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Adolescent sexual and emotional development: the role of romantic relationships

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Abstract

The physiological processes occurring during adolescence, often so abrupt, threaten the permanence of the previously constructed sense of identity, questioning the patterns and representations that had governed the relations of the teenager with his body and with his relational systems. Although puberty is not only reduced to sexual transformations, definitions centered mainly on this aspect can be found in the literature. In fact, pubertal development is the acquisition disclosure index of adult reproductive capacity. Objective: Explore the process of increasing involvement of the adolescent in an emotional and sexual relationship with a partner. Methodology: It will try to understand the adolescent process in the relational and ecological perspective, taking into account the mediation of individual and contextual factors that may influence this process. Critical discussion and conclusions: Carried out examination shows the importance of considering the multiplicity of issues coming into play in the process of psycho-social adaptation of the adolescent, interacting between them over time, enhancing each other or canceling protective or risk factors. Particularly, romantic relationships, whether lived quietly, may represent a growth factor for the teenager and play an important role in the developmental tasks of this stage of life.

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1. Pubertal Transformations and the Implications for Behavior and Development

Puberty is, from a physiological point of view, a brief event of the central nervous system, which activates the hypothalamus-pituitary-gonad axis and promotes sexual maturation. From a social point of view, however, it is a long and uncertain period in which sexual development takes place and the behavior and emotions associated with it begin to emerge (Bogin, 2011). These transformations define a dynamic and integrated process, in which the levels of biological, contextual and psychological functioning are thought of as "fused", as they all exercise an influence on the development of a person-context system (Susman & Dorn, 2009).

From a psychological point of view, pubertal changes call into question the schema and the representations which had regulated, until then, the adolescent's relationship with his or her body, family and peer group, favoring the integration of sexual and aggressive drives with social and family pressure. Indeed, the social-family context, responding to the adolescent's physical changes, modifies its attitudes toward the adolescent, expecting more adult behavior (Fabbroni, 2008). Adolescents may, nonetheless, find it difficult to control their impulses and regulate their expressions of affection, in so far as an adolescent is characterized by a personality and cognitive functioning which is still partially infantile, though manifesting functioning modalities that approach those of an adult (Mancini, 2006). Adolescents will be able to overcome these difficulties when they can integrate their sexual desires and sexual representations of themselves in a renewed sense of personal identity, correlated with previous identifications. This process, often conflictual, heralds other changes, including the emergence of a new sexual identity, learning appropriate sexual behavior and re-elaborating family ties (Kestenberg, 1962).

In other words, pubertal modifications presumably represent a new evolutive organization (Spitz, 1958), that guides the adolescent towards achieving a definitive sexual organization, in which the content of sexual desires and oedipal identifications are integrated into an irreversible sexual identity (Laufer and Laufer, 1984). The sexual identity, more generally, is a dimension that includes "... an individual's perception of his or her "qualities" in the sexual domain, that is, their perceptions regarding their sexual self." (Buzwell e Rosenthal, 1996, p. 490) and that shapes the adolescent's sexual behavior. It is articulated in sexual self-esteem, sexual self-efficiency and the sexual representations of oneself, which, in turn, is structured in four subdivisions (Goggin, 1989). They include: the physiological perception of one's own sexual activation, the display of explorative behavior, tied to the pressures of sexual desires, possibly anxious hypersensitivity to sexual contexts, and finally, interpersonal priorities, which identify the areas of commitment (Goggin, 1989). It is reported, moreover, that an individual's sexuality is not limited to a single possible expression but and how it can be expressed through a variety of styles which have been labeled, respectively, as sexually naive, sexually insecure, sexually adventurous, sexually competent and sexually driven, which are related to the different qualities of the sexual identity and which may be realized in various types of risky sexual behavior (Buzwell and Rosenthal, 1996).

Furthermore, during puberty, the increase of secretions of the gonadic hormone favors the emergence of the sexual desire, intended as the drive to be involved in sexual activity, looking for objects that will satisfy libidinal impulses. The intensity and frequency of this desire can threaten the balance of the adolescent, who has to experience it and make sense of it, in the light of the idea of sexuality that he encounters in his or her family, society and culture (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2011).

If, indeed, the sexual desire fosters the sexual behavior of the adolescent, then it proceeds from a decisional process, which unfolds in different ways, in relation to the resources that the individual has available (Henrich Brookmeyer, Shrier & Shahar, 2006) and depending on the transactions which take place between the individual and his or her vital space (Bonino, Cattelino & Ciairano, 2005). Specifically, it emerges from the intertwining of the choices of two people, whose intentions to become involved in a sexual relationship are better predicted by their behavioral beliefs, religiousness, peer pressure, parental norms, previous behavior and the perception of controlling their own behavior. Nonetheless, their manifested behavior is determined by their previous behavioral experiences and their perceived behavioral control, more than by the desires they express (McCabe and Killacket, 2004).

It is, therefore, a self-regulated action (Bandura, 1997), aimed at responding to specific developmental tasks which the adolescents must face when dealing with his or her life systems (Bonino et al., 2005). Bonino et al. (2005) point out, in particular, that sexual activity plays at least three different roles in general adolescent development. The first refers to acquiring the status of adult, to the development of autonomy and the integration of the sexual component in personal identity. The second is connected to the need to explore, transgress and experiment, which characterize the adolescent. Lastly, the third pertains to emulative tendencies and the need to be accepted by peer groups (ibidem, 2005). In relation to emotional development, instead, sexual behaviors offer the

context in which young adults put significant parts of themselves into play, building their own way of living and expressing their emotions and affections, whilst guided by and modeled on a precise family and social context (Bonino, 2005; Buzwell e Rosenthal, 1996). Romantic relationships, on the other hand, offer the opportunity and the motivations for sexual desires to be realized, sexually-oriented emotions to be explored and sexual behaviors to be expressed (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2011). Within that context, the adolescent learns to integrate, in relationships with a person the same age, the sexual and passionate drives that he or she is feeling, and to develop the necessary competency to establish future close relationships. This competency includes being able to reveal oneself, reciprocity, empathy towards one's partner's sentiments and feelings, in addition to ensuring one's own well-being. That implies that, gradually and contextually, sexual objects are perceived as human beings endowed with autonomous desires and needs, which must be taken into account and borne in mind when expressing one's own needs and desires (Shuman, Connolly & McIsaacs, 2011).

2. Sexual relationships in adolescence: origins and evolution

The emergence of sentimental vicissitudes constitutes, therefore, a central aspect in adolescent development, closely intertwined with pubertal and sexual development. Within this framework, the negotiation of intimacy takes shape (Graber, Brook-Gunn, 1998), defined by Reis and Shaver (1988) as "... an interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become "close"." (pp. 387-388). This entails the development of emotional, behavioral and motivational competencies, whose acquisition represents an exclusively adolescent achievement, even though it is rooted in previous development phases (Collins & Sroufe, 1999).

Like more mature emotional relationships, those of adolescents are defined by five distinctive characteristics, represented by the involvement, the choice of a partner, the content of the relationship, the quality of the bond and by cognitive and emotional processes (Collins, 2003). They are formed within heterosexual groups (Bouchey & Furman, 2003), where the adolescent experiences new dimensions of affection and new ways to be in a relationship (Baldascini, 1996). Dunphy (1963), in particular, describes a process which, beginning with small homosexual groups (first stage), leads to the formation of a couple relationship (fifth stage), passing through three intermediate stages, in which heterosexual interactions become more and more frequent and profound until they are organized in genuine sentimental relationships. This rather dated model was later replicated, confirming that young adults begin to spend more time with others their same age in sexual interactions generally during middle adolescence and that they are initially experienced in the context of a group, but are later transformed into authentic dyadic relationships (Shuman, Connolly & McIsaacs, 2011).

Adolescent sentimental relationships, therefore, follow a path of emotional and sexual growth, defined by the orientation towards the other, the communication, commitment, care and sexual maturity (Franz & White, 1985). Specifically, the self-focused level regards, for the most part, a unilateral involvement with oneself, a scarce empathetic ability and an inadequate understanding of mutuality, during which one's own needs and desires take precedence and those of one's partner are overlooked. On the role-focused level, instead, there is an awareness, on the part of the individual, that knowing and respecting one's partner is part of being a good friend and a romantic partner. However, an adequate elaboration of the concept of emotional or sentimental commitment does not yet exist. Some sentiments are shared at the center of a relationship, while others are not explicitly expressed. This phase of romantic relationships represent, in adolescence, the basis on which a later capacity to establish intimate relationships will evolve, reaching the individuated-connected level. Individuals who possess this level of relationship competence exhibit an active understanding of themselves and others and succeed in committing themselves to stable and satisfying relationships, moving along lines of tenderness and passion (Franz & White, 1985).

It is not only the nature of sentimental relationships that change during the course of adolescence, approaching those typical of the adult world. The socio-emotional needs that the adolescent satisfies through these relationships also undergo a significant development (Furman & Wehmer, 1997). Indeed, during middle adolescence, they are especially functional in the activation and strengthening of the associative and sexual/reproductive systems, in so much as the partner represents the person with whom the adolescent spends his or her free time and shares positive emotions, as well as the companion with whom it is possible to experience one's sexual orientation and build one's own way of experiencing affection (Furman & Wehmer, 1997). Later, in late adolescence and early adulthood, couple relationships will initiate and develop the functions of the motivational systems of attachment and caring, allowing the transformation of the partner into the main figure of attachment and the relationship with him or her

into the new source of personal and relationship security (Fraley & Davis, 1977). From this moment forward, then, individuals begin to turn to their partners for the emotional and instrumental support which they need, modifying the hierarchy of attachment bonds and progressively transferring the functions from caregivers to sentimental partners (Collins & Sroufe, 1999).

3. Sentimental relationships in the context of other developmental processes

Romantic relationships are one of the declinations of adolescent development and, at the same time, play a primary role in the definition of other developmental domains (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

The adolescent's falling in love supports the development of sexuality and the sexual identity, representing the primary context in which adolescents can experience their first sexual relationships and increase their knowledge in this area (Rodgers, 1996). Adolescents who wonder about their sexual orientation, in fact, find support in a relationship that confirms or modifies their own sexual preference, discovering the characteristics of others that attract them and learning what they desire from their partner and what their partner wants from them. Another person's sexual interest, moreover, helps them to face the emotions tied to feeling inadequate and positively reinforce a individual's self-image (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2011).

Romantic experiences also influence the development of the adult identity. First, through couple relationships, adolescents develop a distinct perception of themselves and of others in an environment that is different from their sphere of family or friends, defining it in relation to the existence and sentimental quality of the romantic relationship (Connolly & Konarski, 1994). Secondly, sentimental experiences and the perception of oneself that derive from them, since they are strictly connected to an individual's psychological and psycho-social well-being, help to determine an individual's self-esteem, faith in his or her abilities and expectations of success in the sentimental and scholastic realms (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997). Adolescents involved in an emotional relationships, specifically, perceive greater psychosocial well-being and are able to adapt to their developmental condition, benefiting from the advantages it offers in experiencing emotions and reducing the possibility of engaging in risky sexual behavior. The adolescents who have not yet experienced an emotional relationship nurture, instead, high expectations of personal fulfillment in the scholastic realm, but it does not guarantee their psychological well-being. They seem less willing to face the developmental tasks characteristic of their age, such as autonomy and the construction of the adult identity. Finally, those adolescents who have prematurely engaged in relationships and have developed promiscuous sexual behavior, perceive a greater sense of psychosocial malaise, in so far as they have only assumed the exterior features of an adult, nurturing scarce expectations of personal and scholastic success. That could later lead to experimentation with risky behavior and other insuccesses (Ciairano, Bonino, Jackson & Miceli, 2000).

Sentimental relationships also have an effect on adolescents' relational assets, by which, in turn, they are strongly influenced, with particular reference to their family relationships and those with their peers (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009).

Although research has not yet been able to state in what direction this materializes, it is clear, for example, that couple relationships, together with friendships, help to reduce the time adolescents spend with their parents and determine a significant increase in the levels of conflict between parents and children (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

There is, however, more information regarding the processes through which relationships with parental figures foster the emotional competence of children. In particular, the influence of interior operative systems allow adolescents to build reference schemas for the definition of intimacy and sanction the extent to which they will be involved in romantic relationships, in addition to influencing the quality of those relationships (Furman, Simon, Shaffer & Bouchey, 2002). The literature points out, moreover, how relational dynamics between parent and child are predictive of those the child will form with his or her sentimental partner (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009), as regards, in particular, nearness and emotional support (Smetana & Gettman, 2006), the adoption of interpersonal modalities that foster autonomy and assertiveness (Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig & Costa, 2001), the ways to negotiate conflict (Reese-Weber & Khan, 2005), and more general communicative abilities and the levels of aggressiveness and hostility experienced during interactive exchanges (Furman & Shomaker, 2008). Nonetheless, it appears that this influence is more evident starting in late adolescence, when the emotional relationships of an adolescent resemble more those of an adult (Furman, 1999).

The parental effect on the emotional competence of their children, in any case, also refers to indirect processes, in so far as the matrimonial relationship of the caregivers offers a model on whose base it is possible to interpret and make sense of close relationships, in addition to observing and learning the dyadic patterns of communication, conflict resolution and the search for support that will be experienced at a later stage (Bouchey & Furman, 2003).

The emergence of sentimental relationships gradually makes friendships less important and is often the source of conflict between adolescents and their friends. It modifies the peer group from a structural point of view, too, fostering the entrance of new members and facilitating contacts with other groups. This process will stop, beginning in late adolescence when, in conjunction with the transformation of sentimental relationships into attachment relationships, the groups will become smaller and the contact between members will become less important and frequent (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Friendships and couple relationships, in any case, are characterized by analogous functioning modalities, with particular reference to intimacy, trust, and openness of the respective dynamics, to the communicative abilities put to use during interactions and to the degree of hostility and conflict with which they are characterized (Kutler & La Greca, 2004). The quality of friendships and the representational processes that are at their foundations, in fact, enable the acquired social abilities in relationships with peers to shape the nature of the couple relationship, too, and the low levels of support that may have been experienced in the peer group are correlated with those of close relationships (Furman, 1999). Moreover, a group of friends tends to direct the choice of potential partners, sanctioning the behavioral norms and rules of negotiation of the initial intimate relationships.

Regarding the aforementioned similarity, relationships with peers influence the development of romantic relationships within the limits of pre and mid adolescence, especially when they possess associative characteristics and those of sexual experimenting (Erikson, 1968). During middle adolescence, moreover, the ability to form close relationships is not a major developmental task, but rather an emerging evolutive characteristic which is still being defined. It is only at the start of early adulthood that intimacy, in its emotional and sexual components, will become a key process in the definition of the individual's maturity, allowing him or her to acquire the ability to form sentimental relationships (Erikson, 1968).

4. Conclusions

It emerges from the considerations reported here how sexual and emotional development identifies a set of deeply interwoven processes, which are fundamental for the definition of the adolescent's journey to adulthood.

As concerns sexual development and behavior, a greater understanding of adolescent sexual relations and how they are integrated into adult operations, would entail juxtaposing the study of premature sexual expression with the ecological analysis of individual developmental processes, making note of the elements of continuity which, like others, characterize this dimension of personal development, too (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004). Furthermore, it would be opportune to rethink the more general view of adolescent sexuality, disengaging it from the idea of danger, sickness and death that tends to be associated with it, to associate it with the idea of pleasure, joy and trust, fostering the awareness of normative and developmental aspects appropriate for adolescents and sexuality (De Nisi, Bianchi, Piffer & Arisi, 2008).

As regards emotional development, it has only been treated in a more comprehensive manner since the late nineteen nineties, shedding light on many aspects of an adolescent's falling in love, including the observation of specific properties of sentimental relationships, the identification of their developmental progression and structural aspects, the analysis of the connection between the processes and developmental objectives and the connection between loving relationships and other key relationships, and the exploration of the influence exercised by the psychosocial adjustment of the adolescent. In any event, each of these areas requires an in-depth analysis, beginning with a longitudinal study of the stages, overcoming the tendency to examine each phase separately, to continue with an analysis of intra and interindividual variability, connecting it with particular ethnic-cultural dynamics and finishing with the identification of pathological, or otherwise, atypical aspects of premature sexual relationships (Connolly & McIsaacs, 2009). Moreover, models have not yet been elaborated which are able to explain the complex influence exercised by parents, friends and peers and shed light on the probable effects of mediation and moderation (Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzger, 2006).

In Italy, only a few of the these processes have received significant scientific attention. If it is true that the study of pubertal processes and sexual behavior has been delved into, enriching the already substantial international literature, then it is also true that little attention has been paid to the analysis and understanding of sentimental relationships. It is necessary, therefore, to begin complex research programs that will be able to replicate the conclusions of international literature, identifying the eventual cultural specificities that shape the emotional development of Italian adolescents.

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