

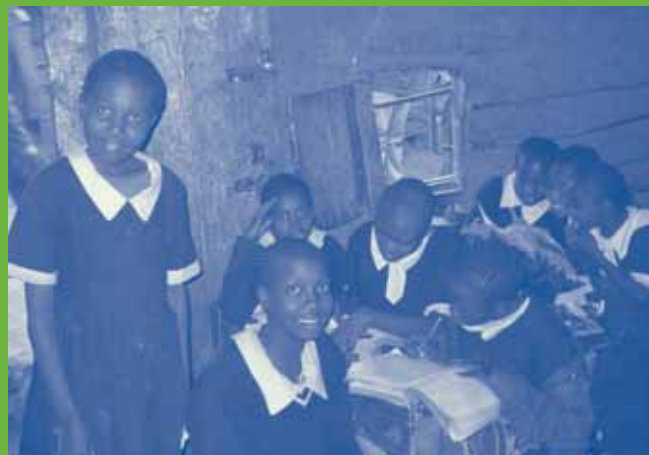
Talking about sex: Using youth language in sexuality education

Chi-Chi Undie, Joanna Crichton & Eliya Zulu

Language shapes the way we think about life, and therefore influences our actions. Analysing the metaphors young people use while talking about sex can provide valuable insights into the ways in which they understand sex, sexual behaviour and sexual relationships. These insights may have untapped potential for enhancing the effectiveness of sexuality education interventions. Despite increasing levels of awareness about HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, many young people in the region still lack detailed knowledge on protecting themselves from sexually transmitted infections (including HIV) and unwanted pregnancies. Studies show that young people become sexually active at relatively early ages, have multiple sexual partners, and often do not use condoms or other contraceptive methods. In this context, interventions to raise knowledge and awareness and to influence attitudes and behaviour need to be well-designed and accessible for young people.

Research shows that sexuality education, if well-designed and implemented, can be a useful tool for encouraging sexual responsibility among adolescents. A recent review of 83 evaluations of sex and HIV education interventions from around the world found that the most effective programmes tended to be carefully designed to fit their socio-cultural contexts.¹ These successful programmes used activities, methods and behaviour messages that are relevant to local youth culture. They directly addressed risk and cultural factors affecting sexual behaviour, such as values and attitudes.

We suggest that an important way of tailoring interventions to the socio-cultural context is through incorporating young people's own language into curricula and teaching approaches. Researchers have for a long time realized that socio-cultural contexts are important for understanding sexual behaviour and vulnerabilities to HIV infection. However, they have tended to overlook the significance of language as an important aspect of culture.² An important insight from academic research on cognitive linguistics is that the ways in which we think are shaped by metaphorical language, which indirectly influences our actions and behaviour.³ A metaphor is



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a figure of speech which helps us understand and/or experience one thing in terms of another. As we communicate with one another, we unconsciously use metaphors to help us make sense of reality. Our conceptualizations of sex can, therefore, be shaped by metaphors, thus, influencing our sexual decision-making and action.

A study conducted by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) in 2006 sought to gain insights into the ways young people in Malawi think about sex and sexual relationships by analysing the language – specifically, the metaphors – they use. Analysing the metaphors young people use to talk about sex is one of a number of ways through which one can understand youth culture and adapt sexuality education approaches accordingly. The data analysed in the study were drawn from a larger multi-country

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research project involving focus group discussions (FGDs) with 14-19 year-olds, and nationally-representative surveys and in-depth interviews with 12-19 year-olds, parents, teachers and health providers. In Malawi, eleven FGDs were conducted, involving 114 young people aged between 14 and 19. We did separate FGDs among males and females in rural and urban settings and among adolescents that were in-school and out-of-school. We asked the participants questions about the nature of sexual relationships among adolescents; HIV and STI knowledge; views on abstinence, condom use and premarital pregnancy; and preferred sexual and reproductive health information sources and services. The FGDs were tape-recorded in the local language, translated into English, and transcribed prior to being analysed.

Analysing metaphors

As we examined the FGD transcripts, coded, 'youth-only' language emerged as a central part of youth culture and communication.

Young people explained that speaking in this covert ‘language’ was a means of keeping their sexual knowledge hidden from parents, other adults, and younger children. Intrigued by this finding, we began an in-depth exploration of youth language to discover what it might suggest about how young people conceptualize sex, and the implications of these conceptualizations for their sexual and reproductive health.

Our analysis of youth language involved a process of reading carefully through each FGD transcript to identify and record all metaphorical expressions that described sexual world-views and other sex-related phenomena (e.g., the act of sex itself, male and female genitalia, multiple sexual partnerships, rationale for choice of sex partners, etc.). The most recurrent expressions in the transcripts were examined for patterns and categorized according

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to the information they appeared to reveal about the world-view of the group or speaker. This process revealed three main ways in which young people conceptualized sex. Young people’s expressions focused largely on the mechanics of sexual actions and the utility of sexual organs (metaphorical concept 1: ‘sex is utilitarian’). Their metaphors also emphasized the gratifying nature of sex (metaphorical concept 2: ‘sex is pleasurable’), as well as the passionate aspects of sexual activity (metaphorical concept 3: ‘sex is passionate’). For some examples, see the side box.

It is important to point out that there was usually some overlap between these three concepts; they were not necessarily conceived independently of one another. A missing feature in the metaphors

used by youth, however, was rhetoric that demonstrated their emphasis on, or familiarity with, intimacy and emotional aspects of relationships, which raises questions about their capacity to build quality relationships based on these tenets.

Language and sexuality education

The Malawian study revealed that language is an underutilized entry point into the world of young people. It can serve as a critical evidence base for sexuality-related research and prevention efforts, and for informing sexuality education. Although many teacher training guidelines emphasize the importance of adapting interventions to culture, most do not acknowledge the role language can play in helping to understand and address young people’s conceptualizations of sex. Local studies of such conceptualizations could provide valuable information and insights to inform the design of sexuality education curricula, tools, and teacher training programmes. Similarly, teachers could be trained on how to assess and utilize the youth’s conceptualizations in their classrooms.

One practical finding from the Malawian study was that young people are often more willing to talk about sex in peer focus group discussions than in one-to-one interviews. Therefore, discussions among small groups of peers may be a particularly fruitful method for collecting information about youth language with a view to inform sexuality education programmes and interventions.

Tailored messages

Recurrent metaphors could serve as a starting point for tailoring educational messages. For instance, in the present study, ‘utilitarian’ metaphors were the most commonly-used language for sex-related phenomena among adolescents. A useful exercise might therefore be for educators to identify prevalent metaphors and assess whether these lead to positive or negative constructions of sex, which could have health or rights implications. Small group discussions could encourage young people to critically reflect on the language they use, with the aim of raising awareness about

Popular youth metaphors in Malawi

In the ‘sex is utilitarian’ category of metaphors, the expressions young people used to refer to ‘having sex’ included phrases such as, “*putting Colgate [toothpaste] on a toothbrush*” or “*opening a girl*” (an expression employed by male respondents). Girls referred to female genitalia (specifically, the labia) by saying, “*They are like doors*”. Young people’s views about multiple sexual partnerships were expressed via opinions such as, “*It is good to have a spare tire; if one gets flat, [you] just fix the other,*” or: “*Girls say, you don’t need to have one cloth [outfit] only.*” On the one hand, these examples illustrate that the adolescents’ metaphorical language emphasized the utility of female genitalia as an object which – much like a suitcase or a set of doors – may be opened, entered through, or exited from. On the other hand, in likening sex to the ordinariness and familiarity of opening a door, or brushing one’s teeth, young people unconsciously construct sexual activity as a normal, routine activity. Some of the metaphorical expressions above also suggest that sex and sex partners are as commonplace, mundane, and changeable as clothing or spare tires, thus, serving to normalize multiple sexual partnerships.

An example of a metaphor from the ‘sex is pleasurable’ category is: “*Sometimes, it is better to have sex ‘meat to meat’ because if a person wants to eat a banana, do they eat it along with the peels? The banana won’t taste good, hence the need to remove the peels and eat it.*” Young women refer to condom use as follows: “*You can’t eat candy while it’s in the wrapper. It doesn’t taste good.*” In the ‘sex is passionate’ category of metaphors, common expressions for ‘having sex’ among Malawian youth include: ‘*breaking one another*’, ‘*finishing each other*’ and ‘*putting water on the beans*’.

Resources

on sexuality education



Keep the Best, Change the Rest. Participatory tools for working with communities on gender and sexuality

International HIV/AIDS Alliance, 2007 (99 p.)

The toolkit *Keep the Best, Change the Rest* provides a resource aimed at enabling individuals and organizations working on HIV and AIDS issues to address gender and sexuality effectively. It contains participatory activities which enable groups of men and women of different ages to explore how gender and sexuality affect their lives and identify changes which they wish to make to improve their relationships and sexual health. It aims to establish the ongoing involvement of key stakeholders such as chiefs, traditional advisors, teachers, health workers, civil society organizations and religious and other leaders. The toolkit was developed in collaboration with individuals, groups and organizations in Zambia, through workshops, seminars and field experience.

http://www.aidsalliance.org/custom_asp/publications/view.asp?publication_id=257

hard copy (free): publications@aidsalliance.org

Christian and Muslim Family Life Education Training Manuals

Family Health International/YouthNet, 2006/2007



These manuals entitled *Teaching adults to communicate with youth from a Christian perspective* and *Teaching adults to communicate with youth from a Muslim perspective* encourage open discussion about sexuality, reproductive health, and HIV in the context of faith communities. They contain training materials for six workshops and a participant handbook designed for adults, including parents. Participants practice communication skills and learn factual information as linked to religious teachings and appropriate Bible and Quran verses, respectively. A third manual, *Teaching youth about reproductive health and HIV/AIDS from a Christian perspective*, is available for working with youth from a Christian perspective.

<http://www.infoforhealth.org/youthwg/trainingmaterials.shtml>
hard copy (limited copies available):

2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 700, Arlington, VA 22201 USA

E-mail: youthnetpubs@fhi.org

concepts that reinforce (or discourage) risky sexual behaviours and power inequalities, or that lead to rights violations. The likening of female genitalia to a door, for instance, raises questions about adolescents' possible perceptions of the role of women as passive participants in the sexual process (whose only role is to be 'entered into' and 'exited from'). Such conceptualizations have potentially negative implications for young women's sexual agency, and can form the basis of a fruitful classroom discussion/analysis session. Similarly, the absence of youth rhetoric about relevant issues (e.g., sexual violence, abstinence, safer sex) also provides food for thought-provoking discussions and self-evaluations.

Young people's emphasis on pleasure in this study supports arguments that an effective approach to sexual health education should incorporate concepts of sexual pleasure. Addressing the concept of pleasure in sexuality education is likely to be controversial, but may be essential in many contexts to ensure that sexuality education interventions are relevant to young people's culture and world-views.

We readily acknowledge that implementing recommendations along the proposed lines will have its challenges, given the difficulties generally experienced during implementation of sexuality education in many countries. Nonetheless, given the importance of sexuality education, there is value in continued development of innovative ways of addressing these challenges. A reflective discussion of metaphors not only provides an opportunity for instructors to understand the concepts and constructs in the sexual worlds of young people in their own right, it could also help teachers to identify and address their own biases and assumptions. ■

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