

PC63 Local translations of sexual behaviour terms - impact on data validity in HIV Prevention research

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ABSTRACT TEXT

Issues:

In order to determine both the effectiveness and the acceptability of vaginal microbicides we must collect accurate data on sexual behaviour. These data are usually derived from verbal self-reports (interviews or self-assessment tools), using a set of key terms (e.g. casual partner, regular partner, spouse, sex act, condom use, abstinence). These terms are translated into the various vernaculars in which the interviews are to be conducted, and backtranslated for accuracy. It is assumed that the English terms and their vernacular translations have the same meaning, as verified by the back-translation with only slight differences across cultures. The terms are often assumed to be clear and unambiguous and have become more-or-less standardised in HIV-related research. They are assumed to enable comparison between studies and the measurement of trends in sexual behaviour.

Description:

We highlight the ambiguities of sexual behaviour terminology and critically discuss the often arbitrary nature of the translation process. We question the accuracy of sexual behaviour data and comparisons between studies based on this process. Using examples from the development of sexual behaviour questionnaires and in-depth interview guides in the six African sites involved in the MDP301 microbicide feasibility and pilot studies, as well as data collected from other sexual behaviour studies, we present an alternative strategy for collecting sexual behaviour data.

Conclusion:

Uncritical and inflexible use of standardised key terminologies and a focus on the narrow translation of individual terms rather than broader exercises in translating cultural meaning may lead to inaccurate data on sexual behaviour and spurious comparisons. Innovative approaches are needed in the way in which sexual behaviour questions are formulated and translated in different settings.

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