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## **YOUTH, GENDER AND SEXUAL PRACTICES IN BRAZIL** *JUVENTUDE, GÊNERO E PRÁTICAS SEXUAIS NO BRASIL*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Based on a survey developed in three Brazilian state capitals, this paper presents data and interpretations about the sexual practices and management of sexual desire among male and female youth. The findings indicate a close connection between gender and sexuality in modeling individuals' sexual trajectories and subjectivities. There is a higher acceptance of practices formerly considered to be deviant, revealing that sexual morality among youth has acquired a more modern configuration. This paper argues that there is a differentiated modernization of sexual values: gender disparities were detected in the answers of respondents in all social environments. The increasing flexibility of individual trajectories does not necessarily lead to gender equality. The affirmation that the individualizing process coexists with the persistence of traditional gender ideology entails the recognition that men and women's, and different generations' and social segments' modernization paths do not evolve in the same way.

**Keywords:** youth; gender; sexual practices; sexual values; survey.

### **RESUMO**

Baseado em uma pesquisa desenvolvida em três capitais brasileiras, o presente trabalho apresenta dados e interpretações sobre as práticas sexuais e gestão de desejo sexual entre os jovens do sexo masculino e feminino. Os resultados indicam uma estreita relação entre gênero e sexualidade na modelagem de trajetórias e subjetividades sexuais dos indivíduos. Há uma maior aceitação de práticas anteriormente considerado desviante, revelando que a moralidade sexual entre os jovens adquiriu uma configuração mais moderna. Este artigo argumenta que há uma modernização diferenciada de valores sexuais: as disparidades de gênero foram detectadas nas respostas dos entrevistados em todos os ambientes sociais. A flexibilidade crescente de trajetórias individuais não conduz necessariamente a igualdade de gênero. A afirmação de que o processo de individualização convive com a persistência da ideologia de gênero tradicional implica o reconhecimento de que homens e mulheres, e diferentes gerações "e segmentos sociais" caminhos de modernização não evoluem da mesma maneira.

**Palavras-chave:** juventude, gênero, práticas sexuais; valores sexuais; pesquisa.

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Sexuality is one of the richest fields in which to investigate the social dynamics of the modernization process (Elias, 1969). The intricate relationship between modernizing changes and the resilience of traditional logic prevails at both the level of values and practices.

Brazil is domestically and internationally represented as a sexually uninhibited society. Images of tropical exuberance, 'carnivalization' and spontaneity are combined so as to forge a view of a society free from sexual constraints. Present in ordinary and erudite narratives of Brazil (Heilborn, 2009; Parker, 1991), this representation historically coexisted with rigid forms of family organization as well as a rigorous

system of gender relations. In fact, until merely four decades ago, the Brazilian structure of power and prestige was grounded in men's control over women's morality and sexual conduct.

The labeling of Brazilian social order in the term "cordiality" (Holanda, 1936/1995) accurately reflects the weak boundaries between public and private realms and the unstable balance between expression of feelings and violence in everyday life. Therefore, Brazilian society is seen as antithetic to the civilized pattern of social relations and organization, characterized by a distance between individuals and the control of emotions by way of their internalization.

France in the Elysian analysis of the seventeenth century constitutes a classic case of the civilizing process. Each society that belongs to the so-called Western world presents a distinct historical process in terms of the social construction of the body. However, due to cultural diffusion, these processes followed the French model of delineating barriers between individuals' bodies and levels of intimacy.

Studies of historical-cultural processes reveal how some behaviors, perfectly acceptable in certain epochs, become prohibited in other periods, thereby modifying the way in which people experience sexual pleasure. Through self control the prohibited becomes internalized, and acts that were once publicly practiced turn into behaviors practiced privately.

In Brazil, recent social transformations expanded egalitarian ideals regarding the relation between sexes; this mitigated certain differences between women and men's situation, mainly with respect to access to schooling and work (Heilborn, 2004). Nonetheless, critical asymmetries persist, particularly in the domestic and family domains. Indeed, sexual practices in Brazil have evolved in a context of profound social hierarchies, resulting in a distinct framing of egalitarian ideology and corresponding patterns of behavior in the country.

Our argument is built upon a conceptual framework that brings together notions of modernity and individualization, and contrasts them with notions of traditional and hierarchical social relations. This theoretical framework is influential in Brazilian anthropology and associated, in slightly different ways, with writers such as Gilberto Velho (1981) and Robert Da Matta (1979), who draw in large part on inspiration from French anthropological work (such as Dumont [1966] on hierarchy), as well as British structuration theory (Giddens, 1992). We link this framework to Norbert Elias' early-twentieth century sociological analysis of "the civilizing process", combined with an analysis of cordiality (Holanda, 1936/1995), in order to contextualize and interpret changing values related to sexual desire and practice among different social classes and educational groups of youth studied in the GRAVAD survey<sup>1</sup>.

Our analytical perspective recognizes sexual norms and values more for their role in guiding behavior and less as instruments that simply differentiate right from wrong. In this sense, sexual values and norms constitute tools that individuals use to take a stance and make decisions in complex situations (Bozon, 2004).

As culture influences what desires and behaviors are socially acceptable in a society, it shapes individual's

entry into and experience of sexual life. Consequently, sexual practices vary among different societies, in accordance with the references of the diverse social segments that these societies are composed of. In any given socio-cultural strata, expressions and manifestations of sexuality correspond to the distinct meanings of contemporary values. Hence, sexual acts are not necessarily univocal. The socialization that sexual behavior demands is integral to the way in which gender relations are organized in specific contexts.

The study of sexuality affirms the precepts of sociological theory regarding the relations between society and the individual and how these connections are reproduced. Sexual practices reflect the various forces of socialization that a person experiences in his or her lifetime, including family, friends, school environment, neighborhood and access to different means of communication. A particular conception of sexuality entails the social use of the body and sexual norms, mainly when individuals enter adolescence and engage in their first sexual encounters.

We analyze sexual practices among heterosexual youngsters within the social and individual contexts. Youth is a phase of life marked by intense processes of learning and elaborating new experiences. For example, it is during youth that an individual first attempts to gain autonomy from his or her family, and the pace of this process is affected by the individual's social environment and life history (Galland, 1997).

## Methodology

The data presented in this paper are taken from the 2002 GRAVAD survey of 4,634 men and women in three large Brazilian state capitals: Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. The data presented here are from the study's quantitative stage, but the research approach in the GRAVAD Research links two methodological strategies: (1) semi-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. 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. Interviewees also answered questions on values and opinions concerning sexuality and about sexual practices over the course of their sexual trajectory

and in the most recent sexual intercourse. We aim to demonstrate in this paper the close connection between gender and sexuality in modeling individuals' sexual and affective trajectories. Age at sexual initiation and partnering, number of partners and religious belonging are all significant indicators that social environment and biography constantly interact.

### Sexual practices and gender differences

Traditional Brazilian gender norms dictate that men should have many partners – a sign of virility – while sexual modesty is expected of women. These precepts exert a social pressure on individuals' elaborations of their sexuality. For example, among respondents that had been sexually active for four or more years, five out of every six men had had more than three sexual partners, while only two out of every six women had had sexual relations with more than three people. The ways in which men and women count their sexual partners is differentiated by a subtle arrangement that allows both sexes to discuss their sexual behavior within the confines of social expectations and gender norms (table 1).

A strong association between sexuality and love feelings is recurrently observed among women (Béjin, 1996; Heilborn, 2009; Sandford, Bos, Haavio-Mannila, & Sundet, 1998). Women recall their partners selectively: they register the ones with whom there was more commitment or a meaningful relationship and tend to "forget" – or decline to count – occasional partners. Thus, Brazilian social construction of the female gender binds together sex and affection so as to configure a relational perspective of sexuality. The same kind of result is present in the last French survey on sexuality (Bajos & Bozon, 2008).

In contrast, men's sexuality is not confined to the relational frame; it is imbued with a social meaning of its own, as if it had an intrinsic instrumental quality (Heilborn & Cabral, 2006). Indeed, men's affirmations of their promptness to engage in sexual activity and high number of partners reflect this logic.

No differences about sexual repertoire were found in respect of regional belonging. The relevant aspect was that women's median age for sexual initiation was higher for individuals living in Salvador, Bahia. This fact was noticeable because it denies the social expectations about a more eroticized sexuality in the northeast region of Brazil. (Heilborn & Cabral, 2010). The influence of race/skin color was analyzed and it does not present any specific result in modeling the answers patterns. The few situations in which

these differences appeared were linked in a fabric of factors that social class and gender have more power in shaping behaviors and values (Heilborn & Cabral, 2008; Moutinho, 2008).

**Table 1. Proportion of youth sexually active for four or more years, according to number of partners and sex**

Number of sexual partners	SEX				p-value
	Women n	%	Men n	%	
	1159		1279		0.0000
1		23.1		3.2	
2 or 3		41.6		11.5	
4 or 5		17.5		16.5	
6 or more		17.8		68.8	

Source: Gravad Survey, 2002

Population: Youth, ages 18-24, Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Salvador (BA).

Masturbation, the subject of forceful medical interventions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has also been targeted by educators (Foucault, 1976). Its practice was then proclaimed to harm health and lead to degeneration (Stengers & Van Neck, 1998). Such notions have prevailed due to the persistent dissemination of historically dated scholarly knowledge, and they continue to inform social groups who do not have the cultural capital to question their accuracy. Nonetheless, masturbation has become over the last forty years a legitimate practice for adolescents and individuals who do not have a sexual partner (Laqueur, 2003, p. 22; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994, p. 80).

Among other questions, the GRAVAD survey respondents were asked about self-masturbation, masturbating a partner and being masturbated by a partner. Their answers indicate that masturbation continues to generate moral condemnation. Women expressed strong disapproval, particularly with regards to female masturbation. In fact, men were more accepting of female masturbation than women themselves. The difference between men and women's attitudes toward masturbation is remarkable.

Also due to norms that prescribe modesty, the women surveyed communicated an aversion to sexual practices that they considered morally reprehensible. Notably, six percent of women refused to answer the question about masturbation, making this the question they were least likely to answer in the survey as a whole.

Masturbation seems to be more acceptable when it is practiced with a partner. The difference in the percentages (table 2) indicates a greater lack of knowledge about masturbation among women than men. Women were more likely to refer to intimate caresses performed by partners than to masturbation. This variation in terminology may reflect women's reluctance to admit that some caresses constitute masturbation, and also allows both sexes to integrate the practice into their sexual repertoire.

Opinions about masturbation are also seen to differ according to social class. The belief that masturbation is a vice, or a private practice acceptable

only among those who do not have a sexual partner, is more common in lower social classes and among married people. As for more privileged social classes, masturbation is largely considered a trivial act, regardless of the context in which it occurs, although a gender difference in attitudes persists even among those with a college education.

Men's age at sexual initiation was an important variable for the modalities of sexual activity, except for the case of masturbation with a partner, where it had no weight at all. This finding indicates that masturbating a partner is part of the masculine repertoire since the moment of sexual initiation.

**Table 2. Proportions of youth that had masturbated a partner, practiced masturbation prior to sexual initiation and after sexual initiation, according to characteristics of respondents' biographical trajectories and sex**

Characteristics of biographical trajectories	Masturbation with a partner				Masturbation prior to sexual initiation				Masturbation after sexual initiation			
	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	1542		1792		340		1599		600		1582	
<b>Sexual initiation</b>												
Early		77.1		90.2		15.6		76.8		28.0		74.2
Average		82.2		88.8		17.0		81.2		28.5		78.5
Late		71.6		87.1		14.2		77.9		27.6		72.1
<b>Religious belonging</b>												
Catholic		74,6		87,6		13,2		80,9		28,5		78,1
Pentecostal		67,2		87,9		6,2		61,8		17,7		59,5
No religion		78,0		89,9		18,2		79,8		28,4		75,8
Others		85,7		87,9		20,7		83,2		32,9		79,2
<b>Conjugal history</b>												
Married (past or present)		72.6		91.6		12.6		75.2		22.1		60.6
Never married		80.1		88.0		17.8		79.9		32.2		80.1
<b>Time passed since sexual initiation</b>												
Up to 1 year		67.9		76.6		15.3		74.1		27.2		63.2
2 to 3 years		75.6		82.5		15.1		79.3		25.8		74.2
4 to 5 years		77.9		90.7		16.6		81.1		28.6		76.8
6 or more years		81.3		91.5		15.1		78.1		30.0		76.3
<b>Number of sexual partners</b>												
1		68.2		73.4		12.7		72.5		20.6		60.0
2 or 3		77.7		80.9		12.2		76.9		26.9		71.2
4 or 5		83.6		83.3		21.1		73.1		34.5		75.7
6 or more		91.9		92.8		26.6		82.2		42.6		76.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>76.8</b>		<b>88.8</b>		<b>15.5</b>		<b>78.8</b>		<b>27.9</b>		<b>75.3</b>

Source: Gravad Survey, 2002

Population: Youth, ages 18-24, Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Salvador (BA).



In clear contrast to the female trajectory, young men's sexual lives often begin with self-masturbation (Jones, 2010). Seventy-nine percent of the men and fifteen percent of the women surveyed reported that they had masturbated prior to sexual initiation (table 2). After sexual initiation, a similar proportion of men had continued to masturbate. Men were also seen to be more accepting of the practice as their educational level rose. Meanwhile, a large portion of women did not begin to masturbate until after sexual initiation. Moreover, forty-one percent of the college-educated women surveyed practiced self-masturbation – twice the amount of women that had not completed more than primary school.

Specific life contexts also proved to have an influence on attitudes and the practice of masturbation. Young people who had never been in a conjugal relationship were more explicit in accepting the practice, which demonstrates a link between marriage and a critical attitude toward masturbation. It is worth noting here that those with a lower level of schooling represent the majority of the respondents who were or had been married. This difference illustrates that the lower a person's cultural capital, the stronger his or her adherence to the belief that sexuality should only be exercised with a partner. With regards to religious

affiliation, masturbation is widely rejected by both Pentecostal women and men. Notably, fifty-one percent of the Pentecostal women surveyed, in contrast to twenty-eight percent of the Catholic women, defined masturbation as “a vice”.

The practice of self-masturbation must be understood in light of the ways men and women conceive sexual activity in general. For men, sexual activity means engaging in certain acts in order to obtain pleasure for oneself. For women, sexual activity is a medium through which to communicate both feelings and expectations of establishing a relationship with a partner. Hence, for women, sexual activity is fundamentally relational.

Gender discrepancies were also found when young women and men were asked about their practice of oral and anal sex. Fewer women than men had engaged in these activities. Vaginal intercourse was the most widely practiced sexual act, followed by oral sex. Anal sex was the least practiced sexual activity (Heilborn & Cabral, 2006).

A low percentage of women and men have never practiced oral sex. The most remarkable disparity between men and women was recorded with regards to the practice of anal sex (table 3).

**Table 3. Proportion of youth with experience of oral sex, anal sex or masturbation with a partner, according to sex**

Sexual activity	SEX				Total		p-value
	Women		Men		n	%	
	N	%	N	%			
<b>Oral sex</b>	1969		2028		3997		0,0000
Yes		82.2		89.0		85.8	
No		17.8		11.0		14.2	
<b>Anal sex</b>	1978		2029		4007		0,0000
Yes		25.2		60.9		43.8	
No		74.8		39.1		56.2	
<b>Masturbation with a partner</b>	1974		2031		4005		0,0000
Yes		76.8		88.8		83.1	
No		23.2		11.2		17.0	

Source: Gravad Survey, 2002

Population: Youth, ages 18-24, Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Salvador (BA).

Oral sex has become increasingly socially acceptable, but is still not considered a central practice in sexual relations. Caresses that include oral contact with the sexual organs – *fellatio* and *cunnilingus* – are often part of foreplay (Bajos & Bozon, 2008), but they are not necessarily mutual. The diffusion of the practice of oral sex is an indicator of the changes

that took place in women and men's sexual script in the last century, as the practice came to be included in the repertoire of conjugal and pre-marital sexuality (Gagnon & Simon, 1987; Laumann et al., 1994). This represented a change mainly in women's behaviour, as oral-genital contact became socially acceptable to all women and no longer to prostitutes only.

In the GRAVAD survey, men were seen to highly value *fellatio* and *cunnilingus*, while women mentioned these practices to a lesser extent. Level of schooling played an important role in respondents' answers regarding oral sex: the higher the level of education achieved, the larger the number of references to the practice. Mutual oral sex is more common in the sexual repertoire conveyed by women and men with a college education than among women and men that had completed at most primary school. In fact, the proportion of college educated respondents who had never experienced oral sex is extremely low (approximately four percent). In contrast, there is a remarkable gender difference in the segment of respondents that had not completed more than primary school: the number of women that had never experienced oral sex is twice that of men. This difference appears to be grounded in cultural beliefs adhered to by the lower social classes about what constitutes proper conduct. Hence, we can confirm the absence of a symmetrical reciprocity between partners in performing oral sex.

As for anal sex, the practice is positively charged in the Brazilian male imagination, although women who engage in it are generally stigmatized as "easy" or as prostitutes. This apparently led the women surveyed to under-report their experiences of anal sex. The percentage of young men who stated that they had practiced anal sex "on rare occasions" represents half of the total sample of men that had ever had anal sex. This is also the case among the women, although only twelve percent reported that they had practiced anal sex "on rare occasions".

Specifically on account of the divergent norms that women and men are expected to conform to in their sexual relations, the realm of sexuality remains a field for perpetual negotiation. In this sense, individuals' sexual-affective trajectories reveal meaningful differences with regards to the practice of anal sex. Cohabitation, for example, proved to be an important factor in the practice of anal sex: seventy-four percent of men who lived or had lived with a partner said they had practiced anal sex. Meanwhile, only fifty-seven percent of those who had never lived with a partner had practiced anal sex. Among women, these proportions correspond to thirty-one and twenty-one percent, respectively.

Respondents' experiences with anal sex also differed according to the time passed since sexual initiation: both men and women who had been sexually active for six years or more were three times more likely to have engaged in anal sex than those who had been sexually active for less than a year. Among men, the proportion of those who had engaged in anal

sex falls from seventy-two to twenty-five percent, respectively, while it decreases from thirty-five to ten percent among women.

Over the years, interest in anal sex has altered due to the development of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 107). The GRAVAD data reflects this change to the extent that only four percent of the men and one and a half percent of the women reported that they had anal sex "frequently". The majority of respondents answered that they had anal sex either "sometimes" (twenty-nine percent) or "on rare occasions" (twenty-seven percent). Once again, the contrast between male and female respondents' answers confirm the absence of reciprocity between men and women of different regions in the practice of sexuality, and allows us to affirm the hierarchical nature of gender relations in Brazil.

Among the respondents, vaginal intercourse continued to play a central role in the construction of the individuals' sexual scripts. In general, when sexual relations did not occur with the current partner, they were more diversified. The list of variations depends on how the partner was classified: current partner, ex-boyfriend, ex-girlfriend, ex-husband, ex-wife, eventual partner, paid escort, sex worker. Notably, women who had sexual relations with their ex-partners reported a more frequent practice of *cunnilingus* and anal sex. Men, meanwhile, reported having engaged in anal sex with their ex-partners and, even more frequently, having engaged in *fellatio* with sex workers. Men and women's responses to questions regarding orgasm also varied. Women's answers about their partners' orgasm and men's answers about their own orgasm coincided, but men seemed to believe that their partners orgasmed more frequently than appeared to be the case.

Cultural capital had a significant influence on men and women's answers regarding their repertoire of sexual practices (table 4). A considerable asymmetry between men and women's reports of sexual activity was noted among the respondents that had not completed more than primary school. This contrast echoes the traditional worldview that gender acts as a fundamental classificatory axis for defining the field of possible experiences and the prospects for expressing them. The modernization of sexual habits has given rise to the expression "sexual equality", which is used to characterize younger generations for whom the disparity between men and women has decreased (Giddens, 1992). However, this concept does not apply to countries with deep social and educational inequalities. Moreover, moral double standards remain even in countries where the principles of egalitarianism are widely embraced (Haavio-Manilla & Kontula, 2003, p. 16).

**Table 4. Proportion of youth with experience of vaginal, oral and anal sex, according to some selected socio-demographic characteristics and sex**

Selected socio-demographic characteristics	Women						Men					
	Vaginal sex		Vaginal and oral sex		Vaginal, oral and anal sex		Vaginal sex		Vaginal and oral sex		Vaginal, oral and anal sex	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	p-value	n	%	n	%	p-value
	360		1107		468			176		632		1155
<b>Educational level</b>												
Primary school incomplete		34,8		37,2		28,0			16,5		18,7	64,9
Primary school completed		19,9		57,3		22,8			9,2		31,5	59,3
Middle and/or high school completed		12,0		63,3		24,7	0,0000		7,3		32,0	60,7 0,0000
Higher education ongoing/completed		4,4		68,3		27,3			2,4		38,5	59,1
<b>Conjugal history</b>												
Married (past or present)		21,4		47,9		30,7	0,0004		6,7		17,5	75,8 0,0000
Never married		13,7		64,8		21,5			10,0		33,3	56,7
<b>Religious belonging</b>												
Catholic		20,4		57,8		21,8			10,3		25,0	64,7
Pentecostal		20,5		56,5		23,0	0,1374		14,9		28,0	57,1 0,2012
No religion		14,0		59,3		26,7			7,7		31,4	60,9
Others		13,4		54,6		32,0			8,3		34,7	57,1
<b>Total</b>		<b>17,2</b>		<b>57,6</b>		<b>25,2</b>			<b>9,2</b>		<b>29,6</b>	<b>61,2</b>

Source: Gravad Survey, 2002

Population: Youth, ages 18-24, Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Salvador (BA).

### **The management of sexual desire**

A considerable portion of anthropological literature on sexuality emphasizes the idea that sexual desire is uncontrollable (Parker, 1991; Vance, 1984), and that it is likely a vital instinct. Meanwhile, the interpretive framework offers a richer perspective according to which emotions are culturally modeled and managed. Thus, as Elias proposes (1969), the expression of sexual desire may vary according to an individual's degree of reflexivity and internalization of control. These abilities, in turn, are distributed and developed unevenly, as they are closely linked to access to and appropriation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979).

Brazilian sexuality has traditionally been influenced by rigid gender codes. In order to maintain their honor and ensure the best interests of the family, women were held responsible for managing the sexual acts initiated and performed by their husbands (Fonseca, 2000; Heilborn, 2009; Parker, 1991). Thus, in Brazil, the regulation of physical contact between the sexes in the context of reduced social control over women is conceptualized as a civilizing process (Bozon & Heilborn, 1996). However, this specific civilizational path also entails a less internalized control of emotions, which ultimately promotes more "spontaneous" sexual relations. Spontaneity, in turn, does not favor a reflexive preparation for engaging in sexual encounters. Consequently, women decline to



admit that they think about the possibility of such encounters occurring, while men do not worry about discussing necessary precautions with their partners. In such a context, “spontaneity” both results from and reinforces the idea that individuals should not reflect before engaging in sexual activities. Nevertheless, based upon our data, we argue that gender differences in relation to sexual desires and attitudes are strongly influenced by issues of class and educational status.

In our survey, respondents’ opinions about the control of sexual desire illustrate the prevalent social representation of a stark difference between men and women’s sexual nature. When asked about the nature of sexual desire, the majority of the men (fifty-five percent) answered that sexual desire is difficult to control. Young men – especially those from lower social classes – often referred to sexuality using the expression “to be in need”, which essentially communicates the perception that sexual impulse is connected to virility. To the contrary, the young women surveyed said sexual desire can be controlled for “over a long period” of time. More men than women stated that it is not possible to control sexual desire (table 5).

Youth’s level of schooling constitutes a key factor in shaping what possibilities young people see for managing sexual desire. The lower the youth’s level of schooling, the greater the likelihood was that he or she believed it impossible to control sexual desire. The proportion of women who believed that this is the case vary from nineteen percent of those who have not completed junior high school to four and a half percent of those with a college education (table 5).

Surprisingly, more men than women affirmed that “men and women have the same need” for sex. The majority of women believed that men have greater sexual needs (table 5). Despite a broad discussion of the need for more gender equality, men at all levels of schooling accepted the idea of a more intense male sexual impulse. In other words, a socially shared ideology of virility persists.

In general, the hypothesis that higher education implies a higher level of reflexivity with regards to sexuality was confirmed. Nonetheless, men who belong to more privileged social classes by and large continue to view male sexuality as both active and uncontrollable. This view seems to stem not only from a gender ideology regarding masculinity, but also from a class logic, according to which more privileged social strata exhibit a two-way association between

masculinity and class domination. This constitutes a good example of the case in which “biology” is evoked to reinforce social hierarchy (Laqueur, 1992).

Thus, sexual desire remains a male attribute, and women’s sexual needs continue to be seen as much more moderate. According to the survey results, women are more likely to agree with this traditional representation of sexuality. Women’s answers also suggest that they adhere to a naturalistic reading of male sexuality, or the idea that men “need” sex more than women. This aspect seems to prevail in other cultural contexts, such as in France (Bajos & Bozon, 2008).

This finding leads us to propose that the spontaneous expression of sexuality in Brazil does not occur through means that are analogous for men and women. Women declare themselves to be innocent because, they say, they do not think about sex, despite being able to control their need for it. Men, on the other hand, reiterate spontaneity through allegations of their limited ability to manage sexual impulses. Hence, we conclude that the modernizing process has not completely subverted certain, very rooted, notions about gender, such as the idea that women’s sexual behavior is governed by will and is controllable, while men’s sexual behavior is governed by instinct and is uncontrollable.

Social norms and representations are unconsciously internalized by and guide individuals as they select partners, fall in love and engage in sexual practices. From a sociological perspective, these unconscious social mechanisms, or collective rules that the individual internalizes – in addition to a person’s psychology – shape individual subjectivities (Bozon, 2004; Elias, 1969; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Giami, 1999; Laumann et al., 1994).

However, the survey results reveal new elements in the representations of sexuality. Similar proportions of the men and women surveyed affirmed that sexual activity constitutes “a partner’s display of love or affection” (the conjugal or relational interpretation) and “a source of pleasure and personal satisfaction” (the individualistic interpretation). Men’s adoption of a relational view of sexuality is indeed a novelty, but even more striking is women’s embrace of the individualistic interpretation of sex. Furthermore, a clear social gradient is apparent with regards to the idea that sex is a source of pleasure: the higher the respondent’s level of schooling, the greater the likelihood that he or she adheres to this belief. Meanwhile, the likelihood that a person believes that sex is a display of love or affection decreases as level of schooling increases.

**Table 5. Representations of sexuality (meaning of sexual activity, sexual desire and control of sexual desire) according to sex and educational level**

SEX	Representations of sexuality	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL								Total	p-value
		Primary school incomplete		Primary school completed		Middle and/or high school completed		Higher education ongoing/completed			
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Meaning of sexual activity											
Women		435		568		785		585		2373	0,0576
	Sex is a physical necessity, like eating and drinking		11.4		9.2		11.1		6.2		9.7
	Sex is a display of love/affection for one’s partner		52.6		45.7		47.3		43.1		47.0
	Sex is a source of personal pleasure and satisfaction		36.0		45.0		41.5		50.7		43.3
Men		495		562		629		434		2120	0,0000
	Sex is a physical necessity, like eating and drinking		9.5		20.4		13.5		20.7		15.7
	Sex is a display of love/affection for one’s partner		54.8		47.6		47.2		28.9		46.1
	Sex is a source of personal pleasure and satisfaction		35.7		32.0		39.4		50.4		38.2
Ability to control sexual desire											
Women		434		561		780		584		2359	0,0000
	Yes, over a long period		41.6		47.4		59.4		59.4		53.2
	Yes, over a short period		42.7		44.7		35.3		35.3		39.0
	No, not possible		15.8		7.9		5.3		4.5		7.8
Men		495		562		631		440		2128	0,0000
	Yes, over a long period		16.6		25.0		31.4		41.2		27.5
	Yes, over a short period		54.8		58.6		58.2		45.0		55.2
	No, not possible		28.7		16.4		10.4		13.8		17.4
The “need” for sex											
Women		438		570		793		596		2397	0,1154
	Men need sex more than women		64.7		60.6		56.8		53.0		58.5
	Men and women have the same need for sex		32.2		37.1		41.2		46.7		39.6
	Women need sex more than men		3.1		2.3		1.9		0.3		1.9
Men		491		561		632		446		2130	0,0143
	Men need sex more than women		43,0		42.1		43.1		41.0		42.4
	Men and women have the same need for sex		46,2		50.2		53.8		56.4		51.2
	Women need sex more than men		10,7		7.7		3.5		2.6		6.4

Source: Gravad Survey, 2002

Population: Youth, ages 18-24, Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Salvador (BA).

### Conservative modernization?

The GRAVAD survey respondents displayed a higher acceptance of practices formerly considered to be deviant, revealing that sexual morality among youth has acquired a more modern configuration. Men and women's opinions with respect to certain conduct were also seen to converge. Furthermore, a process by which prevalent values and moral lines are rendered more flexible was observed, despite the persistent influence of asymmetric relations on men and women's behavior.

The increasing flexibility of sexual norms noted in this study, which reflects a relative process of modernization, does not mean to imply that we are facing a homogeneous process. Some concepts remain firm, as is the case with the connection between gender and the idea of sexual desire. Indeed, women's persistent belief in men's "need" for sex is remarkable. At the same time, women are increasingly adopting the belief that sex is a source of pleasure and personal satisfaction, leaving behind traditional notions, such as the idea that sex is a way to demonstrate one's love for a partner.

Sexuality is the result of a complex process of socialization, learning and cultural modeling that is subject to historical changes. Individuals' sexual trajectories are conditioned both by their social environment and educational capital and by aspects of their life histories, which may effectively expand or restrict sexual experience.

In Brazil, level of schooling encapsulates social position, problem-solving capabilities and the ability to handle different situations. Moreover, an individual's trajectory in school is closely connected to the social background of his or her family. The fact that the individuals with higher levels of schooling declared themselves more capable of controlling their sexual impulses is consistent with their social standing, because this is what enables them to most effectively manage the various challenges they face in life. Nevertheless, the survey results indicate a connection between increased schooling and some educational mobility among the lower social segments, mainly among women.

Gender disparities were detected in the answers of respondents in all social environments, albeit to different degrees. Despite the relatively broad diffusion of egalitarian values among more socially privileged men and women, differences with regards to various topics, such as the representation of sexual activity, remain. Hence, we believe that a differentiated modernization of sexual values is

underway. In fact, highly educated men demonstrate a weak adherence to the principles of gender equality, while their female peers show a remarkable flexibility in their attitudes toward and beliefs about sexuality. This unexpected disparity provokes us to suggest that there is a reinvigorated expression of gender inequality in a social stratum, in which the real progress of egalitarianism could easily be imagined. Nevertheless, this finding provides a good example of the concomitance of individualization and hierarchical representations of the world.

The affirmation that the individualizing process coexists with the persistence of gender asymmetries indicates that the increasing flexibility of individual trajectories does not necessarily lead to gender equality. Individualization refers to the complex and lengthy historical process that modified the mechanisms of social constructionism and the very construction of individuals, by emphasizing individual initiative and the construction of the self. Defined as a comprehensive process, individualization varies enormously from society to society. Nevertheless, it operates as a social *dispositif* that ascribes increasing value to individual choice, particularly with respect to the obligation one has to position her or himself.

Finally, the affirmation that the individualizing process coexists with the persistence of traditional gender ideology entails the recognition that men and women's, and different generations' and social segments' modernization paths do not evolve in the same way.

### Note

- 1 GRAVAD ["Adolescent pregnancy: multicenter study on youth, sexuality and reproduction in Brazil"] was developed by Maria Luiza Heilborn (IMS/UERJ), Michel Bozon (INED, Paris), Estela Maria Aquino (MUSA/UFBA) and Daniela Knauth (NUPACS/UFRGS). The main research findings were published in the book *O aprendizado da sexualidade: reprodução e trajetórias sociais de jovens brasileiros*, Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz/Garamond, 2006. Several articles based on the GRAVAD study are also presented in a special issue in *Reports in Public Health*, 22(7), July 2006 – Youth, Sexuality, and Reproduction.

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