

Sexual practices in youth: analysis of lifetime sexual trajectory and last sexual intercourse

Práticas sexuais na juventude:
análise sobre a trajetória e a última
relação sexual

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Abstract

This article examines the sexual practices of young Brazilians based on data from the GRAVAD Research Project, a household survey targeting males and females from 18 to 24 years of age (n = 4,634) in three Brazilian State capitals: Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador. The set of practices experienced over the course of their sexual careers is characterized by traits of social belonging, elements from individual life histories, and prescribed rules of conduct for men and women. The authors compared the young people's range of lifetime practices and those from last sexual relations in order to discuss the spread and incorporation of practices into life histories. The data point to the hegemony of vaginal sex in both the lifetime repertoire of sexual practices and the last sexual encounters, such that vaginal sex provides the prime definition of heterosexuality.

Adolescent; Gender Identity; Sexual Intercourse; Heterosexuality

Introduction

This article provides an overview of the range of sexual practices in the life history of young Brazilians, based on data from the research entitled *Teenage Pregnancy: A Multi-center Study on Youth, Sexuality, and Reproduction in Brazil* (GRAVAD Research Project). The project focuses on the sexual and reproductive behaviors of Brazilian youth through a household survey with a stratified probabilistic sample of young individuals of both sex ranging from 18 to 24 years of age (n = 4,634) and residing in three large Brazilian cities: Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador.

The GRAVAD Research Project differs from more traditional approaches to teenage pregnancy and sexuality to the extent that it is based on a sociological conceptualization valuing contexts and relations to analyze such issues. We highlight the premise of sexuality as a learning process and sexual experimentation with the partner, such that given events such as pregnancy in adolescence are subject to a wider range of interpretation. We also focus on the concept of youth as a *process* rather than *age group*, allowing us to treat life histories and to list certain biographical events for analysis. We define life history or trajectory as a set of events and situations characterizing a biography; within sexuality this includes the first sexual relation as an event and steady relationships or

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unions as a situation. The study emphasizes the *social processes* underlying the events in the sphere of sexual and reproductive health, encompassing the process of sexual experimentation with the partner in which the description of sexual practices is crucial for unveiling the sexual culture and profile of gender relations pertaining to a given period in history.

Social research on sexuality seeks to describe how individuals (according to gender and other social characteristics) display specificities in their sexual practices, in order to demonstrate the important influence of the cultural setting and social expectations in this area. To conceptualize sexual practices is a complex task, since the body techniques amenable to classification as sex acts are the object of social and historical definitions and thus vary according to the cultural context. Sexuality is a domain that demands socialization, like other domains in social life; it is informed by the values ascribed to the sex act, which in turn bears a relationship to the different ties between partners. Based on this point of view, studies on this theme aim to capture the choices and frequency of given types of sexual practices, seeking regularities that point to traits of social belonging, life history (like conjugality), religious affiliation, and especially the influences of behavioral prescriptions for men and women in the reported behaviors.

To investigate sexual practices is also not self-evident. Depending on how questions are posed, it is possible to access different concepts of what is acknowledged as pertaining to a sex act or sexual relations. According to the interviewee's frame of reference, "having sexual relations" may mean only vaginal coitus, or may include intimate caresses of the partner's genitals, for example. In the GRAVAD Research Project, not only sexual relations as defined by sex with penetration (vaginal or anal), but also sexual practices involving oral sex or masturbation were considered part of the young people's sexual repertoire.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has been one of the key factors in the change of understanding in sexual relations, due to the forms of HIV transmission¹. Thus, bodily techniques such as masturbation and oral and anal sex have entered the research agenda for contemporary studies on sexual practices. However, it is important to note the differential treatment usually given in surveys on sexual behavior in relation to sexual practices and issues referring to sexual orientation: questions on heterosexual relations are frequently drafted with the premise of hegemony of vaginal sex in intercourse, while other

types of sexual practices are often not specified, particularly in relation to same-sex partners^{2,3}.

The reliability of information from respondents is one of the crucial problems in research on sexual practices. Since sexuality is generally viewed as belonging to the private, intimate sphere, doubts frequently arise concerning the accuracy of information in portraying behaviors. Thus, critiques and doubts are commonplace in relation to surveys on sexuality and the possibility of subjects answering questions on what are considered intimate matters. We share the theoretical premise (dear to the social sciences) that the interview is a social interaction that incites the interviewee to speak. The responses that subjects provide on sensitive issues are related to biographical contexts. To provide answers on sexual practices involves a recall of sexual acts to which meanings are ascribed as a function of the context in which they have taken place. The presupposition is that sexual relations belong to a broader set of meanings, such as the context of the relationship, the moment in the individual's life history, the partner's attributes, and the feelings involved. Motivation for the sex act can vary: satisfaction of desire, demonstration of social position, consolidation of an affective relationship, the desire to procreate, etc. The meanings are not mutually exclusive and vary according to the moment in the individual's history⁴. Although it is impossible to guarantee the veracity of responses in any study, comparison of the results with those of other studies on the same theme is one way of ensuring the data's plausibility for analysis and interpretation.

The current article thus describes the sexual practices experienced in the trajectory of Brazilian youth and analyzes the ways by which such practices comprise their sexual repertoire. It also compares the set of lifetime practices to statements on what was practiced during the last sexual event. This strategy allows weighing the greater or lesser incorporation of reported practices into the young individual's trajectory.

Methodology

Young people were interviewed in three Brazilian State capitals: Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, located in regions with different characteristics (the Northeast, Southeast, and South, respectively). The data presented here are from the study's quantitative stage, but the research approach in the GRAVAD Research Project links two methodological strategies: (1) se-

mi-structured interviews (n = 123) in 1999-2000 and (2) a household survey (year 2002) with a three-stage stratified probabilistic sample of men and women from 18 to 24 years of age.

To conduct the quantitative stage of the study, census tracts in each city were stratified and grouped into five strata according to the inhabitants' socioeconomic status (head-of-household's mean income and proportion of heads of households with at least 12 years of schooling). Census tract sampling was done independently in each stratum through a random selection proportional to the number of 18-24-year-olds. In each selected census tract, the permanent private households were listed which had residents ranging from 18 to 24 years of age. Based on these data, 33 households were selected, with equiprobability and without replacement; in these, a young person was selected randomly to be interviewed. Face-to-face interviews were held with a questionnaire based on the results of the qualitative stage. The instrument has the same list of questions for both sexes. Questions were worded according to the interviewee's sex.

The questionnaire prioritized certain events and situations in the individual's affective and sexual history: first and most recent sexual relations, first relationship lasting at least three months (and including sexual relations), first union, first separation, first and most recent pregnancy, first and most recent child, first abortion (spontaneous and induced), and current partner. Interviewees also answered questions on values and opinions concerning sexuality (infidelity, homosexuality, masturbation, etc.) and sexual practices over the course of their sexual trajectory and in the most recent sexual intercourse.

The latter set of questions provides the basis for the results we present below, i.e., on the forms of sexual intercourse, such as vaginal, oral, and anal, in addition to inter-partner and "solitary" masturbation. The answers refer to the frequency of the acts, offering the interviewees the alternatives *frequently*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, or *never*. As a strategy for treating and analyzing the data presented here, the first three possibilities were grouped as having experienced a given sexual practice, while the alternative *never* was interpreted as lack of such experience.

Sexual practices were analyzed according to socio-demographic variables (like individual schooling and that of the interviewee's mother) and life history (for example, number of lifetime partners and length of sexual activity in years), but we only highlight the results that are useful

for analysis and interpretation of the data. In addition, these were sexual practices within heterosexual relations, since the subjects who reported same-sex sexual experience (n = 134) were excluded from the sample. Homosexual relations have specificities not only in the range of practices, but also in the link between gender and sexuality, and merit specific analyses.

Results and discussion

The following results refer to 4,634 young interviewees (47.2% males and 52.8% females), of whom 93% and 81.6%, respectively, were already sexually active. Median age at sexual initiation was 16.2 years for boys and 17.9 years for girls.

Types of sexual interaction

Vaginal sex is the most widespread modality of sexual contact among sexually active Brazilian youth. This result expresses the central nature of vaginal coitus as a sexual technique, demarcating and defining heterosexuality. Other practices did not show a similar distribution: oral coitus was the second most commonly practiced, followed by masturbation and finally anal sex. In addition, the responses varied according to gender. In all cases positive responses were always higher for males than for females: approximately 18.4% of women and 11.2% of men reported *never* having practiced oral sex; the same was true for 24.1% of females and 11.6% of males in relation to masturbation with partners. Finally, 75.1% of females and 39.8% of males reported *never* having practiced anal sex, showing a clear difference between females and males in relation to this practice (Table 1).

Some inferences can be drawn concerning this contrast between female and male responses. The lower number of positive responses by women may indicate a certain inhibition in talking about sexuality. From a different angle, the higher number of reports by males should be interpreted with caution, since this result may reflect the ideology of masculinity in Brazil, whereby constant availability for sex is considered a sign of virility⁵. Still, the consistent differences between responses by men and women indicate the absence of mutuality in these sexual practices. Such striking distinctions suggest how the sphere of sexuality necessarily includes a game of permanent negotiation between partners and the differential distribution of power between the genders.

Table 1

Any lifetime experience (%) with vaginal, oral, or anal sex or masturbation with partners in sexually active 18-24-year-olds. Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Brazil.

Any lifetime experience	Women (n = 1,944)	Men (n = 1,966)	Total (n = 3,910)	p-value
Vaginal sex	99.7	99.6	99.6	0.5511
Oral sex				
Fellatio	69.3	84.7	77.3	0.0000
Cunnilingus	78.4	81.7	80.1	0.0000
No oral sex	18.4	11.2	14.6	0.0000
Anal sex	24.9	60.2	43.3	0.0000
Masturbation with partners	75.9	88.4	82.5	0.0000

Source: GRAVAD Research Project, 2002.

Dissemination of oral sex

Oral sex, including two distinct types of oral-genital practices, fellatio and cunnilingus (the former meaning sexual stimulation of the penis by oral contact and the latter oral contact with the female sex organ), differs from vaginal coitus since the latter automatically involves mutuality in sexual intercourse. Although oral sex has become increasingly accepted and widespread in the social scenario in recent decades, it is not considered a central technique in sexual relations. According to Laumann et al.⁶, its dissemination reveals transformations in the sexual script of men and women in the 20th century. According to these authors, the spread of oral sex is closely linked to the "sexual revolution" in modern Western society. Gagnon & Simon⁷ interpret this spread differently. They contend that such changes are due to the inclusion of oral sex in the range of practices in conjugal and premarital sexuality. Thus, particularly for women, oral sex (especially fellatio) is no longer a specific technique of prostitution.

When asked "Have you done oral sex on a partner?" and "Has some partner done oral sex on you?", the vast majority of interviewees reported this practice in their life histories. Reports differ by gender concerning fellatio and cunnilingus: fellatio is reported by 69.3% of females and 84.7% of males, while cunnilingus is reported by 78.4% of females and 81.7% of males (Table 1). The discrepancy between the responses refers to the dimension of meanings ascribed to these modalities of sexual contact, valued differently by the two genders. Men apparently value fellatio and cunnilingus, while women do not appreciate such practices to the same extent.

Such differences may indicate a lack of mutuality in caresses between partners. They may also express a distinct process of recall of such practices according to the respondent's gender.

Schooling is a relevant social characteristic for differences in practicing oral sex: the higher one's educational level, the greater the reported rate of oral sex (Table 2). Male and female responses were significantly similar for those with a university education, where almost no one reported never having experienced either cunnilingus or fellatio (only 4% of responses). Among youth with low schooling, there is a strong gender asymmetry in the reports: nearly twice as many females as males report never having practiced oral sex. This difference may be interpreted in two ways: that oral sex is actually not so widespread, particularly among women, or that women are somewhat reticent to reveal it, thus leading to underreporting. On the other hand, the similar levels among men and women with university education (especially for cunnilingus) indicate greater egalitarianism in this social universe. The converging analyses for schooling (both that of the interviewee and his/her mother) thus indicate that females' and males' sexual experience varies according to their position in the social hierarchy, and is less divergent in social strata with more schooling.

A questionnaire that focuses on sexual practices can measure to what extent sexual experience changes over life. The process of learning sexuality is reflected as practices are added to the initial repertoire. Thus, reference to oral sex becomes more frequent as time since sexual initiation increases: the rates for recently initiated youth (males and females) are lower than those reported by individuals with at least six years of sexual activity (Table 3). Likewise, the number of sex partners and stable relationships are important elements in individual socialization concerning sexuality. Both are sources of diversification for experiences, attesting to the gradual acquisition of experience in this area. The percentage of responses claiming "unawareness" of oral sex decreases with the increase in the number of partners and longer relationships. Young people's sexual trajectories are thus differentiated according to situations and events such as earlier or later sexual debut, steady as opposed to multiple sex partners, and relationships with greater or lesser intimacy and types of caresses. Our results thus agree with those of renowned authors on sexual behavior: the spread of oral sex illustrates how sexuality is conditioned by the prevailing mindset in a given social context and historical time^{6,7,8}.

Table 2

Any lifetime experience (%) with oral sex, anal sex, or masturbation with partners in sexually active 18-24-year-olds according to respondent's level of schooling and sex. Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Brazil.

Any lifetime experience	Time since sexual initiation				n	p-value
	Incomplete elementary	Complete elementary	Secondary	University		
Female						
Oral sex						
Fellatio	48.1	64.3	77.8	85.3	1,323	0.0000
Cunnilingus	60.5	74.1	85.5	91.7	1,495	0.0000
No oral sex	36.4	22.1	11.6	4.5	382	0.0000
Anal sex	27.6	22.1	24.6	27.1	457	0.5484
Masturbation with partners	60.8	68.3	82.2	92.4	1,487	0.0000
Male						
Oral sex						
Fellatio	73.4	84.1	89.2	94.9	1,652	0.0004
Cunnilingus	71.3	81.2	84.5	92.4	1,596	0.0016
No oral sex	19.7	11.4	7.8	4.1	219	0.0037
Anal sex	60.6	59.9	60.7	58.7	1,143	0.9782
Masturbation with partners	80.7	85.5	92.7	97.6	1,723	0.0000

Source: GRAVAD Research Project, 2002.

Table 3

Any lifetime experience (%) with oral sex, anal sex, or masturbation with partners in 18-24-year-olds according to time since sexual initiation and sex. Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Brazil.

Any lifetime experience	Time since sexual initiation				n	p-value
	≤ 1 year	2 to 3 years	4 to 5 years	≥ 6 years		
Female						
Oral sex						
Fellatio	55.1	64.0	74.9	76.0	1,323	0.0002
Cunnilingus	66.2	75.1	84.8	81.3	1,495	0.0005
No oral sex	32.4	21.2	12.9	14.8	382	0.0002
Anal sex	10.5	22.0	25.1	34.4	457	0.0000
Masturbation with partners	67.5	74.7	76.8	80.5	1,487	0.0907
Male						
Oral sex						
Fellatio	66.7	75.7	86.1	89.8	1,652	0.0000
Cunnilingus	64.0	68.3	84.3	87.7	1,596	0.0000
No oral sex	24.8	20.1	9.4	7.1	219	0.0000
Anal sex	24.6	38.1	62.3	71.4	1,143	0.0000
Masturbation with partners	75.9	81.5	90.5	91.4	1,723	0.0002

Source: GRAVAD Research Project, 2002.

Anal practices: the framework of an specific sexual culture

According to Brazilian common sense, anal sex is an ordinary element in the range of possible forms of sexual intercourse. This representation is pertinent to the social imaginary of youth. Responses by young people in the three Brazilian cities showed a clear contrast with data from international studies: according to our results, 60.2% of males and 24.9% females have experienced anal sex during their trajectories.

According to the French survey ACSF (*Analyse du Comportement Sexuel en France*)⁴, 26.4% of males and 20% of females in the same age bracket (18 to 24 years) had experienced anal sex at least once in their lives. The United States study NHSLS (*National Health and Social Life Survey*)⁶ shows analogous results to those of the French study, with a 16% positive rate, the same for both men and women. According to the U.S. NSFG (*National Survey of Family Growth*) in 2002, anal sex in 18-24-year-olds was reported by 27.2% of men and 26.5% of women⁹. Although these rates are higher than in the 1992 study (NHSLS)⁶, the male figures are lower than those for Brazilians. There is thus a striking difference in responses by Brazilian males as compared to French and Americans, while the rates reported by Brazilian females are more similar to those of their French and American counterparts.

Another interesting element is the uniformity of behavior according to level of schooling. Unlike oral sex, lack of experience with anal sex is absolutely similar between youth with different educational levels (Table 2), which also applies for the mother's schooling (data not shown). The data indicate certain links between sexuality and gender in Brazil: reporting anal sex is a key sign of the ideology of masculinity.

The development of one's affective and sexual career is central to the decision about trying a given type of practice (like anal sex), although the interviewees still have short sexual trajectories because of their young age. Living with the partner is an important differentiating factor: 74% of males who currently live with or have ever lived with a partner report having practiced anal sex, as compared to 57% of those who have never cohabited (data not shown). This difference can be interpreted as indicative of a higher degree of intimacy or greater possibility of negotiation in sexual relations as compared to those who have never cohabited. Length of sexual trajectory and socialization along the way also involve different stances for men and women. Anal sex is reported more frequently

by youth who have been sexually active for at least six years, as compared to those have been sexually active for less than a year: the proportion varies from 71.4% to 24.6% in men and from 34.9% to 10.5% in women. On this issue, the GRAVAD Research Project results are consistent with those of Laumann et al.⁶ and Haavio-Mannila & Kontula⁸.

New cultural trends bring changes in the exercise of sexuality, highlighting the close connection between sexuality and culture. Surveys held at different points in time (e.g., the Finnish studies in 1992 and 1999) show variation in reports of anal sex: 20% in males and 17% in females in 1992, whereas by 1999 there had been an increase of approximately one-third of the interviewees⁸.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic brought about a change in the surveys' interest in anal sex. According to the NHSLS in the United States⁶, unlike oral sex, anal sex is not part of the commonplace repertoire of sexual practices for most interviewees⁶. The GRAVAD Research Project study shows analogous results: only 4.3% of men and 1.5% of women reported *frequently* practicing this form of sexual interaction. Most of the responses on the regularity of this practice were *sometimes* or *rarely*. Such results do not allow stating precisely whether the levels are over or underreported. The difficulty in discriminating the quality of responses is due to a prevailing social imaginary in Brazil concerning anal sex. There is a widespread social representation of anal sex as unnatural, prone to being exercised by women who are labeled as *easy* or by sex workers, as the focus of intense negotiation between heterosexuals (according to interpretations from the qualitative material)¹⁰. Such a classification of this sexual modality for women, based on a moral judgment of those who engage in it, could lead young female interviewees to underreport this practice. Still, in our view the best interpretation is the strong valuing of this practice by male interviewees.

Solitary sexual pleasure and masturbation with partners

Masturbation as a technique for producing sexual pleasure has a controversial history and is still stigmatized, despite changes in certain social milieus in the last forty years. In a historical study on "solitary sex", the author points out that until the 18th century there was no moral reprimand against masturbation or sexual pleasure in general¹¹. The beginning of the Enlightenment was marked by the idea that caressing one's gen-

itals had nefarious consequences, resulting in physical and intellectual decrepitude¹².

The last decades of the 20th century witnessed important changes in the role of certain practices, especially in the media's discourse and imaginary. However, the spread of new concepts or scholarly ideas has not been uniform in society as a whole; anachronistic notions still persist among social groups with less cultural capital. In addition, gender relations (so significant for modeling sexuality) entail distinctions, since there are different modes of cultural construction concerning the forms of obtaining pleasure for women and men. The representation apparently still persists which links masculinity to auto-eroticism and male sexual activity as bearing an intrinsically technical nature, while for women sex is encompassed by the sphere of affectivity, which we refer to as the relational perspective towards sexuality^{13,14}. Due to gender socialization, women would tend not to value the technical dimension of obtaining pleasure by mere sexual satisfaction.

The GRAVAD study asked questions on solitary masturbation (which we refer to here as self-masturbation and/or auto-erotic practice) and masturbation with a partner (masturbating the partner or being masturbated by him/her). In relation to masturbation with partners, the responses are quite similar to those for oral sex. Women tend to practice this technique less: 11.6% of males and 24.1% of females reported no previous experience with masturbation with partners. This practice varies according to the respondent's educational level for men and women: higher schooling was associated with higher rates, indicating greater acceptance of mutual masturbation in this social universe. Still, the reports show differences for men and women (including those with more schooling), and the difference is greater here than for oral sex.

The factors time since sexual debut, number of lifetime partners and stable relationships are correlated with the incorporation of masturbation into the list of sexual practices. On one specific aspect, masturbation differs from other sexual practices in men: early versus late sexual debut is a relevant factor for all the sexual activities analyzed here, except for masturbation with partners, where it has no apparent effect (data not shown).

Reports on solitary masturbation before and after sexual initiation were compared using the following questions: (a) "before your first sexual relations, did you masturbate or touch your sex organs to obtain pleasure?"; (b) "since you have begun having sexual relations, do you masturbate?". Contrasting with female sexual trajectories,

the form of socialization in sexuality for men is masturbatory practice. Before sexual initiation per se, masturbation is reported by only 14.9% of females, while for males the proportion is 78.5% and remains the same for men who are already engaged in sexual relations. For women there is a reasonably large change after sexual initiation, with masturbation increasing to 26.6%.

As for educational level and the comparison of auto-erotic practice before and after sexual initiation, females with a university education reported higher levels than those with low schooling (40.9% versus 25.9%). Among males with the same respective educational levels the proportions are 91.1% and 93.1%. Two aspects thus emerge: (1) maintenance of the same male behavior before and after sexual initiation, contrasting with that of females and (2) greater acceptance of auto-eroticism in the social stratum with more schooling (Table 4).

Thus, auto-erotic activity is part of the male repertoire, but this practice is not incorporated to the same extent in female sexual scripts. Still, for women there is a relevant difference between auto-eroticism and masturbation with partners: 26.6% and 75.9%, respectively. Based on these results, we conclude that masturbation is acceptable within a relationship, confirming the differential construction of sexuality for men and women: for males, sexual activity is characterized by technical performance, oriented towards obtaining pleasure, while females perceive sex as a means of expressing feelings and expectations concerning a bond with the partner. In this sense, for women sex is fundamentally relational^{13,14}.

Table 4

Percentage of sex active 18-24-year-olds engaging in auto-erotic masturbation before and after sexual initiation according to respondent's level of schooling and sex. Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Brazil.

Respondent's level of schooling	Auto-erotic practice before sexual initiation		Auto-erotic practice after sexual initiation	
	Women (n = 317)	Men (n = 1,514)	Women (n = 558)	Men (n = 1,498)
Incomplete elementary	10.3	66.4	19.7	61.8
Complete elementary	9.5	76.2	17.8	72.3
Secondary	15.4	83.1	29.4	80.6
University	25.9	93.1	40.9	91.1
Total	14.9	78.5	26.6	75.1
p-value	0.0001	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000

Source: GRAVAD Research Project, 2002.

Data from the 1992 French survey point to an increase in self-masturbation by women in younger cohorts, despite the recurrent under-reporting of this practice⁴. Interestingly, the reports by males and females are similar for France and Brazil: 38% of French women 20 to 24 years of age admitted to this practice, as compared to 85% of young French males; in Brazil the figures were 27.7% and 75.2%, respectively. The French literature highlights that auto-eroticism is the most heavily underreported sexual practice for both men and women¹⁵. Females' difficulty in reporting this practice is similar to that of another aspect: number of sex partners. In both studies the numbers reported by women are lower than for men (data not shown). This phenomenon can be interpreted as evidence of non-tabulation of certain facts in female sexual histories, indicating selective recall¹⁶. Women would thus tend to retain only relevant aspects of their sexual careers, i.e., with some affective significance. This can be attributed to the fact that for women sex is symbolically subordinated to the affective link.

Gender and sexual repertoire

We contend that differences in reporting oral and anal sex and masturbation highlight a greater acceptance of oral-genital contacts for both sexes. Masturbation is still interdicted for women, and the least common modality of sexual contact is anal sex, with a marked difference between male and female responses. The variation between reports by females and males according to educational level indicates that among youth with less schooling, gender is a strong differentiating element. This less egalitarian pattern can be ascribed to a more traditional worldview, in which gender is the central classificatory axis for defining the field of possible experiences or at least for the negotiation games in a sexual interaction¹⁷. Some authors point to "sexual equality" as a reference for younger generations¹⁸. However, in our view the Brazilian case, with marked cultural heterogeneity, emphasizes the importance of the social position of the target groups. Still, even in more egalitarian countries, the double moral standard in gender relations has still not disappeared entirely⁸.

Sexual practices in the last sexual intercourse

The premise of quantitative studies on sexuality is that the last sexual intercourse, being the most recent, are more likely to display reliable

recall, with memory playing an important role in detailed reconstruction of the event. According to the GRAVAD Research Project, among sexually initiated youth, 58% had had sexual relations during the week prior to the interview, while 20% reported no intercourse in the previous month. Comparison of these response and reports on lifetime sexual practices allow greater precision, in addition to providing evidence of the incorporation of such practices.

The results show a preponderance of vaginal sex in the most recent sexual event as well (99.3% of females and 97% of males) and differences in relations to the other practices. Male and female reports concerning oral sex are lower than for the range of lifetime practices, but signal a greater proximity of proportions between men and women: fellatio is reported by 33% of females and 38% of males (the proportions for cunnilingus are 36% and 38%, respectively – Figure 1). This modality is more frequent for males and females with more schooling and who have been sexually active longer.

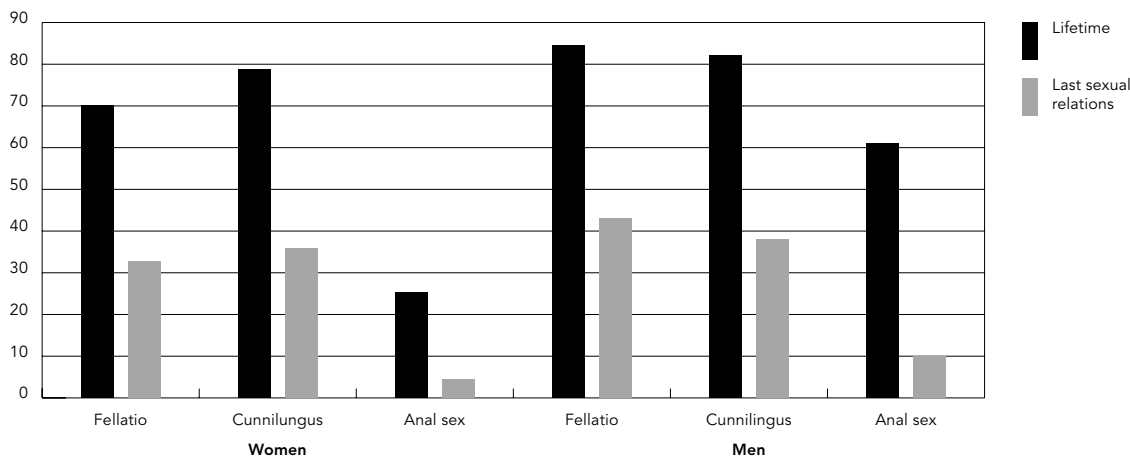
Based on responses concerning last sexual intercourse, in fact anal sex is not part of the sexual repertoire of Brazilian youth. The proportion of positive responses is quite low (4.4% for females and 10% for males – Figure 1). Unlike oral sex, reported anal sex in last sexual relations was more common among youth with less schooling (data not shown).

The American data from the NHLS survey⁶ (for the same age bracket) in regard to last sexual event show lower percentages than for Brazilian youth. The survey shows fewer positive responses for oral sex, especially fellatio, a practice for which there is significant discrepancy between American females and males (19.1% versus 28.9% respectively). The difference is even greater for anal sex: only 0.9% of American females and 1.8% of males reported it in their last sexual encounters⁶.

Analysis of last sexual intercourse reveals the hierarchy of sexual practices and demarcates more clearly the exercise of sexuality as conditioned by the type of partner. The practices vary according to type of link with the partner (whether current or former boyfriend/girlfriend, former spouse, occasional partner, sex worker). In principle, sexual relations with occasional partners tend to include a greater diversity of modalities. Thus, women who had relations with former partners reported a higher proportion of cunnilingus and anal sex. Likewise, men differ in their responses concerning anal sex with former partners and fellatio with sex workers (data not shown). Females and males differed in relation to orgasm

Figure 1

Fellatio, cunnilingus, and anal sex: comparison of lifetime experience and last sexual relations in 18-24-year-olds. Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Brazil.



Source: GRAVAD Research Project, 2002.

in their last sexual encounters: female responses on their partners and male responses on their own satisfaction agree. However, the opposite is not true: apparently the men (90%) believe that their partners reached orgasm, a higher figure than reported by the women themselves (83%).

Final remarks

The range of sexual practices in Brazilian youth entails differences between men and women. First, sexual careers are conditioned by the social milieu and educational capital. Second, the characteristics of life histories serve to expand sexual experience. The GRAVAD Research Project focuses on an age bracket in the phase of acquiring sexual experience. Therefore, it was not possible to compare the Brazilian data with the literature, according to which there is a trend in individuals around 30 years of age to

close their phase of experimentation and incorporation of sexual practices, defining their preferences in the domain of sexuality at around this age^{6,19}. Both in the repertoire of lifetime sexual practices and in the last sexual relations, vaginal coitus reigned supreme among the youth interviewed in the current survey.

Finally, we highlight the importance of research on young people's sexual behaviors and practices, especially since it allows privileged access to data pertaining to the sphere of sexual and reproductive health, which can provide the basis for strategies and policies both to prevent STD/AIDS and to protect against unpredicted pregnancy. Analysis of reported sexual practices proved to be a fertile ground for elucidating questions on the differential construction of sexuality by men and women, allowing to discuss some social and cultural constraints affecting the differential modeling of masculinity and femininity in Brazilian culture.

Resumo

Este artigo examina as práticas sexuais de jovens brasileiros com base em dados da Pesquisa GRAVAD – inquérito domiciliar realizado com jovens de ambos os sexos, com idade entre 18 e 24 anos (n = 4.634) e residentes em três capitais brasileiras, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro e Salvador. O conjunto de práticas experimentadas no curso da vida sexual é caracterizado segundo marcas de pertencimento social, elementos de trajetória biográfica e regras de conduta prescritas para homens e mulheres. Procedeu-se a uma comparação entre o elenco de práticas na trajetória e as declarações acerca do que foi feito na última relação sexual, com o intuito de discutir o grau de disseminação e de incorporação das práticas relativamente à trajetória dos jovens. Os dados apontam a hegemonia do sexo vaginal, seja no repertório das práticas sexuais, seja no último encontro sexual, modalidade que é por excelência definidora da heterossexualidade.

Adolescente; Identidade de Gênero; Relação Sexual; Heterossexualidade

Contributors

M. L. Heilborn worked on all phases of the study, from drafting the original project, conceptualization of the theoretical framework, implementation of the research, and analysis of the data. C. S. Cabral performed data analysis and interpretation of the results. The two authors drafted the article.

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