

Children and adolescents as sexual beings: cross-cultural perspectives

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Cross-cultural considerations of nonadult sexuality provide a plurality of sexual attitudes and behaviors far from the absolute perspective of Western societies. An anthropologic point of view helps us to fully understand the sexuality of children and adolescents. Inspection within the ethnographies that are available in cultural anthropology shows us that information with regard to the sexuality of children, and to a lesser extent, adolescents, is peripheral. In general, sexual ethnographic material is never central. Moreover, anthropologists' ideas of the sexuality of children and adolescents vary widely. When incorporated into the main ethnographic discourse they might be considered anecdotal. Basically, the scarcity of ethnographic/empirical and anthropologic/theoretical data is due to the lack of focus on sexuality as a subject of discussion within cultural anthropology. This should not surprise us. Since the death of the father of sexual anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), and until the last quarter of the past century, aside from discussion of sexual taboos, such as incest, anthropology has remained mute on sexuality [1–8].

The depth of the silence regarding the sexuality of children is deep. Western societies view children and their sexuality within an idyllic paradise of innocence. Therefore, children's sexual expression has remained an unexplored "legitimate" topic for anthropologic study. No significant sexual ethnographies have focused on the sexuality of children with the exceptions of the writings of Malinowski [9], and, to a certain extent, Margaret Mead [10]. Most references on the topic follow Ford and Beach [11], whose classification of societies with respect to sexuality as "restrictive," "semirestrictive," and "permissive," is quoted frequently. The work of Ford and Beach is based, not on their personal fieldwork, but on documentation within the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF).¹ Data on child sexuality within the HRAF is scarce, fragmentary, and contradictory. As a whole,

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¹ The Human Relation Area Files is a collection of ethnographies that is available to researchers. These reports are field notes and writings that were contributed to by classical anthropologists and others and purport to be accurate accounts of life in different societies.

the Ford and Beach book, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, is an excellent work for its time (1951), but it developed from an ethnocentric perspective. Although the book may be seen as critical of American society and its negative sexual features, it took the data from the HRAF. In the final analysis it is a rich transcultural projection of sexuality but without the support of extensive data within a cultural context.

Malinowski's death was followed by a long period of silence on sexuality. A work on Marquesian sexual behavior by Suggs [12] appeared in 1966 but it passed unnoticed by most anthropologists. It wasn't until the work of Marshall and Suggs [13] in 1971 on the sexual practices of several societies; the work of Gregor [14] in 1985 on Amazonian people's behaviors; and, above all, the prolific ethnographic account of Herdt [15–18] on the Sambia people from Papua New Guinea, that good data on various sexual practices were derived from concrete cultural settings.

Another hurdle to our study is the Western taboo against sexual relations between adults and children, which was projected as being universal. When anthropologic data of a specific, non-Western society did not support this presumption, adult-child sexual intercourse was presented as the exception that proved the rule. This presentation raises an interesting debate because the exception does not prove the rule.

The Western taboo against the sexual relationship of an adult with a child has been labeled as child sexual abuse. Generally, this taboo resulted in the omission or eradication of such behaviors from anthropologic ethnographies that documented the cross-cultural evidence of these activities. In its stead, anthropologic concerns focused on the incest taboo and other research on adult-child sexual activities or general childhood erotic practices remained in its infancy [19].

Among societies of anthropologic interest,² an age difference between sexual partners is not seen as a major cause of law breaking or a reason to avoid sexual intercourse. The most universal anthropological proposition—the taboo of incest—is broken frequently. Anthropologic complacency regarding this kind of sexual interaction is no longer supported by epidemiologic, clinical or sociologic data [20]. In Western societies, in the last 30 years, the difference of age and power in sexual relations between fathers/stepfathers and daughters, and to a much lesser extent, between mothers/stepmothers and sons are viewed as an “epidemic.” Because of Western societies' views of childhood innocence and the laxity and reluctance of anthropology to delve into any variance of children's sexuality, we are confronted with a vacant anthropologic field.

Child sexuality, like women's sexuality, and, by extension, the sexuality of other marginal groups, such as the poor, elderly, migrants, disabled, and, despite their achievements, gay, lesbian, and transgendered people, has the power to demystify sex and expand any definition of normal sex. “Prohibition of child sexuality pretends to be protecting children from adult sexuality, but it is the civilized world that needs to guard itself against the sexuality of children” [21].

² Such societies are those considered non-Western, unsophisticated by modernity, closer to nature, rural, and generally more primitive than contemporary.

The erotic expressions of children, as seen differently in many cultures, in other places, and over time, is a threat to the repressive Euro-American adult sexuality. Therefore, it is silenced conveniently. Age, unlike the universalism of gender, has not been subjected to deconstruction³; it seems difficult for childhood sexuality to get the same treatment and similar deconstructive criticism that women's sexuality has had [22].

Contradictions and double standards in Western societies favor certain features of sexual conduct. The stereotype incorporates heterosexuality, male-initiated encounters, and participants that are white, young adult, and middle class. Under this filter of sexuality understanding, Western societies reward those who follow the sexual prescription. Conversely, those persons who do not follow this standard, such as sexually active children or those adults who have sex with them, are punished. For the anthropologist, Scheper-Hughes [23], this is seen as the way American society displaces its anxieties and conceals the fact that it is an abusive society. Another anthropologist, Delgado [24], referred to the tradition of the usurpation of minors by European societies as “pedophagy.” He offered this as a metaphor for the social cannibalism of children.

The ambivalence of Western societies that is manifested through its sexual double standard and sexual contradictions does not work when Euro-American cultural features are applied to societies of anthropologic interest. Western penetration in “primitive” societies is well-known and documented; it is characterized by attempts, particularly among missionaries, to erase and eliminate any trace of native sexual behavior that is not adjusted to Western patterns. The open sexual expressions of Trobriand Islanders were observed by Malinowski [9]. Trobriand Island children between 6 and 8 years of age had knowledge of sexual matters. Older children and parents were responsible for the transmission of this knowledge. Encouraged by oral tradition and visual experiences of sexual activities, children begin to practice sexual games, masturbation, and sexual intercourse. Parents in the Trobriand Islands believe that children's sexual activity is a cultural must—something to be learned and transmitted socially. Together with affection and emotional involvement, such instruction constitutes the correct itinerary to marriage. Moreover, the cultural rule that prescribes marriage does not prevent sexual intercourse for people who were excluded from marrying [25]. This was similar to traditional Hawaiian culture, where, particularly among the privileged Alihi, it was incumbent upon elders, usually uncles and aunts, to initiate youngsters into sexual practices [26]. In distinction to Trobriand Island culture, marriage was not part of Hawaiian society.

Missionaries and colonial administrators did whatever they could to impose Western religious and legal rules upon the Trobriand Islanders “but there is no

³ Deconstruction is to give a new meaning to an old concept. Deconstruction re-elaborates on a traditional concept, giving it a new significance (eg, women's sexuality is not considered as traditional. It is no longer seen as passive; reproduction is not the one and only aim of women's sexuality, and so forth). Deconstruction—giving a new face to childhood sexuality—has not occurred. Western societies continue to prefer to consider children as dwelling in a kind of sexual “limbo.”

evidence that converts adopted a Christian sense of inferiority or an awareness of sex as something hidden inside them.” The idea of Western correctness was imposed everywhere. In Hawaii, after 200 years of Western contact, most of the cross-generational sexual conducts were lost, especially those related to the “kapu” (taboo) system. Significantly different from taboos in the West, in Hawaiian society, eating with the opposite sex was banned socially, whereas sexual activities were not [26].

Another example of the lack of ambivalence of Western societies to apply their rules to colonized people is the riddles of the Mayan language, the so-called “language of Zuyua”, before the arrival of Spaniards. According to Sigal [27], the Maya of Yucatan riddles point out a clear relationship between adolescents and nobles that is manifested in terms of political power and pederastic desire. Nobles who used recurrent pedagogic manners “will teach the adolescent boys how to rule, and, in doing so, will require the services of these “adolescents” (...) “to gain the political power of the halach uinic, the youth must gain his [mentors] semen and blood. Whether this ritual was attained through actual sexual activity or simply through the use of semen and blood as symbols of power is something that we may never know” (...) “The leaders of ceremonies must be able to understand the rule of the Cross” (...) “The association of Christianity with traditional elements of Mayan kinship shows the power of colonialism.” The inferences to extract from these examples are: (1) Western tradition imposes its criterion on sexual behavior regardless of where it is placed; (2) “exotic” or just different sexual practices are nullified or forced to adopt Westernized forms; and (3) in traditional and Western societies adults always dictate the rules. Adults allow or prevent children and adolescents from playing sexually or to have cross-generational sexual relations.

It is obvious that the sexual assumptions of Western culture cannot be substantiated in other cultures. It is impossible to establish universal patterns for sexuality in childhood and adolescence. Childhood and adolescent sexual behaviors must be contextualized socially and culturally to permit the understanding of such conduct. Cultural and social contexts vary; their changing patterns are the forces that frame sexuality in terms of age, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors [28]. Cross-cultural sexual differences are illustrated by discussing different practices of children and adolescents. In doing so, it becomes obvious that anthropologic universals cannot be sustained. This must be recognized in terms of time, in terms of the perception and concept of what it means to be sexual, and, how different cultures view age.

Childhood and adolescence: appreciation over time

We know from historical evidence that adults have not always, as Mead [29] pretended, treated children as weak persons who need to be protected. The special protection of children, in the sense of a socially mandatory condition, emerged recently [30]. Until the fifteenth century children were treated as adults [31]. High

rates of infant mortality may have prevented parents from getting emotionally close to young sons and daughters [32]. By the age of 6 or 7 years, children were subject to rights and duties that were similar to adults. For Jackson [33], the sexuality of children—as specifically different from adult sexuality—emerged during the nineteenth century. By the nineteenth century, child innocence came to be emphasized, and, therefore, the shielding of children from corrupting influences became a fundamental nucleus of Western discourse.

With reference to France, Cardin [34] said that adults transform children in literature (ie, adults put them out of social reality). When society awakens and recognizes the lethargic cloud in which its thoughts were inserted, it is with surprise; society leaps from denial to obsession and paranoia. That has happened since the 1970s, when society drew away from its previous way of thinking and began to recognize the reality of incest. Before that time it was assumed that incest was rare or did not exist and then it was found in every corner of society. The new recognition implied that the interpretation of social reality changed. As incest and the sexual contact of adults with children had to be admitted, the only way to perpetuate the mental image of children as innocent was by picturing the behavior of adults who had sexual contact with them as sexual predators or abusers who engaged in pedophagy (the term should be understood as a kind of metaphoric sexual cannibalism). It never was recognized that the Western societies were abusive. By today's legal standards, Gauguin's sexual relations with children would be considered to be abusive, although the artist is presented as a genius rather than as an execrable person. In his time (1848–1903), French laws against adult-child sexual contact did not exist. Colonial French administrators morally, but not legally, repudiated Gauguin's sexual conduct with children in Tahiti and the Marquesian Islands. We can conclude that Western culture is unable to sustain over time their own principles on the sexuality of children and adolescents.

The concept of being sexual

The perception and concept of what it means to be sexual or what is considered sexual is not universal. Across cultures the same conduct may or may not be considered pleasurable and sexual. Among the Huaorani peoples of Amazonian Ecuador “physical contact is never construed as sexual, nor the desire for affection taken to be a desire for sex” (...) “bodies are socialized to experience diffuse, unfocused pleasures.” Children seek and experience sexual pleasure at least as actively as adults. The Huaorani do not differentiate genital pleasure from other bodily pleasures. “For example, no distinction is made between the pleasure and contentment felt during sexual intercourse” and “the pleasure and contentment of a 3 year old caressing the breast of the women from whom she or he is feeding” [35].

Among the Khumbo of Nepal, children do not become sexual (ie, adults do not consider them sexual beings) until they are 5 years old. At this age their

genitals are covered with some cloth and the child is taught to be ashamed of certain actions that previously had not been construed as sexual. Before the age of 5 years, Khumbo children engage in behavior with their mothers that for us would be taken as sexual or even incestuous. While his mother suckles the child, the former sucks his penis [36]. In ancient Hawaiian society the blowing into a baby's penis by an adult woman was seen as an obligation and duty to best prepare it—by keeping the foreskin mobile—for eventual subincision [26].

Khumbo, Huaorani, and ancient Hawaiian behaviors are examples of answers to the question that was formulated 50 years ago by Whiting and Child [37] to clarify what is “being sexual,” and what does it mean to be sexual? Khumbo, Huaorani, and Hawaiian cultures offer examples of variance that show the impossibility of establishing a universal criterion of sexual or erotic behavior. The concept of being sexual, and, as a consequence, what it means to be sexual, is established by concrete social organizations. Each culture and society develops its own rules and ideas of what it means to be sexual or the meaning that is given to any behavior. Comments made by some Spanish journalists about a photo that showed a South America woman nursing a baby wild boar illustrate this. They labeled the image as an example of zoophilia [38]. Had the woman suckled a baby human being, the picture would have been classified as nurturing, not sexual. Context and cultural meanings have to be taken into account. Western cultural so-called “universal assumptions” are not necessarily valid outside the West. Definitions of “being sexual,” of “sexual beings,” and “sexual abuse” are plural and should not be judged exclusively by a single standard of behavior. More ironically, Weston [38] wanted to know what (homo)sexual activity was and stated that “the \$64,000 question remains: Is the Kiman practice of rubbing sperm on young male bodies for its growth-inducing properties best understood as a form of ‘indirect homosexuality’? In whose eyes are such interpretations salient”?

The ages of childhood and adolescence

When does childhood pass to adolescence? When is adolescence abandoned and adulthood reached? Physiologic factors are not sufficient to distinguish the child from the adolescent and the latter from the adult. Social or cultural criteria decide when boys and girls are no longer children and adolescents. Adults—whether driven by legal purposes as often seen in Western societies or motivated by sociocultural measures in traditional societies—always make such decisions. Logically, cultural variation across societies does not help to construct a common agreement. There is no consensus among social scientists. For example, Ennew [39] referred to three broad stages to reach adulthood: “infancy (0–5 years), pre-pubertal childhood (6–12 years), and post-pubertal adolescence (12 years to adulthood or the age of political majority).” Frayser [40] wrote of childhood and designated five forms through a developmental continuum: (1) prenatal development; (2) newborns and infants (0–12/18 months); (3) toddlers (12/18 months–3 years); (4) early childhood/preschool/kindergar-

ten (3–5 years); and (5) middle childhood (6–12 years). For Herdt [41], the point for sexual subjectivity is age 10. This is the critical year when childhood and adulthood coincides at a point that he called “sexual juncture.”

Kandiyoti [42] preferred to talk of changing social roles instead of years of age. The Anatolian village of Turkey that was studied by Kandiyoti marks differences by gender and marriage. For females there is a twofold distinction: unmarried girls (*kiz*) and married woman (*kadin*). Males have a threefold distinction; there is a differentiation between adolescents or young unmarried men (*delikanli*) and married men (*akay*). But there is a third category—old men. Referring to boy-lover sexual preferences, Brongersma [43] used the following classification of boy's ages: to about 10 years of age (small children), from 11 to 13 or 14 years of age (prepubertal boys), and from 13 to 16 years of age (boys in puberty and adolescence). Other classifications show boys' ages according to desires: strict pedophiles (those who prefer prepubescent children usually from 6 to 12 years) and ephebeophiles (those who prefer early postpubescent adolescents from about 12 to 16 years). The aforementioned considerations of age reflect a lack of consensus. Even among Western societies the decision varies as to when adolescence ends and adulthood begins. Each country establishes such ages in legal terms by fiat, not on the basis of physiology or behavior. In the United States the ages differ among the states. There is no universal criterion that fixes the passage of one social or legal status to the next—social particularism replaces universalism.

The status of adulthood in Western societies is conferred at ages that vary for different purposes. For political voting, adult age varies between 18 and 21, depending on the country. The legal age at which one can give sexual consent is a peculiar definition of sexual adulthood that differs from the legal sexual age of adulthood (or the minimum age for marriage); these ages vary according to political situations. In Iran following the Islamic revolution of 1979 that overthrew the Shah, the minimum age for marriage was decreased from 18 years to 9 years; there is no such thing as an age of consent for unmarried girls. In Hawaii, in 2002, the age of consent was increased from 14 years to 16 years. This was not the result of the lack of sexual intercourse by teenagers of 14 and 15 years of age, but by its prevalence and the frequent declaration of the youngster that their intercourse with an adult was by choice. No teenager of 14 or 15 years of age is arrested for having sexual experiences with another minor. If an adult is involved, however, he or she is now subject to the law of statutory rape. Another set of examples exists in Spain. Political adulthood in Spain is achieved at 18 years of age, whereas the penal code expressly says that the age of sexual adulthood is achieved at 16 years and the sexual age of consent is established when 12 years and 1 day are reached [44]. Some political reformers want legislation introduced that increases the age of sexual consent. The ombudsman for minors proposed that the consent to have sexual relationships should be increased from 12 to 14 years of age. At present, a public debate is ongoing to establish who should be considered a minor. Some cases of homicide that were committed by minors, not sexual experiences, have been the origin of the debate. Parents of a girl who was older than 18 years who

was raped, killed, and her body burned with gasoline are collecting signatures to change the “Ley del Menor” (Minor Law) [45].

Sexual age of consent: Western culture

Governmental institutions continue to act in ways that consider adolescents as asexual persons. The beginning of heterosexual genital relations among adolescents is initiated earlier each year. Increasingly, more 14- and 15-year-old girls and boys experience their first sexual contact. The irresponsible attitudes of institutions and groups that perceive adolescents as indifferent to sexual relations or as being asexual means that their sexual education is postponed; the resultant behaviors are risky and uninformed. This can result in unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmissible diseases; this is not much different from the ideal of childhood sexual innocence of American families that was expressed by Konker [19]. This investigator claimed that American society has the “tendency to deny that children are sexual beings with sexual feelings,” Spanish institutions also continue to view adolescents as indifferent to sexual relations or as asexual beings. In this area of thought Americans and Spaniards are alike.

Nowhere in Europe is the minimum sexual age of consent less than 12 years of age or greater than 18 years of age. Beyond these legal considerations, minimum sexual age limits are fixed differently across countries. Sexual relations that are related to age may or may not be prosecuted according to specific, plural, and legal social realities. Societies consider different factors in such prosecutions. The age of consent may be dependent on different criteria. Factors under consideration might include the difference in age between those involved; whether the sexual intercourse was vaginal, anal, or oral; if the sexual activity was homosexual or heterosexual; and if the sexual contact was penetrative. The age difference always is considered, regardless of the sexual act. Some communities consider the concept of “seduction,” others consider the concept of “authority” (ie, sexual contact between a teacher and a student or therapist and patient). Other regions evaluate if the sexual act will be deemed as “depraving” or the result of biologic immaturity [46]. Western societies do not provide a common answer to the questions of “What should be the age of sexual consent?” or “When should one be considered mature enough for sexual activity?” The supposed uniformity of features of Euro-American societies that are opposed to the variability of the “exotic” traits of societies of anthropologic interest is a chimera. Therefore, sexual adulthood is established by a hodgepodge set of considerations that are superimposed on concrete legal regulations.

Sexuality of children and adolescents: ethnographic settings

Although the uniqueness of sexual practices of non-Western societies has been lost over time, especially as a result of the politics of colonial administrations, it is

important to understand the richness of the anthropologic record. In many societies there are no written rules regarding sexual activities. Regulation is framed through cultural and social organization and understanding. As in Western societies we see variation at the moment that we decide to examine cross-culturally how sexual adulthood is reached. In the Turu society of Tanzania, Bantu-speaking boys and girls reach adulthood after they have experienced the rites of passage [47]. Difference of gender is significant for this African society; girls become adults earlier than boys. Girls have their rites at about 10 years of age when they are clitoridectomized; then they are confined for months at the onset of menstruation, and, finally, are considered to be adults. The rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood for males is accomplished through circumcision. This is done when boys are about 15 years old. To be circumcised is crucial to maintain sexual relations with a woman. In Turu society “it is forbidden for an adult woman to have a relationship with an uncircumcised boy, and vice versa” [47]. Romantic and sexual relationships—“mbuya”—usually are accomplished after boys and girls have gone through the rites of passage [47]. Turu society reflects the conclusive general statement of Ford and Beach [11]: adolescents within African societies, after they have passed their initiation ceremonies, but not before, were allowed to engage in sexual intercourse. In this sense, Young [48] explained that the meaning of initiation rituals for young adolescents is to encapsulate girls within the private domain of domestic groups and to incorporate boys within the overall public society.

Differences between the sexes also can be observed among the Kwahu, African people from Ghana. This group is related to the Asante and linked to a larger, ethnic group that commonly is referred to as the Akan [48]. Girls and boys play games—as early as 4 years of age—in which genital sex is focused and central. Girls are punished with more severity than boys if they are caught by adults while playing. Girls may get pepper or ginger put in their genitals; however, the punishment does not stop the practice and the sexual games continue. Bleek [49] believed that this is because the play is extremely interesting and enjoyable. From the age of 8 years the sexual play becomes more frequent. Bleek [49] concluded that “though many are aware that it [genital sexual play] belongs to the world of the adults (those who work and are married) one cannot say that it is laden with taboos and fear of punishment and most children talk about it without inhibition.” Marriage is a crucial passage that leads to adulthood. The transcultural research of adolescents in 186 cultural settings that was conducted by Schlegel and Barry [50] pointed out that in most traditional societies, adolescence ends with marriage that can occur at any age. Among the Kwahu, for example, the social value of marriage does not prevent adolescents from having sexual relations before a wedding occurs. In this regard, it is not different than Euro-American societies.

From these ethnographic and transcultural reports it is apparent that children’s sexual games and genital play are not eradicated easily. Sexual experimentation—although punished—increases with age; this confirms another of Ford and Beach’s [11] theses that punishment does not suppress sexual activity. Similarly,

moral or religious restrictions in Western societies do not prevent prohibited sexual behaviors (eg, priests break the vow of chastity).

Do parents fail in their imposition of punishment or do they just try to make children believe that sexuality is not right for them? Perhaps parents do not encourage sexuality for children but they usually do not act with extreme measures to suppress it. The opportunity for children to observe coitus of parents and adults can be interpreted in that way. Berndt and Berndt [51] described the early acquisition of sexual knowledge of aboriginal Australian children of Western Arnhem Land. Boys and girls sleep in their parents' dwelling and have personal knowledge of sexual intercourse. Children pretend to be asleep but their position is optimal for listening and watching the parents' sexual acts. In Brazil, common space among Mehinaku people is shared by children and adults. From their resting hammocks, children can see the hammocks of adults and their participation in sexual intercourse [52].

Sexual encouragement was the attitude of Polynesian parents with respect to their minors. Polynesian societies consider childhood to be an age for sexual learning. Consequently, parents ensure that their children are taught about sex in direct ways; no aspect of sexuality is concealed from them. Sexual instruction is commanded to increase sexual knowledge and skill as much as possible. Children observe parents' sexual activity while they are supposed to be sleeping. Because they share sleeping arrangements with parents, they have the opportunity to hear and see them engaging in sexual intercourse. Children often were exposed to parents' copulation and allowed "as the most natural thing in the world, to be present at nude dancing and demonstrations in the technique of sexual intercourse" and parents "urged their children to masturbate when they wanted peace and quiet" [53]. By the age of 10 years, boys and girls—especially the latter—play at marriage, intercourse, and giving birth. As with sexual intercourse, children witness the way that babies come to the world. For Polynesian children, sex and sexuality is not forbidden and sexual learning is stimulated through "theory" and practice, exposition, and playing. For Polynesian societies, immorality or amorality and sexual abuse consists of not inculcating sexual learning to their children.

Directing his attention to Mangaia, a South Pacific Island of the Cook archipelago, Marshall [54] confirmed Danielsson's [53] general vision about Polynesian childhood sexuality. In Mangaia, children receive instruction in how to copulate. The sexual teaching by adults is by means of play; they make a game of copulation. "Real" copulation starts after boys are superincised, at the age of 13 or 14 years and after girls have reached menarche, at approximately the same age. Sex as an ideal between boys and girls is sought at this age; however, some Mangaian boys experiment with coition before being superincised. In these cases, sexual intercourse is fulfilled with available older women and widows.

Sexual instruction also is provided by Muria society, the non-Hindu people from Bastar region, India. The Muria are well-known by the writing of the anthropologist, Verrier Elwin [55], especially for their "ghotul," a dormitory where adolescents are sexually instructed (among other social considerations and rules). In the ghotul, sexual activity is a common practice. There is no marriage nor

fiancés involved; each boy and girl belongs to the overall group. The ghotul is a dormitory where premarital sexual activities are the rule. In some Muria communities the relationships between the boys and girls have restrictions about who can be with whom and how often; other communities have no restrictions. Elwin [55] recorded 347 ghotuls among the Muria in 1947. Thirty-five years later, in 1982, when the most knowledgeable scholars believed that ghotuls had been extinguished, Haimendorf [56] published *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival*—and announced to the surprise of the academic community—that adolescent dormitories were still alive and ghotuls continued to exist. He mentioned specifically that in Nayanar the ghotul was larger, including dependencies that had been in existence in 1947.

Masturbation

Generally, masturbation by children is seen as a preliminary step that is to be followed by sexual intercourse. In several societies, however, this preliminary phase of sexuality in boys is accompanied by sexual activity with animals. This is particularly true during late childhood and adolescence and is viewed as a prerequisite to achieve future sexual potency [57]. Masturbatory behavior is a clear example for the need to frame sexuality within a social context; the same sexual behavior is interpreted differently depending upon the particular society. Bateson [58] anticipated this idea many years in advance of social construction theory. He used masturbation as an example that American and English cultures are resistant to infantile sexuality. He stated it concretely: “masturbation of the child by parents or nurses is strongly deprecated.” In a clear contrast, he said that masturbation of the child by the parents among Italian peasants is common. Masturbation pacifies the child and makes him sleepy. Another interpretation is that the aim and result of masturbation is to wake the child up and make him more active, as is done in Bali. Bateson [58] makes such inference regarding the use of masturbation in Bali “from the mother’s evident enjoyment both of the baby’s responsiveness and of the temper tantrum which often follows.”

Understanding masturbation among the Pilagá Indians of South America is to take into account that children’s behavior is defined by an “untrammelled polymorphous exuberance” [59]. Adult and child sexuality—to put it metaphorically—are linked by a bridge. The metaphor is the one that makes possible and allows children to masturbate against their mothers. Siblings are allowed to masturbate against one another and are encouraged to engage in such a practice. Sexual intercourse among child siblings does not occur. Whiting and Child [37], in a more general sense, reported masturbation by adults, to calm children.

Adult-child sexual contact

From an anthropologic point of view it is important to consider adult-child sexual contacts that would be seen as sexual abuse by Western standards (eg,

when an elder touches and manipulates the genitals of infants). The elder can be a member of the infant's family. In certain societies, the purpose of the genital manipulation is to embellish the shape of the infant, and, in so doing, to prepare boys and girls to be more successful in society. In Truk, Micronesia, a "woman whose vagina is 'full of things' will achieve orgasm more rapidly and give more pleasure to the man. The 'things' consist in a prominent clitoris, labia minora, and a small projection below the clitoris whose anatomical definition is unclear" [60]. Soon after the girl is born, manipulation of the genitals is initiated by mothers. Girls, while urinating or bathing, pull at their labia minora to increase their size and for pleasure; they often do it upon prompting by their mothers. In this way the minor labia reach "incredible dimensions" [61].

Other forms of sexual contact—not to be confused with masturbation—are the different kinds of touching of children's genitals by adults. Olson [62] noted that Turkish people kiss the genitals of minors, congratulating themselves when, according to their standards, the children's genitalia represent a premonition of fertility. In Spain, until recently, a baby's genitalia was celebrated. This was especially true for boys; the genitalia's shape, with the course of time, was supposed to guarantee fast growth of the child. It was believed that "good" (large) genitalia made boys become big men, and, to a certain extent, made girls become "proper" women. In Mediterranean societies, the external appearance of babies' genitalia was evaluated differently for boys and girls. Large male genitals were the announcement and the symbol of sexual potency. "Proper" female genitals had another meaning—the waiting room of reproduction. It could be said that Mediterranean societies treat genitals as true fetishes [5].

Sexual maturity of children

In other societies, the possession of well-shaped genitals is not enough to help children grow or to facilitate reproduction or acceptance in society. In these societies, children need help to become adults (ie, suckling of their mother's breast to develop their bodies). The question is: "When must weaning occur"? And then what? Melanesian societies provide answers to both questions. If we follow Hogbin's [63] description of childhood in New Guinea, children are weaned at the age of 3 years. By the end of the third year children are taught and persuaded to get away from the mother's breast. Literally we read "come, come my child you have grown too big for my nipple" and "the breast is for little babies not for a big boy like you. Look at your father: nobody suckles him" [63].

Several societies of New Guinea, such as the Sambia, Etoro, Keraki, Onabasulu, Gebusi, Marind-Anim, and others, are well-known for demonstrating that boy children must have semen to grow up and become adults. Semen is transferred from adults to children and adolescents to procure their body development and masculinity. Maturation and adulthood can be reached in these Melanesian societies only through the semen that is given by adults (adolescents

by Western standards) to children and younger adolescents by way of anal intercourse, corporal impregnation, and oral insemination. Intergenerational sexual relations among same-sex members are performed ritually. All of these Melanesian sexual practices are well-documented. The richest and most developed of them can be found in the ethnographic information that was elaborated prolifically by Herdt [15], especially in his *Guardians of the Flute*.

Herdt [15] studied a society that he called “Sambia” (a fictive name). He pointed out that children begin to receive semen orally between the ages 7 and 10 years. A span of 10 or 15 years is needed to complete oral insemination. The practice is believed to assure the future maleness and masculinity of children because they do not have enough semen. The lack of semen in the body requires that it be filled up by fellating older youth. Ritualized homosexuality—first as fellator and then as fellated—goes on until children/adolescents become attracted to women and get married. Marriage occurs when youth are between 16 and 25 years of age. For a period of time, youth combine homosexual and heterosexual acts. Heterosexual activities coincide with a wife’s first menses and with the fifth of six rituals. The sixth—and last—rite of initiation is celebrated with the birth of the first child. Adolescents—with fatherhood accomplished—cease fellating activities and engage only in heterosexual relationships. Herdt reported that although some Sambians are married and fathers, they never abandon fellatio activities.⁴

Data on the frequency of sexual intercourse and other cross-cultural child and adolescent behaviors are more limited. Child and adolescent sexual activity that is expressed by heterosexual intercourse is known. Polynesian societies offer good examples of communal dwelling and the chance for children to observe parents during the sexual act. Polynesian societies also offer the reverse example—the opportunity for parents to see their children and adolescents copulate. Known as “moetoro” or “motoro” in Mangaia, “moetotolu” in Samoa, and “tomo” in Rorotonga, this common sexual practice consists of adolescents inviting their partners to pay a nocturnal visit to the communal dwelling where they have sexual intercourse. In Mangaia, if adolescents are caught during the sexual act by parents, punishment, though rare, can occur. Motoro is considered to be the ideal way to obtain a spouse; however, youngsters do not limit their sexual intercourse to the motoro practice. Beaches, woods, the bush, empty huts, and out-of-the-way places are used for sexual encounters. Sexual self-discovery for adolescents requires little time because “the male youth has been instructed by the older male, the young female by the older women and the male youths have been schooled in practice as well as theory” [13]. The sexual maturity of Polynesian children and adolescents occurs earlier than in Western societies.

⁴ Although what is being described are same-sex activities, many researchers do not consider them homosexual because the behavior is socially compulsory.

Adult-child sexual intercourse

Another culturally-accepted form of sexual intercourse is that between an elderly man and a premenarche girl; the difference of age is obviously definitive for the relationship. Australian aborigines have an anthropologic reputation for practicing what is known as “gerontocratic” marriage. Such marriages institutionalize sexual intercourse between a child wife and a much older adult husband. Burbank [64] referred to a Western Arnhem Land community that she named “Mangrove.” In nomadic times, adolescent sexuality was controlled by marriages before menarche, and, Burbank adds, their husbands emphasize that some of these wives resembled contemporary 9-year-old girls.

Goodale [65], referring to the Tiwi of Melville Island, mentioned that betrothals of first marriage occur before a girl’s birth as a result of an agreement between the husband and the girl’s parents. The future husband abandons his customary residence to live with the parents of the future wife. He works for with the new family as a new family member. Time elapses until the mother- and father-in-law of the future husband give birth to a daughter—the future wife. After the child grows up and shows herself to be responsible enough to fulfill household chores—which always happens before she is able to menstruate—she is given by her parents to the husband. She goes to live at her husband’s family residence and receives her first practical sexual lesson. Her husband is the instructor; the teaching takes time. She is deflowered by the husband’s finger. Slowly, sometimes not before a year of common residence, the husband has sexual intercourse with the child wife. As in the case of Sambia, with the believed need of semen to become a masculine adult, the Tiwi see a need for sexual intercourse to develop the female body. It is believed that through sexual intercourse with her husband, the wife’s breasts form and pubic and axillary hair develop. Perhaps more important for the marriage agreement, sexual intercourse is the cause of the wife’s menarche and subsequent menstruation. In this society, menarche is the key to understanding the whole cultural cycle. It is the precise moment for the celebration of rituals by which the newly emerging women is accredited by society as a potential future mother and mother-in-law. When an expected, but not yet born, daughter of this new couple is betrothed to an adult man, the future son-in-law comes to live with the married couple to serve them and the cycle is reinitiated.

An early experience of first sexual intercourse for girls as being related to the idea of body development also is seen among the Lepcha of Sikkim. In this Himalayan population, girls—by the time they are 11 or 12 years old—should begin their sexual intercourse activity, under the consideration that if they do not engage with a partner heterosexually then their bodies will not mature [66].

These ethnographic references to the sexual experiences of girls may sound strange. In Western societies it was, and to a certain extent still is, believed that male adolescents were expected—and even encouraged—to have premarital sexual intercourse, whereas chastity before marriage was expected from female adolescents. Among Mohave Indians of North America the first sexual experi-

ence of girls is characterized by anal intercourse. This occurs in a society where “adults seldom have sexual intercourse with children of their own sex, although betrothal of young girls to old men or seduction of very young boys by adult women was not rare” [67].

Summary

All of these references, although not comprehensive, give an idea of childhood and adolescent sexuality across cultures. As Green [68] indicated, these cultural considerations do not pretend to foster similar and “exotic” practices into Euro-American societies. For Western societies, the sexual activities of traditional settings, although full of anthropologic interest, have been ignored or, at best, viewed as “curious” and never imported; in fact, it worked the other way. Western societies exported their sexual patterns to the point of erasing the beliefs and behaviors of the “other” cultures.

The goal of this article was to show the anthropologic variety of sexual behaviors, the variability of cultural/sexual beliefs and realities, and the plurality of sexual expressions across societies. When the ethnographic present was used, it does not mean that the sexual practice is still alive. Pukapukan children, for example, no longer masturbate in public.

No demonstrated set of practices has been found best for all societies and approved manners vary over time.

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