"We have our own special language." Language, sexuality and HIV / AIDS: a case study of youth in an urban township in South Africa.

Terry-Ann Selikow
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT:
Background: Despite the fact that most South African youth know about HIV / AIDS and how it can be prevented, there is a high prevalence of HIV / AIDS amongst youth in South Africa. Generally youth do not practice safe sex, and youth sexuality is characterised by multiple sexual partners, not using condoms and transactional sex.
Objectives: To minimize the risk of HIV infection, it is necessary to understand youth sexuality. In this paper I explore youth sexuality with a specific focus on how language influences sexuality.
Methods: I use discourse analysis and qualitative research techniques. Purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling was used. I interviewed seventy youth individually or in groups and used in-depth semi-structured interviews.
Results: The use of language influences youth sexuality. Youth have developed a specialised language to talk about sex and sexuality and this language has become part of the daily discourse, so that unsafe sexual practices become norms and are justified.
Conclusions: The realm of language can be a creative way for peer and HIV / AIDS educators to work with youth towards creating a healthier sexuality. However, as language always occurs in a material context, it is also necessary to work towards changing the material environment, such as poverty. This environment not only facilitates the development of a particular language but it also encourages unsafe sexual practices such as transactional sex.
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INTRODUCTION

This article is part of a broader research project focusing on youth sexuality and HIV / AIDS in South Africa. HIV / AIDS is a serious concern in South Africa, particularly amongst youth. Recent epidemiology of HIV in South Africa indicates that at the end of 2001, 20.1% of the adult population were infected with HIV[1]. The problem is most severe amongst youth[2], and it is thus imperative to understand youth sexuality in order to halt the spread of the HIV / AIDS epidemic as well as other sexually transmitted infections. Sexuality is not easy to characterize as it is so interlinked with a number of facets in society ranging from reproduction, medicine, art, love, violence and pleasure to name but a few[3][4]. In addition, the relationship between sexuality and gender is complex, and the study of sexuality cannot be reduced to the study of gender

nor vise versa[5]. Aggleton[6] draws an important distinction between gender and sexuality. While both are intrinsically connected, gender is about how males and females behave in ways that are associated with masculinity and femininity respectively, and, sexuality is more specifically defined (at least in part) by whom a person has sex with, in what way and under what circumstances. As such, sexuality includes, but is not limited to, how many sexual partners one has, whether one practices safe sex and why one engages in sex.

There is much evidence about the necessity of focusing on the unique socio-cultural contexts in which HIV infection occurs [7][8][9][10]. An important, but under researched part of culture is language. Thus the following research question was addressed; how does language impact sexuality and sexual practices of youth in an urban township in South Africa? Although in my broader research project I look at how females use language, in this paper, my focus is primarily on how males use language.

METHODS
Intensive structural / interpretive qualitative research design
As there is already existing quantitative base line data on sexual practices in South Africa, I chose to complement these studies by using an approach that draws on qualitative techniques. Moreover, qualitative techniques offer many in-depth insights that cannot be gleaned from quantitative techniques.

Correspondence:
Terry-Ann Selikow
International Sociology of Education
Department of Education Policy Studies
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
CANADA
T6G 2G5
tselikow@ualberta.ca

I used intensive research which uses qualitative research techniques and is based on examining a large number of properties from a small number of cases. This is in contrast to extensive research which primarily uses quantitative techniques and is based on considering a few issues from a large number of cases. Moreover, while some research studies focus only on meanings and others focus only on "objective" material realities or structures, the structural / interpretive research model I adopt explores objective material issues and structures as well as the meanings, perceptions and language of participants[11]. My research is a case study and my sample was drawn from an impoverished township in an urban area in South Africa.

Sampling

Using snowballing techniques, and starting from three different areas in the township, I conducted three pilot group interviews between April and May 2001. Based on themes that emerged from this data, I conducted individual and group interviews between February and August 2002. Purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, was used. This method is particularly appropriate when the researcher is interested in each member of the group, and not merely their representivity[12]. In total seventy youth were interviewed, twenty individually and the rest in groups of six to ten. The interviews took one to three hours, and individuals were re-interviewed one or two more times to follow up on issues and elicit detailed and deeper responses.

Interviewing

I used semi-structured in-depth interviews with a triangulation of individual and group interviews.

I viewed the interviews as "conversations with a purpose[13]," and focused on empowering youth by letting them tell their own stories in their own words.

The semi-structured interview allows some consistency of interview questions as well as giving the researcher the freedom to customise questions to respond to individuals and their unique circumstances[14].

The group interview or focus group is advantageous as an exploratory technique, and, although a personal relationship is more difficult to establish, and there is the danger of "group think," such interviews can be data rich and stimulating for respondents, helping them to recall and elaborate over and above individual responses[15]. To overcome the limitations of group interviews, interviews where also conducted with individuals.

Data Analysis

In the initial set of interviews, I looked at as many issues as possible to provide a sense of what issues to explore. Based on the themes that emerged I modified the interview questions for the next cycle of interviews. In the next cycle of interviews, I narrowed the issues to focus on a smaller number of reoccurring themes, and in follow up interviews with individuals, I was able to get respondents to elaborate on and clarify issues. When the respondents were adding no new data I stopped interviewing and focused on analysing the data by grouping issues into themes and sub-themes and theorizing about them[16].

Discourse Analysis

There are many different approaches to discourse analysis. I adopted a ground level approach to language[17] in order to explore the relationship between language and sexuality. Moreover, I recognize while language is central, we cannot reduce everything to discourse, and that language always occur in particular material environments[18] [19].

Ethics and trust

Gaining trust and rapport is an essential part of the research process[20], and, as such, Euegene Cedras, a community member worked with me and set up interviews, explained the purpose of the research and introduced me to participants. Informed consent is a key ethical issue, and after the study was explained to participants and they were invited to share their views, they were also informed that at any time they could withdraw from the research process with no negative consequences.

RESULTS

To locate my focus on how youth use language, I will briefly summarise my overall research results. These results are congruent with much of the literature produced in relation to HIV / AIDS in Southern Africa.

The history of colonialism, underdevelopment and oppression and resulting poverty and political instability that has characterized many African countries, coupled with traditionally patriarchal societies, has contributed to the development of a violent sexuality. Moreover, in the context of a lack of job and educational opportunities, one way that men can prove their masculinity is by being sexually assertive, and this has encouraged not only an aggressive sexuality but a culture of multiple sexual partners.

Often sexual relationships are based on coercion. This coercion exists on a continuum, with obvious coercion

such as violent rape to more subtle forms of coercion, such as the threat of withdrawing love if sex is withheld. Moreover, in relation to the material environment, many youth live in a context characterized by poverty and women are often engaged in transactional sex, to meet basic needs or for conspicuous consumption, the latter needing to be seen within the culture of globalization and consumerism. Within this milieu, men, who usually have more access to money than women, "buy" sex and are therefore usually in control of the conditions of sex, for example whether a condom is use. As well, traditional institutions that were primarily responsible for sexual initiation have broken down and have not been replaced with new mechanisms for sexual education and it is seen as taboo for parents to speak to their children about sex. Finally, although most youth have some knowledge about HIV / AIDS, there are many myths and contradictory messages relating to sexuality, HIV / AIDS and safe sex[21]. While all these factors are critical and form part of my larger study, in this paper, I focus specifically on how, within the above context, language plays an important role in the shaping of youth sexuality.

Specialist Discourses
A central part of sexual culture in the township is the development of a "specialist discourse" or language. As one of the young men I spoke to said, "We have our own special language we use in the township." This specialist language has lead to the development of a number of terms and figures of speech relating to sexuality as will be discussed below.

Male sexuality in the township is defined by how many sexual partners men have and sexually assertive male behaviour is regarded as a prominent factor in being a "real man." The notion of a "real man" is captured by the development of the term "ingagara." The extreme opposite of an ingagara is called an "isithipa." An isithipa, does not have many girlfriends, does not wear fashionable clothes, is often employed and does not do crime and wants to achieve educationally. *While* "…ingagara is the highest compliment one can get in Alex,*" and the ingagara is referred to as the* "top dog," *the isithipa is not respected, and, as he does not have many girlfriends, he is seen as dumb in relation to all issues, not only issues relating to sex*: "…if you do not have a girlfriend, the belief is that, you cannot even discuss

with me with anything. You cannot discuss even things that you saw in the newspaper this morning, …, you cannot even show me a good car because I am going to ask you, how can you know of a good car when you do not even have a girlfriend. People who do not have any girlfriends or have few ugly ones, they do not take you serious." *(male, individual interview).*

Indeed, youth confirmed that not having any girlfriends, or only having one girlfriend, is viewed as abnormal, while having many increases the status of males. Thus the language of ingagara as a "real man" and isithipa as "sleeping" or "dumb person" encourages a sexuality of promiscuity and multiple partners. As multiple partners have become such a norm in the township, a special discourse has developed to refer to female partners in such relationships.

Within multiple relationships, there are two main categories of girlfriends, the "cherrie" (sometimes called the "makwapheni") and the "regte," as well as a one night stand, although this is less common.

Regte and cherrie are both slang Afrikaans words. A "regte" is the "right one," or steady girlfriend, or "mother" or "wife to be" in English. This is the woman with whom a fairly permanent relationship is established, and often children are born from this union. The cherrie, or second best, is also referred to as the makhwapheni (roll-on, as in deodorant that is put under the arm, which is code for "kept secret"). Males say that they "love" the regte but that cherries are mainly for "sex that is fun," and each "category" of women is associated with different sexual behaviour and norms: "Fucking is a one-night stand, sex is with a cherrie, and lovemaking is with a regte." (Male, group interview). Thus the language used by youth to refer to intercourse linked to different categories of women has implications for sexuality and unsafe sex.

In addition to having a sexual function, cherries / makwaphenis also assume the role of providing status to the ingagara. Indeed, although "makwapheni" (roll-on deodorant) refers to the idea that the cherrie is hidden, this seems ironic as, contrary to being hidden, it is actually important that men know about each others' cherrie/s, given that being a "real man" is seen as dependent on how many women he "has[22]."

Binaries
As illustrated above, youth use fixed oppositions or binaries in defining their sexuality. These are based on either / or logic, and are mutually exclusive, rather than allowing for a continuum with intermediate positions[23]. These sexualities are spoken about in "either / or" terms. In this regard, the ingagara is an ingagara in relation to the isithipa and without this mutually exclusive binary opposite category, the idea of ingagara could not function and visa versa. Youth contrast the ingagara with the isithipa: *"Isithipa, it's a sleeping person. Ja, someone who maybe doesn't do funny things.*

*…Maybe who's not even drinking liquor or smoking, who's doing the right thing. … he doesn't have lots of money. **No, he is not like the ingagara**, he can't [doesn't] have too many girls."* [my emphasis] (female, individual interview). As such youth speak about men as being **either** an ingagara, who is a real man, **or** an isithipa who knows nothing about sex and therefore cannot be respected. Similarly, youth speak about women as being **either** a regte who is appropriate for a long term relationship **or** a cherrie and therefore just for fun. In reality, men can be an ingagara in some regards but also have some aspects that are more inclined towards being an isithipa and vise versa, and women do also not fit into neat categories of regte or cherry. Although youth speak in binaries, messy day to day township reality does not operate in neat either or categories, but is far more complex and contradictory.

The binary terms used by youth are associated with normative symbolic attributes which set up particular value systems where some values are privileged over others[24]. For example, if one uses binary logic, then by inferring from the literal translation of "regte," which means "right one," cherry takes on the meaning of the "wrong one." Indeed, while cherries are the "bad girls," symbols of sex and fun, the regte is seen as suitable for being a serious long term partners and mother of a child. Moreover, in the ingagara / isithipa binary, the ingagara is clearly seen as superior in the hierarchy of men

Metonymy

The use of metonymy is a further mechanism whereby day to day language creates and recreates sexual relationships. A metonymy is a figure of speech whereby a particular part stands in for the whole. There are many parts that can stand for the whole and which part is picked, indicates which aspect of the whole youth are focusing on (e.g. we need good heads, means we need intelligent people, and heads, not legs, are chosen to represent the whole to indicate this)[25]. As such, how metonymy is used provides useful insights of what is important to youth in their construction of sexuality. Although it is not conclusive, there is some evidence that the construct "cherrie" seems to have originally been used to refer to a woman's vagina, and hence the word cherrie functions as a metonymy based on a part-whole relationship, whereby cherrie (or vagina) represents the female. As such the construct of "cherrie" refers to a woman who is for sex.

However, by the same token, it also omits reference to many other characteristics of the "cherrie." Moreover, the word "cherrie" stands for the characteristics abstracted as common to all "cherries" and their "roles," and particular characteristics unique to individual cherries are largely ignored[26]. Thus through the use of language, the cherrie becomes a subject, or set of roles, rather than an actual individual person with unique traits.

Metaphor
Metaphors function so youth understand one thing in terms of another. Similes, a form of metaphors, function to justify particular worldviews[27]. This is seen in the simile where a man is compared to an axe: *"… If you are a man you have to have many girlfriends because you are just like an axe, you cut each and everything, you just go there and cut.* (male, group interview). As such, when youth refer metaphorically to men being like axes, this involves an image of men as violent and powerful, they "cut each and everything." Moreover, in traditional rural settings, an axe is lent to neighbours to chop wood. Thus, saying that man is like an axe that must be lent to others reinforces the fact that a woman must accept that her boyfriend/husband will have other girlfriends as he is like an axe that can be lent to other people. This view of men has specific implications for sexuality, whereby males' sexuality is seen as violent and promiscuous. This understanding of masculinity is justified by drawing on the axe metaphor which is based on tradition, despite the fact that traditional institutions are declining, especially in urban areas. Drawing on tradition is discussed in more depth further.

Another commonly used metaphor is *"You can't eat a sweet with its paper on."* Men use this metaphor to justify not using condoms. Similarly, they argue that just like you cannot get the full benefits of a shower if you shower in a raincoat, you cannot fully appreciate sex if you use a condom. There is also a popular metaphor that compares women to food: *"…you can't eat cabbage everyday. It means you need to change women, like you cannot eat the same one everyday and all day. Then they are not really talking about cabbage. Like it is, that, for men, we cannot have the same one everyday. That thing it is in us because we can get bored quick, and that is, because that is how we are."* (male, individual interview). This metaphor implies that men would get bored with one woman, and this is presented as an idea that is not challengeable, *"this is how we are."* In addition, cabbage is a cheap and relatively available food in the township, a further comparison of the idea that women are easy to obtain and objects to be consumed by men. Thus, once again, it can be seen how language is used to justify multiple relationships. This justification of multiple partners is reinforced by other metaphors: *"It's [the idea of having a cherrie] like a bucket, you*

cannot depend on one bucket to carry water, any mistake can happen to that bucket." (male, group interview). *"You need to have a spare wheel, meaning that if something goes wrong, you know that maybe your car has a puncture, you know that I have a spare wheel, [if] I need to take off that tyre, I have another tyre. That is why guys do have a spare wheel … it like with the cherrie, so she is like the spare wheel… "* (male, group interview).

Hence, men use language, like metaphors, to reinforce the idea of the necessity of multiple partners and having a *"back up girlfriend, should the regte misbehave."* The comparison of women to "buckets" and "tyres" liken women to commodities, and this use of language feeds into the idea that men can control the conditions of sex as women are seen as functional objects like buckets and tyres; to be bought, owned, used and controlled. This illustrates how language has implications for sexual practices. A further metaphor that will be elaborated on in more detail is the metaphor of women as *"iteye."*

Language of Tradition and Biology
Using the language of tradition and biology, leads to the belief that some practices are "meant to be," as they are based in biological realities and / or tradition. With regard to the latter, a good example is the axe metaphor. With regard to biology, if youth believe that something is inherent or biological, it is seen as natural and unchangeable. *"With men, **that is how it is like.** … If we can see different ones [women], then that is how we become aroused. So we take many girlfriends. It cannot only be the regte, we **need** to have more than the one. … It is because **we are born in that way**, [but] women can sometimes just be with one [man]."*(my emphasis) (male, individual interview). As such, the idea that that men, but not women, have an inherently strong sex drive and get easily sexually aroused and need varied sex from multiple partners is used to not only justify multiple partners by rooting this idea in biology, as men are "born that way," but to explain why men sometimes don't use condoms, as they get sexually aroused, *'too hot"* and *"loose control"* very easily. In contrast, when women have multiple sexual partners, not only are they judged harshly, as discussed below, but their "promiscuity" is not explained by the fact that they have a sexual libido but is attributed to the fact that they need multiple partners because one man cannot satisfy all their financial needs.

Denotations and Connotations
The relationship between language and sexuality can also be explored by looking at denotations and connotations. A denotation is a literal or obvious meaning, while a connotation is not neutral but has an evaluative meaning invented by a community and it is more open to interpretation (polysemic). Moreover, connotations help establish a normative order[28]. A good example of how the normative order functions via connotations is the use of the metaphor "iteye" to refer to a woman who is seen as engaging in frequent sex. The denotation of iteye is that of a tea bag. A tea bag could have the connotation of being sweet and tasty, however, in the youth discourse, the connotation is insulting and refers to something that is easily obtainable, relatively cheap, drunken by everybody at any time of the day and is also disposable. *"They call her isifebe [bitch], skebereshe [bitch], bitch, sperm dish, **itiye**,…"* [my emphasis] (female voice, group interview). *"She's [iteye] very unpopular 'cause they think now she's sleeping around so they call her a makosha [prostitute]."* (female, group interview) *"It's o.k. for a guy to have many girlfriends, but for a girl to have many boyfriends, eishhh…"* (male, group interview). Hence, this metaphorical comparison of "promiscuous" women to tea bags offers a normative commentary on "sexually assertive" women, degrading them. The normative connotation becomes even more apparent when one considers the comparative term used to describe a "promiscuous" man and the connotations attached to the concept ingagara. While women who have multiple sexual partners are demeaned by belittling labels like iteye, in direct contrast, the term "ingagara" is a sign of respect to refer to a man who has many sexual partners, and connotes that he is a "real man," unlike isithipa, which has the connotation of being a "sissy." Thus connotations function to set up and maintain double standards in relation to men and women's sexuality.

DISCUSSION
The above examples have illustrated how language works to shape and justify youth sexuality. It is very important to understand the micro politics of language and how it functions at a concrete day to day level, as it is often at this level that sexualities are formed and reformed. Although language is socially constructed by youth, youth often see it as natural as it becomes part of their daily vocabulary, guiding and partly shaping their sexuality.

Language helps youth make sense of their complex worlds, however, it must also be remembered that there are some sexual identities and behaviours for which there is no language. As such, while recognizing the centrality of discourse analysis, it is equally imperative to realise that sexuality cannot be read from language as if it were a mirror.

In the case I presented, language works to reinforce an unhealthy sexuality where multiple partners are the norm and women are seen as objects and whereby there are double standards for men and women. This type of sexuality encourages unsafe sexual practices increasing youths' risk of HIV infection. As such, it is important to do further studies into exactly how language influences sexuality, and how language can be reinvented so that healthier sexualities are encouraged. Other questions that I ask in my full research project are why a particular language becomes dominant at a specific time, and how youth can use language as space to resistance unhealthy sexual practices?

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that language does not develop or operate in a vacuum, but rather grows and functions in a particular material and cultural environment, and this environment enables and constrains the type of language that can develop. For example, the discourse of the ingagara, where status is defined primarily by how many sexual partners a man has, may not have developed if there were educational or job opportunities whereby men could achieve status. As well, the ingagara and cherrie / regte discourse may not survive in a context that is not patriarchal or that is not poverty stricken so that women have resources other than sex. As such, the method I use in my broader research project appropriates a discourse analysis that focuses on how language functions, but always locates language within the material context, i.e. structural / interpretive research.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative for researchers and practitioners to understand youth sexuality, so that they can work with youth to create healthy sexual practices that do not put young people at risk of sexually transmitted infections. One way to explore youth sexuality is to look at how language is used to develop and justify certain sexual practices. However, while discourse analysis is imperative, such analysis must be rooted in the real material context in which youth live. Perhaps we cannot "change the (whole) world with the word," but language is certainly one of many areas that health practitioners can work with, while fighting for an end to broader material and cultural factors that increase the chances of unhealthy sexualities amongst youth. As such, I conclude by referring back to the title of the paper, and hope that, together with the youth, we can develop a new "special language" that encourages a safe and healthy sexuality for all.

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