

Current Presentations of Adolescent Sexualities

Mag. Elias Adler

While at the Adolescence Laboratory of the Uruguayan Psychoanalytical Association (APU), our beloved teacher and colleague Marcos Lijtenstein used to recommend that we be precise when discussing the changes that happen over time during adolescence. To those of us also studying adolescence, he proposed that we distinguish two aspects of adolescence: what had remained consistent over the years and what had changed. Although keeping these two categories in mind without compromising the sense of adolescence as a process has been difficult, doing so has well been worth the effort for what it contributed to our reflection.

I hold on dearly to Marcos Lijtenstein's words.

We used to avoid sticking solely to contributions from psychoanalysts and from clinical practice at that APU Laboratory. There was always research going on and lectures by sociologists, social communicators, writers, anthropologists, and educators who all wrote about adolescence and its developments. We thought we needed to hear what other disciplines had to say, above all because it was immensely enriching. Furthermore, many of us not only wanted to take part in a critical historical juncture; we also believed there were meaningful changes taking place in the way subjects are defined.

Marcelo Viñar, Maren Ulriksen, Christine Chabert, Luis Kancyper, Maria Lucila Pelento, Raymond Cahn, Asbed Aryan, Alain Braconnier, Phillipe Jeammet, François Marty, Annie Birraux, Ignacio Lewkowitz, Cristina Corea, José Garriga Zucal, Marshal Berman, Richard Sennett, Silvia Duschatzky, Michel Maffesoli, Marc Augé, Zygmunt Bauman and dozens of other authors nourished us, helping us to think and continue to reflect.

For a while, I considered writing an exhaustive list of the writers who came, but it seemed absurdly overbearing. Considering the topic that I am about to address, this time I prefer not to hide behind prestigious figures and to take responsibility for what I claim.

How has adolescent sexuality changed over the past several years?

What has changed in their fantasies and in their practices?

I admit that, on this occasion, differentiating the adolescent sexuality of today from that of yesteryear, as Marcos Lijtenstein would have suggested, would be an impossible feat for me, given its breadth and complexity.

On this occasion, all I can do is provide an account of what has transpired and what continues to transpire in my clinical practice.

To clarify further, I have to say that I would not be able to talk about the sexual life of adolescents or of anyone else if I was only thinking about the attraction that one sex has for the other, or if I believed there to be one sole model of relationship. Object choice today is especially diverse.

I do not know when the changes began. As is almost always the case, there was no specific moment. Or, rather, there was no tipping point. I think I started to realize that something different was going on ten or fifteen years ago – at first, through the stories of other adults, then through the stories of others without thought to their age, until finally I found myself hearing these stories from the very adolescents and post-adolescents of the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes of Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay.

As you will see, this time I will put aside other disciplines and focus solely on what I have heard from my colleagues, in supervision, and in my private practice, all of these having been drawn from within one particular social, cultural and geographical context.

Let us first address what appears to persist with great similarities, in spite of the passage of time and considerable differences across various domains. As always, sexual desires, which have hitherto been dormant, emerge more or less explicitly and with great intensity in many adolescents. These desires produce a sense of there being a “world to discover”, of fascination but also of fear, of joys and shadows. What once seemed distant now becomes a possibility. Anxiety starts increasing, and ambivalence about new opportunities for exchange sparks a world of fantasies that are difficult to contain.

Some young men and women show a significant degree of inhibition about seduction or sexual connection with their peers. This defensive withdrawal does not eliminate the arousal summoned by their bodies and psyches. This is a reason why an adolescent may seek treatment, which is sometimes concealed by other presenting concerns. Let us bear in mind that romantic relationships and sexual encounters allow these young people to feel more independent from their parents, to grow, and to develop. The task of walking down one’s own path is not easy and is full of twists and turns.

We can also observe that questions about their own heterosexuality or homosexuality repeatedly arise for some adolescents, and these can be a source of distress.

You may find that some young women fear intercourse because they do not feel capable of engaging in it even if they wanted to. The fantasy of possibly getting pregnant despite using birth control continues to appear with the same force as before, and they do not shy away from the topic. Hail the use of condoms! And condoms continue to be an issue because many men refuse to use them. They may talk about discomfort, about how the sexual act does not feel the same with a condom as without one. Nevertheless, this resistance can be associated with the fear that they will not be able to hold an erection if they take the time to put on a condom. The issue is still sexual potency.

What’s new in the stories that adolescents bring to the consulting room?

It goes without saying that virginity seems to have taken on a different status. Though no longer a value, it remains on the table; whether or not somebody is a virgin is not just any issue. There may be some young women who have not had sex who feel uncomfortable when they have to admit it to their peers. “Still” having a hymen can be a source of embarrassment. For young men, on the other hand, feelings of worthlessness may arise if they have not had sex if their friends have.

Other young women choose to be the ones to pursue men to “get together”, and getting together does not necessarily mean being in a sexual relationship that includes intercourse. There may only

be a kiss or a touch. This time, they decide to break from the custody and care of their parents. They seek to cast off the idea that young women who “get together” with several men at a time are “fast” or “loose”. Moreover, these young women want to assert that if men can “get with” several women he is not more valued, and that they can do the same if they so wish, so they carry themselves more freely and actively at get-togethers and parties. These young women’s approach frightens some males who feel insecure when faced with such proactivity.

Adolescents consume substances that lower their inhibitions. Alcohol allows them to “overcome their fears”, and some ingest it in significant quantities. However, abusive intake can be an issue. Sometimes they may not remember anything they did or they may come-to on a city park bench without a clue about what happened. In some cases, the gap in their memory of events frightens them. They fear that “something” of a sexual nature may have occurred and that they do not know it.

While on the subject of substances, the use of Viagra by men who are so young is striking. Their reasoning is that they want to perform “perfectly” with a young woman and that they cannot fall short in the least. Once again, the issue is potency.

Today, some groups are open to accepting adolescents on alternative paths. They are not alarmed if there is a homosexual couple within the group. Some adolescents increasingly talk about “open couples”, which suggests that the members of a romantic relationship can keep relationships going with other people if they want to. Some adolescents talk about “polyamory”, that is, a relationship in which it is possible to be in love with more than one person at a time. A young person might bring in ‘being pansexual’ to session, and so we begin to acquaint ourselves with a set of terms that we previously ignored and to which, I believe, we as analysts ought to listen carefully. We must suspend our judgment as long as we are able, because sometimes adolescents’ stories may contain deadly risks, before which we cannot remain impassive and silent. Careless promiscuous affairs can be dangerous.

For many adolescents, “sleeping over” at their boyfriend’s or girlfriend’s house is a recurring event. I should note that the family of origin might also live in this home and that the adolescents sleep in the same bedroom and in the same bed with the consent of the respective adults.

Relationships over social media are quite common. Adolescents use cell phones and computers to talk and to chat. This kind of communication has its own etiquette. “Likes”, which can be expressed through social networks, can be a means of seduction. Several “likes” from a young person on an image, a photo, or a story may indicate interest in the person who posted them. Through this immersion in technological phenomena, adolescents explore the world, intimacies, and their own and others’ experience with powerful intensity. “Stalking” or looking someone up through social media can be appealing and exciting. It is common to connect and meet up with people through mobile apps such as “Tinder”, “Happn”, or other apps that become obsolete just as quickly as they were launched. Unlimited access to any touchscreen allows for finely detailed voyeuristic trips. I strongly maintain that we have not previously heard many of the situations that we hear in the consulting room today.

Ultimately, new questions arise for psychoanalysts who work with adolescents.

We cannot stop reexamining cultural change and emerging social imperatives. Speed, efficiency, success, excellence, perfection, enjoyment, pleasure, consumption, no waiting, no boredom, a world decidedly not for “losers”. Adolescents are trying to achieve to a sense of fulfillment that we know to be impossibly unattainable. Mistakes are not allowed and can be experienced as narcissistic wounds

with devastating effects.

At some point, and as a byproduct of the psychoanalyst's omnipotence, we started thinking that adolescents almost always told the same story about their sexuality. We were inclined to believe that adolescent behaviors were characterized, above all, by the intensity of their desires. We were wrong.

Knowledge is simultaneously partial, limited, changing, and fragmented.

It is necessary to point out that, beyond the differences that might exist among subjectivities and regardless of the various presentations and changes in adolescent sexual life, new narratives of crisis, suffering, and anguish in subjects' psychic life continue to emerge from the stories we hear in the consulting room. The body, its drives, and their destinies continue to generate questions that are not easy to answer for the adolescent who stands on the verge of reconstructing an identity and a psychic apparatus. As happens at any age, adolescents and their sexualities are subject to internal conflict.

For those of us who work as psychoanalysts with today's adolescent patients, who accompany them for a time as they work through the circumstances that they were given by chance, our challenge is to shed light on the vicissitudes of their fantasies and sexualities.

Translation: Mr Gabriel Hirschorn