


Singular or plural? The diversification of young Brazilians' sexual initiation paths/processes'


Singular ou plurais? Diversificação dos percursos/processos de iniciação sexual de jovens brasileiros.as

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Abstract

This article discusses the initial processes related to sexually engaging with a partner, addressing issues related to the permanence or changes in gender relations and morality that circumscribe the exercise of sexuality at this life stage. We use data from the socio-anthropological multisite survey “Jovens da era digital” (Young people in the digital age), which interviewed 194 young people aged 16 to 24 years concerning their affective-sexual trajectories from 2021 to 2022 - a period characterized by significant declines in COVID-19 pandemic-related mortality. In this article, we reflect on sexuality socialization processes based on three biographical cases, which provide a wealth of dimensions and specificities demonstrating the diversification of youth sexuality socialization processes in contemporary Brazilian society.

Keywords: Adolescent; Young Adult; Sexuality; Gender; Gender Socialization.

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¹ Language is an important political dimension. Thus, in the Portuguese text, we opted to use the spelling ‘os.as’ in words that require gender inflection in order to break (at least at the textual level) with the universalization of subjects in the masculine form (Loison; Perrier; Noûs, 2020).

Resumo

Este artigo discute os processos de entrada na sexualidade com parceiro.a, abordando questões relativas às permanências e/ou às mudanças das relações de gênero e moralidade que circunscrevem o exercício da sexualidade nesta etapa da vida. São utilizados dados oriundos da pesquisa socioantropológica multisituada “Jovens da era digital”, em que foram entrevistados 194 jovens, com idade entre 16 e 24 anos, a respeito de suas trajetórias afetivo-sexuais, entre os anos de 2021 e 2022 - período imediatamente posterior ao arrefecimento do número de mortes da pandemia de covid-19. Neste texto, nos dedicamos a refletir sobre o processo de socialização para a sexualidade a partir de três casos biográficos, os quais aportam uma riqueza de dimensões e de especificidades que nos impele a argumentar em termos de diversificação dos processos juvenis na socialização para sexualidade na contemporaneidade.

Palavras-chave: Adolescente; Jovem Adulto; Sexualidade; Gênero; Socialização de Gênero.

Introduction

Youth is an important stage in the acquisition of social skills, the attribution of duties and responsibilities, and the construction and affirmation of identities, as it involves the intensification of various learning processes. This conception differs from the perspective that emphasizes universal and timeless aspects to understand this life stage and highlights biological, hormonal, and psychological markers when characterizing it. This description usually underlies representations of youth as the period of life most subject to various “risks” and on which instances of socialization, including the state and public policies, should focus in order to produce certain prescribed/targeted subjects (Aguião, 2017; Conceição, 2023). Among the “risks” often associated with youth, some are more likely to arise closer to the onset of puberty, such as adolescent pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), both of which are associated with the onset of sexual life with a partner.

However, it is crucial to highlight numerous other social events that begin during this life phase, such as one’s first romantic relationship, an increase in curiosity, knowledge, and questions about one’s own body and that of one’s partner, as well as the intensification of the learning of norms, representations, attitudes, beliefs, and values, comprising a vigorous process of identity construction (Bozon, 2004; Sawyer et al., 2012; McCarthy et al., 2016). These first experiences can be understood as expressions of behaviors that are not only being learned, but also consolidated (Igras et al., 2014). This understanding does not deny the bio-psychophysiological changes inherent to human development, but, rather, emphasizes that this period of life is closely related to the social, cultural, and moral context that young people inhabit. This perspective not only questions the generalizing and essentialist conception of youth, but also situates it in a historical and political context, restoring its eminently social, heterogeneous, and generational character.

Societies are organized by differentiation criteria, such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, generation, nationality, etc., which imply remarkably diverse social experiences depending on

the positions held by individuals within a complex and intense axis of social stratification and differentiation. The concept of intersectionality, coined by US and Latin American Black feminists, has been a powerful analytical tool for examining how women's and men's experiences are permeated by various tensions and axes of oppression (such as sexism, racism, ageism, lesbo/homophobia, and capitalism, among other matrices of oppression) that are intertwined with everyday life and which structure social relations (Collins, 1993; 2015). In this vein, we argue that learning and experiencing sexuality are different phenomena, considering the differentiations produced according to gender, race, skin color, ethnic belonging/identification, generational position, socioeconomic class, or any other social markers that are used to read/understand the sinuosity of these experiences and their correlates.

It is also important to emphasize the premise of the continuous learning of "gender competencies" (Connell, 2002), which takes place even when adolescents and young people do not adhere to normative ideals or hegemonic social expectations. The transitions experienced by adolescents and young people entail changes in the perception and meaning of themselves and others and are related to the specificity of the resources made available by the context in which they are inserted. In social institutions (family, school, peer groups, religion, territorial communities, digital platforms, etc.), normative expectations are transmitted, reiterated, and regulated by social control processes (Kâgesten et al., 2016). Gender and sexuality are learned by becoming familiar with the practices, values, beliefs, social representations, behavioral models, and forms of interaction present in local cultures. In other words, sexuality and gender

pedagogy occur via the apprehension and reiteration of cultural elements of femininity, masculinity, heteronormativity, and racialization immersed in the context of everyday life and socialization institutions, and crossed by intersectional dimensions that produce differentiations and inequalities (Phoenix, 1997; Collins, 2000; Butler, 2002; Guimarães, Cabral, 2020).

This article discusses sexuality socialization processes based on the analysis of three biographical cases, which provide a variety of dimensions and specificities and allow for a discussion of the diversification of youth processes concerning the socialization of sexuality, in addition to complexifying the definition of sexual initiation traditionally used in studies carried out in disciplinary matrices such as public health and demography.

Research data production and the empirical universe

We carried out the research project "*Jovens da era digital*"² (Young people in the digital age) with young people aged 16 to 24 years living in four major Brazilian cities - Porto Alegre (POA), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Salvador (SAL), and São Paulo (SP) - and in two small cities located in more rural settings - Conceição do Mato Dentro, Minas Gerais (CMD), with approximately 23,000 inhabitants, and São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Amazonas (SGC), home to approximately 51,000 inhabitants. We interviewed a total of 194 young people, focusing on narratives about their affective-sexual trajectories. We conducted the interviews mostly in person from 2021 to 2022, following a decline in COVID-19 pandemic-related deaths.³ We gained access to the young interviewees using various

2 The research "*Jovens da era digital: sexualidade, reprodução, redes sociais e prevenção às IST/HIV/AIDS*" (Young people of the digital age: sexuality, reproduction, social networks, and STI/HIV/AIDS prevention) was coordinated by Cristiane Cabral (general coordinator; from São Paulo/Universidade de São Paulo - USP), Ana Paula dos Reis (Salvador/Universidade Federal da Bahia - UFBA), Daniela Riva Knauth (Porto Alegre/Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul - UFRGS), Elaine Reis Brandão (Rio de Janeiro/Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - UFRJ), Flávia Bulegon Pilecco (Conceição do Mato Dentro/Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais - UFMG), and José Miguel Nieto Olivares (São Gabriel da Cachoeira/USP). The study received financial support from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) (grant number: 442878/2019-2; grant number: 431393/2018-4). The authors would like to thank the coordinators and fieldwork teams in each location, as well as the young people who shared part of their life experiences with the researchers.

3 The methodological details of the research "*Jovens da era digital*" can be found in the article by Cabral (2024) that is part of this dossier.

tools, encompassing the researchers' contacts and networks, referrals of possible participants from the interviewees themselves, and calls/invitations made via social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook.

The participants were mainly cis people (cis women, n=100; cis men, n=87). Approximately a third of the interviewees were LGBTQIAP+ (n=58), including 34 lesbian or bi/pansexual women and 21 gay or bi/pansexual men, as well as seven trans and non-binary people. Over half of the interviewees declared themselves to be Black or mixed-race (n=119), 55 identified as White, one as Asian, and 21 as Indigenous. There was a significant contingent of young people who professed no religion (n=89), as well as Catholics (n=25) and evangelicals (n=30). This study was approved by CONEP and by the research ethics committees of the co-participating institutions, complying with the rules set out in Resolutions 466 (Brazil, 2013) and 510 (Brazil, 2016) regarding ethics in research with human beings. We utilized fictitious names in this publication to protect interviewees' privacy.

The narratives presented in this article condense descriptive elements subjected to an analysis and interpretation anchored in the theoretical framework adopted. The descriptions derived from the interviews aim to be as close and faithful as possible to the representations and re-elaborations that each individual highlighted concerning the issues raised at the time of the interview, as well as the meanings they attributed to their experiences. There is no escaping the fact that these discourses were forged in the context of a social interaction of a researcher conducting an interview in dialogue with an interlocutor (Minayo; Deslandes; Gomes, 2016; Franco, 2018). Therefore, rather than looking for a supposed "truth" or excessively focusing on the reliability of facts, it is more compelling to consider precisely how and what elaborations/interpretations of the interviewees' selves and the contexts in which they are immersed were presented at the time of the interview, particularly when researching topics such as sex and sexuality. The analytical process of this type of empirical research requires carefully navigating among different narrative levels and first- and second-order interpretations to better understand and discuss the research objects.

Three biographies "good for reflecting on" the subject of "sexual initiation" in Brazil

The selection of the analyzed cases sought to cover contrasting youth trajectories in terms of sexuality socialization processes. Rather than presenting "ideal models" that combine certain sexual initiation paths/forms/processes, the biographies presented fulfill the function of illustrating this article's central argument concerning the diversification of youth paths and the complexity embedded in what is traditionally understood from a simplistic or reductionist perspective as "sexual initiation," particularly in certain disciplinary fields and the related scientific literature.

Planning first sexual intercourse

Betina's case allows us to analyze the processes surrounding the representation of so-called *planned* sexual initiation. The trajectory of this cis, Black, heterosexual woman from a low-income background is emblematic because it condenses different elements of socialization into sexuality. The young woman was 24 when she was interviewed. She had been living in the downtown area of the city of Conceição do Mato Dentro (CMD) for a year, having moved from a rural part of the same municipality to a more densely populated area because of her job and her professional need for reliable Internet access. In the part of CMD where she was born, she grew up with several brothers and sisters, all of whom are now married and living "in the countryside." She was the only one to move to the city center.

Her parents dropped out of school before the fourth grade and worked on the family farm. Betina described her relationship with her mother as positive, but highlighted some tensions with her father, who has problems with alcohol abuse. The young woman emphatically pointed out how her sisters (women) were all currently homemakers, drawing attention to the fact that she has taken a different path. In fact, she also made distinctions in relation to the other members of her local community: "*I graduated [high school], I always left home to go to other places, meet other people, look up*

information, things that most of the young people in my community don't do, right?" Betina stressed the importance of contact with this "external social world" throughout her life, which was comprised of "other places," of school,⁴ the information she sought out, and the spaces she was able to access, given her early involvement with social movements.

In her interview, she critically discussed the complex relationships between what she identified as "the countryside and the city," reflecting on how structural difficulties (such as a lack of Internet access and job opportunities) end up pushing young people to move to the outskirts of urban areas. She said she felt frustrated with not being able to live in the place where she was born and raised (the countryside) due to the precarious material conditions there (public services, leisure options, etc.).

Betina was brought up in an evangelical church (*Assembleia de Deus*), which she was involved in until a certain point in her life. She later distanced herself from religion. She mentioned that although she is familiar with other religious beliefs, she does not currently profess or identify with any faith. She graduated from high school, studying only in public schools. Throughout her educational career, she took several free courses related to her professional field and maintained a strong connection to social movements.⁵ At the time of the interview, Betina was dating the same partner with whom she had had her first sexual encounter, but she did have sex with someone else during a period when her current relationship was on hold. She reported never having become pregnant and wishing to have children in the distant future, hoping to fulfill her professional and academic goals before embarking on a reproductive path.

Betina's approach to the subject of sexuality was permeated by different agents of socialization, which seemed to restrict dialogue and the ability to ask questions about the subject, permeated by the strong influence of her family's religiosity. When she was about 12 years old, she took home a "science"

book given to her by her teacher, which dealt with the subject of sexuality. When her grandmother noticed the content of the book, she tore it up. Upset, Betina did not know how to explain this situation at school. Thus, she concluded that her family was not a reliable source of information or a space for possible dialogue regarding the topic of sexuality, which was absent from her family environment. She stated that although what she had learned about sexuality at school was important, she now realized that it was not enough.

At the age of 16, Betina experimented with exploring her desires and "hotter" bodily sensations with a boy from her community, in the context of a relationship that "did not go any further." However, she did not consider these experiences to have been her sexual initiation. The young woman did not like certain behaviors of this "boyfriend" that she described as "gender stereotypes." For example, the boy prohibited her from doing certain things, and she disliked the way he talked to her, which made her end the relationship.

She said that her first sexual encounter was at the age of 18, with a 21-year-old Black man who was already employed. Her "first time" happened while the couple was still not in a serious relationship, four to five months after they met. They first had sexual intercourse during the consolidation period of their relationship, which they only later identified as "dating." Betina explained that there had been some planning concerning "the first time" and that they had both *decided* to have sex. In the interview, Betina frequently referred to sexual and reproductive decision-making processes shared with her partner. She said she had felt motivated to have sexual intercourse for the first time because she wanted to fully live that moment, which she had not yet experienced. She felt good about the way her partner treated her and the way they talked about her sexual initiation, which was characterized by trust. She did not mention whether her partner was already sexually experienced. The couple made a plan, which

⁴ In particular, Betina attended high school in the context of this socialization process, which broke the boundaries of the community where Betina lived, a rural part of CMD. In order to continue their schooling beyond elementary school, students in this rural area needed to travel to the downtown part of the city every day using school buses provided for this purpose.

⁵ We cannot provide further details regarding this dimension for confidentiality reasons and to protect the interviewee's identity.

involved the young man booking a hotel with his own financial resources, as he was already working. They also discussed contraceptive methods, which led them to agree to use a male condom for the first sexual intercourse. According to Betina, their sole concern was the risk of pregnancy, while STIs were not addressed – something commonly observed in the context of heterosexual relationships, especially more stable ones. She said she enjoyed her sexual initiation, which included penetrative sex, and which she described as “normal sex.”

Betina said she only ever had sex with two men – her first sexual partner and another man she met during a period when her relationship had ended. In the interview, she said that she did not enjoy the experience with this other person as much due to a lack of “chemistry,” and that she was satisfied with her current sex life. Betina reckoned that her sexual initiation took place at a later age than most girls. An analysis of her trajectory reveals a tangled web of mediators in this complex socialization process. According to Betina’s personal understanding, these mediators have led her down a path that is different from what would be expected of her, given her family and territorial origins. In addition to her “late” sexual initiation, her trajectory does not culminate in forming a family nucleus of her own, an aspect that she commonly witnessed among her siblings (mainly sisters) and other young people in her community. Betina was able to postpone reproduction and family formation, in order to achieve her educational and professional goals.

Ever since I was a little girl, I have always left home to go other places, meet other people, look up information, things that most of the young people in my community don't do, right? So, they form relationships with their cousins, and then it ends up being only these people that they know, so it is only these people that they will have this bond with and end up having children with, right? You have no chance to learn about contraceptive methods, right? (...) I managed to finish school,

high school, I managed to overcome this bubble and leave the community, to study abroad, have experiences abroad, travel, meet people, and get involved in various other things, right? And that made me see things in a different light, [and] it gave me the opportunity to get to know other things that they did not have, right? (Betina)

The script of impulsivity as a norm at the beginning of young sexual life

The observation and analysis of narratives about sexual initiation by most of the young people interviewed allude to a context of impulsiveness and spontaneity, commonly described in the literature. These relationships usually take place at the home of one of the two people involved in the sexual act, which some authors have called the “domesticated sexuality” of the current generation (Bozon, 2023). Other common locations for young people’s first times were bathrooms at parties, a street, a park, a friend’s house, a school playground, or a building staircase, among others.

To illustrate this script⁶ and most sexual initiations that followed it, we examined the case of Pedro, a young interviewee from Salvador. He was 19 at the time of the interview and reported identifying as a Black cisgender man. He reported living with his mother, father, godmother, and grandmother in the same apartment since he was born, located in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Salvador. His parents, with whom he reported having a tense relationship, both possessed university degrees. Pedro was brought up Catholic and still considered himself Catholic at the time of the interview. He also liked Protestantism because of the music he listened to – “*I always like to listen to the Word.*” At the time, Pedro was retaking a subject he had failed in order to graduate from a private high school.

Pedro reported that he had first learned about sex at school when he was “very young,” around the fourth or fifth grade. He felt that the information

6 The theory of “sexual scripts” was proposed by Gagnon and Simon in their exquisite 1972 work, “Sexual Conduct.” This important work sought to situate discussions of sexuality within the framework of what we identify as constructivism or social constructionism, opposing the notions of (natural) instinct and impulse as axes of understanding sexual behavior and conduct. For the authors, sexuality is a learned dimension that involves cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal aspects (Gagnon; Simon, 1972). The dimension of impulsiveness/spontaneity has been described as a characteristic that organizes gender and sexuality repertoires in the Brazilian context (Bozon; Heilborn, 2006).

was good, but insufficient. He reported currently talking about the topic with his female friends, but not with his male friends. When he has questions or would like further information about sex or safer sex, he turns to the Internet, searching platforms such as YouTube.

Pedro was reluctant to talk about his sexual initiation, which alternated between identifying it as his “first time” or as “child’s play.” His sexual initiation occurred when he was 13 years old, taking place in the condominium complex where he lived. Pedro’s first time involved a childhood friend, a Black girl who was a year older than him, as well as another 12-year-old friend, an experience that involved all three of them. Pedro reported that, after that “first time,” he only had another sexual relationship when he was around 16 years old.

Pedro describes his first time as “*not planned at all,*” referring to a situation that took him by surprise, “*I did not feel the lust that I feel today, I was not dirty-minded, I do not think I even thought about these things at the time, and then, out of the blue, this opportunity came up, so I just went for it.*” According to Pedro, the girl “lured” him into a sexual relationship while they were playing soccer and having fun. She showed the boys a video of her containing sexual content. Pedro said that, until then, he had never experimented with sexual practices, such as masturbation, and that when this girl invited him “out of the blue,” he jumped at the chance. Although another boy took part in this experience, in the interview Pedro explained that he did not “hook up” with him because he is heterosexual and was not interested. The participants did not use any contraceptive or STI prevention methods, nor did the topics come up in their conversations prior to the act, as Pedro reinforced - “*at the time I did not even know what that was, to tell you the truth.*”

Pedro’s account expresses a degree of ambivalence regarding his sexual initiation. He said he had felt desire and pleasure and enjoyed it when “that” happened; however, he said he had some regrets because he did not think his “first time” should have been with that person

at that time. There is an insistent reiteration of the idea that he was induced by that girl to take part in the “game,” which, according to him, they repeated over the course of a week: “*Then she showed her video like that, and so on, and we started playing hide and seek, and then the game [sex] happened, we spent a week just like that, playing and so on.*”

However, at no point in the interview did he imply that there was a lack of consent on his part.⁷ On the contrary, although Pedro was surprised and lacked “lust,” the opportunity to take part in “games” of seduction and sexual experimentation seems to have had some appeal for him. His negative evaluation of the experience and feelings of regret emerged afterward, in association with the perception of “having made a mistake,” referring to “the wrong person” and “the wrong moment.” On the one hand, Pedro, who considers himself Catholic and who is close to Protestantism, said he viewed his sexual initiation as inappropriate. On the other hand, some interest, motivation, or desire (as he himself mentioned) was at work during Pedro’s sexual initiation, which he viewed as spontaneous and unexpected. Penetrative sex was one of the practices he experienced during that week of play, closeness, and learning. At the end of the interview, he described that period as a “good” week, but afterward he had no more contact with that girl. It was only after some time had passed following his sexual initiation (at least two years later) that he began to experiment with masturbation and more intimate sexual contact with other people, having had sex with around 20 girls by the time of the interview.

Pedro’s experience, which was characterized by surprise, innocent experimentation, and sexual learning, followed by a long pause before resuming sexual experimentation, raises questions about the meaning of sexual initiation, especially for young men. It is possible to read Pedro’s representation of what happened as circumscribed by the norms of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2003; Connell, Messerschmidt, 2013). Faced with a relevant opportunity to affirm his cisheteronormative masculine identity, he felt compelled to “take advantage of it,” even though he did not necessarily

7 In subsequent sections we will discuss the notion of the “age of consent” and questions about sexual abuse and violence.

(as he reported) feel the need to engage in sexual experimentation with a partner. There seems to be a certain contradiction inherent in the (at least) two-year gap before Pedro resumed his sexual experimentation and practices (including masturbation) after his supposedly satisfactory, albeit unexpected, sexual initiation. However, while notions and norms surrounding masculinity may have played a role in the development of his sexual trajectory, a certain modesty and moralism seem to have guided him in his representations of his first sexual experiences, as his initiation was induced by a girl, and it was only years later, at a time he felt was more appropriate, when he embarked on more “intentional” sexual experimentation.

Multiple sexual initiations: the reiteration of learning sexuality as a process

Leonardo’s case brings perspectives conducive to a discussion about multiple sexual initiations. He is a cis gay man who self-declares as Black (“*a little less dark than usual, but I am Black*”) and identifies as middle class (“C class”): “*I have a very good standard of living (...), I have never lacked anything, but also, like, I do not have a standard of living that allows me to splurge.*” Leonardo was born and raised in the southern part of Porto Alegre by his father and aunt, a region that encompasses some neighborhoods with better infrastructure and others with more impoverished and vulnerable populations. He lost his mother very young, at the age of 12. He grew up on a lot where two houses he considered small had been built - one for him, his father, and his sister and the other for his aunt, who he considered to be a mother figure. In the interview, he pointed out that he had an unstable relationship with his father (a retired civil servant), characterized by “ups and downs” and distance: “*We do not talk, we are not very close.*” Leonardo grew up Catholic, having served as an altar server, but said that he currently identifies with the principles of Umbanda, associating this religion with his origins.

He did not say much about his childhood apart from his shared upbringing, but he was proud to report that he had been accepted to a federal university, affirming that “this is the path” that

will lead to many achievements in his lifetime. In addition to his studies, Leonardo has been working at a law firm in Rio Grande do Sul for over four years, which he joined at the age of 18 as a young apprentice, before becoming a full-time employee near the end of his contract. He said he had a “tumultuous” relationship with his father, but considered him to be a source of support, as he earns little more than the minimum wage from his job. From his perspective, expenses on more “superficial” things, such as “clothes, trips, cell phones and computers,” should be his responsibility, depending on his father’s assistance for monthly bills or one-off events.

He reported that, in addition to his work, he loves spending leisure time with friends and sees himself as being “at the height of his youth,” doing “everything young people do,” such as “having fun, kissing, going out, [going to] parties.” He pondered that, as he matures and gets older, he will need to be more “responsible, more grown up,” citing the example of his sister, who is twelve years his senior, and who had to quickly “become an adult” to look after her three children.

His first contact with the subject of sexuality was at school, during lectures he had in his “science” classes on health maintenance and prevention. He had his first sexual relationship at the age of 15, with a cisgender man he had met “randomly” on Facebook. However, Leonardo brought up the notion of a “first time” that was not a single event, but, rather, made up of three experiences that complemented one other and differed in terms of sexual practices. In his words:

So, it was a man the first... the first... I usually say I had three first times, right. But I had... initiations of various sorts, in a way. The first time with a woman, the first time with a man being a top, the first time with a man being a bottom. So, I usually say that I have three... that I have had three first times. (Leonardo)

Leonardo considered this relationship “disappointing”: “*I expected a more... exciting first time.*” According to his account, there were no subsequent encounters with the same man. Leonardo spoke about using dating apps, citing

Grindr, Inner Circle, and Tinder (which he uses less often), as means of reaching out to other sexual contacts, even they do not result in face-to-face encounters in most cases, as such events are quite rare, according to him.

Escaping the hegemonic idea of sexual initiation as an event marked by penetration, Leonardo mentioned the importance of kissing as a form of initiation and materialization of desire during adolescence: *“It starts, actually, I think... sex itself, sexual initiation for teenagers, starts with kissing, right. Kissing someone else, before the act itself, I think it all starts... when you kiss other people, right.”* He also talked about the beginning of his sexual life based on experimenting with his own body: *“Obviously, I started by getting to know my own body, masturbating, you know... like every teenager does, you know, before having these... sexual initiations.”*

The three sexual initiations he referred to took place between the ages of 15 and 16, motivated by his “curiosity” about what sex was. Reflecting on his “first times,” Leonardo commented that if he could turn back time, he would have waited a little longer for a “more opportune” moment and chosen someone with whom he had felt a greater romantic connection, but he did not invalidate the importance that his sexual initiations had at the time they occurred. In the interview, he estimated that he had had sex with around 40 people, highlighting his preference for men, while simultaneously elaborating on more diverse experiences in relation to his sexual partners’ gender and a posture of openness to their wishes and desires: *“I think we always have to have new experiences in sex.”*

In his words, based on the *“completely different [sexual] experiences”* he had with *“completely different people,”* he viewed his sexual trajectory in a positive light, understanding that sex is a “need” and something that is part of “being human,” even though this is a perspective that naturalizes his wants and desires, to a certain extent.

Discussion

First, it is important to consider the ways of defining the notion of sexual initiation, whether

in qualitative studies in which the interviewees’ narratives are freer (or less *structured* - alluding to the instruments commonly used to produce quantitative data) or in quantitative research in which a “simple” operationalization of this “variable” is made based on time standardization. Studies traditionally ask about the “age at first sexual intercourse,” which is most often understood as when the first sexual intercourse involving penetration took place, following a heteronormative logic of relationships among affective-sexual partners. However, many recent studies with adolescents and young people corroborate the interviewees’ accounts discussed in this paper, which, on the one hand, demonstrate the vitality of this hegemonic representation of sexual initiation, while, on the other hand, indicate possibilities for sexual initiation based on other social logics of interpretation, behaviors, and interactions among partners, social expectations, or identity dimensions (Calvès et al., 2006).

The current societal context characterized by growing sexual experimentation, the weakening of certain norms and values, broadening of identity possibilities, and diversification of sexual paths or scripts (Gagnon; Simon, 1972) etc., raises certain questions: Can non-penetrative sex with a partner be considered a marker of the onset of sexual life? What is the entry marker of sexual life for cis lesbian women and trans men? Is it valid to discuss different first times based on the partner’s sex or on sexual practices? To what extent is classifying one’s sexual initiation, for example, as “heterosexual” or “homosexual,” relevant, given the much more fluid (or transitory) conceptions that contemporary young people possess about the conformation of their sexual or gender identities? Furthermore, can sexual initiation take place with or without consent? How should we understand the place/status of one’s first sexual intercourse under coercion? In these cases, how many or which sexual initiations would we be considering?

Of course, the “sex as a risk” perspective presides over many of the definitions and operationalizations of sexual initiation employed in numerous studies and public policies (Brasil, 1989; Rubin, 1984; Laumann et al., 1994; Vance, 1995; Lagrange, Lhomond, 1997). We argue that young people’s

journeys encompass a broader diversity in terms of what can be understood as “sexual initiation.” This understanding undoubtedly broadens the conceptions that are often conveyed by public policies and that underly the production of moral panics regarding young people’s sexuality. By more closely examining these three types/possibilities of sexual initiation scripts based on the empirical cases from the study, which encompass differing scenarios, plots, and elements, we attempt to complexify the hegemonic notion that is anchored in measuring the age of a “first sexual intercourse,” which is mostly comprehended as heterosexual penetrative sexual intercourse (using protection, in the best-case scenario). This concept has political, moral, normative, and evaluative consequences. We argue in favor of youthful learning and experimentation processes, an aspect that adds another level of complexity to discussions about exercising one’s sexuality and processes of self-construction. Understanding adolescent sexual initiation as an expected (and probable) event in the transition to adulthood implies developing practices and public policies that provide affective, material, reflective, and comprehensive support to young people (Santelli et al., 2017).

It is essential to consider the idea of consent when it comes to sexual relations and negotiations among partners. Ideas surrounding consent have gained significant prominence in discussions about sexual abuse and violence, based on the concept of the “age of consent,” a societally acceptable minimum age threshold for engaging in sexual relations. In Brazil, sexual intercourse with children under the age of 14 has been classified as a crime since the penal code reforms of 1940. More recently, changes to the Brazilian legal framework have introduced the concept of “rape of a vulnerable person” through Law 12.015, passed on August 7, 2009 (Brasil, 2009), a fundamental factor for guaranteeing legal abortion access in cases of pregnancy. The “age of consent” varies according to historical periods and social contexts, as well as based on the gender or sexual identity of those involved or the type of sexual act, among other factors (Waites, 2005).

On the one hand, the “age of consent” is clearly an attempt by state authorities (whether by the

judiciary, the legislature or, more recently, by the executive branch in Brazil [Cabral, Brandão, 2020]) to regulate the exercise of people’s sexuality, using age as a criterion. However, these regulations do not consider the diversity of possibilities that govern exchanges/interactions among people, and age alone (under 14) is an insufficient (although necessary) logical element to judge, define, or identify people in situations of abuse or coercion. In one of the cases reported in this paper, the beginning of sexual life is understood as a process of the successive accumulation of experiences, which typically begin to unfold before the legal age of consent.

However, it is important to mention that we recognize the existence of affective-sexual paths characterized by coercion and sexual exhortations, and which culminate in non-consensual sexual relations, including from the perspective of age. In addition, power disparities (whether due to class, race/ethnicity, age, or sex/gender) among affective-sexual partners can lead to episodes in which it is impossible to use preventive measures, even when desired by one of the parties, such as removing a condom during sex without the consent of both parties. This is a complex topic that requires substantial care to be properly addressed. Coercive sexual experiences form a part of some young people’s journeys, more so for young women than men, and will be addressed in future articles based on the empirical data of this research.

We must also consider sexual initiation experiences that simply “happen” in an “unexpected” way, as in the cases of Pedro and Leonardo. The idea of the “unpredictability” of sexual relations possesses other layers of problematization, alluding to social expectations linked to masculinity and being constantly ready for sex, the greater difficulty of declaring (especially among young women) that sexual intercourse was expected, considered, or even desired, and the modern demand to make rational and measured decisions, especially in relation to sexual behavior and STI or pregnancy prevention practices.

It is necessary to understand the notion of “it simply happened” as a way of exercising sexuality, but one that does not fully meet the modern expectations placed on a rational, cognizant, and autonomous subject. This notion is completely

intelligible within the framework of the analytical key that argues that young men and women learn, assimilate, and develop behaviors and relationships during adolescence and youth that are sometimes more equitable or safe and sometimes less so. The varying degrees of planning or spontaneity that characterized participants' sexual initiations derive from a complex set of elements, strongly influenced by sexuality and gender norms, religious affiliation, (im)possibilities for dialogue in family environments, etc. Instances of sexuality socialization present themselves in a variety of ways throughout the trajectories of young people. Moreover, greater flexibility in these incidences has accompanied increases in educational attainment in Brazil, as well as expanding information frontiers in the digital age. It is worth to note that school is an important socializing institution and is quite present in our study participants' narratives. However, the young people in our study consistently complained about the sexuality education they received at school, portraying it as insufficient in terms of both its practices and content.

Moreover, it is possible to achieve greater predictability and preparation among young people exercising their sexuality by making the subject explicit in the context of various instances of socialization, and by not silencing it or linking it with the idea of sex as something dangerous. Between pleasure and danger, there is a vast field of possibilities for intervention in youth autonomy building processes, moving toward the exercise of a sexuality free from the constraints associated with sex, such as unplanned pregnancy and STI transmission.

The political and normative goals of public policies and socializing institutions should be to allow for adolescents and young people to make choices about when and how to engage in sex, so that they feel comfortable with others, know how to protect themselves from coercion and violence, and have access to trustworthy institutions to report such occurrences (if necessary) and obtain needed support (Schalet, 2011a, 2011b). In the survey "Jovens da era digital," we observed that sexuality is still a taboo subject in many families and is seen as a topic that has no room to be questioned,

or problematized at home. At school, an important field of socialization and sociability for young people, it is difficult to work with sexuality in a comprehensive way beyond the paradigms of risk and abstinence that have been disseminated among parents/guardians and teachers in recent years (Paiva, Silva, 2015). Public health services, which should be places where professionals protect young people's privacy, often prove to be hostile environments when young people raise concerns or ask questions that go beyond the scope of STI or pregnancy prevention (Guimarães, Cabral, 2022). Sexual autonomy helps young people navigate affective-sexual dynamics and interactions that can lead to sexual practices. In turn, this can allow them to expand their knowledge and better articulate their desires and pleasure, while also preparing them for sexual experiences (Schalet, 2011a). This is not only a fruitful path that favors the experience of sexuality in a way that is dissociated from reproduction, but, above all, it facilitates the perception, discernment, and disclosure of abusive relationships that involve rape and coercion (Schalet, 2011a; 2011b).

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Author contributions

Cristiane da Silva Cabral was responsible for the conception of the manuscript, writing, data analysis, and the final revision. Nathália Pacífico de Carvalho contributed to data curation, analysis, writing, and the revision of the manuscript. Guilherme Lamperti Thomazi contributed to data curation, analysis, writing, and the revision of the manuscript.

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