X WHAT SEX MEANS FOR CHILDREN

My friends have girlfriends. They take it as a normal situation. But they are not thinking ahead.
[Shilling, 13, Magu town]

Introduction: The interplay between self and society

The focus of this study is to gain a thorough understanding of children’s sexual behavior in Tanzania. I believe such understanding forms the basis for analyzing children’s vulnerability to HIV and poor sexual and reproductive health in general and for analyzing the limited success of many SRHR and HIV/AIDS intervention efforts. In Part 2 ethnographic data was presented that described the experiences of Tanzanian children and their perceptions of sex, social norms and regulation of childhood sexuality. Children described various social influences, situational aspects and reasoning that inform their decisions regarding sexual activity. To understand children’s sexual behavior we need to appreciate how socializing influences act together with individual goals, feelings and circumstances, shape sexual meaning and lead to decisions that are expressed in behavior. In short, we have to examine the process of decision-making. Decision-making is complex and involves a multitude of elements that influence the process. There is a risk of drawing a static picture in which a rational actor makes cognitive decisions. I believe it is critical to examine how individual psychological processes, both cognitive and emotional, as reported by the children interact with social and situational influences. I want to make an analysis of the interplay between self and society. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital are useful tools for such an analysis. However, I choose a different approach although it bears some similarity to Bourdieu’s concepts. I intend to provide greater opportunity to focus on conflicting influences including bodily experiences and to allow for a more dynamic understanding of risks, benefits and vulnerability. My approach will explain why a person with their own habitus and capital makes different sexual choices in virtually similar situations and contexts or fields, for example depending on mood. I have chosen this approach after contemplating the term ‘temptations’, which was used so often by children to describe the reasons for boys and girls to engage in sexual activity. Temptations imply choice and conflicting interests. Temptations
are attractive alternative choices that compete with intentions. There is a connotation of morality: intentions are often ‘good’, rational and responsible, while temptations are judged as distracting from a higher goal and often related to physical or emotional short term gratification. Giving in to temptations insinuates a lack of self control and is sometimes labeled as sinning. For a person to be tempted, he or she must have a consciousness of good and bad and a degree of freedom to choose between those. If this consciousness and freedom are present, we can say a person has ‘free will’, or agency.

I use the theoretical model of ‘individual temporal orientations’ in the conceptualization of agency for my analysis (Hitlin & Elder 2007; Emirbayer & Mische 1998). This model provides an analysis of behavior by examining how goals, whether socially, biologically or personally defined, inform individual decision-making. This requires considering the temporal horizon of these goals and how external circumstances direct the actor’s attentional focus. Temptations could be seen as an example of causing a shift in an actor’s attentional focus. I apply this model to analyze particular behavior, namely the sexual behavior of the children in this research. But before I start I first give a short overview of how I understand the model.

The theoretical model of individual temporal orientations is based on the assumption that people do not make completely random choices. Rather people are guided by aspects of their personality, ‘the self’, which includes the conscience. Feedback from the social environment and processes of reflection establish a sense of right and wrong, a sense of self-esteem and a conception of the self (Stets & Burke 2000, Longmore 1998). The internalization of gender roles is an example of such a process. Gender roles may be defined as the activities that society determines to be appropriate for individuals based on their biological phenotype (male or female). From birth, biological gender determines whether an individual is raised and socialized as a boy or as a girl and each gender has unique social expectations. Gender roles are internalized by socialization and children learn to identify with a specific gender, i.e. reflect upon themselves as a girl or a boy, and thus to express their gender identity in corresponding ways. This reflection and expression becomes automatic or habitual over time depending on the frequency of recursivity (repetition) of the thought and action patterns (like Bourdieu’s habitus) and are integrated as a person’s sense of self and identity. Identity refers to who one is, to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others (Stryker 1980). Social norms and expectations such as gender roles and ideas about good and bad can be internalized and influence an individual’s sense of self. Living up to social expectations can
become a significant personal goal and motivation for behavior although this goal is culturally informed. However, as we saw in the discussion at the beginning of this book, social norms, expectations and personal goals can conflict. The roles and expectations adults place on children such as ‘sex is not for children’, ‘the age does not allow’, ‘you are still a student’, can conflict with norms and expectations regarding gender and sexuality and the norms and expectations placed upon children by their peers. Later in this chapter I will analyze how children exercise agency in order to manage these conflicts. Actors exercise agency in order to perform in congruence with their sense of self, although the amount of agentic effort or the level of conscious reflection might differ depending on the situational demands and the frequency of recursivity of the thought and action patterns. Emirbayer and Mische refer to this with the idea of “iterational dimension” of agency (1998:971) and Hitlin and Elder refer to the concept of “identity agency” (2007:179). I find these concepts useful, for they illuminate the role of internalization, conflicts of norms and the importance of parental and gender expectations, peer pressures and self-esteem in regard to the sexual behavior of children.

The model makes an analytical distinction between situational aspects that orient the actor to the here and now and the ‘projective element’ of agency that allows an actor to imagine possible trajectories of action further away in the future. Choices are made in relation to the actor’s hopes, fears and desires for the future (Emirbayer & Mische 1998:). Such choices exert influence on one’s life trajectory and Hitlin and Elder call this “life course agency” (2007:182). For example, we found that many Tanzanian boys and girls made sexual decisions in consideration of larger ‘life’ projects, or at least rationalized their decisions in this regard, for example postponement of sexual activity for reasons of schooling. However, actors also have to deal with the here and now of situations that emerge and pose particular demands. The goal of the actor’s behavior in the context of such novel situations is to successfully manage the present situation and decisions are based on quick assessments. The capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments in response to emerging demands is referred to by Emirbayer and Mische as the “practical-evaluative dimension” of agency (1998:971) or with the term “pragmatic agency” by Hitlin and Elder (2007:178). Behavior in such situations can be impulsive and unpredictable even to the actor him/herself (Longmore 1998). In this chapter I will consider the role of physical impulses, emotions, feelings and situational demands -often referred to with the term temptations- that might orient an actor towards the present situation and overrule other temporal orientations.
By applying a model of temporal orientations to the ethnographic data I intend to illustrate how sexual meaning systems are formed through social interaction and shape both individual and social patterns of sexuality for children in Tanzania. I will separate the main elements that influence decision-making in the analysis. I will begin with important socializing influences as identified by the children and the particularities of social situations in which children must adjust their behavior and which enable or limit their possibilities for action. Although I take as a starting point the children’s experiences and perceptions, this chapters should be seen as my interpretation, an ‘etic’ account, and a generalized reflection from an ‘outsiders’ point of view. This is in contrast to the ‘emic’ perspective that I presented in the previous chapters. My aim is to show how social norms and expectations not only inform but also conflict and compete with individual goals and feelings and with situational demands and how children manage these. It is within this ‘management’ that I believe the concept of agency becomes most concrete. I will analyze the various social manifestations of children’s agency and relate it to experiences of vulnerability and appreciations of risks and benefits of sex. I will also consider how these manifestations of agency (informed and directed by social structures) shape the characteristics of courtship and sexual relationships. In the chapter that follows I will apply the insights gained through the research and analysis in a reflection on children’s vulnerability to poor sexual and reproductive health and why sexual health interventions are of limited success (Chapter 11). I will formulate some points of attention that might be useful for future research and sexual health promotion.

**What is at stake: A good future and being regarded grown up**

Throughout childhood and adolescence children are socialized, learn how to attach meaning to situations and actions, and gradually internalize norms, values and expectations of the people the child is interacting with. This process includes the internalization of gender roles, which become part of the child’s identity. Tanzanian children learn norms about appropriate behavior and that sex is a taboo subject. Yet boys and girls view feelings of desire and curiosity about sex as part of their normal development. This attitude reflects a broader societal view of sex and sexuality as something natural. In general, growing up is regarded of central importance to both children and parents. In Tanzania childhood is concerned with the development of mature and responsible behavior. In Tanzania children are also valuable because of their economic contribution to the household and their future role in the survival of
their parents in old age. In many of the domains that encompass children’s social lives, including economic and household responsibilities, maturity and development towards adulthood are encouraged and rewarded with respect, increased self-governance and ultimately independence and autonomy. Thus, when children learn in school that sexuality is related to the development of the body they are keen to experience this ‘physical change’ themselves. Reaching puberty is a clear sign of development towards adulthood. It gives them an excuse to be curious about sex. Boys and girls compare their development with peers and develop an idea about normality. They want to belong, are driven to be ‘normal’ and therefore to show their maturity and compete with peers in this domain of growing up. Successful competition leads to respect, status and self-esteem, while unsuccessful competition can produce feelings of inferiority, weakness and vulnerability (Maslow 1943, Stets & Burke 2000). The peer, parental and caretaker expectation that developing children will show mature behavior contributes to the personal goal of boys and girls to be regarded grown up. Tanzanian children accomplish this status among peers by demonstrating increased independence from parents and by expressing their femininity, masculinity and sexuality (i.e., by showing interest in the opposite sex). Engaging in sexual relationships has the symbolic meaning of growing up, being sophisticated and becoming independent. ‘Independence’ for both genders means making choices without parental or caretaker consent or knowledge and for girls by having an independent source of money. In this way, sexual behavior can be seen as a normal expression of physical, mental and personal development especially during puberty. It serves the sense of self and is a form of identity agency. For the informants of this research, sex appeared to be of ritual importance for the transition from childhood to becoming a man or woman. Yet adults in Tanzania regard this particular domain of maturity as inappropriate for children. Despite the emphasis on mature behavior children have to make sure adults do not see them entering the domain of sexuality.

Another important personal goal of Tanzanian children is ‘escaping poverty’ and achieving ‘a good future’. This is related to the parental expectation of future reliance on children and to the poor circumstances in which many children grow up. The almost universal wishes for (further) education and employment illustrates this goal for both boys and girls. The ultimate hope is to ‘become somebody’, to move out of the village and into the city to live a life in modernity and with financial security. The children are in agreement on how this can be accomplished. The best way is to work hard in school, to pass Standard 7 examinations with good marks and be selected for secondary education. The chances of getting official
employment are best when a secondary school diploma is achieved. Yet only 8% of the primary school pupils continue with secondary education and children are aware of their slim chances. Compared to boys, it is much harder for girls to find a job without school diplomas. Therefore the next best option for girls to become independent and find a ‘good future’ is to be married, preferably to a prosperous man. We found that many boys and girls made sexual decisions in consideration of larger ‘life’ projects, or at least rationalized their decisions in this context. As explained in the introduction of this chapter, an attempt to exert influence to shape one’s life trajectory can be called “life course agency”. School in particular was mentioned as a reason to postpone sexual activity. Boys and girls who were performing well in class and with a realistic chance of entering further education were resolute in their decision not to engage in sex. They reasoned that a relationship would distract them and if they get caught or pregnant they ran the risk of being expelled. Neema and Juma attached a priority to education that was so strong it outweighed encouraging influences and benefits of sexual relationships (see Chapter 5). In general, school seemed to be the only peer accepted excuse to postpone sexual activity. Children who said they wanted to wait with having sex generally argued that they wanted ‘to finish school first’ and in the courtship dialogues we found many girls responding to a boy’s suggestions with: “I am still a student” (see Chapter 6).

The personal goals of being regarded as grown up, escaping poverty and achieving a good future reflect wider societal expectations and a context of poverty in Tanzania. These goals and the belief or strong hope to be able to reach these goals are significant because they direct the actor’s temporal orientations and influence decisions regarding sexual behavior and activity. But these goals often conflict or compete with other goals and shift within social contexts. The most important social contexts that were mentioned by the children in which different meanings of sex were constructed were family context, peer context and partner context. In the next section I will analyze how children’s temporal orientations shifted within these various social interactions.

**Family context: Interaction with parents and caretakers**

As described in Chapters 3 and 4, parents and caretakers in Tanzania attempt to regulate children’s sexuality by limiting boys’ and girls’ interactions with each other, punish ‘bad’
behavior and by maintaining a taboo on sexual topics. Control particularly focuses on girls. But despite all the restrictive norms, parents and caretakers sometimes turn a blind eye or encourage boys and girls either directly or indirectly to engage in sex. And if parents or caretakers do this, children say it is difficult not to comply.

In the context of extreme poverty, parents or caretakers might encourage or ‘allow’ their daughters to engage in sexual relationships as a strategy for subsistence. Girls engage in sexual relationships because it is expected from them or in order to ‘find money’. The meaning of sex is instrumental and relationships will most likely discontinue after the exchange. One could argue that in such a situation, the girl is responding to an emerging demand and her temporal orientation is focused on the present. Sex can then be seen as a form of pragmatic agency. But girls might also try to engage in longer-term relationships with continuous support and hope for marriage. Strategies include multiple partners to increase benefits and to increase the chance of finding a marriageable partner. In order to attract men, girls develop seduction skills, described by children as ways of dressing, moving and speaking. Some more experienced girls apply beauty products like body creams or lotions to increase their attractiveness. They may also utilize strategies to maintain a good reputation and therefore bargaining power by hiding sexual relationships or lying to partners about previous relationships. According to boys, another strategy that girls may use is to become pregnant in the hope that the partner will take responsibility and marry her.

If boys are encouraged by their parents or caretakers to engage in sex, it most likely is a result of ideas about natural or healthy masculine behavior and a perception that the boy is old enough to start developing his sexual prowess (see Kosmos’ experience in Chapter 4). The meaning of sex then shifts towards building self-esteem and proving manhood. In such cases a boy’s sexual relationships are generally multiple and short-lived.

Even if parents or caretakers do not encourage sexual activity or actively discourage this, their children may still be sexually active. But they will be more secretive about it. The children told us that parental or caretaker indifference was an indirect encouragement because they believed that without parental or caretaker guidance children would naturally become sexually active. In their reasoning they referred both to the logic of nature as to the benefits of sex when there is less risk for punishment. During group discussions the consensus was that poor parents or caretakers in particular were more likely to be indifferent. Poor parents and
caretakers were perceived by the children and teachers as uneducated and would therefore be less likely to consider the consequences of their children’s sexual behavior and more likely to be preoccupied with financial struggles than the upbringing of their children.

Apart from socio-economic circumstances and parental norms and values a significant aspect of the family context for children’s decisions regarding sex was the personal relationship between the child and their parent(s) or caretaker(s). From the dramas that the children performed we learned that bad treatment by parents could lead a child to engage in sexual relationships as a form of defiance. If children perceive parents or teachers ‘not to respect themselves’, children lose respect for them and resist control and show disrespect through recalcitrant behavior. This was the case with parents or teachers who preached respectable behavior for children but displayed indecent behavior themselves, such as alcohol abuse or showing inappropriate sexual behavior like flirting or engaging in affairs with non-marital partners or pupils. In these contexts the sexual activity of children could be considered a form of resistance.

**Peer context: Pressure and competition**

A compelling benefit of giving expression to sexuality is that it makes boys and girls feel mature because of the symbolic meaning of sex. Sex makes boys feel masculine and girls feel feminine. Behaving sexually does not necessarily automatically lead to sexual activity. But the peer norm for Tanzanian boys is to show curiosity about sex, to approach girls and for sexual intercourse to be the goal of such behavior. This peer norm reflects a wider societal norm of male sexual prowess in Tanzania. Boys of all ages clearly state they expect physical pleasure from sex. Satisfaction of desire is therefore formulated as an important reason to engage in sex, even for pre-pubertal boys. Boys frequently encourage each other ‘to try out’ sex and many informants reported being pressured by peers. Sometimes a boy who is sexually experienced arranges for a girl to have sex with his inexperienced friend. In such a situation it is difficult for the inexperienced boy to refuse to have sex with the girl (see Charlie in Chapter 5). Occasionally, pressure and curiosity are so strong that it can lead pre-pubertal children to try to become sexually active, as in the case of Tumaini and Daniel (Introduction of Part 2 and Chapter 5). When a boy’s friends or brothers are sexually active and encourage him to participate in sexual activity, boys find it difficult to refrain from pursuing a sexual
relationship with girls. Behaving in a masculine manner, e.g., chasing girls, bragging about sexual accomplishments or sexual needs and showing persuasive skills with a girl is expected and rewarded with positive feedback and self-esteem. Furthermore, having a girlfriend is a way to gain status with peers because it shows not only sexual skills and accomplishments but also independent behavior (going against the wishes of parents or caretakers) and access to money, which in itself is a great status symbol. The meaning that is attached to sex through social interaction between male peers is one of natural curiosity, pleasure, achievement, pride, masculinity and maturity. The meaning that parents and caretakers attach to sex, namely that sex is the domain of adults and the conflicting norms in regard to sexual-, mature- and gender behavior actually help to shape the meaning of sex between male peers.

Many boys practice a form of identity agency with their sexual activity as it serves them to live up to peer and gender expectations and positively contributes to their self-esteem. If boys decide not to engage in sex they need strategies to deal with peer pressure and the negative effects on their self-esteem. The decision not to engage in sex appears to depend on a strong personal conviction that the risks of such behavior outweigh the benefits, or rather, if the benefits of not engaging in sex outweigh the risks. The principal risk of not engaging in sex is negative feedback from peers, feeling abnormal or insecure and social exclusion. Losing friends might mean losing social position and self worth. To address this increased social vulnerability, boys who decide not to engage in sex might sever ties with friends who put pressure on them to become sexually active. They look for the support of other peers who share their decision and are able to openly admit to this, as in the case of Shilling and Zazi (Chapter 5). This strategy is illustrated by our finding that some informants pointed out that their class was separated into two groups, those who made a decision to be or become sexually active and those who decided to postpone this activity. It is doubtful whether this separation was clear-cut since most of the boys and girls were unsure of the sexual ‘status’ of their classmates. That children give such information indicates that children may actively strategize in regard to their social lives. Another strategy to deal with the risk of increased social vulnerability is to engage in a one-time sexual encounter to satisfy curiosity and manage peer pressure but then decide to postpone any further sexual activity until after finishing school. Other boys address the risk of increased vulnerability by lying about sexual achievements. Pretending to have had sex may have the same social rewards as actually having sex but without the risks or the expense. Such impression management is also practiced towards parents, caretakers and teachers. It allows children to live up to the specific
expectations of significant others despite the fact that these expectations are contradictory or conflict with other goals. Using impression management children can assume offered social and role identities while creating space to commit to more personal goals and identities\textsuperscript{64}. Children’s skills with impression management pose challenges for researchers and make it hard to assess the reliability of their stories or data from surveys for that matter. It is therefore useful to collect data from the same informants in different settings with different group compositions, personal interviews and child-to-child interviews. And if available, quantitative data.

The norms and expectations for girls are even more conflicting. On the one hand feelings of sexual desire and curiosity are seen as natural and indicative of normal development since growing up is important for girls as well as boys. When children are maturing there is competition and pressure to demonstrate this by giving expression to sexuality. If boys and men show interest in a girl this confirms to the girl that she is attractive and feminine. Girls boast to each other about being approached and how much money or material goods were offered. But the societal norms for women’s sexual behavior are constricting. Girls are supposed to show restraint and should be reticent about their sexual feelings. Expressions of curiosity or desire can be interpreted as ‘bad behavior’ and can damage a girl’s reputation. Overt attention and approaches by boys are therefore seen as an annoyance. Yet, there are also permissive societal norms for women’s sexuality in Tanzania that allow them to use sex as a resource to exploit (Wight et al. 2006). Girls see examples of peers and women in their community who benefit socially and economically by the ‘support’ of a single or multiple sexual partners. Some peers are successful in maintaining a relationship from which they gain continuous support, such as Deusi as described in Chapter 4. Deusi might very well marry her current boyfriend if she cannot continue with secondary education and she would therefore safeguard her future and independence from her family. Girls become jealous when they see peers who have achieved desired goals by means of a boyfriend’s support. Girls encourage each other ‘to find a boy to solve your problems’, referring particularly to the money that can be gained through a relationship. Money is a strong status symbol among girls as it is for boys. It enables girls to have greater control over their lives. With money a girl can get what she wants such as beauty products that might be relevant for her self-esteem, reduced insecurity about access to food or tuition for school. Girls with money are able to take control

\textsuperscript{64} Social identity; role identity and personal identity are the meanings one has as a group member, as a role-holder, or as a person and form the bases of self. See Stets and Burke (2002).
over their own lives and no longer have to depend on the finances or wishes of parents or caretakers. Therefore, girls identified money as a primary short-term goal for sexual relationships. Girls are severely limited in their ability to secure money in Tanzania and so they turn to boys if they are in need. Girls frequently try to obtain money by skinning boys without returning sex. But this involves the risk of conflict and force from the boy. A girl might decide to have sex with a boy she was skinning to prevent force. Sex then becomes a strategy for harm reduction. However, for most girls who engage in sex, sex appears to be a strategy for control in their lives and possibly to safeguard a good future. Within the context of female peers, the meaning of sex is related to self-esteem, sophistication, independence and control. Girls who are involved in sexual relationships risk being expelled from school. They also risk ruining their reputation and the chance for marriage as well as conflict with parents or caretakers. The principal perceived risk of sexual activity for girls is to become pregnant. This perception actually inhibited many girls from engaging in sexual relationships. It is clear that Tanzania girls who engage in sexual activity can achieve multiple goals yet also jeopardize other goals. If a girl decides to engage in sexual relationships she will attempt to cope with the risks by keeping her relationships hidden making it difficult for others, including researchers, to assess her sexual history.

**Partner context: Feelings and expectations**

For boys and girls in Tanzania, the decision to engage in sex involves a complex interplay of personal goals, feelings and social contexts. Parents, caretakers and peers influence this decision in the form of expectations, feedback, norms and pressures. Decisions are made in light of hopes and fears for the future, ideas about the self, and about normality. Situational aspects like conflicts, threat of force, ‘arrangements’ by friends and poverty can further influence this decision. But of course, the decision is not detached from emotional feelings towards a partner. In most cases sexual partners are not randomly selected. This is despite the fact that identity related and pragmatic goals such as self-esteem and money would appear to decrease the importance of the selection process. Girls indicated that the most critical reason to say no to sex was failing to be attracted to the boy who initiated courtship. Boys mentioned the importance of physical appearance and good manners of girls. An intention to engage in or to refrain from sex is often established in advance. The real decision, however, must be made when sexual activity becomes a real possibility. Long term planning can give way to
more immediate concerns. The most common examples of these concerns may be falling in love, sexual arousal and pleasure. Boys, in particular, mentioned that infatuation could make them ‘lose control’ or ‘drive them crazy’, describing a state in which those powerful feelings resulted in some degree of narrowed consciousness. Mathias told his friend Iddy how he forgot to use a condom because of sexual arousal. Some boys mentioned a need to act upon their feelings of wanting to experience pleasure. Emotions, therefore, play a significant role in the temporal orientation of an actor. Within the social context of physical interaction between partners meanings of sex are reconstructed and strongly influenced by bodily experiences. Unfortunately during this research I did not manage to persuade girls to talk about more intimate feelings and experiences in detail. As discussed in the methodological chapter, it was difficult to find girls in the age group under sixteen who dared to admit they are sexually active which I believe reflected a norm of Tanzanian female sexual inhibition. Yet in general girls talk about feelings of love, attraction, desire and expectations of pleasure. It is likely that for girls those feelings, as for boys, play a role in temporally orienting girls to the here and now.

Emotions are influenced by social learning, personal characteristics (mental, cognitive and genetic qualities), personal history, physiological processes and stage of mental and physical development. Puberty is perhaps one of the most glaring examples of strong physical and mental impulses influencing emotions, bodily experiences and behavior. Boys and girls have an idea about how strong feelings can become in a relationship. Imani told us, “[…] You don't know what kind of temptations will face you when you grow up. Personally I'd like to hang in there [stay a virgin] until marriage, but I can't promise”. Boys and girls consider the consequences of such strong emotions when they make decisions about sexual activity. Those who have decided to postpone sexual activity try to avoid situations where these feelings might develop. Neema, for example, remarked, “If I would have a boyfriend now, my mind would go out to him and I would be thinking about him too much. Then I could not concentrate on my studies or what the teacher is saying”.

Meanings of sex are reconstructed with a potential partner within the social context of interaction. It is within this context that a fear of getting hurt is experienced as vulnerability. Hurt feelings can result if meanings are not synchronized, expectations differ and if feelings are not reciprocated. Boys and girls employ complex negotiation strategies during courtship to assess each other’s intentions and to negotiate the meaning of sex in terms of feelings and
commitment. They do this because of the significant ‘risk’ to their emotional well-being and self worth. The negotiation process or courtship is further complicated by the general normative expectation that sex should involve affectionate feelings and commitment and that boys and girls should behave according to gender norms. Even if the boy and girl are both interested in a one-time sexual encounter, they are not supposed to show this to each other. Therefore central to the courtship ritual are the boy’s initiative and attempts to convince the girl how much he loves her, that he is willing to ‘invest’ in her and wants to marry her, balanced by the girl’s reticent responses, postponement and false promises. On the other hand, even if the boy and girl have strong emotional feelings and hope for a long-term relationship this should not be acknowledged because it increases vulnerability and reduces negotiation power. Courtship strategies include strategies of self-presentation and testing of each other’s intentions and commitment. Girls assess the intention of boys by testing their willingness to invest with money and patience and hence the ambivalent but fundamental role of money in sexual relationships. Boys’ strategies to assess the meaning of girls’ reticence, postponement and false promises, is to be persistent and put pressure on the girl. All these tactics, including skimming and deception have ambivalent meanings and can indicate instrumental goals but also feelings of love and affection. This ambivalence sometimes results in misinterpretations and false expectations that add to the grey areas of sexual violence (see the example of Nuru in Chapter 6). Both boys and girls assess each other’s intentions by ‘investigating’ the character of the potential partner and his or her sexual history, family background and good manners. However, the Tanzanian social context limits boys’ and girls’ possibilities for assessment. For other youth in other contexts, a ‘dating’ period is normally used for the assessment of compatibility, feelings and intentions and to develop intimacy. Boys and girls in Tanzania however have to rely on information from others, on observations and on the short interactions during courtship negotiations.

The temporal orientation of risk perception

Constructing meanings for sex during courtship includes negotiations about prevention of unwanted consequences like pregnancy and diseases. Abstract risks such as pregnancy and disease are personalized within the context of social interaction between partners. School attending informants of this research generally had a high level of knowledge and reported to us awareness of their risk for HIV infection. Yet risk perceptions change within social
interaction, as do sexual meanings. Emotions can override even a high level of risk awareness and boys and girls might prioritize more immediate concerns. If the meaning that is attached to the courtship includes love and commitment then feelings of trust become important in the consideration of risk and prevention. A girl might be more willing to have unprotected sex if she believes that the boy will support her if she becomes pregnant. Partners may decide not to use a condom if they trust each other not to have or to have had other partners. Strategies for risk management include assessment of the sexual history of the partner and application of the ‘cycle method’ by having sex on days that the chance of conception is low, calculated on basis of a girl’s menstrual cycle.

Appraisal of risk depends on the assessment of a potential partner and strategies for risk reduction as well as ideas about the ability to recover from or resist unwanted outcomes. Boys appraise the risk of pregnancy differently from girls because they believe they will be able to avoid responsibility. Girls who believe that they will be supported in case of pregnancy will be more willing to take this risk than girls who believe they will be ostracized by their family or community. Hypothetically, because I did not investigate this, ideas about and access to antiretroviral therapy and perceptions about the possibility of abortion might also influence risk perception. These options may affect the decision whether or not to engage in safe or unsafe sex.

I argue that risk perceptions should be understood as a temporal orientation and therefore dynamic as they are influenced by social context, personal goals and feelings. An important element influencing the temporal orientation of children in their prioritization of the risks and benefits of a sexual relationship are their experiences and perceptions of vulnerability. The *social aspects* of risk predominated the children’s narratives. Negative feedback from peers, parents, caretakers and partners had consequences that affected their feelings about the self, social support and relationships and were considered a greater risk than more abstract health risks or even pregnancy. In general the risk of pregnancy is prioritized over the risk of contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. Although children are aware that condoms reduce the risk for pregnancy and STI not many of the informants seem to use them. The children believed that condoms could harm a relationship between partners if using one communicated distrust or a lack of commitment. Being caught in possession of a condom by parents or caretakers could signal bad behavior and damage the child’s relationship with the adults. Most noteworthy is that Tanzanian boys do not personalize the risk for pregnancy as
much as Tanzanian girls do. The children have many misconceptions about condoms that make their use unpopular. Condoms are difficult for children and youth to obtain, especially because they cost money. In order to increase condom use among children and young adolescents in Tanzania it is clear that these barriers towards condom use should be targeted. It is salient that if boys are not interested in using a condom, it is difficult for girls to negotiate their use.

Understanding social and individual patterns of sexual behavior

The analytical model of ‘individual temporal orientations’ is useful to understand how children construct a system of sexual meanings through social interaction and how this influences and makes dynamic their perceptions of benefits and risk. The model demonstrates how social norms and expectations are internalized and guide behavior. It illustrates how these social norms and expectations inform personal goals that drive children to make sexual decisions in accordance with their sense of self and their hopes, fears and desires for the present and future (near or far). However, the original model does not include an analysis of the roles of strong physical impulses, emotions and feelings that can arise suddenly and which are acutely experienced by children during puberty. The children reported experiencing desire, attraction, infatuation as well as feelings of rebellion and strong curiosity all of which influenced their sexual behavior. Perhaps we could understand sudden powerful feelings as demanding an actor to make practical and normative judgments in response to an emerging demand, Children’s impulses or feelings can result from evolving situations and lead to more impulsive, unpredictable and spontaneous behavior (Longmore 1998). This model of decision making is not dominated by cognition and rationality but allows for biomedical and psychological contributions to explain sexual behavior (e.g. the influence of hormones on moods). Or perhaps we could understand action informed by feelings and emotions as identity agency, if such feelings and related thought and action patterns are recursive and lead to more habitual patterning (e.g. “sexual scripts”65) or ideas about the self. In any case, I argue that feelings such as desire, attraction, infatuation as well as curiosity and rebellion can be conceived as temporal orientation. This would mean that the feelings direct the actor’s

attentional focus to the here and now, competing and sometimes conflicting with more distant goals, life projects or ideas about the self.

I prefer to consider the temporal orientation of an actor as dynamic, simultaneously incorporating the presence of multiple goals and demands, and continuously refocusing through changing contexts. The social manifestations of impression management, resistance, negotiation strategies and risk management are examples of social strategies used by the children to manage the demands, conflicting norms and expectations so that they might optimize their personal benefits. Concrete examples of children’s agency are seeking beneficial social relationships such as friendships and partner selection as well as secrecy, lying, silence, exaggerations, deceptions, skinning, seducing, flirting, assessment of a person’s background, character and intentions, and many more. Children experience vulnerability in the moments when they lack agency, or lack a feeling of control over the outcome of a social interaction. Girls feel vulnerable if social and internalized norms do not allow them to be assertive with an older boy or man or when they are approached in isolated areas. Boys feel vulnerable when they are poor and cannot compete with peers or men who are better off. Boys and girls both feel vulnerable when they are perceived to deviate from the norm or cannot live up to expectations. Boys and girls also feel vulnerable when they are confronted with strong emotions towards a potential partner and the chance that these will not be reciprocated.

Considering the interaction of physical, mental and social structures allows us to determine individual differences as well as broad patterns of sexual behavior. To investigate how structures are being reproduced and transformed including how new meanings are created, social rules are bent and how change might occur requires consideration of the flow of continuous interaction between physical, mental and social processes. To explore the change and reproduction of structural aspects of Tanzanian sexual culture, I first analyze broad patterns of sexual behavior of children in northwest Tanzania. I will consider how the social manifestations of agency, informed and directed by social structures, shape the characteristics of courtship and sexual relationships. My intention is not to generalize, but to discuss which structural aspects and agentic actions shape these social patterns of sexual behavior and to draw attention to their role in influencing children’s future vulnerability to HIV infection and poor sexual and reproductive health.
**Contradiction, ambiguity and secrecy: Sex as a deal**

Whether through modernity, economic hardship, media influences, globalization, sexual taboo, threat of and attention to AIDS or, as parents indicated, ‘mixing of cultural rules’, the norms, messages, and expectations for sexual behavior that children in Tanzania receive are contradictory and conflicting. Children’s main strategy to manage these contradictions is to keep their interactions with the opposite sex hidden (Wight et al. 2006). Because interaction between boys and girls are limited there is not much space to develop friendships or to get to know each other better through ‘dating’. When there is direct interaction outside school, it appears to be automatically charged with an underlying sexual meaning and tension. Perhaps because of the interpretation that parents, caretakers and teachers give to interaction between boys and girls, children ‘learn’ that such interactions cannot be ‘neutral’ and learn to interpret it as something sexual. Because courtship has to take place in secret, boys approach girls when they are alone and dialogue is kept short and to the point. Courtship dialogues seem to have a ritualistic and ‘deal-like’ character and are generally variations on the same script. The boy communicates his interest in the girl and asks her for an answer. If the girl ‘agrees’, negotiations follow regarding the transaction or promises of transaction and a time and place are set when the boy and girl will meet for sex. This setting of time and place is important because of the limited options for privacy for boys and girls. Therefore sex takes place in ‘hidden places’ such as unfinished buildings, the bushes or at home when the house is empty. As argued earlier, I suspect the importance of agreeing on a place and time for sex is related to girls’ assumed knowledge of their chances for conception. Contrary to Fuglesang’s conclusion that “… adolescent sexuality is often irregular and spontaneous and seldom planned” (1997:1252), I believe that most boys’ and girls’ have highly planned sexual encounters. Exceptions are perhaps younger boys and girls who are still allowed to play with each other. We heard stories how play and imitation could ‘accidentally’ or spontaneously lead to sexual games and activities. But for most boys and girls the shape and structure of courtship cause them to consciously make a decision to engage in sexual activity. This actually offers potential entry points for intervention efforts, which will be discussed later.

The context of secrecy can facilitate coercion and force. Because courtship takes place in secret and girls are approached in places where they are alone, boys are less likely to be punished if they use pressure. As the example of Nuru showed, girls find it hard to report such

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66 See also Wight et al. 2006; Dilger 2003; Kayaa et al. 1998; Nyanzi et al 2001
experiences or to ask for help. Wight et al. argue that lack of social feedback due to secrecy prevents the adult social environment to judge or reinforce relationships, which might create more opportunities for children to engage in short and multiple relationships unsanctioned (2006). From the children who participated in this research we learned that long-term sexual relationships between boys and girls of primary school age are uncommon. Relationships usually end after the boy and girl have had sex. Boys explained that they were primarily interested in what they called ‘temporary’ girlfriends because of the boy’s dependency on their own parents or caretakers. Boys’ access to money is irregular and it is therefore hard for boys to maintain a relationship. Boys indicated that chances are high that a girl would move on if a boy is broke or has trouble supporting her or if she is offered a better deal. Furthermore, boys saw marriage as something for the distant future and therefore not the purpose of their courtships or sexual relationships while young. They justified their deceptive words and outright lies during courtship by rationalizing that girls were expected to know this. The fact that the children’s relationships lack non-sexual aspects due to structural constraints contributes to the short duration of the sexual relationships between boys and girls. However, the children maintained the option that a temporary relationship could develop into a permanent one. Despite this claim, the boy’s general perception was that temporary girlfriends were for sex, while a permanent girlfriend was invested in and sex was not the main goal. Partners were selected on this dual basis. Temporary girlfriends were chosen based on physical attraction. Permanent partners were chosen based on a history of good manners and character (for more selection nuances see Chapter 7). Although girls complained about the boys’ deception and lack of commitment, the children acknowledged that boys have difficulty maintaining a relationship due to their lack of money and this gives girls an incentive to move on.

The exchange element and limited space to develop relationships and non-sexual intimacy are consequences of larger socio-economic structures. These structures shape the characteristics of courtship and relationships as well as ambiguous meanings for sex. Children described a reality of relationships that were characterized by short duration, deceit, skinning, transaction and sometimes multiple partners. These relationships are discrepant from the children’s described ideal of long-term relationships that would be based on commitment, trust, faithfulness and love. Children appeared to negotiate these ambiguities by constructing both temporary and permanent sexual relationships. Since every new sexual encounter needs to be
negotiated, temporal relationships can follow each other quickly, sometimes with the same partner(s), or exist simultaneously with a permanent relationship.

Thus, social structures like poverty, conflicting norms and expectations, gender inequality and sexual taboo guide the agentic choices children make regarding sex. Despite the individual differences in sexual decision making and the dynamics of sexual meanings and perceptions of risks and benefits, the social manifestations of children’s agency - secrecy, impression management, negotiation strategies and risk management- shape social patterns of courtship and sexual relationships. Sexual taboo, poverty and gender norms support the continuation of gender inequality and frame how courtship and relationships develop and intimacy and sex are experienced, leaving little room for social change. Torren’s argument that data from children provide anthropologists with an analytical tool to study the micro-history of the constitution of ideas; a basis for explaining adult decision-making and behavior is relevant in this context (1999). Yet the sexual meaning system of children is no passive copy of that of adults. Secrecy creates space for children, away from the control of adults, to develop their own rules for interaction and communication. Within this space cultural norms are sometimes reinvented, but also bent and restructured, incorporating ‘new’ realities of changing economics, gender roles, life course possibilities and perhaps modern images of love and sex. But these processes of change take time and will not immediately impact on children’s sexual decision making and behavior. Unless structural barriers like poverty, sexual taboo and gender norms are addressed, children and young people’s ability to change their sexual behavior will be limited, even if they have sufficient access to information and condoms – explaining the lack of effectiveness of prevention efforts in changing young people’s sexual behavior. In the next chapter I will further investigate key reasons why I think interventions that aim to promote the sexual health of children and youth in northwest Tanzania are of limited success.