



# Young Africans' social representations of rape in their HIV-related creative narratives, 2005–2014: Rape myths and alternative narratives

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is both a major human rights issue and an important driver of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa. While quantitative indicators of sexual violence have evolved to facilitate cross-national comparison and country-level decision making, qualitative findings typically remain constrained to single sites and populations. We analyzed social representations of sexual violence, specifically rape, in a sample of 1446 narratives about HIV written by young Africans between 2005 and 2014. The narratives were written at 5 discrete time points (2005, 2008, 2011, 2013 and 2014) by equal numbers of males and females aged 10–24 in urban and rural areas of Swaziland, Kenya, South-East Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Senegal. We combined three analytical approaches: descriptive statistics of quantifiable characteristics of the narratives, thematic data analysis, and a narrative-based approach. Violent rapes by strangers occur in all country samples, but in Nigerian narratives the ‘immoral’ behavior of female characters facilitates these attacks. Swazi narratives, in contrast, often depict familial rapes that include disclosure and service seeking as key components of the rape scenario. The social representations found in the narrative data reflect rape myths, which, at the socio-cultural level, serve to trivialize sexual violence by minimizing or justifying aggression, thus shifting blame to victims and absolving perpetrators of blame. Additionally, these social representations conflict with self-report data from Violence Against Children surveys conducted in Swaziland (2007), Kenya (2010) and Nigeria (2014) in that they depict perpetrators primarily as strangers or family members as opposed to romantic partners; however, social representations and self-report concur regarding barriers to disclosure and service seeking for victims. The Swazi narratives offer potential models for the framing of sexual violence in ways that promote disclosure and support for survivors and counteract harmful rape myths.

## 1. Background

Recent research demonstrates that sexual violence perpetrated against adolescents and children is a significant public health and human rights concern (Sumner et al., 2015). Sexual violence in sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as an important driver of the HIV epidemic and therefore must be addressed if the response to HIV is to be effective (Andersson et al., 2008; Sommarin et al., 2014). However, until recently, a fragmented body of studies has used varied definitions and measures to assess sexual violence, obscuring the magnitude of the issue. For example, estimated prevalence of sexual violence across Africa has ranged from 1.6% to 77.7% in different countries; this diversity potentially stems from the variability in measures used and populations sampled, rather than reflecting differences in sexual violence prevalence at the national level (Meinck et al., 2015). The US

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF as part of the *Together for Girls partnership* (2011) have sought to address this issue by implementing the first cross-national, household survey designed to measure the prevalence of violence against children, including sexual violence (Chiang et al., 2016). Results reflect an alarming prevalence of sexual violence victimhood among children and adolescents; for example, 25% of Nigerian, 32% of Kenyan and 38% of Swazi young women report experiencing sexual violence prior to age 18 (National Population Commission of Nigeria, UNICEF Nigeria, & U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Sumner et al., 2015; United Nations Children's Fund Kenya Country Office, 2012). In comparison, countries like Burkina Faso and Senegal, which have not carried out VAC surveys, lack national level data to assess sexual violence amongst children and adolescents and must rely on data on adult populations, if available, to inform decision-making.

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While quantitative indicators have evolved to facilitate cross-national comparison and country-level decision making, qualitative findings typically remain constrained to single sites and populations. These qualitative studies serve to link behaviors and attitudes with context and social processes and provide invaluable access to the perspectives of individual young people, however their impact is limited by the fact that they are conducted in a small number of often highly circumscribed settings and without a clear point of comparison outside the study site. With notable exceptions (Hirsch and Wardlow, 2006), few qualitative and ethnographic studies have used similar data collection and analytical techniques across multiple cultural settings or time points.

In this paper, we analyze young Africans' social representations (Moscovici, 1981) of sexual violence – specifically rape – over a period of 10 years across five countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Social representations are the shared imagery, metaphors, values and practices that allow us to make sense of, navigate, and position ourselves within the social world. They are lay forms of knowledge, or “the equivalent, in our society, of the myths and belief systems in traditional societies” (Moscovici, 1981, p. 181). We use a distinctive form of secondary data: a large sample of creative narratives submitted by young Africans to a scriptwriting competition between 2005 and 2014 from five different countries: Senegal, Burkina Faso, South-East Nigeria, Kenya and Swaziland. Narratives have been identified as a particularly valuable and underused data source for the study of social representations (Laszlo, 1997; Murray, 2002). In this study, they allow us cross-national and longitudinal insight into the cultural meanings and resources available to young people within and across the five countries as they seek to make sense of sexual violence in the evolving context of the HIV epidemic. Given that three out of the five countries (Nigeria, Kenya and Swaziland) have implemented the VACS, our results also serve to contextualize VACS findings within existing sources of youth sense making around sexual violence, highlighting concurrence and discrepancies between the social representations and self-reports, and thereby suggesting avenues for increased socio-cultural intervention to support ongoing sexual violence and HIV prevention efforts.

## 2. Methods

Representations of sexual violence and coercion in the narrative data range from portrayals of multiple perpetrator rape to sexual relationships of inequality in which the distinction between consent and coercion is ambiguous. Given the depth and complexity of the sexual violence theme within the data, and in order to place primary emphasis in analysis on emic definitions of sexual violence, we focused in this manuscript on representations described as rape, physically forced sex, sexual abuse, assault and/or molestation. Almost all such depictions in our sample of sexual violence result in HIV transmission, implying penetration; we refer to these representations as ‘rape’. We exclude narratives from this subsample that depict coercive sexual encounters that are not described as rape (for example, coercive encounters with economic or social power differences between male and female characters that do not include descriptions of physical force, violence or terms such as ‘rape’ or ‘sexual abuse/assault’). Results from analysis of different subsamples of narratives about sexual violence and coercion will be presented elsewhere. Below we explain the sampling methods we used to obtain this rape subsample from a larger sample of HIV narratives, and corresponding analysis strategies.

### 2.1. Study sample and population

The research described in this paper is part of an ongoing five-country longitudinal study of young Africans' social representations of HIV and AIDS (Winskell et al., in press). We analyzed de-identified narratives about HIV submitted to scriptwriting competitions by young people aged 10–24 from five African countries at five discrete time

points between 2005 and 2014. The competitions were coordinated internationally by the non-profit organization Global Dialogues ([www.globaldialogues.org](http://www.globaldialogues.org)). Contest participants were invited to contribute an idea for a short film about HIV. A leaflet, identical in all countries and available in several major languages, was used to provide young people up to the age of 24 with instructions on how to participate in the contest, inviting them to come up with a creative idea for a short film. From 2005 to 2011, *Scenarios from Africa* contests invited participants to “help other people learn about HIV”; in 2013 and 14, the contest, under the name *Global Dialogues*, was framed in global terms, included a broader array of themes (sexuality, violence against women, alcohol and drugs, in addition to HIV), and encouraged participants to “participate in creating a better world”. The shift in framing and elicitation did not result in noticeably different narratives on the theme of HIV and sexual violence, hence we treat this data as comparable.

Approximately one third of submissions were either non-text-based (e.g. pictures, video cassettes) and/or non-narrative (e.g. essays) and therefore eliminated from the study if sampled. A text was eligible for inclusion as long as it incorporated a story component. In some cases, this was preceded or followed by commentary from the narrator, however, the entire text was included in our analysis; for convenience, we use the term *narrative* to refer to it. Scenarios were ineligible for inclusion in the study sample if they did not mention HIV, were contributed in a language other than English or French, or were team-authored. After eliminating these scenarios, we stratified our data by sex, urban/rural location and age (10–14, 15–19, 20–24) and randomly selected 10 from each of the 12 strata, oversampling locales if necessary to increase likelihood that 20 stories were selected for each age/sex stratum. In some countries, certain age/sex strata still contained fewer than 20 narratives, hence some country samples have fewer than the maximum 120 narratives (Table 1). In light of the size and cultural diversity of the Nigerian population, only those narratives from the Igbo-speaking Southeast were sampled. An overall sample of 1446 texts for the five countries resulted.

### 2.2. Data processing and analysis

The data were transcribed verbatim in their original English or French into a Microsoft Word document and imported into MAXQDA 12 qualitative data analysis software (VERBI Software, 1989–2016). Our qualitative analytical approach is situated at the intersection of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). We combine three primary approaches: (1) analysis of quantifiable characteristics of the narratives; (2) a narrative-based approach, focusing on plot summary and thematic keywords; and (3) qualitative data analysis, focusing on thematically-related text segments and memoing for emergent themes. These triangulating methods were developed to enable cross-national and longitudinal analysis and have three main advantages: (1) they grounded the analysis in three distinct, though intersecting, dimensions of the data; (2)

**Table 1**  
Sample distribution.

Country	Keywords and quantifiable characteristics					TOTALS
	Thematic codes				Thematic codes	
	2005	2008	2011	2013	2014	
Senegal	107	79	— <sup>a</sup>	14	67	267
Burkina Faso	112	100	27	—	56	295
Nigeria	120	93	34	65	88	400
Kenya	88	25	—	45	116	274
Swaziland	72	50	—	48	40	210
TOTALS	499	347	61	172	367	1446

<sup>a</sup> Some countries do not have samples for certain years, indicated with ‘—’.

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