

PAA Extended Abstract Submission

Condom Dynamics and Dilution Over Time in Young Rural Malawian Couples

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Introduction

Unlike other success stories in locations such as Asia and the USA, the male condom as an HIV intervention in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has not dramatically altered the spread of HIV (Shelton 2007). Nonetheless, condom use has been increasing approximately 1% per year in the region since the 1990s (Cleland, Ali, & Shah, 2006). In the generalized and largely heterosexual epidemics of SSA, HIV is frequently transmitted within longer-term relationships, where condoms challenge notions of trust and commitment (Chimbiri 2007; Anglewicz & Clark, 2013; Tavory & Swidler, 2009). At the start of sexual relationships, however, such barriers do not necessarily exist. Traditional cross-sectional approaches have left us with limited understanding of condom use dynamics throughout the progression of sexual relationships from new to regular/committed. In this paper, we use eight waves of longitudinal data from rural Malawi to examine how condom use evolves over the course of a relationship and for what reasons.

Background

In a high HIV prevalence (11%) and high fertility context (TFR: 5.7; MDHS 2010), such as Malawi, condoms are principally promoted for HIV prevention, but are also the most commonly used method of birth control among adolescents (Wittenberg et al., 2007). The use of condoms tends to signify a relationship is not one of trust (Chimbiri 2007), which is acceptable within certain types of relationships, but not in others (Smith 2007; Preston-Whyte 1999). Marriage especially appears to change perceptions about the acceptability of condom use (Anglewicz &

Clark, 2013). In addition, qualitative evidence suggests sexual relationships frequently follow a pattern where partners use condoms at first, and stop once the relationship becomes more serious and involves notions of love and trust (Tavory & Swidler, 2009).

Research from Africa and the U.S. demonstrates that condom use varies within heterosexual relationships and is more common among less committed partners (see Plichta et al., 1992 and Macaluso et al., 2009 for research in the USA and de Walque & Kline, 2011 and Cleland et al., 2006 for SSA). Across SSA, unmarried individuals report condom use with casual partners more frequently than with regular partners and much more frequently than with spouses (de Walque & Kline, 2011; Hendriksen, Pettifor, Lee, Coates, & Rees, 2007). In 2001, over 18% of single young women in SSA reported using condoms versus less than 3% of married/cohabiting young women (Cleland et al., 2006). Additionally, women in the region report levels of condom use that were 2 to 32 times greater with extramarital partners than with spouses (de Walque & Kline, 2011).

Research from the U.S. indicates that the length of time a couple has been together influences the persistence of condom use in the relationship (Plichta et al. 1992; Fortenberry et al. 2002). Ku and colleagues (1994) introduced the “sawtooth hypothesis” to describe condom use dynamics in serially monogamous relationships, where condom use declined over time and then increased again at the start of a new relationship. Similarly, South African youth who reported being in their most recent relationship for more than 1 year and who reported having had sex one or more times in the last month were less likely to report consistent condom use than those in shorter relationships (Moyo, Levandowski, MacPhail, Rees, & Pettifor, 2008).

There are a number of possible reasons why condom use might decrease over the course of a relationship. First, over time, sexual relationships evolve into partnerships that are associated with trust and fidelity (Tavory and Swidler 2008; Chimhiri 2007). Second, partners may forgo condom use to facilitate having a child (Moyo et al., 2008). Over time the reasons for condom use may also change from disease prevention to contraception. South African men and women

reported that in regular sexual relationships there was more concern about pregnancy, while in short-term relationships there was greater concern about preventing infection (Maharaj & Cleland, 2006). In Nigeria, Van Rossem et al. (2001) found that concern about HIV infection had a strong effect on consistency of condom use with non-stable partners; however, concern about pregnancy had a strong effect on consistency of condom use with stable partners.

Condom use, of course, need not be all or nothing. Within the course of a relationship it is possible that condom use dilutes, particularly with increased coital frequency, rather than abruptly stops at a certain point (e.g. marriage). This paper aims to understand condom dynamics within the sexual relationships of young Malawians. Specifically, we ask when do young adults use condoms within their relationships, and how does condom use—and its motivations—change over time?

Data and Methods

Our data come from Tsogolo la Thanzi (TLT)¹, an 8-wave panel study (2009-11) of young adults in Balaka, a growing market town and district capital in southern Malawi. TLT was designed to study how young people navigate reproduction and union formation in an AIDS epidemic. The TLT sample was drawn from a complete household listing of people living within a 7 km radius of Balaka town center, which includes the rural villages that surround the more-urban town center. In total, 1,500 women between the ages of 15 and 25 were randomly sampled from the household listing and recruited into the study. 42% of respondents were married at baseline and the remaining were either never married (50%) or formerly married (8%). Given limited condom use within marriage, we focus our analysis on unmarried women.

At each 4-monthly wave, respondents were asked to report on up to three sexual or romantic partners, including relationship-specific sexual and contraceptive behavior. Using name

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matching supported by other relevant data (e.g., whether the partner was reported previously), we constructed a prospective dataset of all reported relationships that allows us to examine changes in condom use over the length of the relationship. In total, we capture 664 premarital sexual relationships from 478 respondents over the 2.5-year study period.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents cross-sectional descriptive results from the first wave in which a non-marital sexual relationship was reported. The final paper will analyze the data prospectively over time, focusing on relationship changes associated with a reduction in condom use. Figures 1 and 2 offer preliminary descriptive representations of the dilution of condom use within relationships over time (Figure 1) and around entry into marriage (Figure 2). Additionally, for a subsample of relationships in which the male partner was enrolled as part of the study (see Yeatman and Sennott 2014 for details on partner recruitment), we will compare partners' reports on condom use, reports of who initiated condom use, and reasons for use or non-use.

Table 1. Relationship characteristics and condom use behavior at first sexually active wave, TLT 2009-11

	%
Relationship status	
Steady boyfriend	76.5
New boyfriend	10.8
Infrequent partner	12.7
Relationship leads to marriage	22.9
Sexual frequency	
1+ times per week	13.3
2x per month	24.9
<2x per month	28.2
once	33.7
Condom use last 3 sexual encounters	
Never	52.3
Once	7.4
Twice	4.7
All three times	35.6
Partner that initiated condom use	
Respondent's	34.1
Partner's	11.2
Both equally	54.8
Reason for using condoms	
Mostly STI prevention	14.4
Mostly pregnancy prevention	23.7
Both equally	60.3
Don't know	1.6
Reason for not using condoms (more than 1 response possible)	
Not available	8.0
Partner objected	25.1
Respondent doesn't like them	8.5
Trust partner	28.4
Didn't think of it	27.8
Wanted to get pregnant	3.4
Other	6.8
Waves of sexual activity in dataset, mean (SD)	2.3 (1.9)
N (relationships)	664

Figure 1

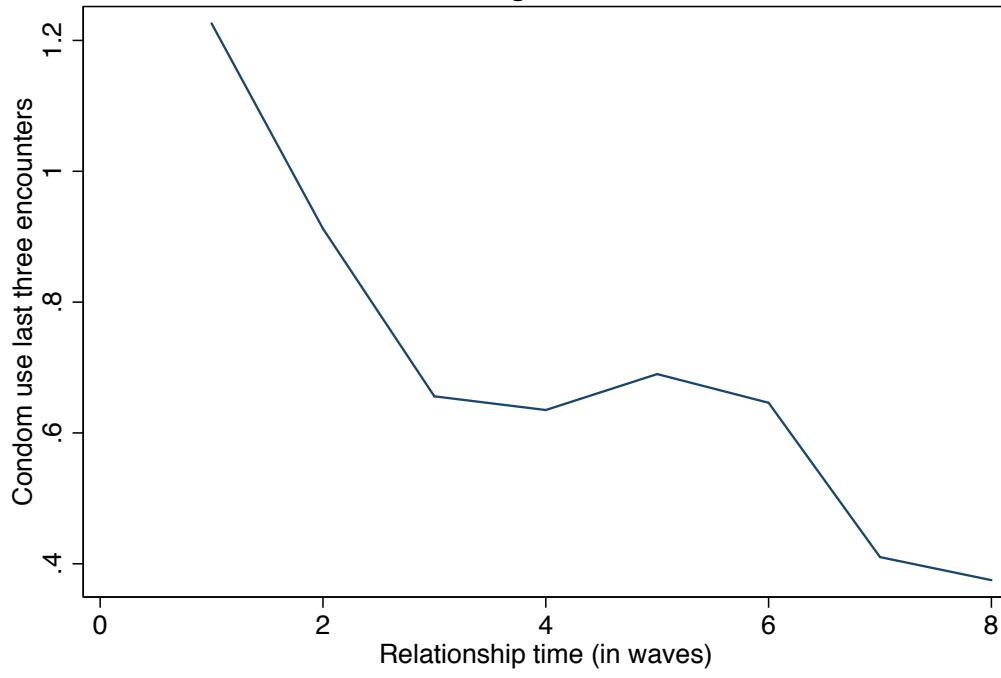
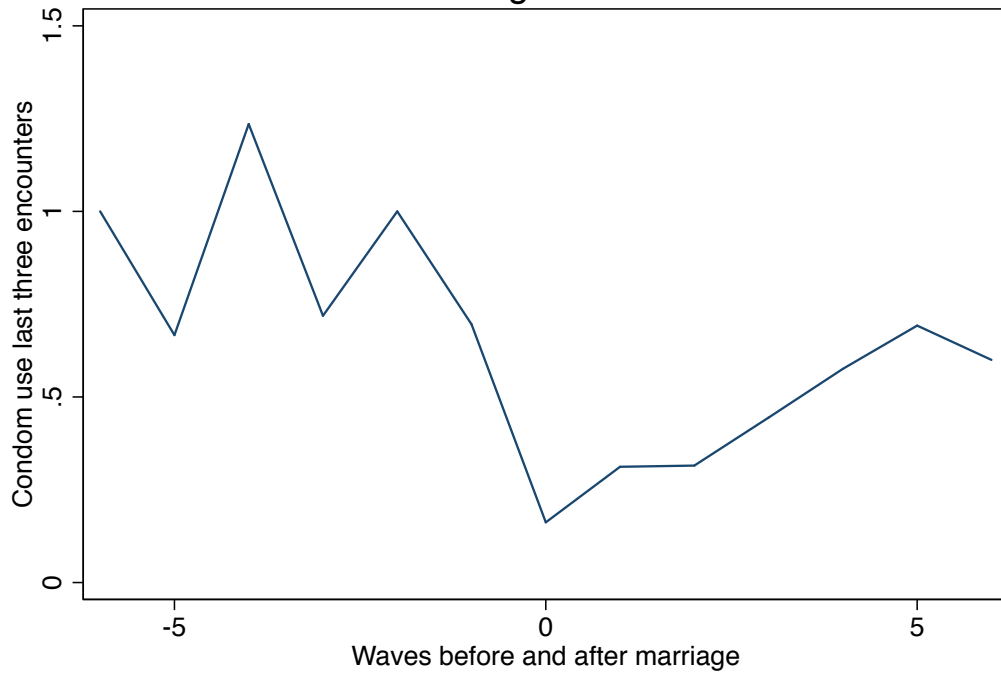


Figure 2



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