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Ties of Dependence: AIDS and Transactional Sex in Rural Malawi

Abstract

Patron-client ties and a moral obligation to support needy kin are central to African social life, and are usually understood as operating in a very different realm than the exchange of sex for material support that Western observers have labeled “transactional sex.” Believed to be a major driver of the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, transactional sex is usually seen as akin to prostitution, a degraded form of sexual expression forced on vulnerable women by economic desperation. Based on evidence from rural Malawi, we argue that the exchange of sex for money is better understood as one of the many ties of unequal exchange in which Malawians and other Africans engage.

The conventional wisdom among academics and policy makers addressing AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa is that the generalized heterosexual epidemic there is driven by “transactional sex.”¹ This is the widespread practice of a particular kind of exchange relationship, in which men and women exchange material benefits and sex. Our argument is that such practices are indeed widespread, but that the standard narrative, linking them to prostitution and emphasizing the exploitation of poor, vulnerable women by wealthier, more powerful men, misses a great deal of what motivates and sustains such sexual patterns. Using a remarkable data-set—more than 600 observational field journals in which rural Malawians recorded the ordinary conversations they overheard or participated in—we try to give a more socially grounded sense of the larger social pattern that naturalizes and sustains what international observers isolate as “transactional sex.”

Three features of transactional sexual practices seem particularly difficult for Western observers to understand. We argue that seeing each of these features in terms of larger patterns of unequal personal dependence gives a better account of the dynamics of such relationships than standard accounts provide. First, Western ideology separates “real love” from monetary exchange (see Collier 1997; Illouz 1997; Zelizer 2005), so that sexual practices that blend long-term relations of mutual affection with overt economic exchange violate analysts’ implicit moral and analytic categories. Second, transactional sex perplexes observers precisely because it is not in fact a distinctive category of sexual relationship like prostitution, which is recognized but appears to be uncommon in Africa. Rather, a transactional element is a feature of most sexual relationships in many regions of sub-Saharan Africa, from marriages, to long-term non- or extra-marital partnerships, to short term relationships (see Caldwell et al 1989; Hunter 2002; 2005). Third, transactional sexual practices bolster a pattern of multiple ongoing partnerships that is difficult for many analysts to explain. While several studies find the total lifetime number of sexual partners no greater in sub-Saharan Africa than in the West, “concurrent partnerships” (in contrast to “serial monogamy”) seem to be more common in Africa, and in the context of AIDS, particularly dangerous.² The image of transactional sex as a desperate expedient of impoverished women seems to explain women’s reliance on multiple partners in a way that Western analysts find comprehensible.³ But such analysts are less good at explaining why many

African men seek ongoing sexual partnerships with a variety of women, and why it is not only—or even primarily—the poorest women who engage in multiple sexual relationships.

Here we examine these features of sexual partnerships in relation to broader African patterns of unequal interdependence. Using a set of conversational journals from rural Malawi, we examine how sexual partnerships are understood in relation to ties of dependence that link kin, patrons and clients, and others who seek to mitigate social and economic insecurity through constructing ties of dependence. Our conclusion is that an appreciation of transactional sex as but one manifestation of a familiar, pervasive and deeply embedded system of interdependence will allow scholars and policy-makers a more realistic, grounded understanding of the forces that hold this system in place and what, if anything, might be done to alter it.

The Data

The journals were collected during the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP). The spine of the MDICP is a longitudinal survey of changing attitudes and behaviors concerning fertility, AIDS, and other matters in rural social networks, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with sub-samples of respondents (Watkins et al, 2003). When it proved to be difficult to learn who-said-what-to-whom in the context of clipboards and tape recorders, the researchers asked several high school graduates living in or near their study sites to be participant observers as they went about their daily routines. If they overheard anything concerning AIDS, they were to make mental notes of what people said and did, and then write their recollections word-for-word in commonplace school notebooks that evening or soon thereafter.⁴ We treat the conversational journals as texts that record hearsay evidence: we hear only secondhand, from the journalists' ears—and their memories—to our eyes.⁵ These journals produce an enormous number of texts that give unparalleled access to the meanings that circulate in a given society.

Approximately 600 journals, on average about 7500 words, were written between 1999 and the present (some are on the MDICP web site, with identifying information removed: www.malawi.pop.upenn.edu). Twenty-two journalists (9 female, 13 male) have contributed journals; three very frequently; thirteen frequently; and six only occasionally. All are high school graduates who went no further, all are young (20s or early 30's), and all rely on subsistence agriculture supplemented by casual labor or small-scale retail as well as intermittent MDICP activities. The conversations were in local languages, but the journals were written in English – and often hastily, such that the grammar is sometimes poor and words omitted. We have retained most of the idiosyncrasies in grammar and spelling, as well as locutions that reflect local adaptations of English,⁶ but have inserted words in brackets [] when necessary for clarity; words in carets < > are the journalist's). All proper names have been changed, and journal excerpts are cited using the pseudonym of the journalist and the date of the journal in year, month and day format.

Before proceeding further, we provide excerpts from a conversational journal to convey a flavor of their style, the remarkable level of detail the journalists recollect, and the number of people whose

conversations and activities they report. The journalist recounts a conversation among strangers on a crowded minibus, drawn together when one lacks the full fare. The main topic is the desirability—and the evils—of money. These excerpts illustrate the multiple conversations that frame the narrative of AIDS—and, to anticipate our theme, the multiple ties of unequal dependence that characterize Malawian life:

Another man began saying that everyone nowadays is serious of seeking money and you may find a lot of rich people not satisfied of what they have and want to have as much as money adding on what they already had. And asking them or begging them [for] money you may find that they really refuse and be giving their own complaints saying they don't have money letting his rather their fellow relatives die of hunger without assisting them yet they have a lot of money in the banks or even at their homes. Another one said that that's very bad indeed because wealth becomes good and sweet when eating together with relatives....

Another one said that even himself sees and thinks, [he] recalls his previous richness as history. And someone said that indeed money is wonderful and if people are dying a lot of the disease which has came nowadays known as AIDS its because of money.

People agreed. And the man continued saying that he feels pity when he visits many places especially in towns where he finds a lot of pretty girls or woman being movious [promiscuous] and a lot of them serving in bars due to rare opportunities of jobs. He went on saying ... that they went to school and they are not getting the job their parents wasted a lot of money paying for their school fees which is very expensive nowadays and then parents be expecting that the money which they had invested paying their school fees should be back to them after school.... [But] after school still they face the problem of job ... and girls especially those [who] looks very beautiful are the ones who find the jobs because they are proposed by the bosses and be sleeping with them and they can keep on changing the job if they want to because for example she might be employed at one company and meet with a certain boss of a certain company and the boss proposes her as well and promises her to find a job in his company with good salaries as compared to the current company she is working; and she accepts.

Another woman agreed and said that then its putting ones life into high risk nowadays its better to die unemployed than rushing to get employed and be obtaining money by sleeping with men (bosses in particular) nowadays of AIDS, the end result is that you wont last long for you will leave others to continue working while you go to the grave to get buried. [Simon 040203]

Although there are few journalists, the population talking is large and diverse. Each journalist has a small number of friends, relatives and neighbors who tend to interact fairly frequently and to know each other—what network analysts describe as dense networks. However, as in the excerpt above, the journalists also interact with or overhear strangers or people known only by name, a more heterogeneous category. We have tried where possible to triangulate the journals against other data, checking our findings from the diaries against surveys, interviews and focus-

group discussions conducted by the MDICP or other studies. The journals are in general consistent with data from other sources, but they give a much more vivid sense of the cultural and moral logics, the complexities and contradictions, and the texture of what people say spontaneously in their everyday conversations,

Transactional Sex and “Vulnerable Women”: Problems with the Dominant View

The work of Martina Morris and others suggests that the pattern of multiple *concurrent* partners, rather than the number of different partners, is a major reason why Africa has a generalized, heterosexual AIDS epidemic (Halperin and Epstein 2004; Morris and Kretzchmar 1995). While survey data from Africa show that a majority of men and women at any one time have only one partner, the proportion of reported multiple partners is substantially higher in Africa than elsewhere (Cleland and Ferry 1995).⁷ But there are several ways in which this pattern is misunderstood.

First, “transactional sex” is often portrayed as prostitution, or a modified form of prostitution. But those engaged in such relationships insist on the distinction between frank commercial sex work and informal transactions, and many scholars have made the same distinction.⁸ At least since Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin’s (1989) review of sexual relations across sub-Saharan Africa, it has been clear that the exchange of material benefits for sex is a pervasive practice in sexual relationships, including marriage, while the “spot market” of purely commercial prostitution is rare. For example, Mark Hunter, writing about the Zulu region of South Africa (Hunter 2004), points out that transactional sexual relationships derive more from the exchanges surrounding marriage than from commercial sex work, and in Kenya they have been seen as deriving from polygamy (Nelson 1985).

Second, while the women who are juggling a boyfriend and a husband, or multiple boyfriends, are usually portrayed as poor, powerless and powerless, often they are not. Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin (1989:215) argue that “For many educated young women, this is the only way of having a relationship with a high-status or powerful man and of gaining an entrée to society. It is also often only one part of a strategy for advancement, success, and high income in the world of government and business...”⁹ Others have found that forms of transactional sex enable women to make contacts that allow some to reach a higher social status, or in rural areas to invest and become economically independent (Pittin 1983 for Nigeria; Halpeny 1975 for Uganda; Akomah 1999 for Ghana). At the aggregate level, Shelton, et al. (2005) show that in Tanzania and Kenya HIV prevalence increases with wealth, especially for women. Their interpretation is that “wealth is associated with the mobility, time, and resources to maintain concurrent partnerships. Clearly such relationships might often have a strong economic element, but poverty itself may not be a major factor” (p. 1058). And although some poor rural married women seek multiple partners to feed themselves and their children, others want luxuries such as lotions and soaps, or are dissatisfied with their husband’s sexual performance, or are taking “revenge” for their husband’s infidelity (Tawfik and Watkins forthcoming 2006).¹⁰ Thus the narrative of women driven to multiple partnerships by economic desperation is at best incomplete.¹¹

Third, and most confusing to foreign researchers, most sexual exchanges are not straightforward commercial transactions in which men pay an agreed amount for sex. Rather, men who seek a sexual partner, whether on a long-term basis or for a single encounter, expect to give their sexual partners or their girlfriends “gifts” (Ashforth 1999; Poulin 2006). The courtship, sometimes brief, begins with words of flattery from the man, perhaps along with a soda or a packet of cookies, and the sexual encounter is typically followed by a more substantial gift (a bar of soap, money to buy a piece of clothing). These gifts are not negotiated as a price but are framed by the man and received by the woman as an expression of “love” (Hunter 2004; Poulin 2006). Moreover, unlike prostitution, the gifts or money may precede or follow the sexual encounter by days or even months (Poulin 2006). Far from demeaning the value of the transaction, the man’s material support affirms the woman’s value, just as among the Zulus of South Africa, the payment of bridewealth signifies the seriousness of a suitor’s intentions (Hunter 2004; Caldwell, et al. 1989:203-207).¹² As relationships develop, the exchange becomes even less explicitly linked to specific sexual encounters (Kaufman and Stavrou 2004), such that after marriage, if it occurs, it is a generalized exchange of the fruits of the gendered division of labor in the family.

As others have noted, outsiders sometimes have difficulty defining marriage in Africa (e.g. van de Walle and Meekers 1994; Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Respondents in surveys in rural Malawi have no difficulty reporting their marital status, but what criteria they use is unclear. Forms range from marriages registered with the government (few in the rural areas) or in a religious service, to marriages described as “I met her by the side of the road and we got married.” Additionally, on surveys a substantial proportion report themselves as married polygamously. What appears to be key to being married is “having someone to depend on” (Schatz 2003).¹³

Sex, Money and Dependence

In Malawi it is certainly true that transactional sex is linked to the idea that women need money while men have it. But this basic truth masks considerable complexity, which we illustrate with an extended excerpt from a conversational journal kept by the woman we call “Alice.” The excerpt makes vivid the links she and others see between gifts and sexual access, even for married couples, as well as their expectation that a man whose business is doing well almost inevitably seeks multiple sexual partners. The excerpt also shows the precariousness of rural men’s economic resources and the strength of women’s social resources—their willingness to divorce a husband who may bring AIDS and their ability to “just say no” (Luke and Kurz 2002:24; Poulin 2006; Reniers 2006). We insert comments in italics.

When I was coming back from Lilongwe, I passed by the house of Silowe’s ex-wife. That one was his first marriage but the woman divorced him because of his behaviour of womanizing. Mr. Silowe was getting married to another woman every year and the extra marital sexual partners were there as well. He was doing that because he was benefiting much from his business of selling fresh fish in the town. But Silowe did not know that things will change next time so that he will become poor and fail to help all the women who he married. His first wife divorced him fearing that he can contract AIDS from one of them.

When I was ready going home, I went to the market to buy some vegetables and I met with him there. He asked me if I was going home and I said yes therefore he bought some fish and gave them to me to take them to his x-wife. I saw him that his body was changed. He has become thin, sores all over his body and his legs are swelling but I did not ask him about his problem which makes his legs to swell especially the feet?

I received the fish and carried them to his x-wife. When I reached there, I told her that her husband was the one who sent those fish for her but [his] wife replied that he was sending them to his children and not her. [*She emphasizes that she is no longer having sex with her ex-husband, so she does not accept fish from him for herself, but only for her children.*] [Since] she managed to divorce him early before he began showing the symptoms of AIDS which he is now showing, she cannot allow him to remarry her again. He was changing women like clothes and he was not allowing to be advised. He was saying that he was using his own body and if someone was getting bored [*means something like "irritated" or "fed up"*], it was better to divorce her marriage and get married to other men who have no several marriages and partners.

He was also saying that it was his time to enjoy with his money which God gave him. It was time for him to drink beer and help poor women through being his sexual partners [*Note the image of him as a patron obligated to help poor women by having sex with them--male lust is not straightforward either.*] therefore his first wife divorced him in order to protect her own life so that she can try to look after her children for a long time. [Alice 040228]

Men's obligation to help poor women recurs frequently in the journals, as in this example from November 2005 during a period of severe drought, when an informant found himself captivated by a radio report of an incident in his home region:

Here is a rich man <*namadya bwino*> who is married and has children so with this starvation hunger situation which has hit Phalombe and the whole country as a whole there is also a certain household there and it was totally running out of food completely and they had nothing to touch them then that household there were two sisters of 18 and the other one 20 they sat down and made a decision that with the current hunger situation they planned to propose the *Namadya bwino* the rich man of Phalombe but he was married. The sisters went to the rich man and openly told him that he should marry the 2 sisters since they have nothing to do no food no any support the rich man accepted and married the 2 girls as of now they are 3 three wives now including the 1st wife and as of now the marriage is going on smoothly a man has married the girls because of hunger. [Chunga 051105]

A second excerpt, taken from a journal entry in which a neighbor consults the journalist about a problem with her husband, is more explicit about the link between sexual exchange and social obligation even as the husband's rationale is also more obviously self-serving:

Now what is happening is that my husband wants to marry another wife who is his cousin, I have tried to ask him to tell me why he wants to do this, but his reply to me was she is my cousin and I cannot allow her to be getting worried that men are not coming to ask for marriage to her.... He told me that he always gets concerned when he sees or hears women who worry that they are [not] getting married or they need help but they don't have means of getting the help like money to buy soap, relish [the meat or vegetable to accompany the staple grain], clothes and other need of their daily life while I know that I can take care of them for I have money and a shop where they can be getting their needs for God says help the needy <*poti Mulungu anati thandizani osowa*>.

So when I ask him is this the way you can help the needy through the exchange with sex, he says do you think I can just keep spending property with nothing in return? [Karmen 041107]

Money is Erotic

Unlike the image of prostitution with its semiotic opposition to “real love” as beyond calculation, non-mercenary and unselfish (Collier 1997; Illouz 1997), the diaries of our Malawi informants conflate rather than separate money and the erotic (as do the interviews in Poulin 2006). A flamboyant example comes from a wild scene in a bar. The diarist, ‘Simon,’ is a young married man with two children—a farmer and small trader—who often goes to bars for sociability. One day, an outraged wife storms into the bar looking for the bar girl who is sleeping with her husband, and a crowd collects, including Simon and several men he had just met at the bar. After an exchange of insults in which the bar girls ridicule the wife’s sexual powers, claiming that the husband comes to them because they have the equipment and the technique to satisfy him, the bar girls beat up the wife. Note that the wife defines her superior position by the fact that it is she who gets the lion’s share of material benefits from the husband:

This time I had my already cut packet of Chibuku [beer] in my hands and I was sipping little by little. And I could hear the woman saying that the man whom [the bargirl] sleeps with is her husband and she has got everything at home and a house too while that one whom she was fighting with has no home, a prostitute moreover and she cannot match with her, the one who was brought [up] in a good and well behaved family than her, a daughter of a snake.

We laughed some of us and then the woman went on saying that even she was bleeding like that but...she should know that the man is for her and she [the bargirl] is the loser and she only receives K100.00 [less than \$1 US] while she [the wife] manages to keep all the man’s salary....

Some of the Bar girls also answered...[that] they pay tax at the government for them to be selling beer there and its their way of earning their living and if her husband is not satisfied of her may be she doesn’t know how to *Kunyumulila*. <Chichewa meaning she doesn’t know how to dance up and down during sexual intercourse as the matter of

attracting the man to ejaculate fast.> The same bar girl said that probably she [the wife] doesn't have the clitoris that the husband could be enjoying when sleeping with her and that's why her husband tends to seek for someone.... She was the one who was talking about the clitoris <*zokoka* in Chichewa> without shy [shame]. She was drunk a bit and she would talk loudly for the woman to hear and others who came to see the fight which took less than an hour possibly 40 minutes. She could shout saying: You have the big problem, big mum your husband is not for you alone! He was born not for you special and indeed he will be sleeping with all of us here because we also need what he has, we need the penis as well for once it enters on us we just know that we are to eat that day no penis no money! [Simon 040215]

The bar girls glory in their sexual talents and lay claim to the man's body, which represents both sex and food (an imagery that recurs in many contexts in the journals). Of greater interest for our argument here, however, is their claim that "your husband is not for you alone." They assert the right to seek sex and money from any man who has it, rejecting any exclusive claim. A man's wealth, like his sex, belongs to any woman who needs what he has.

The equation between love and food also works in reverse, as in this discussion among men recalling the terrible 'hunger season' of 2001 in which relationships ended when men could not reliably feed their partners:

He said he remembered a lot of marriages broke and many *zibwenzis* <mere relationships> ended because men were failing to buy them maize for food and ... he gave an example of himself that a certain girl ended the affair with him because she kept on telling him that she stayed for 3 days without taking *nsima* [the staple food, made of maize flour] and he should give her money to buy maize flour for real maize grains were scares [scarce] and for her to cook *nsima*. But he also was starving with hunger together with his parents for by this time he was here in the village and be facing financial problems. And he said one time he received the letter telling him that he doesn't love her and he doesn't consider her and he said that she ended the affair there despite him meeting with her and pleaded to reconsider rather to be still on love and say about his money problem status. [Simon 040529]

The exchange of material support for sex is so taken for granted that men may demand the return of gifts from women who have betrayed them. In the following excerpt, the journalist, Simon, is drinking home-brewed beer in an informal bar (we would say a "dive") with a group of men he has just met. One drinker recounts his affair with a woman who lives near Simon's village, leading another to tell his own story:

Some one was listening to what we were talking <among the group> and he jumped into the conversation and said that even him he had been destroying his relationships after hearing that the girl is double crossing him.

He also said that when ending <destroying - *kuononga* - chichewa as he put it> he was making sure that what ever he bought for her say half petticoats, pants, shoes, *zitenje*,

dresses he was telling her to give him and the one whom she thinks can help her should take the challenges of buying clothes for her and he had been given back for instance he said he had a certain sexual partner at Mpale and another one at Nsingochi in Mangochi and [when] they double-crossed him he went straight to them and asked for his things. Like the one in Nsingochi he asked for the 4 skirts and 2 pair of shoes and a jean round hat to give it to him and she gave him and then after that he caught red handed the partner at Mpale with another sexual partner in her house where she was staying at night when he was drunk and he fought him and he ran away and he begun fighting the woman until her brother came who was to rescue her... He proceeded saying that the same night he told her parents that their daughter should bring forth the dressing which he was buying for her. He said before he could fight her once again she should not hesitate bringing forth the clothes before him and then parents told her to do that and then she brought the clothes to him while crying and that marked the end of their relationship. [Simon 040210]

By the same logic, a woman who refuses sex is refusing the basic bargain through which she receives support. A man whose doctor recommended that he give up sex and alcohol for a year

started troubling his wife that he wanted to have sex but his wife was refusing. Since the wife was refusing, he decided to stop working at his home and looked for another woman to marry because his own wife was refusing to have sex with him in order to follow what he was told at the hospital. [Alice 031005]

Overall rural Malawians take for granted that a man's material support is directly linked to sexual access, so that a man's failure to provide support justifies his partner's infidelity, and a woman in need of support will seek a husband or sexual partner. In the excerpt below a man tells Alice how his former wife justified her infidelities:

She was asked to say why she decided to have sex with other men yet she is married, she said that her husband was not buying clothes for her and he was also not buying groceries and food for her. She was very poor therefore she decided to look for the method which can help her in her problems. She then said that she does not mean that she doesn't love her husband. She will never do it again but her husband should try to be buying some food, groceries and clothes for his wife. She will always be depending on him as her husband. [Alice 040420]

A Man with Money Requires Sexual Partners

Urban and educated Malawians frequently explained to us that the root cause of the epidemic is women's poverty. From the perspective of villagers, however, it is men's money that is "forcing" men to have multiple partners:

Mary told me that Kassim has suffered a lot because he has been ill for some years. In the first days he was doing his business of selling fish at the market and he was having some much money, so that he was giving the money to his friends by credit but with interest.

He was then having much money and the money [was] forcing him to have many partners. [Alice 031005]

Another woman joins the conversation and, after recounting how Kassim's illness occurred when he cheated a business partner, adds, "He was very movious when he was in town because he had much money."

In contrast, poor men are seen to have trouble finding extramarital partners:

... I just heard from the certain woman called Miss Balani that she went to the funeral where the certain child died of AIDS. That marriage was looking very poor and ill. Many people there were not understanding how that disease came to them because the man was looking very poor. He was showing that he has no means of getting some money and many women now accept to have sex with the man who has money because she knows that she will receive that money and buy what she is lacking but the poor man as he was looking is very difficult to propose the extramarital sexual partners to have sex with. [Alice 031128]

Many men in Malawi are poor, but on average they have more access to money than do women. Both men's relative wealth and women's relative poverty contribute to sustaining transactional sex. But if men and women were equally poor, would transactional sex disappear? We doubt it.

Systems of Dependence

It is obvious that men with more money can afford more sexual partners. But what does it mean to say of a man with money that "the money was forcing him to have many partners"? A self-serving man may answer, as did the man above, that he had compassion for poor women who had no one to depend on for their needs, "while I know that I can take care of them for I have money and a shop where they can be getting their needs for God says help the needy." Our first reaction was to laugh; we now think, however, that the Malawian notion that men with money are forced to have sexual partners gives insight into transactional sex as part of a larger system patron-client relations. Just as women need patrons to provide them with material benefits, men need clients who provide them with an outward display of power, prestige and social dominance and an inward sense of behaving morally.

Some of the most influential discussions of patron-client relations come from studies of Latin America and South Asia (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Roniger 1990; Roniger and Günes-Ayata 1994) where powerful patrons control access to property, including public contracts, jobs or land. By definition, a patron has greater resources than his or her clients, not only material resources but also more influential or larger networks, or more knowledge about the wider world. In African societies, those acknowledged as powerful patrons also have "rights in persons" or "wealth in people" (Kopytoff and Miers 1977; Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Vansina 1990; Guyer 1993; Smith 2004b). As Vansina (1990) notes, "Wherever possible, wealth in goods was still converted into followers." Power, prestige and social dominance come to those who can accumulate clients and followers. Thus patrons redistribute their resources in order to collect

kin, first and foremost, but also followers, clients, and retainers. In exchange, patrons expect reciprocity. Clients can fulfill their obligations by turning up at a political rally or a funeral when the patron needs them—as well as by renewing a sexual relationship.

At the top of the patron-client hierarchy are those with abundant resources: money, jobs, informal networks that can be tapped by providing a client with an introduction to a government minister who might have contract to award, or to a university professor who has arcane knowledge about how to get an opportunity to study abroad. Upon gaining the contract, the former client can use those resources to augment the number and/or loyalty of his own clients or to increase her networks of contacts, and so on down the chain. Such ties are not limited to those in positions of official authority who might have privileges to distribute or a need for clients to demonstrate their prestige. A recent analysis of African societies (Chabal and Daloz 1999:41-2) emphasizes the pervasiveness of vertical ties of dependence: “...relations between leaders and followers, rulers and ruled, are to be understood in terms of asymmetrical reciprocity. Indeed, the imperative of gifts and gift-giving remains central to social life in contemporary Africa: it is more important to give, and thus to earn credit with others, than to receive. The truly destitute are those without patrons.” And, we might add, the truly powerless are those without clients, who in turn can provide more clients for their own patron’s entourage.

Chabal and Daloz also emphasize another aspect of patron-client ties that is central for our argument: such ties are fundamentally redistributive. “Most political actors are simultaneously dominant and dominated, one of the links in one of the many chains of dependence. Although there are strong inequalities within clientilistic relations...patrons suffer considerable constraints. The maintenance of their status is entirely dependent on their ability to meet the expectations of their clients—clients who are, as it were, the material embodiment of their standing—and who in turn must placate their own clients.” Thus, for example, families may be under great pressure to invite large numbers of both patrons and clients to expensive and elaborate funerals (Smith 2004a), and as we show below, those with resources are expected to help those without. “The acuteness of apparent inequalities is reduced by the imperative to be seen to redistribute on a scale appropriate to one's standing”—much as village men with money are “forced” to have girlfriends (Chabal and Daloz 1999, p. 28; see also (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Roniger 1990).

Patrons redistribute resources not only strategically to amass clients who reciprocate by displaying the prominence of the patron at a political rally or voting booth, but also because it is the moral thing to do. Hoarding resources is considered to be profoundly anti-social, breeding envy, resentment and disrespect, and, possibly, witchcraft to punish the miserly (Ashforth 2005; Chabal and Daloz 1999; see also Wardlow 2004). Moral obligations to kin and expectations of reciprocity are the core model for such ties of dependence—in Uganda, the word “poverty” means those who have no relatives (Whyte 1997)—but obligations of redistribution and reciprocity spread outward in a broad network of social relationships, such that only the most unfortunate have no social safety net to cushion an unpredictable disaster.

While those who write about patron-client exchanges usually focus on the political arena, similar ties of dependence can be observed at all levels of African societies (e.g. Vansina 1990; Ekwensi

1987 [1961]; Tibandebage and MacIntosh 2005). In poverty-stricken rural Malawi, both friends and informants described their own economic opportunities in terms of wealthier friends who had assisted them; conversely, many described the pressures of the dependents for whom they had to provide. Urban professionals talk of the burdensome obligations to kin in their home villages, the expectations that they would provide both necessities like cooking oil and maize flour and such luxuries as bars of soap, sugar, and tea. Malawians often told us stories of former associates—an old girlfriend, a former nursemaid, an old employee—suddenly showing up destitute, and according to the tellers at least, such potential dependents were not turned away. Indeed, in our data and in our experience in rural Malawi, each person is constantly shifting from acting as a patron, for example by sharing a “packet” of beer with other men at a bar, to acting as a client, for example by requesting advice or an opportunity for paid work. And of course, as Westerners, we ourselves were frequently cast in the role of potential patrons, both by those with whom we worked or who befriended us, and by the myriad hopeful seekers who offered themselves as “pen-pals,” assistants, or friends.

Throughout Malawian society—and in many other sub-Saharan African societies we have worked in and read about—virtually everyone, at all income levels, is seeking patron-client ties, what we call “ties of dependence” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Bayart 1993; Barnes 1986). Kaler and Watkins (2001) observe that family planning workers in Kenya systematically disobeyed some of the policies of the Ministry of Health because they were casting themselves as patrons, using the services they distributed to earn respect, gratitude, and perhaps unspecified future reciprocity. Daniel Jordan Smith (2003) writes of a similar exchange in internationally-funded family-planning programs in Nigeria. Staff use workshops to “repay the patrons who installed them as officers in the ‘dollar project’ and build their own networks of clients by doling out the per diems and allowances that are paid to participants” (p. 711). This, Smith argues, is part of a pervasive pattern:

Particularly important for negotiating one's way in contemporary Nigeria is what Ubakala natives call ‘having people.’ By this they mean having people—especially kinspeople —strategically placed across the Nigerian social and economic landscape to get access to opportunities and resources. Igbos, and Nigerians more generally, use kinship and other social relationships of reciprocity to mobilize affective ties for instrumental political and economic purposes. (p. 207)

Seeing transactional sex as part of a wider system of interpersonal dependence suggests important questions. In this section we use our understanding of patron-client relationships to interpret otherwise enigmatic features of sexual partnerships in Malawi and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa: the desire for and the difficulty of achieving fidelity; sexual networking as a form of social insurance; and the potential for independence when ties of dependence fail.

Fidelity versus Multiple Partners

In this section we interpret the tension between fidelity and multiple partners in terms of ties of dependence. Fidelity is seen, even by the promiscuous, as a desirable goal, and perhaps even

more so now that all are aware of the risk of premature death from AIDS (Watkins 2004). The fact that the favored Malawian expression for fidelity is “depend only on each other” suggests how central ties of dependence are to the whole way sexual relationships are experienced and understood. Why, then, is fidelity so elusive? As we will see, the forces that push men—but also women—to seek multiple partners do not come exclusively, or perhaps even primarily, from sexual desire.

Infidelity is a prime source of public gossip, but the many stories of infidelities in the journals make clear that both men and women want fidelity in a sexual partner. Despite the emphasis on fidelity by religious leaders (most Malawians report regular attendance at religious services) and from relatives and village elders (the *ankhoswes*, or “marriage counselors”), husbands and wives, as well as unmarried girlfriends and boyfriends, often find that their partners have been unfaithful.¹⁴ Story after story tells of a man away for the night returning home unexpectedly to find his wife with another man, or of a woman who suspects her husband is unfaithful tracking him down and confronting him or his paramour with her anger and distress. In the era of AIDS, infidelity is becoming a rationale for divorce, for women as well as men (Reniers 2006; Bunnell 1996). So what is the logic that generates multiple partners despite aspirations to fidelity?

For both men and women, the temptations of multiple partnerships derive not only from the combination of money and sex, but also from the logic of patron-client ties. For men, this logic leads them to become patrons of multiple women; for women, this logic leads them to seek multiple patrons. A patron demonstrates his (or sometimes her) importance precisely by the number and loyalty of his followers. And although the patron might expect undivided loyalty (think of the protestations of loyalty to fathers, monarchs and “friends” in Shakespeare’s plays), clients often find it expedient to cultivate multiple patrons, especially if each can be kept in the dark about the other’s existence. Mark Bloch (1961 [1940]) describes how in the second feudal age vassals began to swear fealty to more than one lord, receiving a fief from each but creating a crisis of loyalty if the two lords went to war against each other. A similar logic operates, we argue, in ties of dependence in sub-Saharan Africa. In sexual and romantic relationships, people want and hope for fidelity—women sometimes divorce unfaithful husbands or thrash the other woman; men may divorce a wife “caught red handed,” and both men and women express outrage and distress at the discovery of a betrayal. But at the same time, men seek to demonstrate their status as “real men” by becoming patrons to poorer women, and women may not be able—or may not want—to be a client to only one man.

Sexual Ties as Social Insurance¹⁵

One barrier to fidelity is that both men and women worry that their partners may not be available when they need them. A young man wants sex with his girlfriend, but she refuses to meet him by the river. A woman may find that her husband has other partners or no longer provides relish or buys her clothing. But more important than the fickleness of desire is the insecurity that pervades Malawian life.

Thoughtful observers of African realities have noted how fundamentally insecurity shapes the ways most Africans must make decisions. Writing of well-educated, and thus relatively privileged Cameroonian women, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2005:377) notes that, “under extreme uncertainty, when all the rules are changing, what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one—the one that takes every present in the subjunctive, that keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise.” The “judicious opportunism” Johnson-Hanks describes beautifully characterizes the conflicted and uncertain sexual strategies that continually recur in the journals as “everyday experience takes on the ambiguity, intensity, and uncertainty of vital conjunctures and standoffs” (Johnson-Hanks 2005; 2006; see also Whyte 1997 on Uganda; Ferguson 1999 on Zambia).

In such circumstances, sexual relationships are but one type of a much larger category of ties of dependence that are the closest thing to insurance in a perilous world. Another excerpt—from Rumphu, a Tumbuka area in the North of Malawi, where people are better educated and marriages are more stable than in the South—illustrates the critical insurance provided by multiple partners. The diarist, a young woman, is talking with a school friend:

She then told me that after that, her teacher proposed her although he was already married with two wives, she told me that she decided to refuse his proposal but her friends forced her to accept. She then also told me that although she had her teacher as her boyfriend she also had a business man. She told me that she decided to have two boyfriends so that if the other left her then she should already have another one. [Lilyan 040727]

The importance of having patrons as a hedge against disaster comes up constantly in the journals, as people bemoan their fate when those on whom they depend die or depart. In this extract from a chief’s court, in the southern region again, a man is explaining why his family took the house of his brother’s widow:

We did this on grounds that our brother didn't have any children with this woman and its awkward or improper to leave all the property with her, Honourable chiefs. This man, I mean my late brother was supporting a lot of people who are stranded this time due to this death, what are going to do with them, where are we going to get money to support them?

The widow begins to cry, pressing her claim not by referring to her rights, but by emphasizing that she is the one who is most “stranded”:

Honourable chiefs, my second question is that, in his statements, he said that my late husband was supporting a lot of people who are stranded this time, that is completely true and you have to know also that among those who are stranded I'm the person who are completely stranded, I don't know if these people knows that I'm one of those people who is more than stranded, whom do you think then will be assisting me? Tell me?

The reply is that she at least is an adult, unlike the young children who need support, but the decisive argument is that she has others upon whom she can depend:

she is an elderly [adult] person she knows what to do likewise the young ones who can know what to do and you have got your own relatives who can be assisting you. As a matter of fact, she can't be stranded, with this few words, I better stop here, thank you very much. [Trueman 041208]

That sexual ties are woven into the social safety net may explain why these ties are so often multiple and overlapping. Just as rural Malawians accept the inconstancy of the weather or the absence of minibus schedules, both men and women accept the inconstancy of sexual relationships and adopt an opportunistic strategy; they try to secure not only a main partner but also a stable of backups, or “spare tyres,” in case the main partner is unavailable, or stops meeting their needs. While women’s search for partners is often described as the result of economic necessity, in a world where uncertainty is pervasive and personal ties are the major reserve against future uncertainties, people need ties even when they do not immediately need what those ties might someday offer. That is why small gifts—symbolic luxuries rather than necessities—are sometimes sufficient to secure a woman’s sexual favors.¹⁶ Gifts signify indefinite promises of availability rather than single exchanges—a small gift can provide a sort of credit, an expectation of reciprocity at a critical time. Sexual relationships then serve as insurance in a double sense. Having multiple partners can provide backup if a partner dies or proves unfaithful, but even former partners create ties that one might be able to turn to in times of need. Ex-spouses sometimes help each other when one falls ill, and in this excerpt, a woman’s relatives are able to call on one of her former lovers for help with her funeral expenses:

When she died, her elder brother went to the member of parliament of her area and asked him to help them taking the funeral back to their home and he did not refuse because she was once his sexual partner before he was elected to be the member of parliament. That was the death of Miss Mdala. [Alice 040119]

We believe that the pervasiveness of multiple sexual partnerships is better understood not as driven by either men’s nature or women’s poverty. Rather, these partnerships are but one form of a complex system of social insurance that mitigates uncertain risk by binding patrons and clients—at every social stratum, and in many of life’s activities—in a web of ties held together by a moral ethic of redistribution and reciprocity. Even if a man’s libido were low or a woman were not poor, it might make sense to forge ties of dependence through transactional sex, just in case.

The Obligations of Patrons

The obligation of those with resources to help those without is very general. The primary responsibilities are to kin, but those with wealth who fail to share it are universally condemned. A man worries that disgruntled former girlfriends “may be going around telling people many things like the man is greatly [greedy] person he doesn't share food to his in laws and relatives”

[Simon 040210], while in the excerpt below a wealthy woman only belatedly begins to act like the patron she should have been all along:

...the wife used to laugh [at] those people who used to go to church every Sunday she said that those who go to church every Sunday are poor and that they go there to ask God to give them some money and that she can not go to church because she has everything that she needs and that she has a lot of money which can be used for many years and that with the money she had can be enough to feed so many people even the whole country for so many years she was a happy lady but her worries was on her husband who used to have so many sexual partners. She said that after being known that she [the woman] is HIV positive she begun to go to church to help the needy and to chat with everybody even the poor who was her enemies at first. She changed her mind so that when she died many people mourned for her because they worried that their helper has gone and they had nowhere to go and have food or money. [Patuma 040629]

The assumption about the obligations of patrons is so powerful that it makes plausible what seems like an utterly bizarre conspiracy theory about the origin of AIDS—that the industrial world introduced AIDS to kill off the population that was “begging” too much (Kaler 2004).

The equivalence between sexual ties and other ties of dependence is sometimes expressed quite explicitly. In one fascinating exchange, the moral obligation of patrons—to redistribute resources—is directly linked to transactional sex: because the uncle didn’t fulfill his obligations to his niece, she sought another patron. Simon, one of the journalists, sits talking with his wife and a visiting cousin, Regina. Regina, age 20, explains that because she needed someone to depend on, she took an older lover, who is helping her with her school fees and assisting in the support of her younger brothers. Simon objects vociferously on the grounds that if she contracts AIDS, he himself will be obligated to support her. He does not need to say what his wife and Regina (as well as other family members) already know, that because he has earned money from the foreign research project, he would be Regina’s obvious patron if she were to become ill:

I said to her that I am serious and her being my relative I cannot tolerate what she is doing because when she will catch the disease it will be us as her relatives more especially me greatly who will be in great trouble after hearing that she is sick because I can not let her be suffering yet I know that she is my relative and even having not transport money and I will be trying in all best possible ways that I will be visiting her and be assisting her in all means. She laughed and criticized me saying that if I am not assisting her right now when she is okey and more over at school and school fees becomes very hard for her to get [will I be] helping or caring for her when she will be in trouble as I said? <She asked>

Simon’s wife then sides with Regina. Simon has money, yet has never assisted Regina:

We laughed and then wife laughed too and sided with her and then I told wife that she is backing her [Regina] as if what she is doing is good. Wife said that she was not backing her any more but she was <Regina> saying the truth. She went on saying that she is now

in Form I and she will be going to Form 3 if passing her exam and from the time she started Form One I had never tried to even assist her with a single tambala even K100.00 why?

Finally, Regina teases Simon in a heavy-handed way that puts in straightforward terms the essential interchangeability of the support she might legitimately expect from a relative and the support she gets from a sexual relationship:

Then chatting continued and then I said to her that if she will catch the virus it will be her own fault and the goodness is that she is moving around [being promiscuous] like that deliberately [*at least she is engaged in deliberate sexual transaction*]. She answered saying that of course she does that deliberately because of the problem which she had raised already that of lack of any relative to aid her regarding to paying her school fees. ... We chatted and chatted until her and the wife decided to go to the Borehole to draw water after racking their pails. [Simon 040929]

Another briefer excerpt, from a conversation among several men bemoaning the loose morals of girls today, illustrates again the equivalence of “support” from kin and lovers, and perhaps also the strategy of trying to embarrass a relative into offering help. A man describes what happened when he “shouted” at his niece about having married lovers:

He said that his sisters daughter after being shouted by the Uncle she responded that she will be assisted by sugar dads and eating, getting all personal needs from them because her Uncle can not give her all her needs. [Chunga 050402]

Patrons are expected to give advice as well as material support. The following is an excerpt from interviews with a subset of MDICP survey respondents conducted in two of the MDICP sites on the way households cope with disasters.

I: There are these two people Mstisi and Ledison who you said are the dependable ones as far as your compound is concerned. Now I would like you to tell me what they do to be recognized as dependable in the compound.

Aa! The recognition is that everyone at the compound relies on them for any assistance one might need. They do not hesitate in taking some action. Hence they are reliable people as I said.

I: Okay, you mean if they were not in a position to give assistance, they would not have [be] reliable people?

R: Aa! The assistance does not only belong to material but also in the way they handle issues whenever there is a dispute. That is why we really build our hopes on them as far as the compound is concerned. (Van den Ruit 2005, Respondent R53012)

In societies with little effective formal legal protection, as in rural Malawi, resolving troubled social relations may be as crucial as providing monetary assistance.

Ties of Independence: Risk, Uncertainty, and Strategies for Support

Not all women or men have multiple partners. Indeed, as we have said, some couples try to “depend only on each other.” Other men and women may choose to depend only on themselves, or perceive that they have no other acceptable option.

Some commercial sex workers appear quite satisfied without a husband to depend on, claiming to prefer to make their own choices rather than to submit to a husband (see Halpeny 1976 for Uganda; Nelson 1987 for Kenya; Wojcicki 2002 for South Africa; Ankomah 1999 for Ghana). For others, and perhaps especially older women, achieving economic independence by exchanging sex for material benefits may appear a less plausible scenario. In an effort to figure out how they can survive without a husband, Alice and a group of twelve of her women friends—mostly widowed or divorced, and mostly older than 35—meet regularly as the “Umodzi Women’s Group” to discuss problems in their lives. In answer to a query, Alice wrote in one of her journals explaining the origins and purposes of her group. The extract below makes clear that the group formed around Alice because, while like the other women she is struggling to feed her children, she also has some of the attributes of a patron. She is somewhat better educated than the rest, most of whom have not been to school, and with slightly more resources (including connections to our research project). Thus, she can perform at least some of the roles of a patron—advising, teaching, and perhaps linking her clients to more powerful patrons who might provide the resources these women hope for.

[T]his group was formed because of poverty and the AIDS epidemic. The women who are staying [living] close to me and those who know me very well sat down and discussed about their problems of poverty and the dangerous disease AIDS. They discussed about the way they can use to make themselves free from poverty since in the village we don’t have the companies, mines or the estates where they can go and work for them to earn money which can help their families....

These women chose me to be their leader because they thought that I can help them borrowing the money for their businesses at the companies or other organizations because they heard that I do chat with people in the villages and giving them gifts, therefore my job is to help the poor. They also asked me to teach them all the things which can help them in their life like about the importance of religion, family planning, home crafts and about the dangers of AIDS....

Because we have nowhere to go and borrow the money for our small business, we just decided to contribute the K50 [less than 50 cents] each person and give it to one member for her to run the business like baking the doughnuts, but it is not enough. And we have also prepared the land where we have grown the maize and our aim is to sell the yields and do something with that money which helps the group. [Alice 031128]

Week after week the women of the Umodzi group search for ways to go it alone—but week after week they revert to the possibilities of ties of dependence with all their perils. One week they consider how they might survive the hunger period when the “small business” of gathering and

selling firewood has become so crowded as to be unprofitable. The trade-offs between waiting in the market for days without being able to sell a load of firewood versus finding a sexual partner are made painfully clear:

She [Miss Joyani, the chairman of the group] answered that she thinks that it is better to change the business and try another one because if she just stick on that business which she is failing to sell or win then she can die of hunger. But Miss Ali answered that there is no other business which can help a person in these days, firewood was good because it does not need any capital but all other business needs a capital to start with therefore it is better to have a partner who can be helping you during the time that you have nothing at your house. But Miss Chunga answered, she said that Miss Ali was cheating [deceiving, fooling] her friends. These days are very dangerous. They are not the days which one can depend on having a sexual partner because of the Aids disease. You cannot sleep with a man for several times before you get infected with Aids. The problem is that you are single but you have some children. You can get Aids today and suffer from it for a long time, you should know that your children have already started staying like the orphans because they will be lacking you to help them. It is better to stay though we are poor than buying death. Miss Joyani answered, she said that it is better to die of hunger than to die of Aids. If it is hunger maybe you can die all of you and if it is Aids, you can die alone and leave your children suffering. But Mrs Tembo said....It is better to get married and be faithful in your marriage...

Lastly I was asked to answer about the issue. Since I am among the group, it was not possible for me to refuse therefore I told them that I agreed with the women who said that if our business is not going on well, it is better to change it and try another one. Having a sexual partner is not good unless it is a marriage and we need to go for blood test first before we start sleeping together with our husband. If men for marriage are scarce, we should still wait until one will come to propose us for the marriage because Aids is there waiting for us to take out [of] our life.

The group laughed and Miss Ali said that nobody can accept to go to the hospital for the blood test because everyone is aware of the dangerous of Aids. Nobody can allow to go for the blood test.

We closed that issue at that time because the time was over and we agreed to continue with our issue at the next time. [Alice 031115]

That afternoon the women “closed that issue,” but without a resolution. As with the other forms of “independence”—a woman criticized as a “prostitute” for having many partners or a bar girl who says defiantly that she does not want to marry—it is the costs and benefits of various ties of dependence, rather than the possibility of surviving without such ties that really seems to be at issue.

Conclusions

We do not seek to normalize or legitimate transactional sex. Some such relationships are the result of deliberate exploitation of the unequal economic power of males and females; some are corruptions of the ties of dependence that link patrons and clients. But the strategic and moral importance of redistribution and reciprocity in an unequal and uncertain world suggest that those who seek to combat AIDS by rooting out transactional sex would do well to consider more realistically the social practices and meanings that nourish such unequal sexual relationships. Ties of dependence are an accepted practice in contemporary African societies. And for good reason. Such ties are critical for those attempting to navigate a landscape of uncertainties and inequalities, for the Big Men at the top of the patron-client hierarchy and even more so for the poor clients at the bottom who must depend on “wealth in people” rather than on formal institutions. If patrons had no practical incentive to redistribute resources, no expectations of reciprocity and no belief that not to do so would be immoral, the lives of rural villagers left to go it alone would be even more precarious than they are.

Against such pervasive ties of dependence, the relationship between material support or gifts, dependence, and sex appears in a new light. Rather than a marginalized category of sexual encounters set off from the rest of sexual life, a great deal of what international observers label “transactional sex” can be seen as but another facet of a more profound dynamic by which those with resources transmute them into relations with dependents. By providing interpretive depth to what on the surface appears to be merely an exploitative or corrupt transaction, we gain a better understanding of why, even though most men and most women wish their sexual relationships were faithful and stable, transactional sex is pervasive. Patrons and clients have long provided flexible options and social insurance in African societies, and it is not surprising that ties of dependence are precious when poverty and the AIDS epidemic have made times particularly uncertain. Our argument here is that adding to our understand of women’s poverty and vulnerability a broader view of the unequal ties of interdependence that characterize African societies will allow scholars and policy-makers a more realistic, grounded understanding of what keeps those ties in place and what, if anything, might be done to alter them.

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ENDNOTES

¹ On the pervasiveness of transactional sex—and the inappropriateness of identifying it as prostitution—see e.g.: Caldwell, et al. (1989); Standing, (1992); Meekers and Calves (1997); Luke and Kurz (2002); Luke (2003); Hunter (2002; 2004; 2005); Hallman (2004); Kaufman and Stavrou (2004); Nyanzi, Nyanzi et al. (2004); Wight, Plummer et al. (2006); Poulin (2006).

² See Morris and Kretzchmar (1995); Halperin and Epstein (2004). While such relationships are certainly not unknown in the West (Mitterand's second family; Anais Nin's bigamous marriages), Western images of infidelity run toward the torrid affair that breaks up a marriage or a temporary "fling," but not a pattern in which both men and women might maintain long term relationships with more than one partner.

³ There are genuine uncertainties here. But we are struck by how an academic culture that would never show disrespect for sub-Saharan African cultural practices nonetheless presumes a coercive element to women's participation in transactional sex and multiple partnerships, as if only that could justify deviations from normative Eurasian patterns. Even an analyst like Jennifer Cole (2002), writing about Madagascar, who finds that women see using sex for economic advantage as empowering, casts both woman and men as victims of capitalism and consumerism. We are mindful of Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin's (1989:186) warning that "needed research is hindered...by a misreading of the situation, ironically arising often from the best of motives aimed at reducing perceived racialism." They point out the dangers of "find[ing] cultures guiltless by concluding that they do not significantly differ from Western patterns."

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the journals as a methodological tool and as a form of social inquiry see Watkins and Swidler (2005).

⁵ Social analysts frequently draw on textual materials created by others—from the memoirs and letters historians analyze, to the newspaper accounts that social movement scholars rely on, to the documents produced by the Inquisition (Ginzburg 1980). These documents always reflect the biases and interests of those who recorded them, and analysts attempt to take those biases into account. But such texts can also provide access to meanings that operate in a culture in spite of—but sometimes because of—the assumptions and prejudices of their creators (as in the fascinating work of Mohr and Duquenne 1996, analyzing texts produced by social service organizations in New York City).

⁶ English is taught in Malawian public schools from the early grades with formal English starting in Standard 5, equivalent to U.S. fifth grade. English is widespread enough that it has in some ways become indigenized. For example, to be sexually promiscuous is to be "movious" and one who has multiple partners is said to be "moving around," an Anglicization of a chiChewa expression, *woyendayenda*, derived from the earlier association of multiple partners with migrant labor. The naturalness with which the journalists adapt English to chiChewa, chiYao, or chiTumbuka linguistic forms means that their English is somewhat closer to local languages than the standard English of a Canadian, British or American ethnographer.

⁷ In the 2001 MDICP survey, 2.5% of female and 11% of male respondents reported committing adultery in the past year; however, a comparatively whopping 18% and 26%, respectively, said their best friends did so (Smith and Watkins 2005:650). On the possible inaccuracies of self-reports, see Plummer et al. (2004); Cleland et al. (2004).

⁸ There is a large literature on the distinction between commercial sex work and informal sexual transactions in Africa; the particular forms of the latter, however, seem to be quite diverse (Wojcicki 2002; Dinnan 1983; Halpeny 1975; Pittin 1983; Meekers and Calves 1997; Van Den Borne 2003 for Malawi).

⁹ The same point is made by Ankomah (1992; 1999) for Ghana, Leclerc-Madlala (2003) for Tanzania, among many others.

¹⁰ See, for example, Wines (2004), p. A1, The women in Lesotho whom Wines describes as leaving a box of laundry soap in the window to warn boyfriends when husbands are in town are employed factory workers making a reasonable wage by African standards.

¹¹ Wight, Plummer et al. (2006:990) note that "Material exchange for sex, or 'transactional sex', is now recognised to be widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and generally interpreted as a consequence of women's poverty. Some detailed studies, however, suggest that transactional relationships are not always related to immediate material necessity and may in fact be a mark of a woman's self-respect." Indeed, it is said that young Yoruba women became "indignant when it when it was suggested that they took on lovers for any other reason than economic need." (Seidel 1993, quoted in Wojcicki 2002:341-2).

¹² It bears noting that love and material support are intertwined in Western culture as well, from the expensive evening that signals a man's serious interest in a woman (Illouz 1997) to the critical exchanges that occur between parents and children (Fischer 1982). Zelizer (2000:822) notes that "Every population that uses money at all adopts some set of distinctions between erotic relations; most populations mark those distinctions not with payment versus nonpayment, but with distinctive forms of monetary transfers."

¹³ Another and quite succinct definition was offered by a Malawian colleague, who said "They are married when the man can go publicly to spend the night at the woman's house." Although few marriages are said to be arranged by parents or other family members, it appears that in the majority of marriages the family is involved (discussions among the senior generation on both sides, bridewealth of cows among the patrilineal ethnic groups and the presentation of small gifts, such as a chicken, among the matrilineal groups). Especially among the Yao in Southern Malawi, marriages are often unstable, with both divorce and the formation of new partnerships relatively easy (on the long history of this pattern see Kaler 2001, but also Hunter 2005 on the more recent emergence of similar patterns in KwaZulu Natal).

¹⁴ In the 2004 round of the MDICP, 27% of female respondents said they "know or suspect" that their spouse is unfaithful, 46% said that he was "probably faithful", and the rest said they couldn't know his behavior. Men were far more likely to report that their wife was "probably faithful"—76%--although since men are expected to divorce an unfaithful wife, their reports may be exaggerated.

¹⁵ Insecurity has a pervasive influence on life in Malawi, as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Johnson-Hanks 2005; 2006).

¹⁶ On the kinds of gifts young women receive, see Poulin 2006. Kaufman and Stavrou (2004:383) note for young people in urban South Africa: "All respondents indicated gifts were an important part of courtship, and the type of gifts cited reveals the variety and their commonness. In general, flowers, chocolates, jewellery, clothes, lingerie, CDs, drugs, meals in a restaurant, drinks at a club, tickets to concerts, and entrance fees to clubs were the most frequently mentioned items."