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Emotional and Sexual Development in Adolescence: From Puberty to the Formation of Emotional Bonds

Monica Tosto

Department of Psychological, Educational and Training Sciences, University of Palermo, Italy

Alessandra Salerno

Department of Psychological, Educational and Training Sciences, University of Palermo, Italy

Emanuela Fici

Department of Psychological, Educational and Training Sciences, University of Palermo, Italy

Abstract:

The physiological processes, which occur during adolescence and often so abruptly, can threaten the continuity of the previously constructed sense of identity. They do this by questioning the patterns and representations that had previously governed the relations of the teenager with regards to his body and his relational systems. Although puberty is not just about sexual transformations, definitions centered mainly on this aspect can be found in literature. In fact, pubertal development is the acquisition disclosure index of the adult reproductive capacity. The aim of this task is to explore the process of increasing involvement of the adolescent in an emotional and sexual relationship with a partner. Moreover, it will try to understand this process from a relational and ecological perspective, taking into account the mediation of individual and contextual factors that may have an influence. From examinations performed, it is clear that it is important to consider the multitude of issues that come into play in the process of psycho-social adaptation of the adolescent, by interacting with one another over time, by strengthening one another or by eliminating protective or risk factors. In particular, romantic relationships, if they go well, can pose a factor for growth for the teenager and play an important role in the developmental tasks of this stage of life.

1. Pubertal Development and the Definition of Sexual Identity

Puberty launches a series of morphological, sexual and organic transformations which are gradually integrated into the new, physical identity, also giving life to new relational frameworks and sanctioning the transition from the physiological condition of the child to that of an adult. It is, in other words, a bio-psycho-social transition which initiates biological transformations and psychological and social changes which characterise individual development. It is a dynamic and integrated process in which the levels of biological, contextual and psychological function are considered “united” and they have the same impact on the development of the person, or better still, on the development of the individual-environment system (Susman & Dorn, 2009).

The beginning of pubertal transformations may have important implications on the personal adaptation of the adolescent, especially if it is determined at a time that is too early or too late compared to the peer group (Susman & Dorn, 2009). Family conflict, a low socio-economic status, the perception of the quality of the marital bond by the spouses and the absence of the father figure, together with the impact of genetic determinants, are major factors involved in the acceleration of pubertal processes, with consequent implications on psychological, physical and social development (Bogaert, 2008).

The relationship between pubertal timing and adolescent adjustment is rather complex and can be best understood by reference to three potential mechanisms. The first suggests that stress and behavioural problems linked to early biological development may be exacerbated or accentuated by the interaction of pre-existing, psychosocial vulnerability factors in the transition to adolescence (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991). The second describes the stress linked to the transition by making reference to processes of direct and indirect influence. Specifically, an increase in hormone secretion is detected (direct effect) and physical maturation (indirect effect) may lead to an increase in emotional stress, substance abuse and behavioural problems (Petersen & Taylor, 1980). The last refers to the simultaneous elaboration which regards those adolescents who address teenagers facing developmental challenges in puberty and in social contexts and who are defined by relationships with deviant peers and neglectful or abusive parents – variables which can increase their emotional and behavioural difficulties, the earlier they take place (Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt & Silva, 1993).

As a result of changes during puberty, however, the family environment you expect from the boy is more similar to the behaviour to that of an adult. This raises questions about the representations that were set, up to that time, and about his relationship with his body and with his family. Such changes imply that the teenager may be integrating emerging, instinctual pressures with social and family pressures, by finding a way to express himself that ensures, on the one hand, a good relationship with the needs of his sexual body and, on the other hand, an adequate process of socialisation (Fabbroni, 2008).

This translates, often, into more childhood behaviour and into difficulty in controlling their impulses, something that the adolescent will overcome when he integrates sexual desire and sexual self-representation with a renewed sense of personal identity, albeit different but still related to his previous identities. This process is not free from conflict, to the extent that genital maturity and the subsequent onset of sexual impulses disorganise the psycho-corporeal image of the self and the relational world of the adolescent. This also heralds the emergence of a new sexual identity and new objective identities in the learning of appropriate sexual attitudes and the revision of family ties (Kestenberg, 1962). The attainment of sexual identity in adulthood results in the replacement of the oedipal sexual objects with new relationships and in the choice of achievements which will remain dominant for a lifetime. It is during adolescence, in fact, that final sexual organisation is established, for which the content of sexual desires and oedipal identifications are integrated in an irreversible sexual identity (Laufer & Laufer, 1984). In other words, sex and pubertal changes could represent a new developmental organiser (Spitz, 1958), which, through the impact that it has on its social system and relationships, drives the boy to reconsider his psychic world and to redefine his Oedipal ties that will be treasured in a different way (Kestenberg, 1962).

Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996), instead, define sexual identity as a dimension that goes beyond even the entire decision-making process of taking sexual orientation and perceptions of their own masculinity or femininity, to include “... *an individual's perception of his or her "qualities" in the sexual domain, that is, their perceptions regarding their sexual self.*” (*ibidem*, 1996, p. 490). As the authors remind us, however, this dimension of identity shapes the sexual behaviour of the adolescent, providing guidance on the acceptance of any risky behaviour. This, specifically, is divided into several components, such as sexual self-esteem, sexual self-efficacy and a gendered self-representation, which in turn, are divided into four sub-dimensions (Goggin, 1989). They include: the perception of the physiological activation of their sexual orientation, the manifestation of exploring behaviours, linked to the pressures of sexual desire, responsiveness, possibly sexual anxiety, and finally interpersonal priorities which identify the area of commitment (Goggin, 1989). The research in question has also pointed out that there is only one possible expression of their sexuality and that it can be expressed in a variety of labeled styles, respectively, such as *sexually naive, sexually un-assured, sexually adventurous, sexually competent and sexually driven*, which are related to the different qualities of sexual identity and that can take the form of different, risky, sexual behaviours (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996).

2. Sexuality in Adolescence among Regulatory Processes and Risky Behaviour

Sexual behaviour is a major evolutionary transition, resulting from a decision-making process that takes place in different ways, in relation to the resources to which the individual has access (Henrich, Brookmeyer, Shrier & Shahar, 2006) and depending on the affairs that take place between him and his living space (Bonino, Cattellino & Ciairano, 2005). It is, therefore, a motivated and self-regulated action (Bandura, 1997), designed to meet the specific developmental tasks that the adolescent will face in life (Bonino *et al.*, 2005).

Interpreting the sexual decision-making process in light of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), it becomes clear that it depends on the correlation of the two people's choices, whose intentions to engage in a sexual relationship are best anticipated by behavioural beliefs, religion, the influence of peers and parents, past behaviour and the perception of control over their behaviour. However, this does not anticipate any overt, sexual behaviours which are determined by the previous behavioural experiences and perceived behavioural control, rather than by the expressed intentions (McCabe & Killackey, 2004).

Bonino *et al.* (2005) also argue how sexual activity can personify a fundamental dimension of general adolescent development with regards to at least three important functions. The first function alludes to the acquisition of adult status, to the development of autonomy and to the integration of the sexual component in personal identity. The second is linked to the need to explore, experiment and transgress which characterises the adolescent. The third, in short, calls into question the emulative trends and the need for acceptance by the peer group (*ibidem*, 2005).

Regarding relational development, however, sexual behaviours provide the context in which young people bring into play the relevant parts of themselves, by building their own way of living and expressing feelings and emotions, whilst being guided and shaped by family and the social environment (Bonino, 2005; Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996).

Adolescent sexual activity, however, may pose a risk to their physical and psychological health. Physical risks include the possible transmission of sexual diseases or early and unwanted pregnancies. The possibility of psychological risk, however, concerns the consolidation of negative self-esteem and the establishing of relationships, without possessing the emotional maturity required to support them (Bonino, 2005). This could hinder the ability to integrate sexual and affective issues in a stable relationship by building an emotional relationship in which the individuality of both partners is recognised and respected (Graber, Brooks Gunn & Galen, 1998).

In this respect, Bonino (2005) introduces the concept of a risky lifestyle, which identifies children who are characterised by ongoing research into feelings and emotions, a lack of forethought, misdemeanors, multiple self-experimentations, by walking away from relationship difficulties and seeking adultery in its most superficial forms. The highest risk is adolescents, 90% of whom are boys and whom experience sexual promiscuity with frequent partners and numerous partners, whom do not use contraceptives whilst they use psychoactive substances, alcohol and cigarettes. From a behavioural point of view, it is often, however, that they adopt deviant and aggressive behaviour, violating social and legal norms.

Lerner and Galambos (1998), however, identify three parameters capable of establishing the dangers of adolescent development: namely, the excessive precociousness with which a particular behaviour occurs; the continuity with which it occurs; and its transformation into a way of life in which risky behaviours are numerous and take place against a background of tolerant and encouraging peer relationships (Jessor, 1992). In this case, Jessor (1992) talks about *risk behavior syndrome* or *about behavioral life-styles*, complex concepts that identify an organised constellation of risky behaviours, among their co-occurring and co-variants.

The literature reveals, in any case, how the presence of all risky behaviours, including sexual ones, may represent, within certain parameters, a normative aspect of adolescent development for which it seems to play a functional role (Jessor, 1992; Lerner & Galambos, 1998). In fact, "*Smoking, drinking, illicit drug use, risky driving or early sexual activity can be instrumental in gaining peers' acceptance and respect, in establishing autonomy from parents, in repudiating the norms and the values of conventional authority, in coping with anxiety, frustration and anticipation of failures, or in affirming maturity and marking a transition out of childhood and toward a more adult status.*" (Jessor, 1992, p. 598). All these aspects, in other words, ensure that the adoption of risky behaviours, even occasionally, transiently and non-pervasively, may be considered developmentally appropriate, consistent to the need for exploration and experimentation that characterises this stage of life (Lerner & Galambos, 1998), and in addition to the intense fascination with the adult world and the desire to be part of it, which they exercise on children (Bonino, 2005).

The teenager, however, is able to actively construct his own behaviour and his own development in accordance with the characteristics and demands of his social and cultural environment. Even a risky way of life has a purpose and a function, insofar that it is an answer to the clearly well defined, developmental tasks arising from the interaction with the social environment. Such behaviour is always the result of a choice and an attempt to adapt, and through this the boy tries to define his own unique path towards the construction of adulthood and autonomy from his parents (Bonino, 2005, Bonino *et al.*, 2005).

During the transition to early adulthood, however, it seems that risky sexual behaviour tends to occur less frequently, in spite of a significant rise in the number of sexual relationships and a simultaneous fall in the use of contraceptives. This is due, perhaps on the one hand, to the power of the processes of decision making that make young people better able to understand the consequences of risky sexual behaviour and, on the other, the spread of monogamous, long-term relationships and the resulting reduction in promiscuous behaviour (Fergus, Zimmerman & Caldwell, 2007).

3. Romantic Relationships in Adolescence

The Origin, the Evolution and the satisfactory Needs A key aspect of adolescent development, closely intertwined with sexual behaviour, is the emergence of sentimental dynamics within which it is possible to integrate, in a relationship with a peer, passionate and sexual pressures that are experienced from puberty onwards (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009). Adolescents, in fact, begin to deal with the sexual capacity in becoming an adult and have to learn to live within a relationship that respects the needs of the partner, by accepting new genital sensations and learning to enjoy and control them (Bonino, 2005). This also involves the ability to predict and evaluate the consequences of their behaviour, both in relational and reproductive terms (Gambini, 2007). Within sexual matrix situations, therefore, the negotiation of intimacy takes shape (Graber *et al.*, 1998), where "*Adolescent romantic experiences are the initial steps on a journey toward the loving and committed partner relationships that characterise the adult world*" (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009, p. 104), constituting the original context of learning and testing the skills needed to build future *close relationships* (*ibidem*, 2009).

Cognitive development has a strong influence on the ability to establish and maintain mature and sentimental, emotional relationships. Empathy, in fact, becomes a more cognitively mediated feeling, enabling the teenager himself to portray the experience and the feelings of others, even when there is nothing to portray. This allows him to think productively about each one and to reflect on the reasons for his actions according to his memories and imagination (Hill & Palmquist, 1978). Commitment to the emotional relationship and sexual relations also appears to be linked to the expectations for the future which characterize the adolescent. In the event that an orientation to self-realisation prevails in the short term, they are overly precocious, whereas if the desire to project a self-realisation into the future prevails, they will be assessed over time (Nurmi, 1991; Silbereisen & Noack, 1990).

Collins (2003) defines adolescent couple relationships more as emotional bonds, whilst underlining, simultaneously, aspects of similarity and differentiation in friendships. As with the latter, in fact, romantic relationships can be defined as "... *on-going voluntary interactions that are mutually acknowledged, rather than identified by only one member of a pair.*" (*ibidem*, 2003, p. 2), whilst they differ from them by the intensity and by the expression of affection and sexuality. The author describes them by making reference to five distinctive features, represented by the involvement, the

choice of partners, the relational contents, the quality of the bond and the cognitive and emotional processes. The first links with romantic partners are formed within heterosexual groups (Bouchey & Furman, 2003), where the adolescent experiences new dimensions of affection and new ways of being in a relationship, by learning how to give a different meaning to love and its manifestations (Baldascini, 1996). Dunphy (1963), in particular, describes a process that, from the first small homosexual groups (the first stage), results in the formation of couple relationships (fifth stage), passing through three intermediate stages in which sexual interactions become more frequent and deeper until they form real emotional ties. This model was later replicated, confirming that it is only during mid adolescence that boys start to spend more time in sexual relationships with their peers (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009) and that these experiences and practices, in principle, in a group context, are transformed subsequently into real dyadic relationships (Bouchey & Furman, 2003).

It is relationships that elicit embarrassment and distress, overcome by the powerful force of emotional and sexual attraction (Baldascini, 1996). The needs for intimacy, belonging and self-esteem and the desire to explore, in fact, cannot be fully satisfied by friendships, motivating the search for emotional ties (Mitchel, 2002), which involves a higher degree of fascination, exclusivity and sexual desire, greater depth in caring about one another and the greatest potential for mutual enjoyment (Davis, 1986).

The emotional ties and participation in the peer group are the expression of the needs of the adolescent of a secret, psychic and physical dimension, or of an "emotional home" and of a psychological space in an emotionally stable relationship, where the adolescent can feel at ease (Blos, 1962). This urge has two objectives being simultaneously aimed at maintaining the status quo and an emancipatory movement. The adolescent may impair the fusional situation with parents and experiment independently in a "secret" space by safeguarding their identity from excessive interference (Zapparoli, 1987).

The couple experience in adolescence, however, may be discouraged by the fear of losing one's own personal space, to experience a painful separation, to relive crises already experienced by their parents or to break the alliance with one or both (Olivieri, 1999). The characteristic ambivalence of the relationship with parents is also found in the contradictory engagement and emotional disengagement in the couple relationship in acting out sexual behaviour without any awareness. The relational systems to which they belong should, therefore, support the adolescent in the difficult task of facing the opposite sex, by balancing the monitoring of activities in romantic relationships and sexual behaviours of the child with an attitude of support and emotional closeness, which supports the gradual acquisition of relational autonomy (Kan, McHale & Crouter 2008). In other words, if the peer group should encourage action and help to share the anguish of rejections and dropouts, the adult world should avoid too many negative accusations and judgments with respect to sexual ordeals (Baldascini, 1996).

The romantic relationship in adolescence and, in general, all couple relationships, follows a gradual path of affective and sexual maturity, proceeding, according to McCabe and Collins (1984), at least two stages. Generally, it starts with a period of various dates, where teenagers have been dating for a short period of time and without reciprocal obligations. Subsequently, individuals enter into a promise of fidelity which can lead to a relationship that continues over time. The initial stage of the couple relationship is strongly influenced by the way in which the other partner is perceived and the desires, needs, and expectations that are projected upon him (Aune, Aune & Buller, 1994). Thus, these unrealistic images, which are highly emphasized, lead the pair to form idealised emotions and to experience a decrease in conflict in their interactions. Franz and White (1985), instead, identify three types of relationships: the self-focused; the role-focused; and the individuated-connected, each corresponding to a different level of relational maturity, depending on the orientation towards each other, on the talk of commitment, on the level of care and on the level of sexual maturity. The self-focused level mainly concerns a unilateral involvement of the self and a lack of empathy; their own needs and desires overshadow those of the partners and there is an inadequate understanding of the mutuality. On the *role-focused level* there is an awareness by the individual, that to know and respect the partner is part of being a good friend and a romantic partner. There is, however, no adequate elaboration of the concept of emotional or sentimental commitment, where some feelings are shared within the relationship while others are not explicitly expressed. On an individuated-connected level, the individuals exhibit an active understanding of themselves and others and are able to engage in a stable and satisfactory relationship. We air on the side of tenderness (caring of the partner, emotional support) and passion (involvement in sexual intercourse with your partner, explicit expression of strong feelings). In developing emotional and romantic relationships in adolescence, the self-focused level is the foundation upon which the more mature ability of the adolescent to establish intimate relationships and thus the possibility of reaching the individuated-connected level is based.

If you change the nature of romantic relationships during adolescence, to get close to that typical of the adult world, even the socio-emotional needs which satisfy the teenager through these bonds undergo a significant evolution (Furman e Wehmer, 1997). During mid-adolescence, in fact, they are functional, most importantly, at the activation and expansion of the affiliative system and at the sexual / reproductive system, to the extent that the partner is mostly the person with whom you share leisure time and positive emotions, as well as the partner with which you can experience sexual orientation and build a way of life affection (Furman e Wehmer, 1997). Subsequently, in late adolescence and early adulthood, the couple's relationship will trigger and promote the functions of motivational systems of attachment and care, making it possible to turn the main partner into the main attachment figure and the relationship with him into a new source of personal and relational security (Fraley & Davis, 1997). From this point on, therefore, individuals will begin to turn to their peers to get the instrumental and emotional support they need, by changing hierarchies of bonds of attachment and gradually transferring functions from caregivers to emotional partners (Collins and Sroufe, 1999).

4. Interaction with General Development and other Significant Relationships

Romantic relationships are one of the declinations of adolescent development and simultaneously play an important role in each of the developmental tasks of this stage of life (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Adolescent infatuation plays a key role in the development of sexuality and sexual identity, representing the primary context in which to experience a sexual relationship and to increase knowledge in this area (Rodgers, 1996). The boy and the girl who wonder about sexual orientation, in fact, find support in a relationship which confirms or changes their sexual preference, discovering which characteristics attract them to others and by learning what they want from a partner and what a partner wants from them (Diamond, Savin-Williams & Dubè, 1999). The sexual interest of another person also helps to deal with the emotions related to not feeling worthy and reinforces a positive self-image. The need for self-recognition in the context of the relationship and the need for sexual recognition by the other, therefore, lead the adolescent to experiment in a relationship that is a blend of tenderness and sensuality, the characteristics of a mature, genital relationship (Silbereisen & Noack, 1990).

The romantic experiences also influence the development of the adult identity, at least in two ways. In the first place, the adolescent develops a distinct perception of oneself and others in a different context from that of family or friends, defining it in relation to the existence and quality of romantic relationship (Connolly & Konarski, 1994). When you have acquired the maturity to deal with emotionally immersive situations, the love and support that you receive from a young partner can also encourage the development of the ability to be intimate with each other and, in particular, the achievement of greater affective autonomy from their family (Dowdy & Kliewer, 1998).

Secondly the emotional experiences and self-perception that follows constitute a process closely linked to self-esteem, the trust in their own abilities and expectations for success in the scholastic and affective dimension (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997). Adolescents engaged in an emotional relationship, in fact, perceive a greater sense of psychosocial well-being and are able to adapt to their evolutionary condition, reaping the benefits that it can offer in the trial of affect and reducing the possibility of encountering sexually risky behaviours. Adolescents who have not yet experienced an emotional relationship

nourish, however, high expectations of personal fulfillment through the school environment but that does not guarantee them a state of psychological well-being. They seem less willing to tackle developmental tasks characteristic of their age, such as autonomy and the construction of adulthood. The boys who, eventually, are engaged early in the relationship and have developed promiscuous sexual behaviour, perceive a greater sense of psychosocial malaise, to the extent that they have taken only the external aspects of being an adult, feeding low expectations of personal and scholastic success (Cairano, Bonino, Jackson & Miceli, 2000).

Compared to the domains of identity, in short, the central area is certainly the relevant one in the consolidation of gender identity (Ammaniti & Sergi, 2002). If these processes start from pre- adolescence, in fact, it is, above all, the emergence of the first acquaintances that contributes to the consolidation of culturally oriented gender roles, as well as the formation of their own, personal self-concept as a man or woman.

The emotional ties also have an effect on the transformation of family relationships, although research has not yet been able to say how this happens and in which direction it emerges. It is clear, however, that they can help to reduce the time that teens spend in the company of their parents, and lead to a significant increase in the levels of conflict between parents and children (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Friendships tend to become less significant, because the development of an emotional tie is often a source of conflict and causes conflict between the teenager and his friends. The first couple relationships can change peer groups also from a structural point of view, by encouraging the arrival of new members and by facilitating contact with other groups. This process is left stranded, when, in conjunction with the transformation of emotional ties in bonds of attachment, the groups become smaller and contact between members decreases (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

If the development of the ability to build emotional ties influences the relational structure of the adolescent, it is, in turn, heavily influenced by the social environment, with particular reference to family relationships and those with peers (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009).

The quality of relations with parental figures, through the influence of internal working models, allows the adolescent to construct patterns of reference for the definition of intimacy and establishes the degree to which he will be involved in romantic bonds, as well as the quality of the latter (Furman, Simon, Shaffer & Bouchee, 2002). The literature shows, in fact, how the relational dynamics between parent and child prove predictive of those that are structured between the latter and their emotional partners (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009), relatively, above all, to the emotional proximity and support (Smetana & Gettman, 2006), to the adoption of interpersonal ways which promote autonomy and assertiveness (Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig & Costa, 2001), mechanisms for the negotiation of conflict (Reese-Weber & Khan, 2005), to the more general communication skills and levels of aggression and hostility experienced during the interactive exchanges (Furman & Shomaker, 2008). It seems, however, that this influence is more evident from late adolescence, when the adolescent's emotional ties become more similar to adults' (Furman, 1999). The parental impact on the emotional competence of children, however, also calls into question indirect processes, because the bond of marital caregivers provides a model according to which it is possible to interpret and give meaning to close relationships, as well as to observe and acquire patterns of dyadic communication, conflict resolution and support research that will be tested afterwards (Bouchee e Furman, 2003).

Couple relationships or friendships, however, are characterised by comparable modes of operation, with particular reference to intimacy, trust, communication skills to put in place during interaction and the degree of hostility and conflict on which they are marked (Kutler & La Greca, 2004). The friendship group tends, also, to address the choice of potential partners, sanctioning the teachings and rules of conduct of negotiating the first intimate relationships (Furman, 1999). Relationships with peers, however, influence the development of romantic relationships during pre and mid adolescence, especially when they possess affiliative characteristics and the experimentation of sexuality. During mid adolescence, in fact, the ability to have close relationships is not a salient, developmental task but an emerging, developmental feature which is still to be defined (Furman, 1999). It is only from early adulthood that intimacy will become a key process for the definition of individual maturity, by allowing the ability to form emotional ties to strengthen (Erikson, 1968).

5. Conclusion

The historical and cultural changes initiated in the 60s have helped to lower the age of the first sexual encounter. The spread of contraceptives, the postponement of family life, the possible expansion of the single life, in fact, have led to a sexual revolution, making sexual intercourse among adolescents customary and standard, even if it is not expressly approved of.

The changing patterns that regulate sexual behaviour have also reduced the line between possible behaviour towards men but not towards women, as early as adolescence (Zani, 1993). Teenagers today, in fact, have radically transformed the rituals of courtship in the direction of greater reciprocity and interchangeability of roles, and contemporary adolescents are more enterprising in asserting their sexual desire and in taking an active role in ritual courtship (Fornari, 1983). Nevertheless, attitudes towards adolescent sexuality are not uniform and there remain differences in relation to the gender of the adolescent, both among adults and among adolescents themselves (Graber *et al.*, 1998; Buzzi, 1998). It would also be appropriate to reconsider the more general view of sexuality, by unhooking it from the idea of danger, disease and death that it tends to be associated with and by promoting awareness of the normative and developmentally appropriate aspects of adolescent relationships (De Nisi, Bianchi, Piffer & Arisi, 2008).

It appears, in fact, as though sexual and emotional development identifies a set of fundamental processes for the definition of the adolescent path towards adulthood, where some aspects have not been properly detailed. With regard to development and sexual behaviour, the literature highlights how they are characterised by a large intra-and inter-individual variability, which states the importance of understanding the processes in the light of socio-cultural determinants, as well as individual ones, which shape

paths and events. A deeper understanding of adolescent sexual events and how they are integrated within the adult functioning, moreover, would require the study of early sexual events, noting the elements of continuity that characterise this dimension of personal development (Savin- Williams & Diamond, 2004).

Emotional development in adolescence, however, has only been given due consideration as of the end of the nineties, shedding light on the specific properties of romantic relationships, on their evolutionary progression, on the structural aspects, on the relationship between evolutionary

processes and objectives, on the connection between loving relationships and other key relationships and on the influence exerted on the psychosocial adaptation of the adolescent. Each of these areas requires, however, further study starting from the longitudinal study of the stadial dimension, overcoming the tendency to look at each phase separately, to continue with the analysis of intra-and inter-individual variability, linking it to the peculiar, ethnic cultural dynamics, concluding with the identification of the pathological aspects or otherwise atypical aspects of early emotional function (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). The impact of early sentimental vicissitudes on parent / children relationships has, ultimately, not yet been understood nor has it been developed by models who can explain the influences exerted by parents, friends and peers, revealing the likely effects of mediation and moderation (Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger, 2006).

In Italy, only a portion of such processes has received significant scientific attention. If the study of pubertal processes and sexual behaviour has been sufficiently detailed by enriching an already substantial, international literature, then the analysis and understanding of the emotional dynamics has had little commentary. It should be noted, therefore, the need to undertake complex research programs that are able to replicate the findings of international literature by identifying any cultural peculiarities that inform you of the emotional development of Italian teenagers.

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