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#Blesser: A critical evaluation of conceptual antecedents and the allure of a transactional relationship

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Blessed relationships (BRs) bring together technology, sexuality, and economics within a consumerist environment. Academic literature has used ‘blesser’ and ‘sugar daddy’ interchangeably, and online reports have explained how BRs, as a new South African cultural option of structuring relationships, differ from sugar relationships because they represent a new product on offer in relationship shopping. This essay critically evaluates academic and selected online sources to understand the allure and controversy of BRs. Research focuses predominantly on ‘controversial’ frames of health and moral risks. However, labels, such as ‘blesser’ and ‘sugar daddy’ discursively construct different sexual domains. After reviewing literature and online information, the essay presents a nomenclature of transactional relationships that considers the agential and discursive subtleties of BRs. Implications and research recommendations for the structuring of relationships, given newer options for lifestyle, companionship, and sexuality, which BRs have made publicly visible, conclude the essay.

Keywords: blessee, blesser, relationships, South Africa, sugar daddy, transactional sex

Introduction

In South Africa (SA), a new option that reconfigures the traditional sugar relationship (SR) is now available. It brings together the nexus of technology, sexuality, and economics within a consumerist environment and can be referred to as the blessed relationship (BR) where discursive realities of intergenerational and transactional relationships intersect. Writing about SRs, which are considered to be the progenitor of BRs, Brouard and Crewe (2012: 51) contend that “need, opportunity and an internet connection” have made intergenerational sex acceptable and possible; thus investigation might focus not on further stigmatisation or moral questioning, but on how these relationships might be managed and understood. Here, we attempt to provide a discursive understanding of how the BR (where the parties are named ‘blesser’ or ‘blessee’) is an alluring option to manage relational needs and lifestyles in contemporary SA. We thus consider how the BR is simultaneously alluring and controversial. Research and academic attention has focused on the ‘controversial’ pole rather than the ‘alluring’ pole of understanding this contemporary relationship. Because this article distinguishes between SRs and BRs, we use the words ‘sugar daddy’ and ‘blesser’ when referenced as such in sources, rather than using these terms interchangeably. We contend that these terms differ conceptually, as well as in how these identities are lived out in everyday lives and in how these terms gain different meanings within socially constructed and online sexual domains.

In other words, the choice of term (‘blessed’ or ‘sugar’) leads to different discursive complexes. A broader context can be considered influential to understand these relationships. This has been illustrated by Stoebenau et al. (2011) who argue that the experiential realities of transactional sex need to be contextualised with globalised realities of material consumption. The phenomenon, though, has been met with controversy, with literature framed around the need for ‘interventions’, based either on moral or legal grounds because of intergenerationality of sex partners, or on the risks of HIV transmission. Within the discourse of ‘intervention’, which assumes BRs present a social problem, suggestions have been made (e.g. Stoebenau et al. 2011) that interventions with parties in this form of transactional sex need to be separated from those targeted at prostitution. However, whether it is a social problem or a (legitimate) way of reconfiguring sexual relationships in the light of sociocultural changes, attention needs to be given to why transactional sex relationships have changed and become renamed. Here, we attempt to illuminate why this form of sexuality has become alluring in the light of a new discursive reality. Any understanding needs to incorporate such a perspective and needs

to be considered within the conceptual progenitors of BR. We thus evaluate how established literature has historically conceptualised transactional relationships and how BRs present an alternative to dominant (negativistic) conceptions of transactional relationships. The article therefore first evaluates literature on SR that pre-dates the usage of the term 'blesser' to provide a historical context. It then refers to sources that have publicised the term 'blesser', particularly in a discussion about its origin and representation in the online environment. We conclude with pointing out the distinctions and implications that BRs present for the structuring of transactional relationships.

A critical evaluation of sugar

Gift-giving versus prostitution

The BR has its origins in sugar daddies and sugar mummies. Literature, historically, has tried to conceptualise the SR as being different from prostitution, and this distinction helps to understand BRs. Fundamentally, SRs can be considered a form of transactional sex, that is, an "exchange of gifts (material, monetary) for sex framed outside of prostitution or sex work by those who participate in the exchange" (Stoebenau et al. 2011: 2), in contrast to prostitution where parties agree on a fixed money payment and where an emotional attachment is missing (Bougard and Matsi-Madolo 2017). Traditionally, the SR – as a form of sexual practice that is distinct from prostitution – is long term, and it also features a time delay between the sex act and the gift (Decoteau 2016). Transactional sex is therefore a "gifted relation" and can be called 'transactional sexuality' (Decoteau 2016: 291).

Another difference between SRs and prostitution relates to whether legal infringements occur in these relationships. Referring to dating sites catering for SRs in the United States (US), Motyl (2010) addresses the legal and criminal implications, and explains that prostitution is punishable in the US and is based on a sexual act being performed for money, as opposed to companionship. In contrast, because SRs are long-term and structured as companionship, US laws cannot consider these relationships to be prostitution (Motyl 2010). Although criminal laws in the US cannot deter commercial sex within the 'Sugar Culture', threats of civil cases via anti-predator laws could discourage such exchanges; yet both these types of consequences will not prevent 'Sugar Culture' exchanges and state laws can only be applied if sugar arrangements result in "a significant level of harm" for the sugar baby (Motyl 2010: 949). Specifically, sugar daddy sites do not induce illegal conduct (prostitution) according to Motyl's (2010) discussion. Website operators or owners have immunity because they do not provide the

content of the websites, although in one court case against a site unrelated to sex personals, the providers were found to provide partial content. A case against the US personals website Craigslist found that it did not induce users to post illegal content such as prostitution (Motyl 2010). But, considered under the values promoted by neoliberalism, the lines between sex work and transactional sex have become blurred (Decoteau 2016). So blurred has this become that sexual commodification and sex labour, which was typically located in the discursive regime of prostitution, have introduced new formations of transactional sexuality that are as multiple and complicated as the parties involved in them, and the BR is one such discursive instance.

The sugar daddy discourse

Typically, a sugar daddy is a middle-aged man who provides ongoing financial support and attracts partners on this basis, getting sexual attention or favours in return (Mays et al. 1992). Kuate-Defo (2004) used a similar definition to review studies on the topic, referring to the older man as a provider who exchanges sexual relationships with young girls by giving them gifts, clothes, living costs, and favours such as tuition costs and employment. Thus, SRs involve an intergenerational element along with transactional sex where transactional sex is defined as “exchange of gifts (material, monetary) for sex framed outside of prostitution or sex work by those who participate in the exchange” (Stoebenau et al. 2011: 2). Such definitions are acontextual and do not consider meanings that supplement the economic benefits or the cultural currency (i.e. symbolic value) gained in these relationships. Because of economic inequalities in patriarchy in Africa, sugar daddies emerged, and the context of transactional sex has become not about managing survival, but about obtaining material or symbolic commodities (Brouard and Crewe 2012). The pioneering critical literature synthesis of SRs by Kuate-Defo (2004) confirmed the intersections and many dimensions that previous simplistic definitions ignored. Kuate-Defo’s (2004) review shows that, although motivated by poverty and survival needs in a few cases, most sugar babies pursue transactional relationships for non-survival motives such as to obtain fashionable accessories and to gain pride among peers because they have sex with influential men in their communities.

Non-economic benefits in Sugar Relationships

Whereas definitions can take an economic view of some simple exchange value, research, particularly qualitative studies, points to complex discursive dynamics that relate to additional non-economic meanings of SRs. Critical literature reviews (Kuate-Defo 2004; Shefer and Strebel 2012) conducted before the usage

of the term 'blesser', challenged the one-dimensional definitions and research foci of SR because materialistic and globalised contexts were found to influence sugar practices. As Stoebenau et al. (2011) have shown, the experiential realities of transactional sex are contextualised with globalised realities of material consumption. In other words, subtleties get called upon to describe SRs when sugar babies talk about the links between monetary or gift exchange in the context of sexual relationships. Examples of subtleties include love being cited in gift exchange contexts, women in a periurban community in SA distinguishing these transactions from prostitution in once-off exchange relations, and Madagascan women being shown to exploit men for trendy commodities in order to distinguish their acts from prostitution to show more agency (Stoebenau et al. 2011). However, although women may use such discursive strategies to account for their transactional relationships, their male partners' talk reveals that they instead hold the power (Stoebenau et al. 2011). In other words, for the women described by Stoebenau et al. (2011), they gain power via their bodies to attract the men and material goods, while for men, the casual, often unprotected sexual encounter was talked about as the male wielding of power. Nevertheless, this either/or view of power is simplistic, and the BR is conceptually different from such interpretations associated with the SR.

Similarly, to show instances of women, rather than their sugar daddies, having personal power, rural Tanzanian women attached meanings of pride and value to their transactional sexuality (Wamoyi et al. 2011). They pointed out the social acceptability of the practice and commented that the men, rather than themselves, were exploited for pleasure and material needs (Wamoyi et al. 2011). Both fathers and mothers in Wamoyi et al.'s (2011) study further agreed that women's bodies are commodities for sale, with mothers commenting that this gave women control over sex. Although this changes the sex discourse, Wamoyi et al. (2011) added that such community-specific understandings do not translate into control of sexual and reproductive health.

Hunter (2002), studying transactional sex relations in a township and informal settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, SA, explains how such relationships fall outside of western notions of prostitution, which are predicated on predetermined payment, but he also makes the link to HIV, stating that HIV awareness campaigns are not directed at transactional relationships characterised by gift-giving. Hunter (2002) explained that economic conditions led to inequalities based on gender, and so migrant women from rural areas were drawn to a sexual economy for subsistence. These women, as one participant explained, became agentified by choosing different men to serve their needs for rent, food, and clothes (Hunter 2002). Furthermore, a key feature was that these relationships occurred over a long time. The time feature, along with the choice of multiple concurrent male partners in

a particular geographical and historical-economic moment, according to Hunter (2002), distinguishes these relationships from prostitution. In the township setting, the transactional benefits crossed over into consumption mode, creating symbolic ways for young women to assert themselves via images, fashion, and consumer items (Hunter 2002). Hunter (2002), however, frames the argument within a HIV-epidemic frame where the women had material arrangements with 'well'-employed older men with masculinity attachments linked to sex without condoms and multiple partners. These ideas may have been convincing to explain the "taken-for-grantedness of transactional sex" (Hunter 2002: 116) linked to particular geographies and labour conditions. However, they do not shed light on persons who publicise their wishes for trading sex for consumption items and other necessities that help a person advance in life, an act that has come to be associated with BRs being acted out on social media and in the online environment.

The transactional feature, Brouard and Crewe (2012) conclude, from their reading of Hunter's (2002) work, is that it is seen in all relationships because of mutual obligations and notions of exchange that are determined by culture and economics. Marriage is constructed as romantic and not transactional by the establishment (Brouard and Crewe 2012), even though marriage arguably formalises and legalises exchange relations. SRs upset this status quo (Brouard and Crewe 2012). The mainstream view that stigmatises intergenerational sexual relationships should therefore be challenged because of contestable assumptions about love, monogamy, safety, and sex (Brouard and Crewe 2012).

Thus, even while the term 'blesser' was not en vogue in studies that pre-dated the usage of the term, the findings of individual empirical studies (Hunter 2002, Stoebenau et al. 2011), a conceptual paper (Brouard and Crewe 2012), and a review study (Kauto-Defo 2004) have pointed to the extension of SR into a new realm of consumerism and capitalistic drives. This set the scene for a reconfiguration of the SR phenomenon that was ready to be taken up when interactive online social media was introduced into popular culture (to be elaborated upon).

Frames of risk: HIV and morality

Literature reviews about SRs have noted dominant frames of research into SRs, pointing out that transactional sex has been linked to risk and HIV panic. Shefer and Strebel (2012), in their critical review of literature, comment that SR research has primarily focused on sexual risks and coercion by the older male partner. Kuate-Defo's (2004: 14) detailed literature review, discussed previously, even synthesised literature about sugar mummies/daddies in peer-reviewed journals within the frame of "factors promoting and perpetuating unsafe sexual behaviour in young people", therefore calling for action to stop the spread of such

relationships because of health risks. The synthesised literature focused on young girls and older men, making the legal age of consent a barrier to further research. However, such heterosexual relationships were found to take multiple forms and contexts (Kuate-Defo 2004), a point more strongly and comprehensively argued by Shefer and Strebel (2012), who concluded, in their critical review, that younger female partners' agency, negotiation, and material aspirations intersect with discourses of masculinity in sugar daddy practices to create multiple contexts where benefits are similarly multiple and complicated for both parties. Shefer and Strebel (2012) specifically lament that the older male partner, with respect to his sexuality and gendered investments, has been marginalised in research. Instead, the frame in research studies has been one that positions him as an amoral perpetrator within the heteronormative binaries of masculine and feminine roles (Shefer and Strebel 2012). Brouard and Crewe (2012) similarly challenge the dominant understandings of SRs, asserting that one party is not necessarily the victim and the other the predator because the interdependent relationship is stabilised and has been made acceptable.

In SA, Gobind and du Plessis (2015: 6722) investigated SRs in the HIV context, stating that their investigation "asked the question are sugar daddies contributing to the spread of HIV / AIDS in Higher Education Institutions". Despite this question, the study focused on a single educational institution and asked for students' opinions rather than showing a cause-effect between SRs and HIV transmission. Despite not providing either HIV or student sugar baby prevalence data, findings were considered to "have clearly revealed that 'sugar daddies' do exist at the university being researched" (Gobind and du Plessis 2015: 6725). Self-reports of sugar daddies or their 'babies' were missing and no data was provided about how many participants were babies, yet the survey was linked to "whether 'sugar daddies' are likely to transmit HIV among students at the institution". The study confuses opinions of students, who may not be in SRs, with actual prevalence studies, which exemplifies Shefer and Strebel's (2012) assertion that research into transactional intergenerational relationships is situated within the community constructions of the phenomenon as opposed to research that investigates the perspectives of the older male partners themselves. Such a survey is useful to show community constructions, and the media environment (to be elaborated upon) can be considered to primarily disseminate and reproduce them.

A critical evaluation of blesser

Academic literature on blesser

The term 'blesser' has been predominantly used online compared to academic literature, particularly because it is a relatively new term and its origin is in the social media environment. It has received even sparser attention in empirical studies, and these studies seem lacking in scholarly and theoretical commentary. A Google Scholar search for BLESSER and SUGAR DADDY brought only 16 results on February 26, 2018 and for BLESSER and SUGAR DADDIES on the same day brought 14 results. These sets of results contained duplicates and included grey literature (e.g. theses) and books, with only five results representing academic journal articles that mentioned blesser, without blessed arrangements necessarily being the focus.

One paper from the search (Masenya 2017: 121), using a few selected examples of online advertisements and which did not focus on the stereotypical (male) blesser, interprets the female blesser in the light of biblical referencing, stating that 'blesser' represents a "religious term ... hijacked terribly by its users within ... daily jargon here in South Africa". Relevant conclusions from the paper include female blesser upsetting traditional patriarchal structuring of families while gaining control over and celebrating their own sexualities (Masenya 2017). A second article from the search results (Masilo and Makhubele 2017), a review, considered 'sugar daddy' and 'blesser' to be synonymous, simply stating that the latter term was merely a word for the former. It used 'blesser' four times but cannot be considered a study focused on blesser because it was a review about teenage pregnancy.

Likewise, without any focus on blesser and referring to blesser only when discussing a finding with literature (thus serving as a mere side comment), Selepe et al.'s (2017) study of transactional sex sought out beliefs and perceptions of tertiary education students from Botswana. Here, participants claimed they knew of instances where sex was exchanged for weekend entertainment, rent, and better grades ('sexually transmitted grades'), among other typical benefits. Notably, students believed the material benefits were motivated by competition among girls and some male students admitted their girlfriends were in parallel transactional relationships (Selepe et al. 2017). However, this study was about perceptions and hearsay, and was restricted to students, much like another study (Gobind and du Plessis 2015) on this topic.

Similarly, blessers received a peripheral mention in Sidloyi's (2016) interviews with women (aged 60-85) in a study that described the livelihoods of elderly women in a township setting characterised by poverty and unemployment. In this context, Sidloyi's (2016: 385) mention of blessers served a contextualisation function to merely show that BRs represent social pressures on young women who wish to uplift themselves economically as a "post-apartheid desire to consume" that is aimed at improving life circumstances in this context.

The fifth study from our search (Thobejane, Mulaudzi and Zitha 2017) can be considered to have improved on studies like that by Gobind and du Plessis (2015) as it recruited parties who engaged in BRs (eight female blessees and two male blessers) but, even while acknowledging the difference between sugar daddies and blessers, it continued to use the terms interchangeably when it cited studies that pre-dated the introduction of the term 'blesser'. Our contention is that the terms, when citing other studies, should not be used interchangeably because the term arose at a particular historical moment on a particular technological platform. Thobejane et al. (2017: 87160) nevertheless correctly point out that the higher status of blessers, which is created by their greater "spending power", confers a "god-like status of sorts". They confirmed the different levels of blessers who, they added, have an air of ownership and entitlement over blessees, and who bless multiple partners who may compete with each other. The recommendations of Thobejane et al. (2017), however, retain the uncritical blaming discourse and moralistic tone. They recommend, for example, that "campaigns such as "go-away[sic] blesser must be organised by offices of student affairs" (Thobejane et al. 2017: 8728) and they state, "The fact that they [blessees] made it to the university means they still stand a lot of chances to succeed, they must not exchange themselves or their bodies for material acquisitions" (Thobejane et al. 2017: 8728). Thobejane et al.'s (2017) recommendations ignore the role of popular culture online and the youth fashion trends that shape BRs. The recommendations also assume that the male partner is the predator and that blessees, as victims, lack agency. Social media platforms have revealed otherwise: blessees initiate and seek out BRs there and demonstrate pride in adopting the blessee image.

Thus, from a basic and preliminary Google Scholar search, empirical and scholarly work on blessers can be considered to be largely absent. Only one study (Thobejane et al. 2017) can be considered to be empirical and focused on BRs despite it having a small (yet appropriate) sample. BRs have remained a topic in the popular imagination instead. It is for this reason that the next section uses online sources to discuss how BRs have been socially constructed and how they originated and operate on online platforms.

The origin and construction of blessed arrangements in the online environment

Sources that analyse the term 'blesser' appear predominantly online or in the popular press. The frame in online reports is about the revelation of a new social phenomenon. In a Philippines-based international blog about culture, a journalist and author, in a piece entitled "What's the New Nickname for the 21st Century Sugar Daddy", explains that the transformation from SR to BR produces a uniquely southern African relationship structure where each partner positions the other as a trophy and where "a woman doesn't necessarily have to be poor or disadvantaged to be blessed [because] the Blesser phenomenon exploits social and economic inequalities in a society, highlighting the dynamic between sex and poverty, money and ambition" (Wiser 2017: para. 12). A pedagogical discourse characterises many such reports where readers are educated about the new type of transactional relationship. In this section, we refer to popular or non-academic BR descriptions that are aimed at transmitting information about a new cultural phenomenon. However, the framing in news media is not only about educating, but is also warnings about health and moral risks.

BRs originated in the online environment, making blesser initially appear to be the digital age counterpart of the sugar daddy. The online environment may have served to facilitate the meeting of blesser with blessee, but its function has been more than merely instrumental. To reiterate, beyond moral debates, BRs show up the symbolic and socially constructed features of sexualities by foregrounding economic benefits and cultural currency, thus putting it outside of the survival needs version of transactional sex and also outside of hegemonic structures of monogamy and like-age partnerships. The digital environment fast-tracks blurring and renegotiation of sexualities, but it also enables newer agential capacities.

This neoliberal enhancement of relational capacity is built into the origins of the term and practices of blesser and blessee. We conducted a Google News search on March 6, 2018, using the combination SUGAR DADDY and BLESSER to discover when the term 'blesser' might have first appeared in the popular press. The term, according to the reverse chronological order search results, seems to have appeared in news format in a March 2016 report by Shamase (2016: para. 1), who in an opinion piece in the *Mail & Guardian*, offered commentary on the economics of blesser and blessee, and pointed out that "especially in black urban circles ... 'blesser' are a hot topic of conversation and all the rage". According to a report from *The Juice*, which is linked to channel24.co.za and represents mobile news about celebrities and entertainment, the term 'blesser' originated on the social media platform, Instagram:

The term “blesser” comes from social media. Girls would post pictures on Instagram of themselves sipping cocktails on the beach, popping bottles in the club or getting their nails done, using the hashtag #blessed. Some people started asking: Who’s really blessing them? And just like that, a cultural phenomenon was born (The Juice 2016, para. 6).

Because of its origin on social media, BRs can be considered to have started as a popular cultural phenomenon. In other words, it became a social trend, an activity prone to being ‘catchy’ or fashionable and, because it was contextualised within image and commodification, it was ready for uptake by social media youth denizens.

The key move that followed the ‘hashtag #blessed’ usage, which appeared in the tags and captions of posts of blessees, was initiated by social media commentators who, according to Makhele (2016), enquired from the posters who these blessers were. This spread the use of the term (Makhele 2016). Ngobeni (2016) reports a more detailed explanation for the use of the term, quoting the spokesperson of the online platform called Blesserfinder, a website that is hosted by Facebook and which enables BR hookups. The spokesperson is quoted as having offered the following explanation: “It started during Easter this year as social media users passed judgment on this young girl who was planning to fly to Dubai to be blessed” (Ngobeni 2016: para. 4). The Blesserfinder spokesperson acknowledged the origin of the blesser as a cultural phenomenon, iterating that it can be traced to Instagram when a young woman posted she was meeting a man in Dubai in exchange for sex, money, and coprophilia (Ngobeni 2016). It is within such references to affluent and luxurious lifestyles that BRs have been reported in SA (Garsd and Crossan 2017, Majaka 2016, Makhele 2016) and Namibia (“Zoom In” 2016).

The motivation for a luxury lifestyle is the defining feature of BRs, and this distinguishes BRs from SRs. Shamase (2016: para. 2) points out the distinction:

[The blesser is] a new version of the sugar daddy, except his spending power puts him on a much higher pedestal, giving him a god-like status of sorts. And when you date one, it is said you literally feel like your life has been blessed. Fiscally, at least.

Likewise, Mgwili (2016: para. 1) states, “blessers are the new in thing after ‘sugar daddies’”. Sugar daddies, who attend to basic necessities such as groceries and airtime, “are no match for blessers” (Shamase 2016: para 6). In the blessed world, at level one, the gift-giver may buy airtime and data, or provide money for transportation. Level two blessers may offer European designer handbags and fancy wigs and weaves; level three blessers are prepared to sponsor overseas

holidays, cars, and fancy gadgets; and the level four offers the blessee a house or the facilitation of high profile business contacts (Forbes Africa 2017, Garisd and Crossnan 2017, Mkhize 2016). Blessers are therefore not synonymous with sugar daddies (Mgwili, 2016).

Differences between SRs and BRs get reflected in online personal ads where, on one site called Cumtree Adult Classifieds (cumtree.co.za), at least, separate categories exist for blessers/blessees and SRs. On this free public SA website, which does not require users to register or use a password, two subcategories are presented for BRs: “Blessee seeking Blesser” and “Blesser seeking Blessee”. Whereas these terms are gender-neutral, additional subcategories on the same website and under the old-fashioned “Sugardaddy/Sugarmommy Hookups” category include “Female seeking Sugardaddy”, “Female seeking Sugarmommy”, “Male seeking Sugardaddy”, “Male seeking Sugarmommy”, “Sugar Daddy seeks Sugar Baby”, and “Sugar Mommy seeks Sugar Baby”. Such a set-up expects users to be familiar with the differences between SRs and BRs, and expects that users can either place ads, or respond to ads, as suits their personal preferences. Thus, online sex and relationship contacts have assimilated developments and differences that BRs have introduced into sex culture and popular culture in SA.

The structuring of gift-giving exchanges into levels introduces a discourse of promotion and progression in a culture where individuals are incited to develop and grow, where the positions into which persons are recruited always require constant improvement and where persons, in whatever endeavor is undertaken in the project of life improvement and life management, are expected to advance upwards. In his Foucauldian-inspired analysis of changing personhoods and the associated freedom that subjects now have to act agentically in advanced liberal democracies, Nikolas Rose (1996) writes about the continuous striving for improvement and progression of the self in relationships, individuality, the workplace, and in the micropractices of human actions. This is not the case of mere economic improvement. Rose (1996), drawing on the image of an ‘enterprising self’, avers that the enterprise culture as the location for this transformative practice politicises the self. Applying this to humanistic and ‘market-related’ management of relationships is not new, and transactional sexualities have appropriated such discourse to transform the once unfavourably constructed encounter into a version that is seductive and appealing. Appropriating the Foucauldian analytic, BRs can be theorised as yet another technology and practical ethical domain that enables self-improvement of persons in neoliberal culture where contemporary institutions have been deactivated and where the frame of ‘levels’, now applied to a blessed world, transcends the superficial gloss of mere economic value.

Another difference between SRs and BRs, according to Mgwili (2016), is that age discrepancy is not a prerequisite for BRs unlike the typical SR; instead, the prerequisite is money. This makes the intergenerational element a byproduct or even not of consequence, because the motivation for BRs is in the acquisition of fashionable consumer goods, flashy leisure activities, and accompaniments culturally associated with a jet-set or affluent lifestyle. Thus, financial capital, corresponding economic benefits, and cultural currency position a person as a blesser, regardless of age. Mgwili (2016: para. 3) confirms this: "Anyone rich enough to shower women with a lot of expensive gifts can become a blesser regardless of how old they are." The average age of the blesser is 34, unlike a sugar daddy who is much older (Majaka 2016). As the spokesperson for Blesserfinder (quoted in Makhoba 2016: para. 13) has stated, "A sugar daddy has to be double the age of blesser."

The place of sex as motivation is another distinction between sugar daddies and blessers. The spokesperson for Blesserfinder explained this too: "The guys [blessers] are not always looking for sex. Why would anyone pay R3000 for sex when you can go to Hillbrow for R50?" (Makhoba 2016: para. 17). Such a motivation and cultural meaning moves the BR beyond the conception that the encounter is a simple exchange of sex for money or basic gifts. This is a key point that moral critics miss, because the motivation is wrongly assumed to be sexual – a discourse that incorrectly links BRs to sex work or, even, to sugar. The appeal for both parties is in the glamour and luxury that are showered on blessees. Blessers desire beauty, a travel companion, and a trophy of sorts, unlike sugar daddies who tend to prioritise sex.

Furthermore, the online environment facilitates BRs. Many websites, apps, and social media platforms enable blesser-lessee contact. The interactive element of social media, with its immediacy and features that emphasise the image and self-presentation, has contributed to a discursive shift in the landscape of transactional sex, providing new possibilities and alternatives to old-fashioned SRs and sexual transacting. Following the original appearance of the #blessed and online posters asking about how blessers could be acquired, three young entrepreneurs started the Blesserfinder website (Makhoba 2016). Taking on the perspective of the blesser, the platform, Blesserfinder, via its Twitter platform, proudly celebrates the financial benefits of young women finding a blesser (Majaka 2016). According to an online Zimbabwean news source, the biography of the Blesserfinder account on Twitter states, "Don't let the world know your hustle, if you're beautiful, why must you struggle. Get in touch with us and we link you up with a blesser" (quoted in Majaka 2016: para. 11). Here, finding a blesser is touted as a solution for material battles, provided that the lessee is beautiful. Appearance and image are a discourse foregrounded in such advertising. According to a report on Destiny.

com, a social network site, the Blesserfinder page received 3500 likes in one night, while more than 33000 people were engaging in the conversation around the issue at one particular point (Staff Reporter 2016).

The public message, however, has also led to links being made to sexually transmitted infections. Valentine's Day, the day when popular culture glamorises gift-giving, served as an ideal opportunity in 2018 for the KwaZulu-Natal Health Minister to caution youth not to make their sexual debut on that day, expressing his concern about young women between the ages of 15 and 24 who, in transactional relationships, are at risk of HIV infection (Mngadi 2018). According to a business community news report ("HIV Programmes" 2018), blesserers have been singled out as major role players in the HIV epidemic in SA, and therefore need to be targeted in HIV intervention strategies by healthcare workers.

In the grey area that straddles peer-reviewed academic research and popular press reports, BRs, by being (mis)classified as SRs in the popular imagination, have been linked to HIV. In a safety and security magazine, an article advances the security and threat discourse in moral terms and HIV:

In our country, where sex has become a transaction between the poor and the richer, and between the young and the older, thousands of women contract HIV regularly. As long as there are wannabe social climbers who are willing to sell their souls and bodies and discard their morals for designer shoes, handbags, holidays and men who are using their money as a control mechanism to prey on women blinded by the finer things in life, the problem will continue and many young women will continue to become the blessees of much older blesserers (Geldenhuys 2016: 14).

The judgmental discourse of the quoted extract reveals the moral threat, but it also takes on the tone of nationalistic threat, to protect "our country". It positions the blessees as "wannabe social climbers" or as "blinded" victims of predators who "prey on women". Surprisingly, it is able to discursively link HIV to morality in 2016, three decades after moral discourses linked HIV to gay men, making BRs, via such representations, the new HIV frontier for health activists. Such moralistic and marginalising discourses of blame and victimhood, which have been assumed to have disappeared from our cultural landscape because of HIV activism, both globally and nationally, have resurfaced in public warnings about transactional and intergenerational sexualities.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this essay, via critically evaluating academic literature and selected popular online descriptions about blesserers and blessees, we outlined the origins, frames,

and opportunities that accompany a sexocultural moment in SA. The sugar discourse is a negativistic unappealing construction about intergenerational and transactional sex activities: The effect of the term 'sugar baby' is to infantilise and disempower recipients of gifts, even if they show agency; and the effect of 'sugar daddy' is to position the gift-giver as a dirty old man who lures innocent youth with the promise of the sugar in token sweets. The transformation to blessed discourse, in contrast, positions gift recipients as being saved, being lucky, and to now have improved social status. The gift-giver in blessed discourse, which derives from theological constructs, becomes positioned as saintly, sacred, and as provider of spiritual bliss. These very constructions make the blessed exchanges appealing and thus even resistant to risk discourse.

Discourses of risk – whether risks to morality or health – present a challenge to the project of understanding transactional sexualities such as BRs, because eradication and policing of adult sexual behaviours are tasks that have historically been shown to expose the sociopolitical and historical constructedness – and thus malleability – of sexual relations. Indeed, one HIV campaign aimed to stigmatise sugar daddies, but this was problematic, according to Brouard and Crewe (2012), who argue that economic conditions that give rise to sugar daddies will continue to exist, and one way of managing this is to provide health services for young and old people and to challenge patriarchy within a context where transactional relationality is a “valid variant on human conduct” (Brouard and Crewe 2012: 55). This activist sentiment by Brouard and Crewe (2012), which doubles up as a recommendation for future research, implies that transactional and intergenerational sexualities (where the BR is one contemporary form), require investigation from non-moralistic and non-pathological paradigms. In the same way that critical research has investigated the sexual expressions and sexual conduct of non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative persons, BRs could benefit from theoretical attention from a queer paradigm, for example. The goal would be to acknowledge sociosexual and symbolic realities that characterise the contemporary world where adult companionship and/or erotic expressiveness have become complex and complicated.

The BR needs to be considered in the context of gift-giving and as having a particular social structure, rather than exclusively within frames of health or moral risk. BRs need to be conceptualised against other partnering or erotic options (e.g. marriage, sex work, casual sex encounters). Marriage, as the hegemonic means of heterosexual partnering, is assumed to be an acceptable and legitimated contract that grants sex even when one spouse benefits financially. Outside of marriage, but lower on the relationship and sex hierarchy, are romantic long-term relationships that have gift exchanges but which are normalised within dating and courtship. As such, gift-giving is a common everyday practice and part of courtship in

Table 1. Relationships, Sex, and Gift Exchanges: Differences and Similarities

Feature	Heterosexual Marriage	Casual Sex encounters	Sex Work	Sugar Relationship	Blessed Relationship
Sex and Motivation	Cultural and gender relations; sex and romance binds couple; sex is an expression of love. Sex is for procreation in a family structure.	Sex is the only motivation. Recreational sex.	Sex: single occurrence.	Sex is primary motivation for sugar daddy—repeated encounters.	Sex is secondary motivation or a byproduct of agreement for blessing. For both parties, motivation is symbolic rather than only physical (sexual arousal and satisfaction). Repeated sex encounters.
Nature of exchange	Gifts confer symbolic meanings of love, safety, and security.	No gifts.	Money (cash)	Gifts can be for airtime and survival goods.	Leisure activities, and consumer or fashionable commodities for lessee. Trophy possession for blessing.
Duration of sex	As long as marriage lasts. Longterm.	Usually short-lived and once-off.	One to a few hours. Immediate.	Short- to middle-term arrangements.	Short- to middle-term arrangements.
Time sequencing of exchanges	Gifts have no noticeable and contractual sequencing to sex acts, but are linked to celebratory and holiday events.	No gifts.	'Gifts' occur immediately before sex act.	Gifts can be regular over a time-span.	Informal contract. Gifts can be delayed after sex acts or be contracted before (but not immediately before) sex acts.
Laws	Legally protected union.	None for consenting adults.	Illegal or little legal protection.	No legal protection.	No legal protection.
Networks	Old-fashioned (familial bonds and friends in the social circle).	Online and informal.	In physical locations and venues typically.	Informal or online; clandestine.	Online communities or informal networks. Social media.
Relationship ideology	Monogamy and like-age.	Non-monogamous for married persons or those in relationships.	Multiple partners, with limited age and generational boundaries.	Intergenerational: older party is in concurrent relationships.	Intergenerational: Parties are in concurrent multiple relationships.
Positioning of male partner	Ownership and dominant, according to traditional gender stereotypes and patriarchal codes.	Sex for pleasure and recreation. No commitments.	Alone. Sexually desperate 'client'.	Dirty old man. Rural. Middle-aged man. Predator.	Blesser: Urban and trendy. Celebrity. Saint: Enabler.
Positioning of female partner	Sex object and submissive according to traditional gender stereotypes and patriarchal codes.	Sex for pleasure and recreational. No commitments.	Risky. Immoral.	Infantilised. Passive.	Divinely saved and rewarded. Agent. Trophy.

relationships between like-age persons where gifts may be reciprocated with sex (Kaufman and Stavrou 2004). Furthermore, marriage and dating relationships are typically expected to be monogamous. It is these grounds or ideals (romance and monogamy) that get threatened by blessed arrangements where the motivation is not marriage or romance. Blessed arrangements are not sexually monogamous because the blesser may often be married and the blessee has other sexual or romantic partners. Moreover, in contrast to dominant heterosexual ways of partnering, the BR arrangement is explicit about the outcomes not being marriage, monogamy, or romance. The BR is a way of formalising or contracting for multiple acts of gift-giving in contrast to romantic and marital relationships where gift-giving is non-contractual. Here, we do not include cultural bridewealth traditions that link contractual gift-giving to marriage.

BRs therefore require conceptualisation alongside other forms of sexual and relational partnerings (see Table 1). Table 1 presents a conceptual framework that goes beyond simplistic comparisons such as Bougard and Matsi-Madolo's (2017) distinctions between prostitution and transactional sex, or Motyl's (2010) legal comparison between sugar daddies and prostitution, or online distinctions between sugar daddies and blesseres (e.g. Mgwili 2016; Shamase 2016). The distinctions, however, are restricted to male-female relationships with, in the case of BRs and SRs, the older partner being male. Whereas heterosexual BRs are predominantly considered to involve an older man and a younger woman, the younger man/older woman variant, which has been labelled "Ben10" (Bougard & Matsi-Madolo 2017), is recommended for attention similar to that in this paper.

Online-originated relationships and social media promotion of BRs and SRs reveal bidirectional agency. The online domain, based on the internet sources cited in this paper, is not just the space of origin of BRs, as has currently been conceptualised; it is also the space where this transactional encounter thrives by being easily advertised and taken up. In other words, the online space has produced and reproduced BRs. Our analysis supports Kuate-Defo's (2004) recommendation that the role of the internet demands further research, particularly with reference to how contacts can be made via direct communication of desires.

The BR is a way of formalising gift-giving in the context of an ongoing sexual relationship, but the gifts and their value need to be considered within a global image environment. In other words, desires are formalised and contracted, but negotiated within a consumerist and commodified environment. BRs link desires for consumerist and leisure lifestyles with companionship and erotic expansion, but they are subject to interactive and agential management.

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