RELATIONAL AND SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD: SHOULD WE FOCUS ON PROBLEMS OR PLEASURE?

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OVERVIEW

• Introductory questions
• Contextualize ‘sexual development’
• Discontinuity or continuity?
• Challenges in sexual development of adolescents and EA?
• Can we do anything?
• Sex positive approach
• Conclusion
WHEN DOES SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT START?

LIFE COURSE

- Childhood 0 - 12 year
  - Baby 0 - 1 year
  - Toddler 1 - 3 year
  - Primary school child 3 - 6 year
  - Puberty and Adolescence 6 - 12 year

- Puberty and Adolescence 12 - 25 year

- Adulthood 25 - … year
  - Relationship - and family development 25 - 50
  - Middle age 50 - 70
  - Elderly > 70 years

Who has ever had a question of a parent of 9 year old child whether it is normal that his son/daughter is in love and dating with his/her boy-/girlfriend?
INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

• What is a ‘good’ age to start with sexual intercourse in your home country?

• data from Demographic and Health Surveys in 64 developing countries

  • ≤ 14 year old boys and girls
    • are universally “too young” to make safe and consensual transitions to partnered sexual activity that includes coitus;

  • 15–17-year-olds
    • may or may not be too young, depending on the circumstances

  • 18-year-olds
    • are generally "old enough"

(Dixon-Mueller, 2008)
• Sexuality consists of different domains of development
  • biological development
  • emotional development
  • social development
  • language/speech development
  • moral development
  • sexual development

• => sexual development is a specific domain of development
SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

• Sexuality consists of different domains of development
  • biological development
  • emotional development
  • social development
  • language/speech development
  • moral development

• => sexual development is the way an (adult) individual makes an integration of all these domains of development
Sexuality is a ‘splitting’ topic in society and science ➔ debate

Specificity of the sexual development

• No
  • development of a general meaning and behavioural system that will later determine/shape one’s sexual expressions
  • ‘sexual behaviour’ and ‘sexual development’ imply that children can have (individual and own) sexual desires ➔ legitimize sex between children and adults

• Yes
  • Sexuality of children is a basal and rudimentary system that in terms of expression, meaning, and behaviour is very similar to that of ‘adult sexuality’.

• ➔ ‘sexuality far from children’ and ‘children far from sexuality’
SEXUALITY IN CHILDHOOD

• **Baby** (0 - 1 year)
  - genital ‘play’
    - boys at 6 to 8 months
    - girls at 10 to 11 months
  - (nocturnal) erection and vaginal lubrication
    - e.g., during breastfeeding

• **Toddler** (1 - 3 years)
  - discovering one’s own body ➔ shameless direct touching of the genitals – self-stimulation
  - discovering each other's body ➔ look, manipulation, cover and uncover, ...
• **Children (3 - 6 years)**
  
  Sexual rehearsal play ➔ “Playing father and mother”, "playing doctor", “playing big sister”
  
  • What? = creating situations where they can see each other's body, discover and compare both
  
  • Why? = based on (healthy/normal) curiosity
  
  • How? = looking and touching each other’s genitals, kissing and French / deep kissing, touching genitals with the mouth, imitation of sexual intercourse
  
  • 'Healthy’ – normal
  
  • to the extent that they have as much physical contact as they like without an experience of being exploited or feeling pressured to do so.

• **Primary school children (6 – 12 years)**

• Sexual behavior
  
  • Feeling in love
  
  • Physical intimacy
  
  • Feel guilty after ‘sexual activity’
• Children
  • Children far away from sexuality
  • Sexuality far away from children

• Adolescents and emerging adults – sexual gap
  • ➔ young people are sexual beings and are getting positive aspects out of sexuality
  • ➔ sex is dangerous, a risk with only potential negative health consequences

sexual intercourse = transformative

• Adults
  • Nothing was allowed
    • “Sex within the context of marriage and focused on reproduction”
  • Everything that is possible should be done

• Sexuality, and pleasure deriving from it, is a central aspect of being human, whether or not a person chooses to reproduce.
• Adolescents and emerging adults – sexual gap
  • Sex is inappropriate for adolescents
  • Sex is preserved for adults

• sex is dangerous, a risk with only potential negative health consequences
• adolescent sexuality is portrayed as tentative, experimental, confused, inept, and innately dangerous
• research = adolescent sexuality is an expression of “risk-taking” requiring broad social efforts to suppress or control
  • Prevent pregnancy, STI, violence, date rape, ...

• young people are sexual beings and are getting positive aspects out of sexuality
  • But what about ... masturbation, pleasure and orgasm?
SEXUALITY AND ADO’S/ EA

• In-between’ phase between two worlds ... not children but also not yet adults
• Sexuality = full of contradictions

• Biologically = mature adults (physical body, hormones, eroticized body)
• Socially = not prepared for a consistent and socially sanctioned sexual partner or married life and

• Cutureally = discourses about sex and sexuality are equally contradictory
  • A) sex is everywhere, everybody is doing it, there are no consequences!
  • B) sex is forbidden, just say no, because sex is dangerous!

• positive and negative messages from peers, family members, romantic partners, schools, and churches

• Is it any wonder emerging adults have a hard time finding their way in the sexual gap?
SEXUALITY AND ADO’S/EA

• **Adolescence and young adulthood** (12-25 years)
  
  • **Starting point**
    
    • fragmented pieces of knowledge about sexuality and relationships and occasionally pleasure- or lustful experiences
  
  • **Sexual and relational learning is initiated by**
    
    • hormonal changes (adrenarche) and increased sensitivity for erotically laden relationships and physical experiences
    
    • longitudinal growth and development of secondary sexual characteristics, creating a new social position
    
    • the growth of intelligence towards abstract thinking => idealization, criticism and self-criticism
    
    • participation in the socio-sexual interests and activities in the group of peers and abide by the pressure they create for each
• Adolescence and young adulthood (12-25 years)
  • Sexual experience comes gradually
    • 14 years: 50% tongue kissing /French kissing
    • 15 years: 50% caressing under the clothes
    • 17 years: 50% nude lovemaking
    • 17;7 years: 50% sexual intercourse
  
  • Differences between girls and boys
    • girls begin later, but at the age of 16 there are no differences anymore between the sexes
    • N years between the first French kiss and sexual intercourse
      • 2.8 years (boys) versus 2.3 years (girls)
  
  • Adolescents with a migrant background have more sexual experience than Flemish adolescents
    • in girls: the reverse is true
Figure 1: Mean age at first French kiss according to age group and gender
Mean age at which 25%, 50% and 75% of adolescents have experience with first sexual intercourse according to age.
Time (years) between the first French kiss and first sexual intercourse according to age at first sexual intercourse
Adolescence and young adulthood (12 – 25 years)

- Variation according to level of education
  - the higher the educational level, the later the first sexual intercourse

- sexual experience presupposes:
  - biological maturation
  - being part of particular social circuits
  - adapting to their mainstream and accepted life style
ERMERGING ADULTHOOD

• Arnett (2000) coined the term ‘emerging adulthood’ and described 5 core features
  • feeling in between
  • possibilities
  • self-focus
  • instability
  • identity exploration
    • Who am I?
    • How do I fit into the world?
    • How do the various parts of myself fit together?

• Turning point –
  • first time they have sufficient autonomy to redirect their future life paths

  • time of great optimism but also great uncertainty
  • time of increasing well-being but also time of the onset of mood disorders
  • time of “possibilities” but also “worry” regarding one’s future
SEXUALITY: DEFINITION(S)

• Sex defined by the ‘media’

• Sex is everywhere and all over the place in our society
  • information, ideas, images, ...
  • movies, TV, glossies, newspapers, books, ...
  • a way to sell things ... ➔ ‘sex sells’

• narrow picture of / message about sexuality
  • sex = sex between two young, heterosexual people with a good looking (muscles for men; thin for women) sun-burned, wrinkleless body that always ends in a simultaneous, best-ever orgasm for both partners
    • old ➔ ‘out’
    • Ill or disabled ➔ ‘asexual’
• Sex defined by the ‘public health’ debate

  • sex is supposed to be ‘safe’ to prevent sexual transmitted diseases/infections (STD/I) and unplanned pregnancy

  • sex = ‘sex with a condom’
    • paradox:
      • the one who has an STI is responsible to protect the other one
      • women have to protect themselves against rape by « wearing descent cloths »
      • ➔ the ‘weak(est)’ party is responsible for its own safety
SEXUALITY: DEFINITION(S)

• Sexuality is relational

• Sexual behavior ➔ a relational context
  • Exception: masturbation (~ imagination)

• Relations organize our life, but are quite diverse:
  • can last for some minutes until several decades
  • can be based on physical attraction, emotional bonding, obligation, the wish to become father of mother, to comply to or fight with cultural standards, economical reasons, ...
  • can bring happiness for one or both partners; but also unhappiness to one or both partners and even be abandoning or abusive
  • two or more people
  • can be centered around sex or be asexual
  • can be confirmed, disapproved, hidden or illegal in the cultural context
SEXUALITY: DEFINITION(S)

• Sexuality is related to identity

  • Identity
    • Feeling of who, what, how you are ...
    • Feeling to belong to a certain group

  • Sexually attracted to
    • People of the other sex — heterosexual
    • People of the same sex — homosexual
    • People of both sexes — bisexual
    • Nothing of nobody — asexual
    • [something = non-normative object — parafilia]
    • something = non-normative activity — parafilia]

• BDSM, polyamory, sexual delinquents, sex workers, religious people, ...

• Sexual feelings, behaviors and experiences also determine our place in society
  ➔ sympathy for the group we belong to and less sympathy for others
SEXUALITY: DEFINITION(S)

• “What is sexuality?’ = difficult to answer

• sexuality = ... a complex phenomenon of which we always have to make a kind of construction to be able to better understand it ... “a construction of reality, rather than true reality” (Bancroft, 2009, p. 18).

• unbridgeable difference in perspectives
  • Inner-perspective (emic)
    • experience and meaning given by those involved
  • Outer-perspective (etic)
    • meaning that other/outsiders give to it
SEXUALITY: DEFINITION(S)
DEFINITIONS – SEXUALITY

Inner perspective

understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning

Think
Feel
Do

Sex
Think
Feel
Do

Inner perspective

understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
DEFINITIONS – SEXUALITY

Inner perspective of parent, professional, ...

understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning

Think
Feel
Do

Sex

What can we really know ... ?

Outer perspective


Think
Feel
Do

 SEX


Think
Feel
Do

understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
understanding, meaning
SEXUALITY: DEFINITION(S)

• The tension and unclarity about the definition and meaning of sex(uality) ➜ tension between

• essentialist approach
  • refers to an inborn, biological, psychological origin that leads to a final and (predestinated) goal of sexuality

• post-structural, post-modern, social-constructionist approach
  • Sexuality is a socially constructed reality that again and again has to be re-invented and re-defined and in which there is room for sexual diversity – that is broader than hetero- and homosexuality (O’Donnovan & Butler, p. 7)
WHAT CAN WE DO?

• **Sex negative** approach
  • focus on risk and the more problematic aspects of sexuality

• **Sex positive** approach
  • sex is a healthy, rewarding and pleasurable practice including non-procreative behavior
  • avoids making moralistic value statements dividing people into good and bad persons
  • promotes diversity of sexuality and the ability to make personal choices
    • sex is neither good nor bad
    • valence is dependent on context and how it is experienced by others
    • claims to reduce stigma about sexual choices
  • not the endorsement of specific sexual acts nor promiscuity
  • not without acknowledging and tackling the various risks associated with sexuality but without reinforcing fear, shame or taboo surrounding the sexualities of young people.
CONCLUSION

• Ado’s and EA have a complicated and often confusing developmental task

  • the gap between the onset of sexual maturity, first sexual experience, and - typically much later - commitment to a single sexual partner is complex (“dangerous”) terrain
  • sex is everywhere, but real support for making healthy sexual choices is scarce

• make sense of the divergent messages they receive about sexuality,
  • clarify their own sexual values
  • take charge of their sexual health
• Ado’s and EA have a complicated and often confusing developmental task
  • sex is everywhere but real support for making healthy and sane sexual choices is scarce.

• professionals working with young people cannot ignore the role sex plays in their lives.
  • But let’s keep it real - look beyond the stories, images, and messages to not be caught up in myths about sexual behavior in emerging adulthood.

➡️ professionals need to be prepared to talk about it and listen ‘open minded’ and without judgment and provide meaningful information and support as they move through their years in the sexual gap ...

I wish you all an interesting journey in your work while helping children, adolescents and emerging adults to find their own way the sexual jungle ...