

Research in Public Health

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25

Sexual Intimacy among Young
Teenagers in Pelotas, Brazil:

Achieving Maturity in a
Complex World

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The present paper on **Sexual Intimacy among Young Teenagers in Pelotas, Brazil: Achieving Maturity in a Diversified World** used ethnographic methods to explore the relationship between patterns of sexual intimacy and attainment of adult status among adolescents in Pelotas, Brazil. Results show that sexual development is about the formation of gender roles, independence from parents, financial autonomy, access to other the world of "adult" practices (e.g. smoking and drinking). This is not a smooth process, however, since messages regarding how adolescents are told to mature come from ambiguities of the adult world. Therefore, public health campaigns would do well to work with more flexible notions of adolescent transition which avoid understanding the adolescent transition as primarily sexual, and are sensitive to the socio-economic realities of what it means to acquire adult status.

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Sexual Intimacy among Young Teenagers in Pelotas, Brazil: Achieving Maturity in a Diversified World*

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to explore adolescent practices related to the construction of sexual identity. The term sexual identity was meant to cover all behaviors and ideologies locally salient for young people's views of themselves as sexual beings.

Methods: A sub-sample of 93 children from a 1982 epidemiological birth cohort was selected randomly from eight census districts. Unstructured methods (participant observation, unstructured yet guided interviewing, and semi-structured observation) were used repeatedly with each adolescent from December 1997 to August 1998. During the research period, children's ages ranged from 14 to 16 years of age.

Results: Few adolescents had already lost their virginity at the beginning of this research. General narratives of sexuality among these children focused heavily on the social aspects of finding and establishing partnerships, be they short term (one event) or longer term over the course of a few weeks, and even months. The establishing of intimacy for children of this age (which for the large majority of adolescents and of sexual encounters consisted of kissing and petting) substantially modifies a series of other non-intimate relationships (e.g. with friends and parents). In addition, the making and breaking of intimacy touched on delicate emotions such as trust and betrayal, giving each 'sexual' encounter, no matter how brief, a highly charged social and personal element. The 'practicing' of sexual intimacy, therefore, was also about the 'practicing' of gender roles, independence from parents, financial autonomy, access to other 'adult' practices (e.g. smoking and drinking), and psychological maturation in general. As such, differential patterns of how children mature are reflected in specific aspects of sexual behaviors.

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Conclusions: For adolescents, possibly more than for adults, sexual intimacy is more public in nature and motivated more heavily by the social negotiation for independence. As such, public health campaigns would do well to address not only sexual education *per se*, but adolescents' underlying concerns and struggles with gender roles, social validation and cultural difference.

INTRODUCTION

Attending to young people's medical, social and psychological needs is considerably more complex than addressing infant health problems, which can be more easily localized in a primary health care center. Adolescents rarely go to health centers on their own, and have much more contact with other influencing institutions, such as schools. More informally, family members, friends and the neighborhood are critical for providing young people with access to information and a healthy and integrated social life. Like many aspects of life, most everyday events affecting young people's decisions, experiences, acquisition of information, and sense of hopefulness for the future occur in playing fields, on street corners, behind closed doors or, for those who are more heavily controlled, on walks to school. These represent spaces and moments which young people attempt to claim as their own, in an important move towards what they describe as independence in their own individuality. Differential patterns in this process (e.g. what kinds of spaces young people seek, how exclusionary they are, how they relate to the activities and realms of the world of adults) contribute to an understanding of why some children living in disadvantaged situations engage in high risk activities repeatedly while others do not.

Studies are beginning to show repeatedly that a series of health-related behaviors and outcomes (e.g., unprotected sex, early unwanted pregnancy, induced abortion, drug & alcohol use, cigarette smoking, accidents, poor performance at school or early dropout, *anorexia nervosa* / *bulimia*, and violence) are clustered within similar populations of marginalized or disadvantaged youth (Harvey and Spigner, 1995). A myriad of explanations has been put forth for this clustering effect. The most promoted argues that youth who lack support have less resources for developing the necessary skills to cope with stressful life events and make decisions, thereby increasing the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. (Taylor et al., 1997). However, contradictory results exist and some studies show that decision-making skills among youth do not differ substantially from those among adults (Quadrel et al., 1993).

One possible reason for contradictory results is related to the assumption that these studies are uncovering universal aspects of adolescent development at the level of the individual which can easily be compared from one social setting to another. In other words, decision-making skills are not only defined differently according to social setting, but may be more salient in one population than another. In addition, even where found to be salient, poor decision-making skills or other factors understood to be indicators of a lack of maturity, can also be reconceptualized as a community's lack of appropriate resources (emotional, intellectual, economic, institutional) for youth (Jessor, 1993; Lightfoot, 1997). Research which is sensitive to the relationship between individual and social level variables is possibly less apt to apply singular images of adolescent development.

Current images of ‘average’ adolescence are also deeply affected by a series of stereotypes and generalizations that have arisen from a proliferation of research on marginal and highly visible groups of youth, including street children, drug addicts and youth subcultures such as the British punk movement in the 1970s (Eisenstein, 1993; Hebdige, 1979; Johnson et al., 1986; Mensch and Kandel, 1992; Pechansky and Barros, 1995). This body of research, while undeniably important, has perpetuated the view of adolescence itself as predominantly deviant, giving popular credence to G. Stanley Hall’s theory of adolescence as an inherent “storm and stress” (rebellious) transitional period (Hall 1904). For example, the well-known “generation gap” has received much of the blame for adolescent problems, but recent research has started to show that “average” adolescents in many parts of the world have fruitful relationships with their parents (Offer et al., 1988; Yanklovich, 1974). With such deeply engrained stereotypes, it is easy to engage in research that reproduces assumed links between family structure, community stability and public health outcomes uncritically without regard for particular socio-cultural settings. Ethnographic methods which rely primarily on unstructured approaches are particularly suited for engaging in research which attempts to get as close as possible to the reality that people themselves experience.

METHODOLOGY

The research center at the Department of Social Medicine in the Federal University of Pelotas has looked extensively at post-partum maternal and infant health since the initiation of a 1982 population-based birth cohort of 6,000 births (Barros, et al. 1990; Victora, et al. 1989). Given the sensitive nature of sexual behavior, an ethnographic project was begun in late 1997 with a sub-sample of 96 of these children, then 15 years of age. Eight census districts were selected randomly (weighted to be proportional to size) and randomized subsamples of children (6 girls and 6 boys from each district) from the 1982 epidemiological cohort were taken from each district (15-year-olds). With this sampling scheme (as opposed to simple random sampling), fieldworkers were able to concentrate their work in only a few select areas and thus have more regular contact with the children from each census district, enabling them not only to increase general acceptability (and rapport with interviewees) but also facilitating informal interactions and observations. On the other hand, random sampling, an unusual sampling procedure for the application of primarily qualitative methodologies, was resorted to in order to explore the heterogeneity and patterning of experiences. This proved to be essential, as a good number of adolescents were quite inaccessible (either in terms of available time or because they were extremely introverted) and would have been missed had the sampling been opportunistic.

The field team was composed of five members, two male social science students, one female social science student, and two female anthropologists (DPB and HG). Interviewers had several contacts with each adolescent. In order to preserve the strengths of the ethnographic method, fieldworkers were free to explore new topics as they arose and to pursue more in-depth relationships with adolescents as they develop naturally. For each adolescent, several members of their social networks were also interviewed (made possible by the fact that many adolescents in the same neighborhood are members of the same social networks). In addition to participant observation, data collection guides varied in

structure from informal conversations to open-ended structured questions. The large majority of interviews were taped and transcribed. Only those topics that were considered more sensitive to discuss were covered without a tape recorder.

Interviews were also be conducted with older members of the children's families (parents, uncles, grandparents) in order to understand adult perspectives on the challenges of parenting children in this age group. Finally, two important categories of key informants were identified and interviewed: role models (such as older adolescents or aunts and uncles) and attendants at informal neighborhood-based commerce (including bars, stores, video-game machines, and hairdressers). Therefore, the research has, in effect, explored the views and experiences of individuals from a wide range of ages in order to situate adolescence within the life span as a whole.

Transcribed interviews, observations and field notes were entered into the computer, coded and indexed according to topics. All field workers reviewed incoming data on a monthly basis, stimulating and exchanging analytical questions, hypotheses, and the development of explanatory models and analyses. The use of models proved to be helpful to guide further fieldwork, summarize data, and raise hypotheses about the relationship between variables. The term "local ideology" will be used here to refer to popular knowledge, or the local norms that the majority of members of a social group are aware of (even if not agreed with), and refer to in making sense of their own experiences. While this paper consists fundamentally in describing such local ideologies, some comparative analyses are also presented. More specifically, individuals ascribe to the local ideology differentially both in terms of degree of personal conviction and/or the presence of behavioral manifestations corresponding to local ideologies. The reasons for these sorts of differences are explored below.

RESULTS

Description of the Sample and Basic Experiences

A statistical comparison of the ethnographic sub-sample with the larger cohort did not reveal any major differences (variables used for comparison were: family income, maternal schooling, adolescent's race, adolescent employment, and adolescent school achievement). According to epidemiological data collected in 1997 using an anonymous questionnaire that was placed in an urn, approximately 25% of the whole sample had already had already initiated sexual activity (e.g. lost virginity) by the age of 15. When stratifying for gender, 12% of girls and 36% of boys had already lost their virginity. For our sample of 96 teenagers, this meant only approximately 6 girls and 17 boys. In addition, for many, the initiation of sexual activity did not necessarily entail the continuation of a sexually active life, meaning that questions related to health care seeking behavior for contraceptives, for example, are not yet applicable.

The individual epidemiological questionnaire did not ask about loss of virginity directly at 15 years of age, due to the sensitive nature of this question. Instead, participants were asked if they had a girlfriend or boyfriend. Other studies have shown that those who are engaged in a more 'serious' relationship are more likely to have sex, particularly for

girls (Harvey and Spigner 1995). While using these variables as the main outcome certainly does not capture more subtle yet important differences relating to those who have sex outside a ‘meaningful’ relationship, this variable can be used as a rough proxy for initiation of sexual activity. Thirty-five percent of girls and 25% of boys stated at age 15 that they had a boy/girlfriend. Looking at girls and boys separately, those with and without partners did not differ significantly according to basic socioeconomic and racial characteristics (family income, maternal schooling, adolescent’s race, and paternal presence). However, a greater percentage of girls who had boyfriends had already smoked and gotten drunk at least once, and a greater percentage of boys with girlfriends had already failed a year in school. Furthermore, simple mental health indicators did not seem to differ for those with or without partners among boys but did among girls: a greater percentage of girls with boyfriends said that their parents did not care much about their interests (Department of Social Medicine, UFPEL, 2000). This posits a simple yet relevant question for the ethnographic analysis to explore.

First Steps towards Initiating Intimacy

Narratives of intimacy among youth in Pelotas are divided into two main groups: “*ficar*” (to hang together) and “*namorar*” (to be girlfriend and boyfriend), both of which, in popular ideology, are explained to be a necessary and healthy phase of intimate life before marriage. The term “*ficar*” is said to be a relatively new development, and primarily refers to a type of informal dating whereby young couples “hang out” in the evenings either in the streets or at large dancing halls and pair up, designating their link through holding hands or kissing (Beria, 1998). *Ficando* can also designate a more private affair with extensive sexual intimacy, but less frequently does it refer to actual sexual intercourse for this age group. The main distinction between *ficar* and *namorar* relates to feelings of commitment and fidelity whereby no matter how sexually involved one becomes while *fincando* there is no stated assumption of loyalty or fidelity until explicitly agreed upon. Girls and boys will often *ficar* with various partners (upwards of 20–30) in the course of their “adolescent” phase.

Ficar, however, is not a straightforward process. Specifically, only sometimes are couples matched up because one seeks the other directly. Another route is to send a friend to establish the connection and see if the other party is interested in *ficar*. This is termed “*fazer os lados*” (literally, make the sidelines). In this way, it is not uncommon for some to *ficar* with the friend that in the past was the person who “made the sidelines”. For example, one introverted girl who explained that she did not want to *ficar* with anyone, relayed how one of her friends, “the type that *ficar* with several boys” came up to her one day and introduced her to Marcelo, a boy she had *ficar* with, and asked her if she wanted to *ficar* with him.

Girls tended to explain the less committed mechanisms of *ficar* as a safety mechanism allowing them to experiment and “shop around” before making a greater commitment, while boys stated that they experienced *fincando* as a means of asserting their “natural” male freedom. Some girls spoke of the time they began *fincando* as a personal liberation, a time when they themselves had to let their “soul” go and made the move from home to street life. Girls spoke of romanticism and love while boys spoke of companionship and conversation. In practice, however, boys often seemed most scarred by their woeful tales of

unfaithful girlfriends, pointing to their relative disadvantaged position in trying to get a *ficar* since girls are generally the ones who articulate who will *ficar* with whom. As such, it is rare that boys will reject a possible *ficar* where it is more common for girls to reject a *ficar* proposal, especially because they are more at risk of being stigmatized for being with too many boys. Therefore, girls worried about managing *ficando* with different boys without compromising their social network of girlfriends.

For most of these girls, the transition to “hanging out” with boys, even if not part of the process of starting to *ficar*, marked a change in maturity that has ramifications on the whole constellation of the girl’s social network. In several cases, for example, one girl’s initiation into “hanging out” with boys in the street had the effect of alienating a few of her girlfriends, either because the other girls’ parents did not allow this sort of activity or because of jealousy and ensuing “falling-out” fights. The move towards *ficando* or *namorar* changes more than images relating to maturity. The dynamic aspects of *ficando* in terms of processes of identification are highly revealing and dependent not only on the particular social setting but also on social meanings stimulated by the actual couple’s actions.

These narratives hint towards the importance of viewing the creation and dissolution of sexual bonds as part of a whole network of intimate bonds rather than as a simple desire for companionship, intimacy or sexual fulfillment, although these factors play an important part. Indeed, a closer look at the experiences described by these young people shows a variety of motive for “intimate” exchange, particularly when this refers to *ficar* which can be quick and unattached. Many *ficar* narratives show that choices of whom to be with, where and when are related to dynamics resulting from fights with, on the part of girls, ex-boyfriends and other girlfriends. One girl, for example, who lost her virginity with her first serious boyfriend (age 21), with whom she had exchanged rings (*compromisso*: see below) became seriously resentful when he broke off the relationship, particularly since she came from a home where premarital sex was strictly forbidden and thus, had “sacrificed” her position *vis-à-vis* her parents. As a form of retaliation, but also to incite jealousy and possibly “win him back”, she went to the local dance hall, where her ex-boyfriend was present as well and “hung with” four different boys, one of them being a friend of her ex-boyfriends. Like this case are many others where the social incentives to *ficar* are inseparable from personal inclinations. As such, feelings relating to betrayal, fidelity and loyalty entered into almost every young person’s narrative. Indeed, young girls often grouped their friends and more intimate boyfriends into categories of trust, stating that it is not possible to tell all your friends everything, for fear that they may use it against you or tell “everyone”.

In addition to these two categories are three subsequent categories: *compromisso* (commitment), *noivado* (engagement) and *casamento* (marriage). The first category (*compromisso*) involves exchange of rings whereby the implicit intention is to marry, although this is not always stated as such. *Compromisso* is markedly differentiated from *noivado* in that the “real” possibility of marriage is in actuality quite remote. In practice, it also seems that this represents a way for young girls and boys to solidify and make public the intensity or “seriousness” of their bond. In general, *compromisso* happens after two-four months of *namorar*. These categories of degrees of seriousness of intimate bonds, and

in particular their public aspects, helps to legitimize premarital sex for girls for themselves, their parents (if they are involved in the process) and their larger social network. Indeed, in several cases, girls who described greater sense of conflict in deciding when and with whom to have sex for the first time did so only once in a relationship marked by a ring of commitment.

With respect to sexual “lustfulness”, some girls are quite explicit about their sexual desires and needs. For some girls, *ficar* becomes a way to explore their sexual desires (including likes and dislikes) without greater commitment, and some even spoke of frustrations of not having sexual freedom. Some girls explained that they know when “it is time” for their first sexual experience when they feel “uninhibited desire” and lose both feelings of fear and guilt. In particular, some describe that this is the time when no images of adult figures (mother and father) come to mind. In general, girls state that they have sex for the first time with boys whom they like affectionately, whereas boys often explain that they their first sexual experience is with girls with whom they have no significant emotional bond, but with whom they can “learn” about sexuality.

While the basic ideology dictates that sexual development generally follows these patterns (*ficar*, *namorar*, *compromisso*, *noivado* and *casamento*), some major differences can be ascertained. Some girls proceed quickly through the *ficar* phase and start having more serious boyfriends and girlfriends and never go back to the more informal *ficar*, stating that they do not like this behavior pattern. Others do the same (proceed to have more serious boyfriends) but occasionally go back to *ficar* patterns as a way to ensure or solidify the link with their preferred boyfriend (such as the case outlined above). Still others extend the *ficar* phase because they just want to have fun and don’t want to “tie themselves down”, since having a boyfriend entails a certain amount of curtailed freedom. Related to these patterns is the question of degree of social insertion. Some girls are heavily involved in social activities of all sorts and have great (large and intricate) social networks. Not only do these girls have more friends than others, but they also have more “enemies”, as they themselves describe. These girls tend to be quite socially extroverted and experienced, good at making jokes (an important mode of communication) and articulating social relations (such as, for example, being the ones who *fazem os lados*, as described above). As will be discussed below, these different patterns of sexual development are closely related to larger issues of psychosocial ‘developmental’ in general.

For both boys and girls, getting together with people from other neighborhoods opens up many life possibilities, differences, and curiosities. Boys often also state that it is better to *ficar* with girls from other neighborhoods because as one grows older, one gets tired of the girls you have seen all your life. Girls also state it is better to go with boys from other neighborhoods or schools, but explain this is because that way they run less risk of being talked about, critiqued and called a “*galinha*” (one who runs around with many). Although boys can also be criticized for being too “prolific” (and thus not good boyfriend or husband material), girls are indeed more susceptible to social criticism. In addition, although it is possible for boys to be critiqued in this manner, the general ideology allows boys greater liberty and even promotes the idea that boys who get together with many girls are more popular, interesting and highly desired. In this way, norms for girls may be more

contradictory than for boys since girls must attract and marry the “right man”, but are not allowed to be too forward. This, together with the fact that girls in this setting are more extroverted than boys and thus more likely of the pair to instigate a relationship, makes for a series of subtle possibilities in male-female intimate relations.

Furthermore, *ficar* patterns are not only individual, but also about alliances between groups. Often, a group of boys who are friends and go out together meet a group of girls from another neighborhood at a dance hall, and they end up exchanging phone numbers, or extending invitations to go “hang out” where the girls are (the language used even indicates the group nature of this form of *ficar*: *a gente ficamos com ela—we got together with the girls*). These groups-based events sometimes even modify the structure of social networks, as in one case when a groups of male friends stopped hanging out with one of their friends because he wasn’t able to *ficar* with a girls from the neighborhood they went to. Although norms about *ficar* dictate that partners can switch, this is in fact not the case. Boys can, depending on the girl, easily “burn their film” (*queimar o filme*), or get a bad reputation, if they get together with a girl that many others have already had, or that is particularly ugly, or in the case of white boys, that is black. Sometimes boys explain that although they know they are going to *queimar o filme*, they end up getting together with a girl anyway, sometimes out of ignorance or even “stupidity”. Sometimes boys are even “forced” to “hang with a girl”, if for example at a dance hall, she approaches him and is already a friend, and starts playing around physically with him, in a joking manner. To not reciprocate is considered antisocial, or someone that does not like partying. Many of these interactions often have social motivation at their base: to stimulate emotional reactions (e.g. jealousy, desire) in an ex-boyfriend or to avoid going a whole night at the dance hall without having had at least one *ficar*.

A common thread to all of these descriptions is that while sexual curiosity and sincere friendship or attraction motivates behaviors relating to intimacy, *ficar* patterns cannot be divorced from more general social processes. In a sense, *ficar* patterns begin within intricate social networks established during childhood that, during adolescents, can become quite intricate. Possibly unlike adulthood, these networks play an important role in enabling the young person to establish him or herself independently from his/her immediate family by providing significant relations and giving him/her access to information outside the adolescents’ immediate circle. Therefore, a simple *ficar* between two individuals in actuality often involved many other people (e.g. each respective persons’ previous partners, prospective partners, a jealous girlfriend, parents) and a series of social events which play with issues of social limits and control. For boys, this process is qualitatively different, since their social networks tend to be larger, sometimes more heterogeneous and located more prominently in public places (street, soccer fields, and bars). Girls’ social networks tend to be characterized by their smaller size, relative homogeneity and private nature (sitting in doors with three friends talking), but may change in composition more quickly through time. As such, boys’ *ficar* experiences and life outside the family relations in general, circulate more widely and are thus, even more public. In many cases it appeared as though these peripheral relation are of greater social importance to the process of “growing up” than the actual girl-boy *ficar* couple. Given this background, then, how do these adolescents move into making more long-lasting intimate bonds and what are the larger social implications of such a move?

Moving towards a More Serious Connection

Almost all adolescents have had some duration of time during which they engaged in some of the above *ficar* patterns. The duration and timing of *ficar* patterns, and rapidity with which some move into more serious relationships differs. Since a more serious relationship is generally associated with the initiation of sexual intimacy, particularly for girls, research must explore how and why relationships are established, including expectations that partners establish for one another. But the very process of identifying which relations are serious and which are casual is a challenge. Several cases arose in which girls identified a relationship as *namorar* while their male counterparts labeled it a *ficar*. Although less frequent, this also occurred inversely whereby boys thought they were in a more serious relationship which girls then rejected by stating it was no more than a few times of *ficar*. This demonstrates that there is much room for negotiation and modification of experiences, a process that endows the individual with both power and protection.

Motivations to get into a relationship (rather than just “*ficar*”) are quite distinct according to gender. Boys appear to be more motivated by girls’ actions (initiation, insinuations, etc.), despite the fact that the local ideology dictates that girls should be more passive. When it comes to establishing a more serious relationship, girls tend to move things forward and set stipulations, particularly since what marks the possibility of greater intensity is allowing the boy to visit the girl in her house and thus, meet her parents. Once in a relationship, boys also seem much more affected by infidelities, which may contribute to the notion that for them, getting into a relationship is more risky in terms of their emotions and social reputation. Part of the seemingly increased shock for boys may relate to the fact that the local ideology dictates that girls are less likely to be unfaithful, although several informants argue that in reality, they just pretend to be. Boys also tend to begin a more serious relationship with younger girls, mostly, they say, because they are not able to get the girls they want, who tend to be older. In a way, the dynamic of younger boys with older girls is one typically associated with male-female relations such that the older girl holds the more powerful position associated with “masculinity”. This shows that gender roles are in reality more fluid and that the crossing to gender stereotypes awards boys and girls with different kinds of power at different moments in their maturation process.

One 15-year-old boy, for example, explained that his “girlfriends” are always 12 or 13 years old, because he gets too nervous with girls his own age. At dance halls, he gets together with older girls, but never manages to repeat the experience with them, and thus move into more committed dating. With 12- or 13-year-olds, in contrast, he easily gets invited to their homes and simply goes, sometimes turning into a dating relationship without much of his own motivation. He explained that a few years back he never got together with anyone because he was too picky, and always insisted in trying with girls of his own age, always leading to failure or if achieving something, always *levando queimação* (getting “burned”), stating that “this day in age, things are getting difficult”. Underlying this social narrative is the notion that boys often struggle with who controls the situation. One way of rendering this experience socially comprehensible is to revert to a typically adult-like, moralizing argument: “we don’t always invite the girls to go with us to the dance halls, because sometimes they don’t show up anyway. Also because girls are

torrando o saco, they are wanting to control us ... another thing that we see a lot is that girls this day in age are very loose, especially at the dance halls. In one night they may get together with three, four boys!” For girls, this kind of behavior, while precarious because they are always on the verge of becoming a topic for gossip, is a sign of risk and courage, or in the least, status. Some revel, for example, in the ability to attract some boys, set up a rendezvous, and then not show up. The move towards establishing a relationship is laden with a series of power struggles. Indeed, some older key informants explained that “*machista*” boys who “only want sex” are also reacting to a sense of being controlled and a fear of rejection.

Given these power dynamics), two main typologies among boys emerge: those that rather not get involved in anything more serious and those that speak of passion and love. Boys in the first group tend to associate getting involved in a relationship with weakness of character. Narratives show that these boys often argue that “before they know it”, they are in a more serious relationship, being passively manipulated by girls. With regard to sexuality, they speak more about girls’ bodies, getting “further along” sexually, and seem to be more preoccupied with finding ways to lose their virginity. The other group of boys tends to discuss aspects of “the way girls talk” and their general personality. They are also more apt to get into relationships and take on a more active role in setting stipulations in the relationships. The relationship between these stereotyped differences in character and actual development of life events or experiences needs to be explored further, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Girls are said to be the ones that fall in love desperately, and their narratives are more littered with concepts such as “love” and “passion”. However, girls also seem to be motivated to have a boyfriend for personal “liberation” from household controls. The local ideology dictates that girls do not and should not have the freedom to go out to local dancehalls alone or with a group of girls. Having a responsible and “proper” boyfriend enables them to do so. This may explain why, in the larger epidemiological cohort, girls who had boyfriends were more apt to have already gotten drunk once and smoked cigarettes. Girls who have boyfriends are also the ones that sell the idea that they are different from the “promiscuous” girls, or girls that *ficar* with many boys (even if in practice this is often not the case). Even though these girls may also *ficar*, they do so in a different way: in places that are less public and with boys that are less known in her immediate social circle so as to not be the target of gossip. Girls who go (*ficar*) with many boys appear to be less worried about what others think, perceive themselves as more “modern”, and appear to have greater power in negotiating the boundaries and scope of sexual experimentation with boys.

More serious relationships are just as directed and bound by the public sphere as *ficar* encounters. Stories abound of break-ups, which were instigated by lies told by the partner’s friends. A girl’s female friends, for example, may go to the girl’s boyfriend and tell him that they saw her get together with another boy at a dance hall. These series of events becomes a question of which relationship is more trustworthy, intimate relationship or same-sex friendships. By default it seems as though same-sex relationships generally win, at least among younger adolescents, until a confrontation between partners makes the “truth” come to light. Sometimes events that reveal infidelities can be used as a way to get

out of a relationship that one partner no longer wants, even if he or she knows it is a lie. Girls often explain that when female friends do this, it is because they are jealous or want the girl's boyfriend for herself, whereas when boys experience this, it is because their friends are true friends. In many cases, it becomes a struggle of loyalty and trust in either one's partner or one's friend, a process that also marks the transition towards adulthood, since trust in one's partner, before all, is theoretically associated with maturity.

Child-Adult Transition: Psychosocial Development

Sexual intimacy is certainly not the only marker for social maturity, even though the very definition of 'adolescence' is equated with sexual maturation in the popular and scientific arenas. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore how it relates to more general views and experiences with child and adolescent development. "Psychosocial development" here is broadly defined to include locally identified pathways for attaining positive social roles. It is imperative to call attention to the fact, however, that no matter how local or micro-level, there will always be discrepancies and debates regarding what constitutes "positive social roles" and how they should be acquired. The analysis below will highlight some of these divergences.

The transition from childhood is mostly discussed by informants as a relatively linear process that proceeds through significant events or markers of maturity. For girls, for example, these include: not wanting to play with dolls anymore, first *ficar* (usually at school or near the home), first experience going to the local dance hall, work responsibilities in the home, menstruation, first boyfriend, employment, and so forth. Girls also describe the end of childhood as a change in mental "attitudes" or ways of thinking. Despite this general pervasive ideology, some girls actually experience this transition much more rigidly (or linearly) than others. When asked, for example, when and how their childhood had ended, most girls explained that one day they went to play with their dolls and simply did not feel like it anymore. Among these girls, some take a rigid approach, putting their dolls away and stating categorically that such activities are buried in the past while others state that they still occasionally enjoy playing some of their childhood games.

This is reflected in these girls' social networks. Some 15-year-olds have little relations with kids of younger ages, making explicit the notion that they are too mature for such friends. Others, however, are happy to include younger siblings and friends in their social activities. The way adolescents relate to "past childlike" characteristics into their current sense of identity seems to reflect their impetus to "grow up" quickly or not. In a few of our more intensely followed-up cases, the relationships between household structure, the adolescents' posture towards their own development (rigid/quick or fluid) and sexual intimacy behavior patterns can be clearly observed. In these cases, parents' position towards what is allowed/acceptable and what is not are quite rigid (even if at times contradictory), and girls have less explicit freedom to leave the home for reasons other than school or the occasional party. These girls, in turn, reject their own childhood characteristics more adamantly and turn to more adult-like activities, such as establishing a more serious relationship and seeking, or at least stating the desire to seek, employment. In these cases, having a more serious boyfriend gives girls a greater amount of freedom than remaining single, since it is more socially acceptable and practically feasible for them to go to night clubs with their boyfriend rather than a group of girlfriends. The more serious the

boyfriend, then, the more the initiation of a sexually active life becomes legitimate, even if still secretive. It may be, then, that establishing an intimate bond with a boy that has “marriageable” qualities is one way that some girls have of accessing a world of greater freedom and exploration, two qualities also locally associated with maturity and adulthood. This may explain the reason for the association (outlined in the section “Description of the Sample and Basic Experiences”), salient only for girls, between being in a partnership and feeling that one’s parents are not involved in daily life.

For boys the transition is marked by more life-impacting events such as the loss of virginity, one’s first job and complete financial independence. Although both boys and girls state a general desire to work and have their own income, for boys this is much more socially expected. Family pressures and poor performance in school (upwards of 60% of boys had failed at least one year of school (Barros, et al. 1995)) contribute to the importance of early employment. Employment, even if informal and irregular, also has a practical influence on dating, since boys are not only expected to pay for their girlfriends when going out, but the question of material acquisitions (tennis shoes, skate board, motor cycle, etc.) for status seem to be closely linked to the ‘popular’ male image as one who is capable of providing for a future family. In a sense, employment gives boys personal and ‘dating’ autonomy. Again, this is not homogeneous for the sample as a whole. Some boys ascribe to the importance of this ideology more than others do. For some boys, the choice to occasionally stay indoors and socialize only with a few good friends (a typically more ‘feminine’ and ‘childlike’ quality) does not cause them anxiety regarding their adolescent status, for example. The question, then, is what underlies this differentiation.

When comparing adolescents that have more fixed expectations of development with those that do not (for both boys and girls), the degree of social control and structure within the family environment are markedly distinct. In several boys’ and girls’ experiences, this seems to function through divergent mechanisms. Firstly, in homes where the distribution of money, roles, and decisions are more patterned and prescribed, adolescents’ appear to experience *ficar* patterns (together with all of its social and practical ramifications, as described above) as a means of distancing themselves from the home structure. These homes also demonstrate a more rigid set of expectations with regard to adolescent transition: girls are more apt to want a large celebration for their fifteenth birthday (locally important) and boys are more engaged in questions of military service or employment as markers of the transition to adulthood. In general, these adolescents tend to be more conservative in the sense that they are more concerned with others’ opinions and less inclined to accept socio-cultural differences. As such, their initiation into sexual life is more characteristic of the standard local ideology. With regard to norms that state that boys are likely to be manipulated into a relationship by a girl with whom he has *ficar* with more than a few times, these more conservative boys are more likely to feel threatened, controlled, and to use sexuality as a means to negotiate their status *vis-à-vis* their social circles.

The degree to which the adolescent is exposed to different social realms contributes to a more homogeneous and rigid expectation of rites of passage. In some cases, children who were deeply imbedded in a single highly localized social network (such as cliques) had less personal exposure to gender, class (etc.) differences, making their social interactions more

conflicting (less tolerant and more threatening). This is an oversimplification, since it is obvious that mere exposure to differences will not reduce the experience of inter-group 'conflict'. However, those that tend to be more isolated (in actual practice and emotionally, depending on a more homogeneous circle of friends, for example) and less tolerant or threatened by interactions outside their immediate world may be more susceptible to the pressure of peers, possibly paving the way from mere experimentation with socially labeled deviant activities (as important markers of independent identity) to consistently harmful behaviors. From careful consideration of a few detailed case studies, it may be that cross-cutting social networks and the child's 'ability' to permeate several social settings/activities may increase their options for identifying themselves, for choosing situations which feel best, and for feeling less afraid of countering the opinions of others. This hypothesis goes against stereotypical views that one of the 'modern' urban adolescent's problems is the confusion arising from a multiplicity of choices. It is likely that the setting in which these choices are accessed has a strong impact on the values that they hold, and on how they will be incorporated and used in a positive or negative way.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As is the case with a more inductive research process, many of the links between variables described above were actually observed in the everyday experiences of the children from this sample. Due to the nature of ethnographic fieldwork, which is labor intensive and requires extensive contact, these relationships were not observed for each case and so, it is difficult to state, for example, whether repressive or permissive household settings, rigid or fluid approaches towards child/adolescent development and sexual intimacy behavior patterns are indeed related similarly for the majority of the sample. However, these are also not isolated cases, and it could be argued that the associations which inductive methods bring to light are highly valid since the pathways of influence are actually observed rather than speculated.

For adolescents, possibly more than for adults, sexual intimacy is more public in nature and motivated more heavily by the social negotiation for independence. The 'practicing' of sexual intimacy is, as shown above, also about the 'practicing' of gender roles, trust and betrayal in friendships, independence from parents, financial autonomy, access to other 'adult' practices (e.g. smoking and drinking), and maturation in general. As children practice intimacy and enter more intensely into these other 'adult' realms of life, the heterogeneity of their responses and choices grows even more. Children from homes where adolescent rites of passage are more fixed have a more difficult time making the move towards their 'adult' status, a process that is reflected in their sexual behaviors. Therefore, public health campaigns would do well to work with more flexible notions of adolescent transition, the attainment of adult social roles, as well as adolescents' underlying concerns and struggles with gender roles, social validation and cultural difference.

The role of sexual identity making in the transition from childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood is not one simply of sexual curiosity, desire, experimentation, and even playfulness although these are undeniably important aspects. The fact that the making and breaking of intimate relations is part of a larger constellation of social relations which touches on delicate emotions such as trust and betrayal,

modifying a series of other non-intimate relationships (with friends, parents), means that sexual education campaigns must also address these relationships. Virtually all adolescents initiate some sort of sexual life during this time, but not all react to this initiation in the same ways. Nevertheless, most public health campaigns homogenize the experience of intimacy by equating sexual practice during adolescence with risk and danger.

It is important to point out that social messages regarding what adolescence is/is not or should/should not be, come from ambiguities of the adult world. Historical research has shown how the “culture of youth” has been embraced and even copied by adults in an almost nostalgic desire for the “innocence” associated with childhood (Enright, et al. 1987; Ivy 1995). Idealized images of adolescents are often perpetuated hand in hand with contradictory laws (such as in the US) regarding when young people are endowed with the right to vote, drive, drink or make decisions regarding their own medical matters. The experience of adolescence is not merely individual but should be viewed as part of a social process, which incorporates the life span of individuals of all ages. Indeed, the analysis shown above shows that adolescence is ‘made’ through a series of messages that young people receive from the adult world regarding ‘appropriate’ gender, sexual and age-related roles. As such, healthy adolescent psychosocial development is not simply something that can be found ‘in’ the young person, but is a reflection of community level social changes.

Given this approach, further research in different localities using unstructured methods could inform policy-making for adolescent health concerns by

- (1) identifying and addressing young people’s concerns and particulars of their reality;
- (2) exploring and mapping out the exact mechanisms through which determinants (such as access to opportunities) have an effect on behaviors and health consequences; and
- (3) moving beyond individual-level factors in order to understand how changes at the level of communities, neighborhoods, and institutions can alter the development of potentially negative life-span pathways.

Addressing these objectives will certainly aid in developing programs that alter underlying influences, thereby increasing the sustainability of changes.

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