

**SEX, SEXUALITY AND COMMUNICATION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF  
THE PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG SOUTH AFRICAN ADULTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In South Africa, educators and parents, to a large extent, rely on educational sexuality programmes to teach adolescents and young adults the relevant aspects of sex and sexuality. It is argued that these programmes do not manage to address the understanding and interpreting of sexual language adequately. Most of these programmes focus on the biological, physical and social aspects of sex, paying attention to the “mechanics” of sex, the possible dangers of sex, effective protection against unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections, but are silent on the language of sex and sexuality and also lack clear guidance on the interpretation and conveying of sexual interest. This article explores the perceptions of a sample group of 115 first year students registered for the Baccalaureus Educationis degree in primary school teaching at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. A qualitative approach was used as research method and the research data was interpreted by means of a thematic analysis.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The ground-breaking Kinsey reports (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953) on male and female sexuality were published almost sixty years ago. Since then, we have had the worldwide sexual revolution of the Sixties and Seventies. Activists for women's rights have made significant advances in propagating the emancipation of women (politically as well as in terms of giving them "their own voice", and celebrating their own sexuality). This world-wide trend was also evident in South Africa, and now enjoys constitutional recognition and protection through the clauses on alternative sexual orientations and lifestyles, and the recognition, advancement and protection of the rights of the individual.

It is, however, debatable whether South African society has in reality been fundamentally transformed in terms of its views on sex and sexuality, and the free expression of it. One view is that women are still suppressed in a so-called sexually liberated society that claims that women are free to express themselves (sexually and otherwise); that expounds the right to freedom of speech, but at the same time, silences that very freedom to speak out, if not by law, then certainly through socio-political realities of our time.

Perhaps it is significant that the 1982 hit song by the rock band Dr Hook and the Medicine Show *Baby makes her blue jeans talk* is being "rediscovered" by contemporary adolescents, more than 20 years after its release. On the surface, it speaks of female sexual liberation, the right of women to openly express their sexuality; in reality, it reduces women to voiceless objects of sexual desire:

*Baby makes her blue jeans, yes she makes her blue jeans talk*

*Baby makes her blue jeans, yes she makes her blue jeans talk*

*You know what she's thinking about and it turns you inside out*

*She don't say nothing but, baby makes her blue jeans talk*

(My underlining)

Who is doing the actual "talking" here? Where does the message originate? What is the actual message? Is "Baby" in fact communicating her sexual availability through her blue jeans, perhaps by the way it clings to her body, by the way that she moves? Is she aware of sending out such a message at all, or is it merely a male chauvinistic construct, a way of interpreting her clothing and body language in such a way that it in reality expresses male sexual desire?

This brings me to the purpose of this article, namely to determine to what extent a sample of privileged young South African adults are aware of "sexual" communication, can interpret such communication correctly, and express their own sexuality.

Educators and parents often take it for granted that adolescents and young adults are capable of understanding and interpreting non-verbal language correctly. This presumption is supported by Taylor, Peplau and Sears (2003: 56) who claim that non-

verbal communication is universal and can be understood and interpreted by all people despite differences in gender, culture or background. This sweeping generalisation is based on the Darwinian tenet that, in terms of evolutionary theory, “facial expressions convey the same emotional states in all cultures” (*ibid*).

To my mind the general assumption that all people acquire proficiency in non-verbal communication through a process of social “osmoses” that makes training and education in this field redundant, is confirmed by the fact that non-verbal communication is excluded, or features in a very limited way, in current South African Life Orientation programmes offered at school level. It is also noticeably absent from the majority of sexuality education programmes. The vast majority of these programmes focus on the biological, physical and social aspects of sex, paying attention to the “mechanics” of sex, the possible dangers of sex, effective protection against unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections, but are silent on the language of sex and sexuality. Some programmes do pay attention to topics such as sexual abuse and “power” relationships, sexual values and morals, and encourage parents and children to “speak about sex”, but offer very little by way of actually developing the skills to appropriately communicate sex and sexuality.

These programmes assume that once we have taught adolescents the facts of sex and sexuality, we have also prepared them for understanding and interpreting the complicated verbal and non-verbal communicative aspects of it. This is, to my mind, a serious deficiency of current sexuality education programmes, and contributes to the continued suppression of women’s sexuality. One could also argue that by not enabling our youth to express their sexuality through appropriate communication, we allow a situation to arise where conflicting messages of sexual liberation without social responsibility collide with socially repressed sexual desire without the possibility of mediating through appropriate, open communication. Argued to the extreme, this situation creates fertile soil for the escalation of undesirable sexual behaviour in our society, including sexual harassment and, ultimately, “hard” sexual abuse, including date rape and more violent forms of sexual assault.

It is my premise that we, as parents and educators, do not adequately teach our learners how to recognise and correctly interpret the many ways in which humans express their sexuality and convey sexual interest. We do not teach them how to avoid behaviour that might unintentionally convey sexual interest. We do not consciously train them to correctly identify behaviour (including verbal and non-verbal) that may express sexual interest, or worse, constitute sexual harassment. We do not, in fact, train them to avoid potentially harmful situations by correctly interpreting warning signals; we do not even attempt to circumscribe sexual harassment beyond the simplistic definition of it being “an unwanted sexual advance”.

Many years of working as school social worker and later as lecturer in the specialised field of Life Orientation, Sexuality Education and HIV/Aids have challenged me with the fact that adolescents and young adults often lack the proper skills to receive and

decode the broad spectrum of what constitutes “sexual language” correctly. Many interviews with adolescents and young adults who have been sexually harassed, sexually abused and date raped confirm this. The following two aspects feature prominently:

- (1) Most adolescents and young adults have a very limited understanding of the “language” of sexuality and sexual desire;
- (2) Most adolescents and young adults cannot interpret non-verbal sexual cues correctly and, consequently, cannot avoid potentially harmful situations.

In this article I will explore the above aspects by linking it to a thematic analysis of the responses of the cohort of 115 first year students registered for the degree Baccalaureus Educationis in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases in the Faculty of Education at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The 115 respondents constitute a convenience sample and yielded a 100% response rate since the questions were put to them as part of a baseline assessment for the module PGED 101 Child Development. The following three questions were put to the respondents, who replied anonymously:

- What is your understanding of the term “sexual language”?
- What behaviour in another person tells you that he/she is sexually interested in you?
- What is the difference between sexual interest and sexual harassment?

For the purpose of this article only the first two questions will be analysed, since the third question warrants a paper in itself.

Before I present the research findings, a brief investigation into the history of sex and sexuality and the meaning of sexual language is necessary to contextualise the study.

### **A BRIEF CONTEXTUAL HISTORY OF SEX**

Sex, it has been said, may not be the most important thing in life, but there is nothing else quite like it. It is one of the several fundamental instincts given to each of us by nature. Sex constitutes one of several key elements that define our cultures, gender, religions and values, and as such can be considered a unique touchstone. According to Paez (in Cerver 2000: 4) it is the source of life, the expression of love, it is physical attraction and beauty, but it is also “an art, a weapon, a tool and a lure; it is poetry and currency”.

If we consider a brief history of sex, we become aware of suppression, exploitation, deceit and even disrespect. Even if we acknowledge that sex can be a source of great happiness and fulfilment, we must acknowledge that it can also be a source of great emotional trauma and psychological damage. It often becomes an area of uncertainty, frustration and danger in our daily lives. Various serious and even life-threatening health risks are transmitted through sex. Misconceptions about sexuality, sexual violence and abuse and subtle manipulations of sexuality to suit various unacceptable and even illegal purposes, are doing immeasurable harm to people.

The history of sex places emphasis on the physical aspect of sex, and does not sufficiently speak to values, morals and standards. In ancient Greece homosexuality in both men and women was tolerated and prostitution and group sex were readily accepted. It is a known fact that rich Greek and Roman noblemen kept healthy, good-looking young men as sex slaves.

According to Walker (1996: 10) sexual promiscuity was also evident in the New World since “The Puritan settlers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century in New England considered having and talking about sex perfectly normal, and premarital intercourse was positively encouraged as a ‘test drive’ to see if a couple were suited for each other”.

The coming of Christianity brought about wide-spread condemnation of earlier sexual practices and sexual freedom. “The Christian teachings stipulated monogamous relationships, sex for procreative purposes only and a ban on homosexual and other ‘unnatural’ sexual practices” (Walker 1996: 10). These church teachings established sex as essentially sinful and “bad” in Western thinking.

In the West, sex was regarded as disgusting and not to be enjoyed, or spoken about, in civilised society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even words referring to sex or sexuality, or which might have sexual connotations were considered rude and improper. Although men could find sexual expression in visiting prostitutes, it was assumed that women either did not have spontaneous sexual feelings or if they had, and expressed it, they must have fallen from grace and were “loose women”. It was generally accepted that women might perhaps be gently introduced to sex by their husbands. Kitzinger (1987: 18) quotes from one of the bestselling pamphlets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Knowledge sullies woman’s innocence. She must simply trust the man who loves her to tell her what to do. Happiness cannot be sought and found by a woman for herself. It must be bestowed by a man. With this gift a good man becomes almost, God-like, in the worlds of John Milton “He for God only, she for God in him.”

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was also a general view that any form of contraception was disgusting and injurious. The only acceptable way to avoid pregnancy was through abstinence. This resulted in the fact that Victorian women spent much of their lives in a state of child-bearing, lactation or ill-health following miscarriage. Kitzinger (1987: 19) claims: “The frailty which was considered an innate quality of a well-bred woman was to a large extent a consequence of the drain on her health of repeated pregnancies.”

Sigmund Freud’s work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed towards a more enlightened view on sex and sexuality, particularly through his conviction that sexuality formed the basis for human personality and relationships. Although Freud and some of his followers brought sex to the foreground and challenged many perceptions and preoccupations, these theories subscribed to male superiority and suppression of female feelings and sexuality.

During the 1920s an era of greater sexual freedom, especially for women, unfolded as birth control became available to more and more women. A remarkable milestone for

the 1920s was the opening of the first birth control clinic in 1921 in Manchester by Marie Stopes. While the majority of women at the time were untouched “by the new technology of contraception” (Kitzinger 1987: 21), the upper class women of the era had access to contraceptives, and it even became acceptable for women to discuss it, as evidenced by an issue of *Practitioner* in 1923 that claimed that birth control “has now become a commonplace of conversation at women’s clubs and mixed tea-tables” (quoted in Kitzinger 1987: 21).

The availability of an oral contraceptive (“The Pill”) is considered by many to signal the start of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Reliable and discreet contraception that was not dependent on the male, and which in fact could even be used without the male partner being aware of it, represented greater sexual freedom for women. Whereas the well-known *Kinsey Report* of 1948 reflected on the enormous variations in sexual behaviour and the fact that many sexual practices that were previously thought abnormal occurred widely and were therefore normal, it was the Pill that enabled women to participate in sex without the “burden” of possible pregnancy.

The sixties are also synonymous with The Flower Power movement, also known as the Counter-Cultural Revolution. This was the era of the Hippies, young people who deliberately turned their backs on contemporary American culture and who came together in emotional and physical communion. It was also the era of drugs, living in communes, and experimentation with a repertoire of bed exercises and party games intended to guarantee and improve orgasm.

In the more “liberated” (yet fairly mainstream) American and UK societies “swinging” and wife-swapping offered a new kind of sexual adventure. In their ground-breaking work *Human Sexual Response* (1966), William Masters and Virginia Johnson concluded that the basic theories of sexual arousal and of orgasm were the same for the female as for the male. The years following the publication of the study heralded new challenges and questions about sexuality. On the purely practical level, sex became possible for millions of women in the ways it always had been for many men. Sex was something that you had when you wanted to, because you wanted to, and for its own sake. With legal, effective and readily available contraception, sex for pleasure became possible as a cultural ideal for women.

This does not, however, mean that mainstream Western society suddenly subscribed to sexual abandon. Although sex became the catchword of the seventies and eighties (featuring in advertising promoting anything from farm implements to make-up), conventions on “proper” sexual conduct that would have seemed comforting to late 18<sup>th</sup> century society persevered on a fairly wide scale. Moral persons, specifically moral women, still abstained from sex before marriage. Or if they had sex, at least kept quiet about it and married in white. On the whole, women still did not have sex for the sheer fun of it.

It thus appears that the main positive spin-off of the sexual revolution was that women, and in particular feminists, started to ask searching questions about the role of sexual

relationships in their lives. Women were increasingly encouraged to trust their own instincts, thoughts and feelings and to make their own sexual decisions.

The 1980s mainly saw two international crises, namely the “teenage pregnancy” crisis and the diagnoses of the first cases of the Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus (HIV). The teenage pregnancy crisis was not pregnancy itself, but birth, and not births to young people, but births to young *unmarried* people. Almost one baby out of three was born to unmarried parents. What seemed to be happening was that young people started to believe that marriage was no longer the *only* choice for both sex and parenthood. This became known as the second sexual revolution: marriage had been dethroned.

The 1980s will also be remembered for the renewed popularity of the condom. With the awareness of HIV as a sexually transmittable infection and a potential death threat to everybody, regardless of age, gender, culture, social status or educational background, the spotlight was on the condom as almost the only means to prevent infection. The 1980s became the era of condom variety. Variety in makes (Durex, First Love, Rough Rider, etc.), variety in colour (red, green, black, yellow), variety in flavour (strawberry, mint, lemon, etc.) and variety in types, e.g. ripped, studded, ultra thin and some very thick and durable. The distribution and availability of condoms also increased and condoms were displayed at almost all thinkable public places — public toilets, airports, clinics, movie-theatres, college and university campuses, etc. The female condom or ‘femedome’ also gained some acceptance during the 1980s, but never became very popular probably because of the fact that it takes some experience to use and is quite expensive in comparison to the male condom. The female condom also needs to be inserted in the vagina at least a half an hour before sexual intercourse, which often makes it impractical and ineffective. The underlying message of the emphasis on condom use was clearly one of “we will never persuade people to abstain from sex despite HIV and Aids, so keep on having sex, just use a condom”.

To some extent, however, the HIV/Aids pandemic has seen a resurgence of conservatism, or at least an awareness of the need to find meaning in life through the rediscovery of morals and family values as a mainstay of society. Attempts to bridle unqualified personal freedom within ethical frameworks have resulted in the mushrooming of courses in ethics, centres for ethics, and consultancies determined to make a buck out of the new “ethics industry”.

Several campaigns for a “new” sexual morality amongst South African youth have received wide media coverage over the past number of years. The most well known among these have been the highly publicised but controversial LoveLife campaigns, and the True Love Waits pledge, also known as the “Silver Ring Thing”. This pledge was undertaken by thousands of South African Christian couples who promised to abstain from sex until they were married.

In the South African history of sex, 1996 will be remembered as the year in which the government introduced its new Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act. This Act legalises abortion and gives women the right to make choices about their unborn babies.

The Act became possible in terms of the new Constitution, which entrenched human rights for all citizens of South Africa, guaranteeing equality regardless of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion or political affiliations.

In 1998 the new curriculum (RNCS) was introduced in South African schools and indicative of this curriculum is the inclusion of Life Orientation and subsequent sexuality education programmes for all learners from grade R.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is in its infancy, but it is already clear that sex, sexuality and especially social ills linked to it will dominate our lives. Current newspaper headlines are indicative of the fact that the personal freedom guaranteed by the Bill of Rights does not free us of social problems and issues that are associated with sex and sexuality: same sex marriages, school girl pregnancy and maternity leave for them, the increase in violent sex crimes, cell phone pornography in schools, sexual assault among learners in schools...

In summary it can be said that sex always was, and probably always will be, a subject that interests all human beings. Traditionally sex was singled out as a special area of life that was sacred and not a subject for discussion. Today, many champion the idea of sexual freedom, while others agitate for a revival of traditional cultures, each with its own views on sex and sexuality. Given the reality of a multicultural, integrated society, we have to find the means to arrive at a workable social “consensus” on sex and sexuality through communication.

### **SEXUAL LANGUAGE**

Generally speaking, sexual language can simply be explained as the way we communicate sexual interest to each other with or without words. Walker (1996: 182), writing on sexual attraction and body language, pays particular attention to “the way we communicate with each other without words, by moving and positioning our bodies”. According to him, we are mostly not aware of the messages we are conveying, while we are often very aware of messages conveyed to us. He notes that, within close personal relationships, people often “mirror” each other through body actions. A significant aspect of non-verbal language expressing sexual interest is referred to as “displacement behaviour” such as fidgeting and constant grooming.

Taylor, Peplau and Sears (2003: 64) add an interesting dimension to the interpretation of non-verbal sexual communication by differentiating on the basis of gender:

... there are differences in the use of nonverbal behaviour. Girls and woman tend to be more expressive, more involved in their interpersonal interactions, and more open in the expression of emotion. They tend to use more nonverbal behaviour in interacting with others, such as touching, eye contact, expressive body movements, smiling and gazing. Women are also more accurate interpreters of nonverbal cues than are men.

Women's greater awareness of, and use of non-verbal communication may be partially explained by Kitzinger's (1987: 36) feminist perspective on (verbal) language being restrictive to women:

Language is one important way in which our thinking about sex is socially controlled. Language is man-made and expresses men's views of women's bodies and sexuality. This means that women's feelings and experiences remain unspoken, because it is, quite literally, unspeakable.

An analysis of the research data generated by the questionnaire sheds some insight on the question whether women are more sensitive than men regarding the non-verbal expression of sex and sexuality.

### **DELIMITATION, RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study is exploratory and analyses the perceptions of 115 first year education students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The research group is a convenience sample as all the students who are registered for the first year study for the B(Ed) degree in Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase studies were included in the study.

The broad objective of the research was to understand the various perceptions that South African adolescents and young adults have regarding sex, sexuality and communication. A qualitative research design was used for this research. The research was open and not directed by a prescriptive framework, preconceived ideas or formal hypotheses. It has been the experience of this researcher that designing a research questionnaire with a minimum of questions, phrased in an almost naive way, was more accurate in generating responses intended for a thematic analysis. Conventional questionnaires consisting of many questions invariably exhibit inherent themes, and can therefore "prime" respondents to generate these same themes in their responses.

The research sample consisted of a diverse, heterogeneous, multi-cultural group of first year students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The group consisted of 115 participants, 18 (15.7%) were male and 97 (84.3%) were female.

Data collection was done by means of questionnaires handed out directly to respondents with the request to complete the questionnaire without prior discussion. The analysis of the data was done by identifying recurring themes and was scored by calculating the frequency of each theme.

The following questions were asked:

- (1) What is your understanding of the term "sexual language"?
- (2) What behaviour in another person tells you that he/she is sexually interested in you?
- (3) What is the difference between "sexual interest" and "sexual harassment"?

As already indicated, the responses generated by question 3 warrant a paper on its own, therefore these responses will not be analysed in this article.

## ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THEMES

### Question one

The first question yielded 180 responses from the survey group of 115 respondents. These responses were analysed and consolidated into 9 sub-themes. Some responses were grouped under more than one theme.

Sub-themes	Number of responses	Number of responses
1 Non-verbal language of a sexual nature	80	44.4
2 Talking about sexual intercourse	42	23.3
3 Doing sexuality education	28	15.6
4 Inappropriate sexual behaviour or talk	16	8.9
5 Seducing a partner	8	4.4
6 Verbal communication during sexual intercourse	2	1.1
7 Sexism / sexual dominance	2	1.1
8 Real love	1	0.6
9 Counselling for sexual problems	1	0.6

Nine sub-themes were identified, but since five of these represent marginal responses (less than 5% frequency) only the first four sub-themes are discussed.

#### *Theme 1: Non-verbal “language of a sexual nature”*

Based on the number of responses (44.4%), most of the respondents equated “sexual language” to non-verbal language with a sexual meaning, used to signal sexual interest in somebody else. The following verbatim responses typify the theme: *making sexually inviting signs, e.g. winking of the eyes, slow licking of the lips, in-and-out movements with the hips, seductive hand gestures, body chemistry, gentle touching, leaning closer, biting the lips, lots of compliments, teasing, laughing, using soft, husky voice, subtle vibes, invading personal space, how people dress.*

Strictly speaking some of the above responses can more accurately be categorised as pertaining to haptics, paralanguage, proximity and sexual hints. Given that the purpose of the article is not the accurate classification of responses in terms of communication theory, but rather the identification of common perceptions, these responses were grouped under a single theme.

*Theme 2: Talking about sexual intercourse*

This theme scored the second highest number of responses (23.3 %) and the following verbatim responses typify the theme: *sharing sexual feelings, asking another person about his/her sexual history, using sexual orientated words when talking to somebody else, talking about sexual experiences and how enjoyable it was, sexual fore-play, things people do and say when they want to be sexually active, making you aroused and in the mood for sex, getting laid, being perverted, screwing.*

From the responses it is clear that a single theme is addressed, in spite of the variety in responses which range from using language and terms that range from refined to SMS-style and even rude expressions. The term “language” is interpreted narrowly to refer to spoken (verbal) expression.

*Theme 3: Doing sexuality education*

Based on the number of responses, a significant number of respondents associate “sexual language” with sexuality education. It yielded a 15.6 % response and the following responses typify the theme: *Nurses and teachers talking to people about sex topics, discussing the consequences of sex and other issues related to sex, talking about all the cycles of human development, explaining the sexual organs of males and females, talking about menstruation, wet dreams, etc., conferences and seminars about sex.*

The linking of “sexual language” with sexuality education can be attributed to the fact that the respondents were exposed to speaking about sex and sexuality in sexual education programmes. The conflation of speaking about sex and communicating sexuality or sexual desire is a clear indication that the sexuality education programmes these respondents were exposed to did not clearly address the topic of communicating and interpreting sexuality and sexual desire.

*Theme 4: Inappropriate sexual language or behaviour*

Fifteen female respondents and one male respondent gave answers that indicate a negative perception of sexual language. These negative responses represent 13.9% of the overall responses to question one and is a cause for concern since it indicates that a significant number of respondents consider the communication or expression of sexuality and/or desire to be socially unacceptable or even aberrant. This poses a particular challenge to educators and parents, if the negative stigma surrounding sexuality (typical of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and sex is to be removed.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*Sexual language I think is terms like, “Yop you got a lekka butt”, This is usually used by guys or males acting perverts*

*Anything that you do that will give the oppisite sex a message of lust. A form of language that is touchy in sexual places.*

*Sexual language is language used with the intention of sexual connotations that implies acts of a sexual nature, sexual dominance or sexist sexuality*

*Sexual language could be when a guy/girl talks ‘dirty’ to u, makes u feel uncomfortable, scared, nervous*

*When someone makes sexual remarks and uses words that are not appropriate.*

*Mense wat seksuele aanmerkings maak wat jou laat ongemaklik voel – kan verbaal of nie-verbaal wees.*

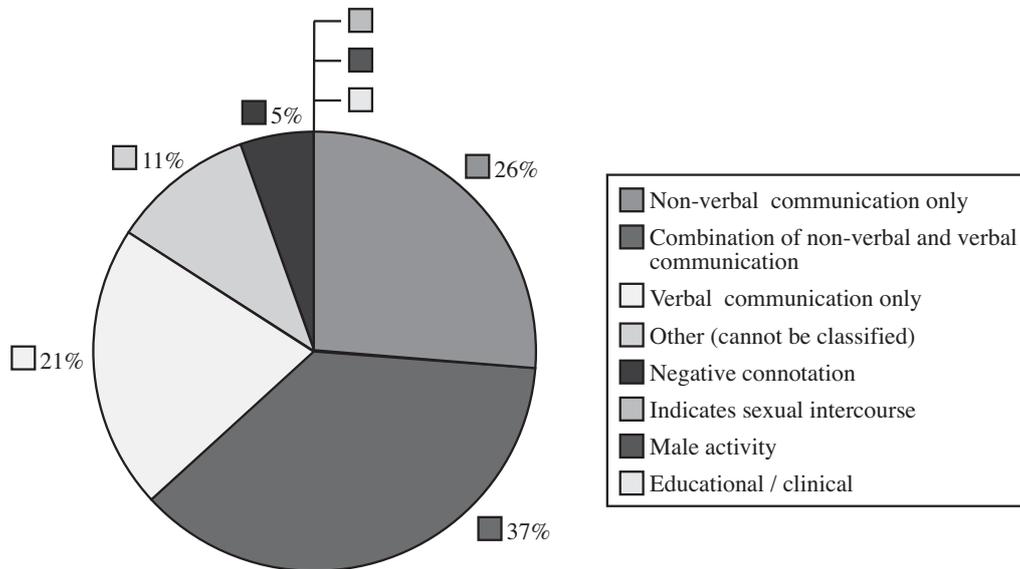
*It is when a person say bad things to someone. As iemand slegte taal gebruik aan ‘n persoon.*

*Sexual language in my understanding its when a person talks about private parts of their body also when they are talking about sexual activities and sex toys that is what I understand.*

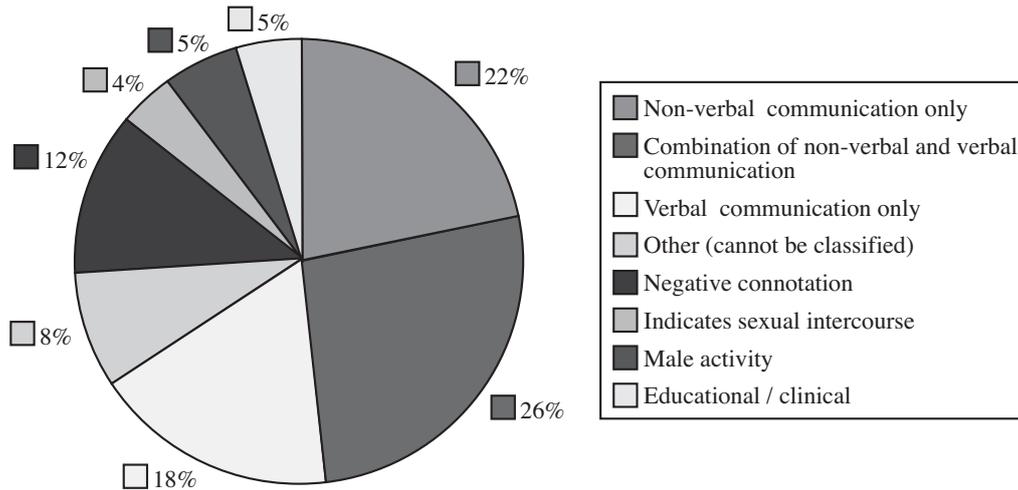
*It a sertainlanguage people use when they want to get sexual for eg. lets get lade it means lets have sex.*

Subsequently, the responses were categorised as non-verbal only, a combination of non-verbal and verbal communication, and verbal communication only. The analysis of female responses revealed three additional themes: a negative connotation attached to the term “sexual language”, a perception that linked it specifically with sexual intercourse, and a perception that it was a predominantly male activity. These results are represented in figures 1 and 2 below.

**FIGURE 1: MALE RESPONSES FOR ALL THEMES GENERATED BY QUESTION 1**



**FIGURE 2: FEMALE RESPONSES FOR ALL THEMES GENERATED BY QUESTION 1**



### Question two

“What behaviour in another person tells you that he/she is sexually interested in you?”

The responses of a total of 115 respondents were analysed. The 97 female respondents yielded 4 well defined themes pertaining to:

- (1) Eye contact – looking
- (2) Touch and physical contact
- (3) Personal space
- (4) Verbal communication.

The 18 male respondents yielded only one clear theme, namely touch. Two respondents made a clear connection between touching oneself while speaking to another; also touching the person you are speaking to.

For the male sample, verbal communication accounted for only 3 responses. On the whole the male respondents seem to be unable to register or interpret sexual interest by another person; perhaps the following two verbatim responses sum it up:

*Today we find that the girl tell the guy if she wants him.*

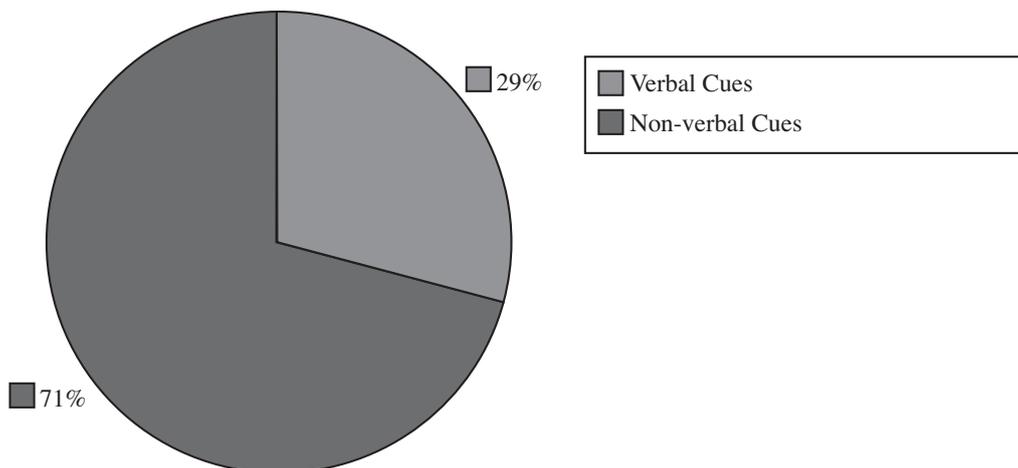
*I think there is no way to find the mind's construction by looking in a face so I cannot say that someone is sexually interested to me by just a smile or something else.*

The analysis of the male responses to question two indicates limited competency in registering and/or interpreting sexual advances unless such advances are obvious to the point of being blatant. This contradicts the following statement by one of the male respondents: “For males it is easy to see whether a female wants to have sex with you or not, most men will know after the first date.” It also contradicts the claim “You know what she’s thinking about and it turns you inside out” (Dr Hook, 1982).

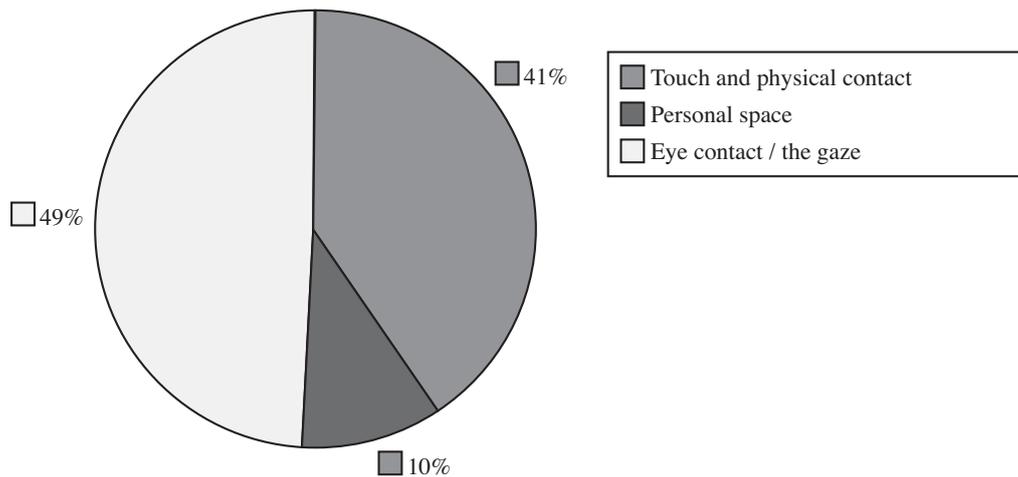
In comparison to the responses generated by the male respondents the female respondents were far more nuanced regarding the number of themes generated and the subtlety of the behaviours registered. Verbal communication as an indicator of sexual interest rated 29.1 %, while non-verbal cues accounted for 70.1 % of the responses. Regarding the non-verbal indicators it is significant that 48.8 % of the responses specifically mentioned the sexual gaze or look as evidenced in 63 counts of phrases containing the words “look” (43), “eye”, (17) or “stare” (3). The importance of eye contact as a non-verbal indicator of sexual interest for women is noted by Walker (1996: 184) and this study confirms it.

Touch as an indicator of sexual interest registered a 41.1% response rate, while references to personal space or proximity total 13 counts or 10.1% of the total non-verbal cues.

**FIGURE 3: FEMALE RESPONSES TO QUESTION 2 CATEGORISED AS VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION**



**FIGURE 4: NON-VERBAL SUB-CATEGORIES OF FEMALE RESPONSES TO QUESTION 2**



From the above analyses it is clear that the female respondents are well aware of the role of non-verbal communication and are able to differentiate between various modes of non-verbal communication. This however, does not directly translate to a level of sophistication or subtlety in registering, or expressing such behaviour. Numerous responses indicate a rudimentary communicative repertoire where much depends on explicit, blatant or even crude signals, as indicated by the following verbatim responses:

*When this person is keep on talking about sex or ask you why you don't wanna do it.*

*If they flirt with you or he/she touches you in places that are uncomfortable.*

*The person touches you in inappropriate places e.g. near the breast or bottom.*

*When they touch you physically, always looking at you, makes sexual gestures at you, tells you you look sexy and moves in.*

*Well, if they come onto you, are always around u touching u, feeling u up, making sexual remarks, hints, etc.*

*They stare at you and try their luck and try attempt some kind of physical contact. All in the body language.*

*That they are telling you they want to touch you private parts and want to have intercourse with you.*

*As 'n ou jou aankyk en dis asof hy jou met sy oë uittrek. Baie ouens is aspris en as 'n kuierplek baie vol is sal hulle teen jou verbyskuur en hulle "crotch" teen jou vasdruk.*

*When he is all over your body, looking at your private parts, eg your breasts, your butt, etc. making all these comments about how well your body is and how good looking your bums.*

As is the case with the male respondent who optimistically asserts "For males it is easy to see whether a female wants to have sex with you or not, most men will know after the first date", the female respondents are equally sure of their ability to recognise and correctly interpret male behaviour, as exemplified by the following response: "They just give you a certain look and you just know."

### **Negative perceptions**

As was the case with question one, a significant number of responses to question two indicate a negative perception on sexuality and the expression of sexual desire. No negative perceptions by male respondents were noted, while 15 female respondents' answers revealed a negative perception regarding behaviour that indicates sexual interest.

The following verbatim responses typify a negative perspective on the theme:

*If they flirt with you or if he/she touches you in places that are uncomfortable*

*If the other person body language is in such a way that it lean someone, and the way the other person looks at you makes you feel nervous and sometimes uncomfortable.*

*When that persons body language makes you nervous, when he/she always does everything close to you.*

*The person might touch you in inappropriate places (eg. near the breast/bottom)*

*Well if they come on to you, are always around u, touching you, feeling u up; making sexual remarks, hints etc.*

*That they are telling you they want to touch you private parts and want to have intercourse with you.*

*As 'n ou jou aankyk en dis asof hy jou met sy oë uittrek. Baie ouens is aspris en as 'n kuierplek baie vol is sal hulle teen jou verby skuur en hulle "crotch" teen jou vasdruk.*

*A person will intimidate you. Forcing you to consider his/her alternatives.*

*If he invades my personal space and touches me in an innappropriate way.*

*When he is all over your body, looking at your private parts e.g your breasts, your but etc. making all these comments about how well your body is and how good looking your bums.*

Due to the comparatively small number of respondents making up the male sample, the combination of male and female data regarding question two does not significantly alter the overall response. Male responses to question two were therefore not graphically represented, nor consolidated with the female responses.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study set out to determine what the perceptions of a convenience sample of adolescents and young adults are regarding the nature of sexual language and behaviour that indicates sexual interest. The sample consisted of 115 students aged between 18 and 47, with a mean average of 20.4 years. Conclusions about differences in perception between male and female respondents can at most be considered to be preliminary since the sample population comprised of 18 males and 97 females. These provisional results indicating a greater awareness of the role of body language amongst the female respondents are in line with general findings in literature on non-verbal communication. In this regard Stewart *et al.* (1990) maintains that “...women use more non-verbal signals of liking than do men”, while Louw and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003: 129) assert: “Women are as aware of courtship gestures as they are aware of other body gestures, but men are far less perceptive, often being oblivious to them.”

It is significant (and a worrying factor) that the majority of responses are based on overt, if not aggressive expression of sexual desire or interest. The respondents' answers do not indicate that they are aware of, or capable of interpreting more subtle behaviour. From a Life Orientation perspective this inability to perceive subtle behaviour presents a possible threat, since being in a situation where private parts are touched, rubbed and crotches pressed against you, hardly provides the opportunity to avoid harm through not placing yourself at risk.

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