your man is getting other women [having extramarital affairs] and coming back home, he changed his attitude and his behavior. If you heard about it and asked him, you will hear him saying "…Are you still here? Why don't you pack your clothes and go at once?" You see! [*She was laughing*.] So, with me I can't stand for that.

As reflected in Olive's quote, traditional expectations for a *makoti's* role in the household reinforce women's subordination in marriage. In this sense, formal marriage can curtail women's freedom and independence at a time when gender rights feature prominently in social and political spaces in South Africa (see also Hunter 2010). In these circumstances, the symbolic capital of lobola may provide women with dignity and status in the community, yet fail to shield them from gendered expectations and a partner's sexual behavior. This tension is brought to light by Glory, a 52-year-old woman in a formal marriage (with lobola), who described the tradeoffs that come with marriage and lobola:

> The good thing about being married is that you get dignity. As a woman, it is a must that after you have grown up, after you have completed your studies, it is good to be married.…But when I look on the other side of marriage, married women are suffering. [*There was laughter*] I think it is good to get married if you use your rights as a woman. If we don't use our rights as women, we will be suffering. Men are giving us problems.…If I knew my rights before [marriage], I think I will have gone far. I would be working.…We [women] accept everything that men bring to us. All we want is to build a family. Even if we are suffering, we don't mind. So, men are difficult.

Glory is grappling with different models of respectability. One model entails traditional routes to respectability for women by emphasizing marriage and childbearing; the other acknowledges the importance of modern life course aspirations related to education, employment, and rights in the post-apartheid context (see also Hunter 2010; Parikh 2007). Although Glory is aware that formal marriage does not guarantee happiness or the fulfillment of women's rights, she still supports the idea of marriage because of its social and cultural importance for women. At the same time, she is opposed to the patriarchal arrangement that marriage may support. The contradictions in these different models of respectability illustrate the uncertainty surrounding modern marriage and the indeterminacy of the institution for women.

In a similar vein, women often weigh the value of education as a modern marker of status and respectability, and voice concerns about how marriage eliminates opportunities to pursue additional education. Aris, a 37-year-old woman in a formal marriage, whose husband completed lobola payments in 2008 (after eight years), said:

> Sometimes you want to do things, but you can't since you are married. I can give you an example about me. This year my parents wanted me to go to university, but because my husband didn't approve it, I didn't go, and it delayed my future plans.

Aris's example shows how desires for education can compete with gender norms in formal marriage. In this case, despite her parents' support of her attending university, Aris had to abide by her husband's wishes. For never-married women, education is often highly valued, in part, because it is tied to future lobola payments. Amukelo, a 27-year-old woman who has been dating her boyfriend for a year, described how the value of lobola is tied to a woman's education:

> …If a woman is married, she is separated from her family, and if she is educated and she is working, she will go to use the money with her husband. The lobola is paid just to thank her family for growing her up and getting her to be educated. And that she is fine and her behavior also counts. So the man should thank his wife's parents by paying lobola.

As Amukelo describes, at the time of marriage, women separate from their natal families and formally become part of their husband's family. Yet, families may still be motivated to invest in a daughter's education as it may translate into higher lobola. At the same time, Amukelo's comments highlight how lobola also depends on a woman's respectful behavior, defined in this setting as abiding by longstanding gender norms that "encourage deference, modesty, and self-restraint" (Sennott and Mojola 2017, 789). In this case, being educated and behaving well enhance the value of lobola, thereby providing an example of how women integrate notions of modernity into longstanding cultural norms and practices to elevate their status.

Respectability gained through lobola even continues after death, as expressed by Rose, a 28-year-old woman who has been living with her partner (without lobola) for three years:

> …If it happens that I become sick or die here [while living with her partner], it will be hard for him to go to my family to inform them because he is not officially known [due to lobola not being paid]…. I think if he pays lobola it is helpful because nowadays there are different diseases[2] [HIV], so if it can happen that I die, he won't have a problem in burying me. My family won't tell him to pay [lobola] because he will have already paid.

---

[2] HIV is commonly referred to through indirect references, such as the "disease of nowadays" (see also Angotti and Sennott 2015).

The expectation is that if a woman dies while living with a partner without lobola, the partner would be required to pay lobola to her family before she is allowed to be buried. Given the employment conditions in the local political economy, this would be a formidable challenge for a deceased woman's partner. Nonetheless, this practice was commonly discussed in the interviews, with women stressing the cultural significance of lobola to ensure a proper death.

Although we did not set out to investigate white weddings in this study, it is important to note that they are increasingly assuming currency in this community as a form of modern respectability in the eyes of the Christian Church but also as a marker—sometimes lavishly so—of social class. Several participants talked about their desires for a white wedding in addition to lobola. However, achieving this is also a source of stress as made evident in Glory's (52-year-old woman in a formal marriage) comments about her daughter's marriage:

> It's like by the time lobola was to be paid for my daughter. I agreed on the ZAR23,000 [from her son-in-law] because they are saying they want a white wedding. That's why I did understand, because a wedding is expensive. You need to budget…. Her husband also said the money we charged [for lobola] is not enough for the wedding, as it will require a lot of money. That's why he is trying all his best to help his wife apply for a job [to help pay the wedding costs]….

This is an example of how lobola is being reconfigured and leveraged to achieve a modern status through its integration into contemporary wedding ceremonies. Glory describes a common predicament faced by young couples who yearn to attain legitimacy through both lobola and a white wedding but struggle to pay the exorbitant costs. Thus, prospective grooms—such as Glory's son-in-law—who are traditionally responsible for paying these expenses are increasingly turning to their future wives to pool financial contributions (see also van Dijk 2017 in Botswana). These efforts may ultimately provide Glory's daughter with more status and negotiating power in the marriage (see also Guvuriro and Booysen 2019). At the same time, because of the exorbitant expense, white weddings send a signal to the community that a family is well off economically, which can cause competition and jealousy among those who do not have the means (see also Ashforth 2005; Niehaus 2013).

In sum, our participants have a formidable task. They need to reconcile different models of respectability in a context in which longstanding cultural practices are highly valued, but women also aspire to modern life trajectories that include education, employment, and some level of power within their relationships. They also face uncertainty in fulfilling gendered expectations. Although lobola provides dignity and respect for women in their communities and families, it may also limit their agency. These tensions highlight the indeterminacy of marriage and lobola for women, which is also made evident in the thorny issue of sexual morality.

Sexual Morality and HIV

Women spoke at length about marriage and sexual morality for women and men in the context of HIV/AIDS. For women, sexual morality in formal marriage is closely linked to the respectability that comes from being recognized as monogamously committed to one man. For example, Alina, a 44-year-old woman who is formally married, said: "The good thing about being married is to be called Mrs., and it helps you have dignity because you have your own husband." Similarly, Alice, a 37-year-old woman who was widowed from a formal marriage and has been dating a married man for three years, emphasized the expectations of sexual morality for married women:

> If you are not married, you are not safe, because some other women who are not married go to the taverns, bashes, everywhere. They don't take care of themselves because they are not married, and sometimes they come home in the morning [stay out all night] because they are not married. But if you are married, you are safe. You will always come home in time. Even when you go out, you will come home early because you are a married woman, and everyone will respect you because you are married.

Alice's comments highlight gendered expectations about women's sexual behavior in marriage as well as the sexual respectability that marriage brings. That is, she describes how married women are supposed to stay close to home rather than frequenting bars and clubs, thus protecting themselves both from alcohol-infused settings that might precipitate risky sexual behavior, as well as assumptions about why women might be frequenting those spaces in the first place, such as to seek out transactional sexual partners (Mojola 2014; Watt et al. 2012). Similarly, Gavaza, a 43-year-old woman in a formal marriage, emphasized how being married can protect women from suspicion when other women's husbands are unfaithful: "…Nowadays if you are not married, all married women are watching you. If their husbands don't come home, they always suspect that you must be having an affair with their husband." Thus, the dignity that comes with formal marriage is in part tied to gendered assumptions about the sexual behavior of married women.

As reflected in the quotes above, participants view formal marriage as bestowing respectability and sexual morality on women. Research from across southern Africa supports the idea that lobola payments "incentivize faithful female sexual behavior" (see also Ansell 2001; Bishai and Grossbard 2010, 1178). For example, studies have found that women in marriages with bridewealth are less likely to engage in extramarital sexual relationships (Bishai and Grossbard 2010 in Uganda) and more likely to engage in behaviors that are known to be protective against HIV, as compared to women in relationships without bridewealth (Wojcicki et al. 2010 in Zimbabwe). In this sense, marriage with lobola can be viewed as beneficial insofar as it defines women as sexually respectable and supports norms of femininity that encourage women to avoid sexually risky environments; it also may provide women with protection from men's sexual advances, as well as suspicion, as indicated by Alice and Gavaza above.

The relationship between marriage and men's sexual morality is murkier. On the one hand, women perceive the lack of lobola as giving men freedom to have extramarital sexual partners, as expressed by Masasani, a 39-year-old woman who has been living with her partner (no lobola) for nine years: "The bad thing is when he 'steals' [cheats] on me and it causes arguments between us….. I think he is doing that because when we argue about cheating he keeps on saying that I should not forget that he didn't pay lobola for me." As is clear from Masasani's comments, men may also buy into the idea that monogamy is only for marriages with lobola and use it as leverage when they are caught cheating on their partners. On the other hand, women acknowledged that men's infidelity was a common predicament that formally married women also face, thus complicating the benefits related to sexual respectability that women might accrue from lobola. Alina, a 44-year-old formally married woman, reflected on this issue: "You find that your husband is cheating on you, it's painful….But you will enjoy marriage if your husband loves you and respects you, and is not cheating on you." Thus, although formal marriage may signal a shift in women's sexual morality and respectability, it does not necessarily do the same for their husbands (see also Bishai and Grossbard 2010; Heeren et al. 2011).

Our data suggest that the role of lobola in relation to men's sexual morality is less about sexual fidelity (as it is for women) and more about engaging in extramarital relationships discreetly. Nyeleti, a 26-year-old woman who has been living with her partner (no lobola) since 2009, highlighted how lobola alters the ways men handle their sexual affairs. She said that when lobola is paid, even if a man has extramarital sexual partners, he "can hide [the affair] unlike the one who didn't pay lobola." In another example of women's optimistic views of how lobola may shift men's sexual behavior, Samara, a 38-year-old formally married woman, commented on married men's use of condoms in outside relationships: "You are more than safe if you are married because if your husband can decide to cheat, he will protect himself [use condoms] for the sake of me as his wife or his marriage."

In sum, the payment of lobola does not necessarily mean that husbands do not have extramarital sexual relationships, but it may encourage men to do so in ways that preserve the respectability of the marriage, such as through hiding outside relationships. At the same time, married women are in a vulnerable position in relying on their husbands to engage in protective behaviors—like using condoms—in outside sexual relationships (Parikh 2007). Women also viewed lobola as protective against other men's sexual advances, who may view married women as more deserving of dignity and respect. Thus, while marriage and lobola could be seen as offering women some peace of mind amidst a great deal of uncertainty, this is complicated by the fact that women still expect that their husbands will have extramarital partners (Hunter 2005; Wyrod 2016). Women whose partners have not paid lobola are in even more precarious situations as their partners may use the absence of lobola to justify their outside sexual relationships, as depicted above in the case of Masasani (see also Heeren et al. 2011). What is common in all cases—regardless of relationship status—is indeterminacy in that the boundaries on sexual morality are porous, especially for men.

Whereas women may be quite circumspect about the power of lobola in enforcing men's sexual fidelity, they appear more confident in the protection marriage offers from sexually transmitted infections, especially HIV. This is particularly consequential in a community with an HIV prevalence of 24% among adult women (Gómez-Olivé et al. 2013). Women perceive formal marriage as decreasing their risk of HIV but also acknowledge the limits of lobola in reigning in men's sexual desires. For example, Twelani, a 28-year-old woman who has been dating her boyfriend for eight months, said: "If you are married, you are safe in terms of diseases [HIV]." Gavaza, a 43-year-old formally married woman, echoed this sentiment: "Nowadays people die by diseases, so if you are married, you are safe because you have your own husband. You will never get infected by diseases." What these women are suggesting is that if you are married, you are more likely to stick with one sexual partner (i.e., your husband), thus reducing your risk of HIV; but this view fails to acknowledge the risks accrued through husbands' outside sexual relationships. For instance, Alice, a 37-year-old widow who is dating a married man, explained: "…Nowadays there are diseases, so if you are married, it will not be easy to get infected by diseases." The contradiction between this statement and Alice's current relationship with a married man is testament to the disjuncture between women's aspirations and their realities (see also Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2006).

Although marriage may not stop men from having outside sexual relationships, women see marriage and lobola as important because they preserve women's sexual respectability by ensuring their own sexual fidelity. Therefore, if women do contract HIV, they will know that it came from their husbands rather than from an outside boyfriend, which is tied to women's sexual respectability. Ripfumelo, a 35-year-old formally married woman, highlighted this link: "…If you are married, you are avoiding many things like diseases. If I am married, I will have one partner…if I am not married, I will go up and down with men [have casual sexual relationships]. Being in marriage is important." Rather than having casual sexual relationships, Ripfumelo claims that marriage reduces the number of sexual partners (for women), protecting them from blame for HIV transmission and reinforcing their sexual respectability (see also Wojcicki et al. 2010). However, Etta, a 30-year-old formally married woman whose husband had completed partial lobola payments, described how this sense of security is flawed, as condom use frequently tapers off as a relationship becomes more established (see also Tavory and Swidler 2009):

> I can say nowadays people are not committed to one marriage….To be honest, between two people who are in love, you will find that condoms were used during the first month or during the first stage of love. After that we get used to each other and there are no more condoms. So I think about my husband, as I don't use a condom with him. The result of cheating is to get illnesses…. I do talk with my husband every now and then about using a condom. I'm happy because I know that even if I can get ill, the one who will infect me would be my husband….I only have him.

Why is it so important to know the source of infection? We suggest that the answer may lie in the importance of gendered sexual respectability. For a married woman, sexual fidelity is consistent with both traditional gendered expectations and notions of a modern marriage sanctioned by Christianity (Parikh 2007; Smith 2007). By ruling out the possibility that HIV infection could occur through her infidelity, a married woman stakes a claim to morality. However, in reality—and reinforced by data—marriage does not confer protection from HIV for women and, in fact, may increase the risk of transmission (Bongaarts 2007; Clark 2004; Glynn et al. 2003; Parikh 2007). Thus, although marriage as a conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2006) provides women with respectability and a boost to their moral status, it does not reliably protect them from HIV.

Social Support and Relationship Stability

Participants agreed that a primary function of lobola is to build a stronger relationship between a couple and their respective families. Eliza, a 55-year-old woman in a formal marriage, said: "Lobola is paid to bring families together so that they should have a good relationship and that I should live in the household that my family will know." Eliza's comments also point to the formal recognition of a relationship that lobola provides. These changes can increase the security that women feel, as explained by Khana, who has been living with her partner (no lobola) for nearly 10 years:

> If he is really in love, he should pay lobola so that both parents can become satisfied and women can also become satisfied that they are really staying in their own household. But if my man didn't pay lobola, it means that I am not complete and they [in-laws] don't like me. If he paid lobola, I will be free [feel confident in my position in his family], and there is nowhere I can go [leave the marriage], and my parents are happy about me.

Although Khana's quote emphasizes the ways that lobola brings families together in support of the couple, it also highlights how familial investment in the relationship can limit a woman's ability to end a marriage. Nonetheless, lobola is meant to ensure accountability and responsibility of the families (particularly the husband's) for the wellbeing of the couple and their children. Indeed, the joining of families to support a couple in a time of difficulty sets formal marriages apart from relationships without lobola, as Amukelo, a 27-year-old woman who has been dating her boyfriend for a year, described:

> If it can happen that the couple has conflict, it is hard for the wife's parents to come in and solve the problem. They can say, "Why are you staying with him meanwhile your husband didn't pay lobola?" They can say that they won't be able to support her. They can also say if the man really loves you [the woman], he should pay lobola. If lobola has been paid, they will tell the couple to discuss and solve the problem. Sometimes when she can go to her parents to report it [the problem], they can send her back to talk to her husband. If there is no lobola, families won't gather and solve the problem. The lobola should be paid so that the families should be united.

Without the formal recognition of the union and the relationship between the two families that lobola provides, women are often left in a state of liminality and uncertainty, as described by Priscilla, a 36-year-old woman who has been living with her partner (no lobola) for 18 years:

> There are no good things [about living together without lobola] but it's only being patient. Because it sometimes happens that you feel bad that he didn't pay lobola, or maybe he can change his mind [about being in the relationship]. You can stay with him meanwhile he's got his own plans. Your parents didn't receive any cent. Sometimes you can stay here at home, and after that you get news that your husband is getting married at Jozi (Johannesburg), who knows! I'm always thinking about this.

Priscilla's comments illustrate how lobola can bring women a sense of security about the stability of their relationship.

However, aspirational ideas about what marriage may bring are not often met in reality, as expressed by Hlekani, a 23-year-old woman who has never been formally married but lived with a previous partner (no lobola), who reflected on her past experiences in her partner's family home:

> By then I was a real makoti. I woke up in the morning and [built a] fire while other people were still sleeping. I prepared breakfast for everyone. On the other side, you are pregnant and you have to cook, meanwhile the sun is hot [*There was laughter*]. He was going out with his friends since daylight, and if you check the time, you find that it's 10:00 at night and still he is not home. By then you are thinking of him and you won't be able to sleep. You also ask yourself questions, like, is he safe? By then I became so stressed….I loved him a lot and I wanted him to marry me. But after that, I decided just to stay at home [go back to her natal family]. I don't want to go to other people's house to be abused. I feel free here at home because I do things according to my will.

Hlekani's concerns about her partner's infidelity and her lack of autonomy prompted her to end the relationship and return to her natal family. Since Hlekani's partner had not paid lobola, the process of leaving was simplified because she did not need to consider whether her family would have to repay the lobola. In highlighting the complexity of modern marriage, the absence of lobola in this case could be seen as an advantage because it allowed Hlekani to leave an unhappy relationship.

As shown above, lobola confers advantages to married women by expanding their familial networks, increasing social support from both families, enhancing relationship strength and stability, and providing women with a sense of security. At the same time, the customs associated with lobola—by requiring that women and their families pay back the money if a marriage ends—can extend the life of an unhappy marriage by limiting women's ability to leave and even incentivizing a woman's family to encourage her to stay married (see also Ansell 2001; Rudwick and Posel 2015). In this sense, the expectations, often highly gendered, that accompany lobola can enhance women's sense of security, but be detrimental to their agency and independence (see Moore 2015).

Discussion

Our findings show that lobola continues to be a critical element of formalizing a union in rural South Africa. Although the majority of women in the study wanted their partners to pay lobola, they were also aware of the tradeoffs they must make to attain respectability through fulfilling gender norms tied to marriage. Women were faced with models of respectability that valued both traditional routes to gaining dignity, including the payment of lobola, sexual fidelity, and submission to a husband, as well as modern markers of status, such as education, employment, and women's rights in relationships (Hunter 2010; Smith 2009; Wyrod 2011). Indeed, the transformation underway in post-apartheid South Africa has left many—in particular, young women—in search of clear cultural scripts to follow. Moreover, a political economic framework brings into stark relief the lack of clear choices amidst high unemployment, uncertain returns to education, and frustratingly limited pathways to upward mobility. On this point, similarities can be drawn with the US context where scholars have noted the formidable challenges that low-income couples face in getting married (Cherlin 2010). Indeed, similar to the women in our study, aspirations for marriage are very high for women of low socioeconomic status in the United States, but the chances of making it a reality are slim (Edin and Kefalas 2011). While lobola as a cultural marker of union formalization is not present in the US context, the issues facing women regarding the need for respectability, support and security, and sexual fidelity (and protection from disease) are remarkably similar. Therefore, the findings from our study may shed light on larger discussions about the changing contours of union formation processes amidst structural disadvantage in a variety of global contexts.

Our analysis also highlights how women are integrating cultural practices such as lobola into modern aspirations and trajectories. Similar to Smith's (2001) findings for Nigeria, Black women in rural South Africa are not necessarily eschewing lobola; in fact, most of them desire it. However, unlike Smith's participants who are educated and urban, the rural women in our study challenge the view that aspirations to attain modern respectability are the exclusive prerogative of urban women (see also Mojola 2014). Indeed, the South African context provides a well-suited backdrop to interrogate and reconfigure the very definition of "modern" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) amidst a post-apartheid setting in which rights have been granted in the absence of economic security, and gendered sexual morality is being tested alongside efforts to prevent HIV transmission. By offering a complex—and often contradictory—set of benefits and liabilities, lobola continues to feature prominently in how women assess their physical, economic, and emotional security, and their aspirations for upward mobility. In some cases, there is evidence of women bargaining with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988) and exerting agency in deciding how to use lobola to attain benefits (e.g., to further their education), while, in others, it may be more a matter of quiet resignation regarding lobola's limits (e.g., men's infidelity), coupled with the belief that lobola can provide some protection from HIV through women's own sexual behaviors (e.g., monogamy). What is exceedingly clear is that women are drawing on multiple evolving scripts to navigate a challenging set of circumstances and expectations in the aftermath of South Africa's transition to democracy. In this sense, the need for a conceptual lever rooted in fluidity, inconsistency, and syncretism (see also Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2004, 2006) becomes clear. The analysis we have presented offers such an approach.

By analyzing women's own desires, aspirations, and experiences related to marriage and lobola, our study adds new insights to scholarly debates on marriage formalization processes across sub-Saharan Africa. Our interviews allow for a nuanced understanding of the ways in which marriage processes play out against a background of profound social change and structural disadvantage, and the consequences for women. Our approach also complicates the view that bridewealth necessarily perpetuates gender inequality, by illustrating how it can also be beneficial for women as they navigate norms surrounding gender, respectability, and modernity. Some of our findings diverge from research on bridewealth in other sub-Saharan African settings. For example, our participants did not discuss a lack of control over reproductive decision-making as an implication of bridewealth for women, as other studies have found (e.g., Dodoo and Nii-Amoo Dodoo 2017; Horne et al. 2013). Although some women discussed constraints on their ability to ensure men's condom use, these comments focused on disease protection rather than childbearing. However, it is notable that our study did not set out to examine the relationship between bridewealth and reproductive autonomy or decision-making. This is an important area for future research drawing on women's lived experiences in settings across sub-Saharan Africa where bridewealth remains important. One limitation of our study is the lack of data on men's views of marriage and lobola, which would allow us to assess whether women's desires and experiences resonate with men's and the role of the political economy in shaping men's desires and decisions related to marriage. Ideally, we would also want to follow women's relationship trajectories prospectively to determine the extent to which their aspirations are met, and to identify the turning points or conjunctures that may be critical for later outcomes.

Our study provides insight into how enduring cultural practices can be reshaped and imbued with new meanings in societies undergoing rapid social change. In post-apartheid South Africa, the complexity that modern marriage and lobola bring for women echoes the country's larger project of social transformation. In the context of globalization, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and shifts in the social organization of education, work, and relationships, women and men must grapple with complex notions of what it means to be respectable in both traditional and modern ways. This means reconciling aspirations for modern routes to status (education, employment, egalitarian relationships) with social pressures to fulfill longstanding gender expectations, while navigating the politically charged terrain of women's status and rights (Hunter 2010; Parikh 2007; Smith 2009; Wyrod 2016). Ultimately, the decisions women and couples make about marriage and lobola amidst these pressures have implications for the persistence of social inequality, the success of global campaigns promoting gender-based rights, and the reconfiguration of culture and modernity in South Africa and beyond.

Acknowledgments Earlier versions of this manuscript were presented at the 2019 Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association and the Population Association of America. We would like to thank the MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt); the Lobola research team:

Meriam Maritze, Nester Monareng, and Ellah Sihlangu; and Emily Dye and Abigail Nawrocki for research assistance. Finally, we are grateful to the women who participated in this project and shared their experiences.

Funding information This work was supported by grants from the Purdue Research Foundation, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Department of Sociology at Purdue University. We would also like to acknowledge support from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (P2C-HD041041) to the Maryland Population Center Research Center. The Agincourt Health and Socio-Demographic Surveillance System site is supported by the University of the Witwatersrand and Medical Research Council, South Africa, and by the Wellcome Trust, UK (grants 058893/Z/99/A, 069683/Z/02/Z, 085477/Z/08/Z and 085477/B/08/Z). The content of this article is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the funders.

References

Adjei, Stephen Baffour, and Anthony Mpiani. 2018. Bride Price, cultural and gender identity, and husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana. *Victims & Offenders* 13 (7): 921–937.

Angotti, Nicole, and Christie Sennott. 2015. Implementing ‘insider' ethnography: Lessons from the public conversations about HIV/AIDS project in rural South Africa. *Qualitative Research* 15 (4): 437–453.

Ansell, Nicola. 2001. “Because it’s our culture!” (Re)negotiating the meaning of lobola in southern African secondary schools. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27 (4): 697–716.

Ashforth, Adam. 2005. *Witchcraft, violence, and democracy in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bishai, David, and Shoshana Grossbard. 2010. Far above rubies: Bride price and extramarital sexual relations in Uganda. *Journal of Population Economics* 23: 1177–1187.

Blalock, Casey. 2014. Labor migration and employment in post-apartheid rural South Africa. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado Boulder.

Bongaarts, John. 2007. Late marriage and the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population Studies* 61 (1): 73–83.

Budlender, Debbie, Ntebaleng Chobokoane, and Sandile Simelane. 2004. Marriage patterns in South Africa: Methodological and substantive issues. *Southern African Journal of Demography* 9: 1–25.

Casale, Daniela, and Dorrit Posel. 2010. The male marital earnings premium in the context of bride wealth payments: Evidence from South Africa. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 58 (2): 211–230.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2001. Grounded theory. In *Contemporary field research: Perspectives and formulations*, ed. R. Emerson, 335–352. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

Cherlin, Andrew J. 2010. *The marriage-go-round: The state of narriage and the family in America today*. Vintage Books.

Clark, Shelley. 2004. Early marriage and HIV risks in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning* 35 (3): 149–160.

Cole, Jennifer and Lynn M. Thomas. 2009. *Love in Africa*. University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. 1999. Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: Notes from the south African postcolony. *American Ethnologist* 26 (2): 279–303.

van Dijk, Rijk. 2013. Counselling and Pentecostal modalities of social engineering of relationships in Botswana. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15(sup4): S509–522.

van Dijk, Rijk. 2017. The tent versus lobola: Marriage, monetary intimacies and the new face of responsibility in Botswana. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 40 (1): 29–41.

Dodoo, Naa Dodua, and F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo. 2017. Bridewealth payment and actual contraceptive behavior in Uganda. *Sociological Viewpoints* 31 (1): 46–60.

Dworkin, S.L., C. Colvin, A. Hatcher, and D. Peacock. 2012. Men’s perceptions of women’s rights and changing gender relations in South Africa: Lessons for working with men and boys in HIV and antiviolence programs. *Gender & Society* 26 (1): 97–120.

Edin, Kathryn, and Maria Kefalas. 2011. *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eves, Richard. 2019. “Full price, full body”: Norms, brideprice and intimate partner violence in highlands Papua New Guinea. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 21 (12): 1367–1380.

Frost, Ashley E., and F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo. 2010. “The man comes to marry the woman”: Exploring adolescent boys’ gendered expectations for bridewealth and marriage among the Akwapim of southern Ghana. *Marriage & Family Review* 46 (1–2): 41–59.

Frye, Margaret. 2012. Bright futures in Malawi’s new dawn: Educational aspirations as assertions of identity. *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (6): 1565–1624.

Garenne, Michel. 2004. Age at marriage and modernisation in sub-Saharan Africa. *Southern African Journal of Demography* 9 (2): 59–79.

Garenne, Michel. 2016. A century of nuptiality decline in South Africa: A longitudinal analysis of census data. *African Population Studies* 30(2 (Supp)): 2403–2414.

Garenne, Michel, Stephen Tollman, Kathleen Kahn, Terri Collins, and Shirley Ngwenya. 2001. Understanding marital and premarital fertility in rural South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27 (2): 277–290.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Glynn, J., M. Caraël, and A. Buvé. 2003. HIV risk in relation to marriage in areas with high prevalence of HIV infection. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* 33: 526–535.

Gómez-Olivé, Francesc Xavier, Nicole Angotti, Brian Houle, Kerstin Klipstein-Grobusch, Chodziwadziwa Kabudula, Jane Menken, Jill Williams, Stephen Tollman, and Samuel J. Clark. 2013. Prevalence of HIV among those 15 and older in rural South Africa. *AIDS Care* 25 (9): 1122–1128.

Goody, Jack, and S.J. Tambiah. 1973. *Bridewealth and dowry*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Guvuriro, Sevias, and Frederik Booysen. 2019. Economic bargaining power and financial decision-making among married and cohabitant women in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa* 36 (4): 504–518.

Hague, Gill, Ravi K. Thiara, and Atuki Turner. 2011. Bride-price and its links to domestic violence and poverty in Uganda: A participatory action research study. *Women's Studies International Forum* 34: 550–561.

Harrison, Abigail, and Lucia F. O'Sullivan. 2010. In the absence of marriage: Long-term concurrent partnerships, pregnancy, and HIV risk dynamics among south African young adults. *AIDS and Behavior* 14: 991–1000.

Heeren, G. Anita, John B. Jemmott III, Joanne C. Tyler, Sonwabo Tshabe, and Zolani Ngwane. 2011. Cattle for wives and extramarital trysts for husbands? Lobola, men, and HIV/STD risk behavior in southern Africa. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 21 (1): 73–81.

Hertrich, Veronique. 2017. Trends in age at marriage and the onset of fertility transition in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population and Development Review* 43: 112–137.

Horne, Christine, F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo, and Naa Dodua Dodoo. 2013. The shadow of indebtedness: Bridewealth and norms constraining female reproductive autonomy. *American Sociological Review* 78 (3): 503–520.

Hosegood, Victoria, Nuala McGrath, and Tom Moultrie. 2009. Dispensing with marriage: Marital and partnership trends in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 2000-2006. *Demographic Research* 20 (13): 279–312.

Hunter, Mark. 2005. Cultural politics and masculinities: Multiple-partners in historical perspective in KwaZulu-Natal. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7 (3): 209–223.

Hunter, Mark. 2006. Fathers without amandla: Zulu-speaking men and fatherhood. In *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, eds. L. Richter and R. Morrell, 99–107. Chicago: Independent publishers group (IPG).

Hunter, Mark. 2007. The changing political economy of sex in South Africa: The significance of unemployment and inequalities to the scale of the AIDS pandemic. *Social Science & Medicine* 64 (3): 689–700.

Hunter, Mark. 2010. *Love in the time of AIDS: Inequality, gender, and rights in South Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hunter, Mark. 2016. Is it enough to talk of marriage as a process? Legitimate co-habitation in Umlazi, South Africa. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39 (4): 281–296.

James, Deborah. 2017. Not marrying in South Africa: Consumption, aspiration and the new middle class. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 40 (1): 1–14.

Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. 2002. On the limits of life stages in ethnography: Toward a theory of vital conjunctures. *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 865–880.

Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. 2004. On the modernity of traditional contraception: Time and the social context of fertility. *Population and Development Review* 28 (2): 12–30.

Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. 2006. *Uncertain honor: Modern motherhood in an African crisis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Junod, Henri. 1912. *The life of a south African tribe*. Neuchatel: Imprimerie Attinger Freres.

Kahn, Kathleen, Mark A. Collinson, F. Xavier Gómez-Olivé, Obed Mokoena, Rhian Twine, Paul Mee, Sulaimon A. Afolabi, Benjamin D. Clark, Chodziwadziwa W. Kabudula, Audrey Khosa, Simon Khoza, Mildred G. Shabangu, Bernard Silaule, Jeffrey B. Tibane, Ryan G. Wagner, Michel L. Garenne, Samuel J. Clark, and Stephen M. Tollman. 2012. Profile: Agincourt health and socio-demographic surveillance system. *International Journal of Epidemiology* 41: 988–1001.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society* 2 (3): 274–290.

Knight, L., Victoria Hosegood, and Ian M. Timaeus. 2016. Obligation to family during times of transition: Care, support and the response to HIV and AIDS in rural South Africa. *AIDS Care* 28(sup4): 18–29.

Kuper, Adam. 2016. Traditions of kinship, marriage and bridewealth in southern Africa. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39 (4): 267–280.

Madhavan, Sangeetha, Abigail Harrison, and Christie Sennott. 2013. Management of non-marital fertility in two south African communities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15 (5): 614–628.

Madhavan, Sangeetha, T.W. Myroniuk, Randall Kuhn, and Mark A. Collinson. 2017. Household structure vs. composition: Understanding gendered effects on educational progress in rural South Africa. *Demographic Research* 37: 1891–1916.

McLanahan, Sara. 2004. Diverging destinies: How children are faring under the second demographic transition. *Demography* 41: 607–627.

Mojola, Sanyu A. 2014. *Love, money, and HIV: Becoming a modern African woman in the age of AIDS*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Moore, Elena. 2015. Forms of femininity at the end of a customary marriage. *Gender & Society* 29 (6): 817–840.

Moore, Elena, and Rajen Govender. 2013. Marriage and cohabitation in South Africa: An enriching explanation? *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 44 (5): 623–639.

Niehaus, Isak. 1994. Disharmonious spouses and harmonious siblings: Conceptualising household formation among urban residents in QwaQwa. *African Studies* 53 (1): 115–135.

Niehaus, Isak. 2013. *Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa*. London and New York: International African Institute and Cambridge University Press.

Parikh, Shanti A. 2007. The political economy of marriage and HIV: The ABC approach, 'safe' infidelity, and managing moral risk in Uganda. *American Journal of Public Health* 97 (7): 1198–1208.

Parker, Glynis. 2015. The practice of lobola in contemporary south African society. *Journal of Global South Studies* 32 (2): 175–190.

Pauli, Julia, and Rijk van Dijk. 2016. Marriage as an end or the end of marriage? Change and continuity in southern African marriages. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39 (4): 257–266.

Pike, Isabel, Sanyu A. Mojola, and Caroline Kabiru. 2018. Making sense of marriage: Gender and the transition to adulthood in Nairobi, Kenya. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 80 (5): 1298–1313.

Posel, Dorrit, and Daniela Casale. 2013. The relationship between sex ratios and marriage rates in South Africa. *Applied Economics* 45: 663–676.

Posel, Dorrit and Stephanie Rudwick. 2012. Attitudes to marriage, cohabitation and non-marital childbirth in South Africa. Paper presented at the micro-econometric analysis of south African data conference (MASA).

Posel, Dorrit, and Stephanie Rudwick. 2013. Changing patterns of marriage and cohabitation in South Africa. *Acta Juridica* 2013 (1): 169–180.

Posel, Dorrit, Stephanie Rudwick, and Daniela Casale. 2011. Is marriage a dying institution in South Africa? Exploring changes in marriage in the context of ilobolo payments. *Agenda* 25 (1): 102–111.

Rudwick, Stephanie, and Dorrit Posel. 2014. Contemporary functions of ilobolo (bridewealth) in urban south African Zulu society. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 32 (1): 118–136.

Rudwick, Stephanie, and Dorrit Posel. 2015. Zulu bridewealth (ilobolo) and womanhood in South Africa. *Social Dynamics* 41 (2): 289–306.

Sennott, Christie, and Nicole Angotti. 2016. Reconsidering gendered sexualities in a generalized AIDS epidemic. *Gender & Society* 30 (6): 935–957.

Sennott, Christie, and Sanyu Mojola. 2017. "Behaving well": The transition to respectable womanhood in rural South Africa. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 19 (7): 781–795.

Sennott, Christie, Reniers Georges, F. Xavier Gomez-Olive, Menken Jane, F. Xavier Gómez-Olivé, and Jane Menken. 2016. Premarital births and union formation in rural South Africa. *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 42 (4): 187–196.

Shope, Janet Hinson. 2006. "Lobola is here to stay": Rural black women and the contradictory meanings of lobolo in post-apartheid South Africa. *Agenda* 20 (68): 64–72.

Smith, Daniel Jordan. 2001. Romance, parenthood, and gender in a modern African society. *Ethnology* 40 (2): 129–151.

Smith, Daniel Jordan. 2004. Contradictions in Nigeria's fertility transition: The burdens and benefits of having people. *Population and Development Review* 30 (2): 221–238.

Smith, Daniel Jordan. 2007. Modern marriage, men's extramarital sex, and HIV risk in southeastern Nigeria. *American Journal of Public Health* 97 (6): 997–1005.

Smith, Daniel Jordan. 2009. Gender inequality, infidelity, and the social risks of modern marriage in Nigeria. In *The secret: Love, marriage, and HIV*, ed. J.S. Hirsch, H. Wardlow, D.J. Smith, H.M. Phinney, S. Parikh, and C.A. Nathanson, 84–107. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Solway, Jacqueline S. 1990. Affines and spouses, friends and lovers: The passing of polygny in Botswana. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 46 (1): 41–66.

Statistics South Africa. 2018a. *An exploration of nuptiality statistics and implied measures in South Africa*. Pretoria: South Africa.

Statistics South Africa. 2018b. *Marriages and divorces, 2016*. Pretoria: South Africa.

Steyn, Anna F., and Colin M. Rip. 1968. The changing urban bantu family. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 30 (3): 499–517.

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet M. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Tavory, Iddo, and Ann Swidler. 2009. Condom semiotics: Meaning and condom use in rural Malawi. *American Sociological Review* 74 (2): 171–189.

Townsend, Nicholas W. 1997. Men, migration, and households in Botswana: An exploration of connections over time and space. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23 (3): 405–420.

van der Vliet, Virginia. 1991. Traditional husbands, modern wives? *African Studies* 50 (1): 219–241.

Walker, Cherryl. 1992. Attitudes to 'lobola': Findings from some student research projects. *Agenda* 13: 57–58.

Watt, Melissa H., Frances M. Aunon, Donald Skinner, Kathleen J. Sikkema, Seth C. Kalichman, and Desiree Pieterse. 2012. "Because he has bought for her, he wants to sleep with her": Alcohol as a currency for sexual exchange in south African drinking venues. *Social Science & Medicine* 74 (7): 1005–1012.

White, Hylton. 2016. The materiality of marriage payments. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39 (4): 297–308.

Wojcicki, Janet M., Ariane van der Straten, and Nancy Padian. 2010. Bridewealth and sexual and reproductive practices among women in Harare, Zimbabwe. *AIDS Care* 22 (6): 705–710.

Worden, Nigel. 2007. *The making of modern South Africa: Conquest, apartheid, democracy*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wyrod, Robert. 2011. Masculinity and the persistence of AIDS stigma. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 13 (4): 443–456.

Wyrod, Robert. 2016. *AIDS and masculinity in the African city: Privilege, inequality, and modern manhood*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Yarbrough, Michael W. 2018. Very long engagements: The persistent authority of bridewealth in a post-apartheid south African community. *Law & Social Inquiry* 43 (3): 647–677.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Christie Sennott is Associate Professor of Sociology at Purdue University. Her research interests are in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, family formation, gender, HIV/AIDS, and motherhood, and her work has appeared in journals such as *Gender & Society*, *Demography, Journal of Marriage and Family,* and *Culture, Health & Sexuality*.

Sangeetha Madhavan is Professor of African American Studies and Sociology and the Associate Director of the Maryland Population Research Center. As a family demographer working in Africa and, in particular, South Africa and Kenya, she has made substantial contributions to our understanding of extended family systems, parenting, household dynamics, inter-household connectivity, spatial proximity and child and adolescent well-being. Her research has appeared in *Population Studies*, *Journal of Marriage and Family, Social Science Research* and *Demography.*

Youngeun Nam is a PhD student at Purdue University. Her research interests include family, gender, sexual and reproductive health, and culture. She has published in *Culture, Health & Sexuality* and *Asian Journal of Women's Studies.*

Affiliations

Christie Sennott[1,2] • **Sangeetha Madhavan**[2,3] • **Youngeun Nam**[1]

[1] Department of Sociology, Purdue University, 700 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA

[2] MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt), School of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

[3] Department of African American Studies and Sociology, University of Maryland, 1119 Taliaferro Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA