**Title**: Metaphor use in narrative reports of birth stories by mothers of children with Down syndrome: Differences by diagnosis timing?

**Authors**: Kristina Kleveland,1 Medha Mohankumar,1 Alaina Leverenz,2 Jennifer G. Bohanek,3 & Angela F. Lukowski1

**Introduction**: Previous research has indicated that individuals use metaphors to make sense of challenging life circumstances, with a sizeable literature focusing on metaphor use as a means of coping with various health conditions (e.g., Horstman & Leverenz, 2024; Leverenz & Hernandez, 2023). To our knowledge, metaphor use has not yet been studied to examine sense-making processes in mothers who have given birth to a child with Down syndrome (DS). The present analysis was conducted to: (1) provide qualitative characterization of metaphors used by mothers of children with DS, (2) report the frequency and distribution of metaphor use, and (3) determine whether mothers differentially use metaphors when discussing the birth of their child with DS based on whether the diagnosis was provided during gestation or after birth.

**Method**: Forty-four American mothers of children with DS were recruited from a Facebook site that provides support and services to individuals with DS and their families. After completing an online screening questionnaire, mothers participated in an online video chat interview with a research assistant. Mothers discussed the time they learned of their child’s DS diagnosis, their child’s birth, and their child’s most recent birthday. Mothers also completed various questionnaires, including a demographics questionnaire that inquired as to whether they learned of their child’s DS diagnosis during gestation or after birth.

Teams of authors reviewed the transcripts together to identify any and all occurrences of metaphors in the narratives. After data coding was complete for the entire sample, the coded text was categorized into strength (e.g., “he was a warrior”), journey (e.g., “and that’s when the journey started”), and emotional vulnerability metaphors (e.g., “emotionally, it was up and down”) as described in previous research (Horstman & Leverenz, 2024). Although data coding is now complete, metaphor categorization has only been completed for 16 participants (n = 8 from the prenatal diagnosis group and n = 8 from the postnatal diagnosis group). Data reduction and analysis for the complete sample will be finalized before the conference.

**Results**: The present analysis only concerns mothers’ use of metaphors in their discussions of their child’s birth story, as previous analyses revealed that group differences (prenatal versus postnatal) were most apparent when considering this event (Lukowski & Bohanek, 2024). Sixty metaphors were identified and categorized as reflecting emotional vulnerability (50%), strength (30%), and journey (20%). The distribution of metaphors in these three categories varied nominally based on whether mothers received a prenatal or postnatal diagnosis of DS for their child. That is, a greater percentage of mothers in the postnatal diagnosis group used emotional vulnerability (73% of metaphors generated in this category) and journey metaphors (83% of metaphors generated in this category) relative to mothers in the prenatal diagnosis group, who used a greater percentage of strength metaphors (72% of metaphors generated in this category).

**Discussion:** The present study indicates that mothers use metaphors when describing the birth of their child with DS and that the metaphors chosen to relay those experiences varied based on whether mothers learned of their child’s diagnosis during gestation or after birth. Examination of the metaphors used by mothers suggests that they use this figure of speech in an attempt to make sense of and cope with their newfound situation, particularly when welcoming a child with DS into their family after receiving a postnatal diagnosis. Additional implications of the use of metaphors in this sample, and in mothers of children with developmental disabilities more broadly, will be discussed.

**References:** A complete list of references is available from the last author.

 University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

2 Columbia College, Columbia, MO, USA

3 University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA