Metaphors We Love By: Conceptualizations of Sex among Young People in Malawi

Chi-Chi Undie, Joanna Crichton, Eliya Zulu

Abstract

This paper explores how young people in Malawi conceptualize sex and sexual relations through an analysis of their personal narratives about these phenomena. Eleven focus group discussions were conducted with 114 youth aged 14-19 years. Participants were asked to describe behaviors, attitudes, and motivations to reduce unplanned pregnancies and the spread of HIV/AIDS, with appropriate probes to illuminate their sexual world-views. The various metaphors that emanated from the discussions suggest that young people in this study take a utilitarian approach to sex, and conceive it as a natural and routine activity of which pleasure and passion are essential components. Future research and prevention efforts (around sexuality education in particular) would do well to incorporate adolescents' language in programming as this can enhance understanding of the world of young people as well as the effectiveness of interventions addressing problems related to early sexual behavior. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2007; 11[3]:221-235)

Résumé

Métaphores par lesquelles nous aimons: Conceptualisations du sexe chez les jeunes gens au Malawi. Cet article explore la façon dont les jeunes gens au Malawi conceptualisent le sexe et les rapports sexuels à travers une analyse de leurs narrations personnelles sur ces phénomènes. Onze discussions en groupe cible ont été menées auprès des 114 jeunes gens âgés de 14-19 ans. On a demandé aux participants de faire des descriptions des comportements, des attitudes et des motivations pour réduire des grossesses non voulues et la diffusion du VIH/SIDA et des enquêtes appropriées pour éclairer leur vision du monde sexuel. Les métaphores diverses qui ont émané des discussions ont montré que les jeunes gens dont il s'agit dans cette étude adoptent une approche utilitaire envers le sexe et le conçoient comme une activité naturelle et de routine dont le plaisir et la passion constituent des éléments essentiels. Les recherches pour l'avenir et les efforts de prévention (surtout à propos de l'éducation sexuelle) feront bien d'incorporer le langage des adolescents dans la programmation puisque ceci pourrait améliorer la compréhension du monde des jeunes gens aussi bien que l'efficacité des interventions qui s'occupent des problèmes liés au comportement sexuel précoce. (*Rev Afr Santé Reprod* 2007; 11[3]:221-235)

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Introduction

The statistics regarding HIV/AIDS prevalence among young people in sub-Saharan Africa are well-known and oft-cited, with the 15 to 24 year-old category of this population accounting for about half of all new infections in the region[1]– a region contending with nearly 70% of all HIV/AIDS cases worldwide.[1] Also commonplace is the knowledge that HIV infection in the African region is transmitted primarily through heterosexual intercourse.[FNA] HIV has come to be known as a discriminatory disease, with young women across the region being more likely to be infected than their male peers.[1] The disquieting association between the youth population and the AIDS pandemic necessitates a value-free exploration of the sexual world in which young people operate, with the aim of understanding their world-views prior to the introduction of any necessary interventions.

Socio-cultural contexts have long been recognized as important domains for understanding sexual behavior and pathways of HIV infection. Language, however, has been overlooked despite its significance as a major component of culture.[2] Indeed, our very conceptual system (and, by extension, our actions) has been argued to be inextricably linked to, and informed by, language.[3] We posit that an important way of gaining entry into young people's sexual world and culture is through incorporating their own language into curricula and teaching approaches. However, most education training guidelines do not discuss what kind of language teachers should use in sexuality education, nor do they give attention to languages used by young people. Evaluations of sexuality education initiatives recommend that programs be 'age- and culture-specific', without detailed discussion of what this involves.[4,5] The UNFPA recommends that sexuality education be carried out in local languages, but does not mention youth language or slang.[6] The few resources that recommend using the language spoken by youth base the recommendation on the importance of making messages and media of communication more accessible for youth.[7] They do not discuss how language reflects and structures our understanding of sexuality.

Using the technique of conceptual metaphor analysis,[3] therefore, this paper investigates the sexuality-related language of Malawian adolescents in order to gain an understanding of how sex is conceptualized among this population and the possible implications for young people's sexual decision-making and actions. Young people's own conceptualizations of sex and sexual relations present a good starting point for tailoring sex education to specific contexts, with a view to enhancing young people's rights and making approaches to sexuality education as effective as possible. Incorporating young people's language and manners of self-expression would increase the accessibility of sexuality education, and promote information communication and dialogue between young people and service providers.

Background

There is evidence that sexuality education, when properly and comprehensively delivered, can be a very useful intervention tool, encouraging sexual responsibility among adolescents.[4] Despite this potential, sexuality education programs have not been fully implemented across the continent. Moreover, those in existence have struggled to achieve the desired impact. Findings from a recent study, for example, show that only 10-14% of girls aged 12-14 years in Burkina Faso, 13-19% in Malawi, 22-34% in Uganda, and 28-41% in Ghana, had received family life or sex education in school around 2004.[8] Furthermore, a major limitation of some existing sexuality education programs is the failure to ensure that tools and messages are tailored to youth culture.[4]

A range of sexuality education strategies are used with the aim of reducing HIV infection rates among young people, including raising knowledge and awareness, influencing attitudes

and behaviors, and promoting the utilization of preventive services through mass media, person-to-person communication, service providers, using the influence of traditional and religious leaders, and sexuality education in schools and other institutions where young people congregate. These programs are formulated on the basis of various study findings that show that many young people in the region are not as knowledgeable as they should be about sexual and reproductive health issues, they initiate sex at relatively early ages, they have multiple sexual partners, they may be affected by sexual violence and other forms of coercion and they often do not use contraceptives or condoms to protect themselves from sexually transmitted illnesses (including HIV) and unwanted pregnancies.

Among this myriad of strategies, c*omprehensive* sexuality education is presently touted as a ground-breaking approach that engages holistically with the sexuality and sexual health of young people, bringing socio-cultural, biological, psychological, and moral factors to the fore.[9] A far more empowering model, comprehensive sexuality education moves away from traditional sex/sexuality education's fixation on the health issues and other 'problems' young people present, to focus instead on their achievement of positive sexual development. The accomplishment of this feat necessarily involves the incorporation of the concept of rights into the sexuality equation. The rights-based approach to sexuality education considers the intersection of democratic practices, health, and happiness, promoting the equality, empowerment, and social inclusion evoked by the notion of rights.[9]

The principle of 'participation' is central to rights-based approaches and has important implications for sexuality education and a focus on the voices (and, hence, language) of young people. There is now international recognition that young people have the right to express their views, and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[10] Rights-based approaches to communication involve facilitating two-way dialogue and responsiveness to the views and aspirations of rights-holders. For sexuality education, this involves incorporating young people's views into the design of training, curricula and resources. It also means moving away from traditional behavior change communication models where targeted 'beneficiaries' are expected to listen and conform to the messages from teachers and other service providers.[11]

Another central aspect of rights-based approaches that is pertinent to this paper involves the promotion of structural change by addressing inequality, exclusion and discrimination created by unequal power relations.[12] The right of young people to express their views is not only a right in itself, but is essential to the process of realizing other rights, because it helps to overcome power inequalities that restrict their access to knowledge and information and silence their voices. For sexuality education, this means employing methods that allow adolescents to express their experiences, aspirations and concerns around sexuality. It involves overcoming constraints to communication created by a combination of socio-cultural norms, institutional factors and their own internalization of the idea that young people should not speak about their knowledge or views on sex.[13,14] It also involves countering mainstream tendencies to construct adolescents as irrational, wayward and irresponsible, or simply as innocent and passive victims of the actions of others.[15]

Bhana[13] has traced the controversy and anxiety voiced around the world about the question of the sexual and reproductive rights of minors. This controversy has often failed to engage with the reality that young people have their own knowledge, interests, concerns and ideas, based on their interpretation, assimilation and adaptation of cultural values and norms from an early age. Aggleton[15] describes young people as 'sentient beings, meaning givers and construers

of their own reality', emphasizing the importance of using adolescent voices to inform sexuality education.

Building on the rights-based approach to sexuality education, this paper seeks to contextualize the sexual and reproductive health of young people in Malawi by analyzing the language they use to talk about sex-related phenomena. Analyzing the metaphors young people use to talk about sex is one of a number of ways to understand their language and to adapt sexuality education approaches accordingly. A focus on young people's "own" language as part of sexuality education programs takes steps toward social inclusion, while listening to young people's own conceptualizations of sex, and incorporating their language in educational practices promotes the participatory and empowering practices that are central to the rights-based approach. Finally, we argue that critical views and beliefs about sexuality are often held latently, and can be drawn out and critically assessed by both young people, sexuality educators, and service providers through an examination of the language they use.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this paper draws principally from Lakoff and Johnson's influential work. Their book, *Metaphors We Live By*,[3] has played a key role in drawing scholarly attention to the importance and power of metaphor in our lives. A metaphor is a figure of speech which helps us understand and/or experience one thing in terms of another. Lakoff and Johnson were the first to extensively examine the notion that, consciously or unconsciously, metaphors often form a part of our speech patterns and ultimately structure the ways in which we conceive different issues. Since then, the concept of metaphor has been applied within various fields (see, for example[2;16-18]), revealing the power that it has to shape current world-views as well as future social realities. In the course of communication, we unconsciously use the device of metaphor to help us make sense of reality. Metaphors shape and structure our perceptions and understanding, lending a framework within which our experiences are interpreted and assigned meaning,[16] and becoming tantamount to "self-fulfilling prophecies."[3] Conceptualizations of sex can therefore arguably be shaped by metaphors, thus, influencing sexual decision-making and action.

Borrowing from Lakoff and Johnson, we turn to a brief examination of a common English conceptual metaphor to demonstrate the influence that figures of speech have in shaping and reinforcing perceptions and actions. The following linguistic expressions, for instance, are indexical of the metaphorical concept that 'TIME IS MONEY':

> You're **wasting** my time
> How do you **spend** your time these days?
> I've **invested** a lot of time in her
> He's living on **borrowed** time

With time being a valued commodity and a limited resource in many cultures, it is often understood and experienced as that which may be wasted, spent, invested wisely or poorly, or borrowed, as depicted by the above examples. Such metaphors reflect perspectives on the phenomena concerned that have been argued to influence attitudes and behavior.[3]

As the example demonstrates, conceptual metaphors "allow language users to understand and communicate about complex or abstract ideas in terms of ordinary experiences" and "are important for interpreting peoples' notions of 'common sense.'"[19] As human communicators, we are typically incognizant of our tacit knowledge and its influence on our comprehension of everyday experience.[19] This conceptual framework has guided the development of our arguments in this article.

Methods

The data analyzed for this paper are derived from the 'Protecting the Next Generation' project – a broad, multi-country (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi, and Uganda) study involving 55 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 14-19 year-olds in 2003 and 400 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 12-19 year-olds in the same year. In addition, nationally-representative surveys were conducted in each study country in 2004 with 12-19 year-olds. Lastly, 240 in-depth interviews with parents, teachers and health providers were carried out in 2005.

Our focus in the present article, however, is on the focus group discussions conducted with young people in Malawi. It is important to note that there was variation in young people's willingness to talk about sex between the IDIs and the FGDs carried out in Malawi. A review of the FGD and IDI transcripts showed that young people were more comfortable discussing sex in peer focus group discussions than in in-depth interviews, supporting findings from other settings on the usefulness of FGDs for investigating sensitive or personal issues that are easier to discuss in a group setting, with a 'group' (as opposed to 'personal') focus.[20] The FGDs thus provided a more fruitful site than the IDIs for the investigation of language.

Eleven FGDs were carried out in Malawi with a total of 114 respondents aged between 14 and 19 years-old. Respondents were selected from four study areas and separate FGDs were conducted with males and females, in rural and urban settings, and among adolescents that were in school and out-of-school. Questions were asked about the nature of sexual relationships among adolescents; HIV and STI knowledge; views on abstinence, condoms, 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 the analysis.

In examining the FGD transcripts, the salience of coded, 'youth-only' language emerged as a consistent and striking theme. Respondents explained that speaking in this particular 'language' served to keep their sexual knowledge hidden from parents, other adults, and younger children. Our research question thus became: What does the language that young people use suggest about how they conceptualize sex, and what are the implications of these conceptualizations for their sexual and reproductive health?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)[21] was used to examine the structure of text with a view to uncovering the perceptions and constructions of sex as revealed by the discursive data. Discourse analysis in general "challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political condition".[22] CDA in particular helps to clarify the linkages between language use and social inequality, making this approach particularly compatible with the rights framework foregrounding this paper. CDA is an umbrella term encompassing several distinct but related approaches to the analysis of social or political discourse. One such approach is "conceptual metaphor analysis".[3] The sex-related discourse used by young people in this study often manifested itself in the form of metaphors. We have therefore drawn specifically on a conceptual metaphor analysis of the prevalent linguistic metaphors for sex and sex related phenomena as an interpretive tool. Conceptual metaphor analysis involves a process in which significant language or speech patterns that might otherwise be overlooked, are identified, exposing covert assumptions about a particular subject or circumstance, and increasing our understanding of the socio-cultural context in which the identified metaphors occur.[17]

Our analysis involved a process of reading carefully through each transcript to identify and record all metaphorical linguistic 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 selected, examined for patterns, and categorized according to the information they appeared to invoke about the conceptual system of the group or speaker. The inferential structures connecting each category of conceptual metaphors were then teased out for implicit meanings, and to enable the unearthing of the hidden social logic of participants.

Results

Three groups of metaphors, based on different conceptualizations of sex, seemed to dominate the communicative events recorded in the transcripts, suggesting that young people in this study conceptualize sex in the following main ways. First of all, sex is conceived as an activity to which a utilitarian approach ought to be taken. Secondly, sex is conceptualized as being pleasurable. Lastly, passion is considered as another essential component of sexual relations. It is important to point out that there was usually some overlap between these three conceptualizations; they were not necessarily conceived independently of one another. Furthermore, although there were numerous metaphors present in the narratives of the respondents, we have restricted our discussion here to the kinds that were most prevalent.

Sex is Utilitarian

The conceptual metaphors employed by the adolescents often seemed to stress utility or function over other values; thus, the focus of the metaphors was often on the mechanics of sexual actions or the utility of sexual organs, with less attention given to the experiential, interpersonal, or social aspects of these actions for those involved. Female genitalia, for instance, were referred to as a "door," or a pair of "doors," highlighting their utility as something which, like a set of doors, may be opened or closed. The following excerpt demonstrates this point:

Participant:	Some say that when you don't have them [elongated labia], marriage becomes very difficult. … They are told to work hard [at pulling the labia] so that they grow [long]. …
Moderator:	They say that the marriage becomes difficult if we don't have them?
Participant:	If you do not have *sewere*.
Moderator:	Are the *sewere* the labia?
Participant:	Eeh! [yes] (All laugh)
Participant:	And men like them.
Moderator:	Mm, mm! So how do men use them?
Participant:	**They are like doors** (all laugh).
Moderator:	Doors? (laughs)
Participant:	Those are the *sewere* (all laugh)
Participant:	Men like playing with them and say, "The labia are so long."
Participants:	(laughter)

(*females, rural, out-of-school, 18-19*)

Here, female respondents describe a practice found in some Malawian cultures in a manner which seems to reinforce the notion that the primary focus of sex should be male pleasure. Furthermore, the matter-of-fact statement "*They are like doors*," suggests that the young women perceive or construct their own bodies in this utilitarian fashion.

The allusion to female genitalia as a set of "doors" was often more implicit than overt, however. The following utterances are examples of the subtle conceptualization of female genitalia and the sexual process as utilitarian:

> Another thing that happens is that you may see her [a potential sex partner] as **brand new** [at first] … as if she has had no sexual relationship: 'So, I am **opening her** myself.' … It is only after [having sex] that you realize that she was **not new** after all.

(*males, urban, in school, 14-19*)

Participant: [Women who have multiple partners] have been called names such as '*palowa ina*,' meaning, '**Another one has entered**.'

Moderator: Aah!

Participants: Eee! [Yes]

Participant: When one comes off, **another goes in**.

Moderator: What is *palowa ina*?

Participant: A penis

Participant: It's just a penis [laughing]

(*females, rural, out-of-school, 18-19*)

As illustrated above, young people use metaphorical language to underpin the notion of female genitalia as an object which – much like a suitcase or a door – may or may not be 'brand new' and 'opened.' Furthermore, women that happen to have several sex partners are viewed, even by young girls, in terms of their perceived sexual function as passive receivers in the sexual process, whose only role is to be entered into and exited from. While this has obvious implications for female sexual agency, it is important to indicate that men are also objectified in the discussion above, being symbolized by their genitals (*'When one comes off, another goes in'*).

Another important commonality shared by these two excerpts is the routinism they evoke. Genitalia in general do not appear to be shrouded in mystique among the participants. Additionally, in likening sex to the ordinariness and familiarity of opening and closing, entering and exiting, young people routinize sexual activity, constructing it as a normal, everyday activity. The following quote reinforces this point:

Moderator: Why do the youth choose [the phrase] 'Colgate [toothpaste] on a toothbrush' [to refer to sex]?

Participant: It's groovy.

Moderator: So is there something which they resemble?

Participant: Maybe they resemble something

All: [laughter!]

Participant: Maybe I am thinking that '**putting Colgate on a toothbrush**' means a female's genitals and a male's genitals. Maybe the toothbrush is a female's vagina and the Colgate means the male's sperms [semen].

All: Yes, it's true! It's true – eeee!!

(Females, urban, out-of-school, 16-19)

The fact that the conceptual metaphor of "toothpaste on a toothbrush" was very prevalent across the discussions with young people is telling. Much like "entering" a room, or going through a "door," brushing one's teeth is a practical, routine, and natural activity. Young people's association of sex with this figure of speech illuminates their functional world-view in regard to this phenomenon.

The following examples equally demonstrate the prevalence of the utilitarian approach with which adolescents in this study engaged with the notion of sex:

Participant: There are some people who advise the youth about having a single [partner], etc. But they don't know that the person they are advising has not yet reached the age of getting into marriage, so it's not good.

Participant: [S]ome give examples, like, "It is good to have **a spare tire**; if one gets flat, just fix the other."

[Laughter]

Participant: They say, "No **motorcar** moves without a spare tire."

(*males, urban, in school, 14-19*)

[Boys say], "Do you just eat **vegetables** daily? Sometimes, you change [your diet]" … Girls say, 'You don't need to have one **cloth** [outfit] only.'

(*females, urban, out-of-school, 15-19)*

The excerpts above suggest that sex and sex partners are as commonplace, mundane, and changeable as spare tires, a daily diet, or a set of clothing. Furthermore, the metaphors employed (set, as they are, in a utilitarian framework) serve to normalize multiple sexual partnerships. Not only is a monogamous sexual partnership framed as imprudent (similar to driving without a spare tire), it is also conceived as being as unbalanced as a monotonous diet, or as insipid as a sole set of clothing. Furthermore, the participants seem to have the impression that sticking to one partner is a concern for married people, but not for the unmarried. The implications of these conceptualizations for youth sexuality are that adolescents may view promiscuity as being an essential part of sexual relations, to the detriment of their ability to foster intimacy and build quality relationships.

The participants' utilitarian approach to sex should not be taken to mean that sexual intercourse, for them, is purely mechanical, however. On the contrary, there is a paradoxical emphasis in the accounts of respondents on what they perceive as the gratifying nature of sex. We discuss this in the following two sections.

Sex is Pleasurable

> You can't **eat** [candy] while it's in the wrapper. It doesn't **taste** [good].
>
> (*females, rural, out-of-school, 18-19)*

> 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.
>
> (*males, rural, out-of-school, 17-19)*

> [Some girls] say, 'I can't have a relationship with somebody [that's] not initiated [i.e., not circumcised]. They say [this] because the initiated are **'sweet**.'
>
> *(females, urban, out-of-school, 15-19)*

Quotations such as the ones above were prevalent in the focus group data. Similar narratives have also been noted in the literature.[2] However, studies have typically interpreted such metaphors exclusively from the viewpoint of irresponsibility and risk. These perspectives are of undeniable importance due to their potentially negative sexual health impacts on adolescents. Nonetheless, the fixation upon health problems alone has served to eclipse other possible interpretations of these figures of speech. One such interpretation is that, despite adult strategies to conceal the association between sex and pleasure,[23,[FNB]] the latter may already be an integral part of young people's conceptual frameworks in regard to sex.

The adolescents in this study clearly viewed sex as something that is designed to be pleasurable. The allusions to taste and touch above indicate that sex, in the minds of the respondents, ought to appeal to the senses. It ought to "taste good," much like candy, or feel good as implied by the phrase "meat to meat" (meaning, "flesh to flesh" or, "without a condom"). The reticence of some girls toward having sex with a non-circumcised male partner speaks to the importance that gratification holds for sexual relations among youth. The perception that circumcised male genitalia provide a more satisfying sexual experience is enough to warrant abstention from sexual intercourse with the "non-initiated."[FND]

The symbolism of food and eating were pervasive in the sex-related accounts of participants. While one may interpret this to mean that, to young people, individuals engaged in sex are "reduced" to food, or objectified, another construal might be that food, candy, and eating are pleasurable phenomena which (like sex) are meant to be utterly enjoyed. The following example lends credence to this assertion:

Moderator: When you say "hitting water," what do you mean?

Participant: "**Hitting water**" means having sex. We use this phrase to make sure parents

	and little ones don't understand the sexual activities [we're talking about]
Moderator:	How did this come into usage?
Participant:	When you reach the climax -
Participant:	Ejaculation
Participant:	Then, eh! Water - *fwa*! Ejaculated.
Moderator:	We have many words that adolescents use instead of sex
Participants:	Yes (chorus)

(*males, urban, out-of-school, 15-19*)

"Hitting water" (another term for "having sex"), as indicated above, literally refers to ejaculation, or coming to a climax in the course of sexual relations. The very construction of this expression and its concomitant meaning, point to the inextricability of sex and pleasure for adolescents in this sample. However, while boys specifically referred to this phrase as being synonymous with male climax, their female peers simply defined it to mean: "Having sex." This suggests that female pleasure may not be emphasized as much as male pleasure among young people. It also raises questions about whether female orgasm is seen as a part of sex, or whether female pleasure is, indeed, linked to female orgasm.

Reminiscent of the utilitarian theme discussed earlier, the references to food and the manner in which it ought to be consumed evokes a sense of naturalism and normalcy where sex and pleasure are concerned:

> "You *can't* eat candy while it's in the wrapper …"
>
> "[I]t 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*?..."
> (emphasis added to both sentences)

Obviously, candy is never eaten along with the candy wrapper. The idea of eating an unpeeled banana is equally absurd. The choice of these metaphors by young people stresses what they view as the sheer unnaturalness and abnormality of sex with condoms, which they expect to be less pleasurable. Clearly, such metaphors have the power to reinforce adolescents' conceptual framings of sex and pleasure, thus creating a risky situation of mutual exclusivity in regard to sex and condom use.

Sex is Passionate

In addition to pleasure, other previously ignored constructs of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, such as intimacy or the erotic, are steadily gaining recognition as significant for a fuller understanding of sexuality.[24-27] However, gaps remain in the emerging literature, particularly in regard to the diversity of ways in which young people engage with issues such as the erotic or sexual desire. The data presented here contribute to the small body of literature that has sought to address this gap, by providing a glimpse into adolescents' dealings with sexual passion.

Several narratives used by both male and female participants to describe "having sex" point to a close association between the sex act and passion. These narratives were in the form of short phrases, as they were usually uttered in response to specific questions such as, "What terms do young people use to refer to sexual intercourse?" The phrases highlighted below are typical illustrations of the notion that sex is linked with passion. Importantly, nearly all of the expressions were repeatedly used by youth in different FGDS:

Moderator:	When you say "**finishing each other**," what do you mean?
Participant :	It means that that they should engage in sexual intercourse. […]
Moderator:	Okay, so we would like to know the different ways in which people have sexual intercourse. What are these ways?
Participant :	Particularly, many just do it without using a condom.

Participant : They say that "It is better if we "**finish each other**."

(*males, rural, out-of-school, 16-19*)

Moderator: Are there other terms that young people use to refer to sexual intercourse? […]

Participant: **Breaking one another**.

(*females, urban, out-of-school, 16-19*)

Common phrases found in the FGDs for "having sex" included metaphorical linguistic expressions such as "**breaking one another**" or "**finishing each other**," as shown above. The implication of such figures of speech and their equation with sexual intercourse is that passion is considered a component of sex. The terms "breaking" and "finishing" one another conjure up the image of totally and vigorously spending one's energies on the task at hand. The expression "**removing dust**," originally coined to refer to having sex for the first time during initiation ceremonies, has also been widely-appropriated by the study participants, and was employed to mean "having sex," without necessarily signifying sexual debut. Like other terms for "having sex" discussed in this section, "removing dust" evokes an image of passion. It may be taken to denote a sexual activity so vigorous as to "raise the dust."

Further evidence of the conceptualization of sex as a passion-filled phenomenon by young people is provided by the following excerpts from an FGD with girls:

Moderator: So, these [expressions], what do they mean?

Participant: I don't know - we say - maybe [young people] use these words so that some people will not [understand] them.

Moderator: So, how do you know that she/he means that? How does it begin among adolescents to reach the point of [saying things like] "toothpaste on a toothbrush"?

Participant: It's like, you heard it somewhere - these same adolescents - maybe when you are chatting with them, it happens that you talk about those issues, so when talking about those things, [like how] we want "to soak between beans" - [all laugh] - so, if said like that, it means this and that.

Moderator: So, do they use this amongst themselves or just like that?

Participant: They understand each other; when they see a girl on this side - there are many girls, so, they shout when playing with them that they want "to **put water on the beans**." […]

Participant: Some put on [condoms] while others don't. They refuse, saying [candy] is not eaten whilst in a wrapper.

Moderator: What does that mean?

Participant: So, if you are intelligent, you ask that [Should an intelligent person ask that]? They say you can't [have] sex with a condom. They say "meat-to-meat should meet" (laughter!). They say "**stone to stone**" (laughter!)

Moderator: Stone to stone?

Participants: Mmmh!

Participant: It's not "stone to condom" (laughter).

(*females, urban, out-of-school, 15-19*)

The phrase "**to put water on the beans**," (which means "to have sex"), with its allusion to extreme heat and the need for an intervention to release heat/energy in the form of steam (as implied by the "water"), encapsulates the salience of passion within the conceptual framework of the adolescents. "**Stone to stone**" as an expression plays a similar role, with its symbolism of rugged, powerful emotions that potentially come into play within the context of sexual activity.

Discussion

We began this paper by suggesting that an understanding of young people's conceptualizations of sex could help guide efforts toward the development of tailor-made sexuality education

programs or curricula, as well as help identify gaps that a universalistic approach to comprehensive sexuality education may inadvertently overlook. The various conceptual frameworks that shape our lives and perceptions are often provided by the metaphors prevailing in our discourse. Hence, this paper has focused on an exploration of the speech patterns of adolescents in Malawi as revealed by conceptual metaphors. These speech patterns suggest that the young people in this study take a utilitarian approach to sex, and conceive of it as a natural, routine activity of which pleasure and passion are essential components.

The linguistic evidence provided thus far raises several propositions for this sample of adolescents, which may be relevant to comprehensive sexuality education for young people in general. Firstly, this study has highlighted language as a useful tool for unraveling sex-related conceptualizations which could inform sexuality education. The design of curricula, tools, and teacher training could therefore be based on local studies of such conceptualizations. Similarly, teachers could be trained on how to assess and utilize the youth's conceptualizations in their classrooms. For instance, in the present study, 'sex is utilitarian' metaphors were the most commonly (and elaborately) used language for sex among adolescents. A useful exercise might therefore be for educators to identify metaphors that are rich and ubiquitous, and determine whether these lead to positive or negative constructions of sex, which could have health or rights implications. Recurrent metaphors could serve as a starting point for the tailoring of educational messages.

Another useful activity, based on this study's findings, might involve the identification and deconstruction of "red flags" in the discourse of sexuality education recipients. This could involve small group discussions that encourage young people to critically reflect on the language they use, with the aim of raising awareness about concepts that reinforce risky sexual behaviors and power inequalities, and lead to rights violations. As discussed earlier, for example, the language of young people in this study raised questions around their possible perceptions of the role of women as passive participants in the sexual process. Such conceptualizations have potentially negative implications for young girls' sexual agency, and could form the basis of fruitful classroom discussions/analysis sessions. Similarly, the absence of rhetoric for pleasure (in terms of sexual climax) where girls, as opposed to boys, are concerned also provides fodder for thought-provoking discussions and self-evaluations. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity for instructors to understand the concepts and constructs in the sexual worlds of young people in their own right, such as the possibility that some young people do not make a conceptual link between female pleasure and female climax.

Participants in this study were clearly knowledgeable about pleasure and passion, and highlighted this awareness in their conceptualizations of sex, despite the tendency of adults to focus on the negative implications of sex in their dealings with young people. A missing feature in the discourse under examination, however, was rhetoric that demonstrated young people's emphasis on, and familiarity with, intimacy and emotional aspects of relationships, which raises questions about their capacity to build quality relationships based on these tenets. The dominance of "physical" sex negotiations in young people's narratives and interactions, at the expense of general discussions that would lead to the development of relationships built on mutual respect and care, has been observed in other settings in Africa.[28] The skills of negotiation and self-confidence promoted in the life skills approach are necessary, but clearly insufficient for promoting informed decisions about sex. As veteran sexuality education experts such as Pearson[29] would contend, comprehensive *relationship* education must also be recognized as central to comprehensive sexuality education,

without which young people will remain with superficial ideas of what sex is about.

In the discussions about sex in this study, young people did not refer to rights violations that we know affect them or their peers. These include sexual violence and other sexual and reproductive rights violations, documented as affecting Malawian young people.[30] The Protecting the Next Generation survey data show that out of all 12-14 year olds who were sexually experienced, 29% of girls and 3% of boys in Uganda, and 9% of boys in Malawi had ever been coerced into sex.[8] The absence of references to sexual rights violations in the FGDs suggests either that the young people are not consciously aware of their rights on these matters, or that they do not consider them to be major issues in their sexual lives. On the other hand, they simply may not feel comfortable talking about such issues. Consequently, further research is needed to assess whether the metaphors analyzed here provide an incomplete picture of young people's conceptualizations of sex, and to examine any metaphors used to refer to negative or taboo aspects of sexuality, which may not be so openly discussed.

Young people's own emphasis on passion and pleasure support arguments that an effective approach to sexual health education should incorporate concepts of sexual pleasure.[15] Addressing the concept of pleasure in sexuality education is likely to be controversial, as sexual and reproductive health rights are contested, but can help with ensuring that sexuality education interventions are well tailored to young peoples' culture. Furthermore, recent discussions emphasize engaging with positive aspects of sex, including pleasure, as an integral part of the sexual health and sexual rights of individuals of any age.[15,31,32] In practical terms, sexuality education programs could, for instance, counter the perception that sexual monogamy is an issue for married people, but not for the unmarried, by indicating that pleasure could actually be enhanced through developing a relationship with one partner, as opposed to having multiple partners – in a word, through having safer sex.[FNC]

We readily acknowledge that implementing recommendations along these lines is likely to be a challenge, given the difficulties experienced with implementing sexuality education in general in the countries we are concerned with.[33,34,35,36,37] However, given the importance of sexuality education, there is value in continuing to develop innovative ways of addressing these challenges. Indeed, a reflective discussion of metaphors could also help sexuality education teachers with acknowledging and addressing their own biases and assumptions.

In our quest to understand better the world of young people, we would do well to consider language as one of its entry points. As this paper demonstrates, language can serve as a critical evidence-base for sexuality-related research and prevention efforts, and can be useful for informing sexuality education. Further empirical research on the extent to which sex-related metaphors expressed by young people are a reflection of their actual sexual attitudes, and on what influence sexual attitudes have on actual behavior, would shed more light on the relevance of language for adolescent sexual and reproductive health programming.

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Footnotes

FNA

There have been recent contestations of this 'fact,' however, by scholars who point to parenteral transmission (Brewer, D, Brody, S, Drucker, E, Gisselquist, D, Minkin, S, Potterat, J, Rothenberg, R and Vachon, F. Mounting anomalies in the epidemiology of HIV in Africa: Cry the beloved paradigm. International Journal of STD & AIDS 2003; (14): 144–147); socio-economic factors (Tanzania Gender Networking Programme. The linkages between resources, policy, gender and HIV/AIDS: A conceptual note. Unpublished paper, 2004); and same-sex relations (Johnson, CA. Personal communication, June 19, 2006), for instance, as contributing significantly to these statistics.

FNB

Adult strategies to conceal the sex-pleasure connection are demonstrated, for instance, by the content of initiation ceremonies in Malawi. Such ceremonies are led by adults who mostly focus on negative implications of sex and use intimidating language such as, 'If you have sex, you will die.' For more information, see Munthali, AC and Zulu, EM. Initiation rites and adolescent sexual and reproductive health behaviour in Malawi (Manuscript published in the current special volume), 2007.

FNC

This approach of using pleasure to motivate safer sex has, in fact, been successfully used recently. For more information, see, for example, Knerr, W. and Philpott, A. Putting the sexy back into safer sex. *IDS Bulletin* 2006; 37(5):105-109.

FND

Indeed, the fact that a "door" was frequently used (see previous section) to symbolize female genitalia could also be linked to the salience of pleasure. It has been noted that the practice of labia elongation is specifically regarded as enhancing female pleasure in some African cultures, as, ideally, a man is not supposed to force his way in through the "door." Rather, he must, in a sense, "open" the "door" with his hands, and this process is pleasurable. Main-Ahlberg, B. Personal communication. May 9, 2007.

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