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ADOLESCENTS' RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOURS IN SEXUALITY: A DANGER OR AN ELABORATIVE CHOICE?*

Elena Bordin** and Giordano Bertolazzi***

ABSTRACT

Does it say that teenagers are ruled by hormones, incapable of considering the consequences of unprotected sex, help us understand them better? What did behaving in risky ways, while being informed on healthy sexual behaviours, mean to their sexuality?

Considering adolescence as a process rather than a developmental stage, this work, through

Personal Construct Psychology, will present adolescents as inquiring men, with the aim of finding new constructions of Self, including in the field of sexuality. In this field, unsafe sexual behaviours can be understood as elaborative attempts to position themselves in relationships.

Such a proposal can lay the foundations for alternative prevention projects and sex education

courses, in which the idea of right and wrong behaviour gives way to one of elaborate choice.

Key words: Personal Construct Psychology, adolescent sexuality, risk-taking behaviour, elaborative choice.

This essay stems from the reflections which have arisen in the field of sex-education projects with adolescents and the clinical work with them we are engaged in, when we realised there was a significant difference between what

the teenagers experienced and spoke about first-hand, and the adults' recounting of the teenagers themselves. Over this time we listened to many stories and today we share the following: Sofia, a 17-year old girl diagnosed as "borderline" and who is grimly observed by her teachers, her parents and mental health service workers due to her unprotected sexual encounters with various partners, her drug use and some abortions. Her despairing parents tried to be accepting, then becoming stricter, until the point where they decided to take her to specialists; but she hasn't seemed to pick up on any nuances in their approaches, with nothing changing as far as the adults are concerned.

Her mother is convinced: "She does it to hurt us, to punish us", for many she is reckless and thoughtless, she doesn't think about the consequences of her own actions and she doesn't listen to those who may indeed be able to help her. Sofia's story is a difficult one in which there doesn't seem to be any possible understanding or compassion the adults in her life: there don't appear to be any solutions or ways out.

Perhaps, lingering on the analysis of her behaviour and searching for the causes do not help us understand Sofia's experience, but it is worthwhile opening ourselves up to wider considerations which view people in their entirety.

* Communication presented at the 8th European Congress on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology and XXX Congress of SEPYPNA, which under the title "Psychological development, psychopathology and human relations today: interaction between the biological and the social aspects" took place in Bilbao on April 26, 27 and 28, 2018

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In order to frame the topic and make it intelligible - from psychologists and professionals immersed in a vast theoretical polyphony and, therefore, exposed to various types of people - we need to define the epistemological frame which gives meaning to all this.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE THEORY OF PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS

What we propose today, with reference to George Kelly's *Psychology of Personal Constructs* (PCP) (1955) (a theoretical model which refers to the wider epistemological constructivist framework), is to imagine people as scientists who formulate and verify their own theories; they interpret and construct the world in which they live. A person is one who elaborates, working from their own experiences, their hypotheses - perceived as rationally as they are viscerally - and, in the immediate, verifies them.

In this view of the person - which we are simplifying - they move as a protagonist - and not as a victim of circumstance or destiny - along a circular temporal continuum, called "experience cycle" (Kelly, 1966): past experience provides the theory and hypotheses, which Kelly calls "anticipations". These are projected in the future and, based on the way they are taken into consideration and verified in the here-and-now, they somehow modify the original theory - both when confirmed, and therefore reinforced, and when falsified and potentially revised.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ANTICIPATION AND CHOICE IN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

At this point it is worth quickly emphasising the idea of anticipation and looking at it a little more closely. According to Kelly, indeed, people are not obsessed by the past and memories, but by the future. "What will happen?" is the question which torments us and on which we can formulate our hypotheses. Kelly even makes the Fundamental Postulate on which his whole theory is based: "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events" (Kelly, 1955, p. 32).

Experience, any personal experience, is neither determined by the past nor by external circumstances, but, rather, is channelized by the way in which, step by

step, we interpret things. Our life becomes a continuous and dynamic narration of various experiments.

All this takes shape against the scenery in which everyone exists (for example: culture, geographic place where people live, family, etc.).

Outside a strictly deterministic frame, we must inevitably imagine that, given certain constraints/bonds (the scenography), a person has the ability to choose. Without the possibility of choosing, it is clear that a person will certainly be determined by something which is independent of them.

PCP expresses this in the corollary choice: "a person choose for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system" (Kelly, 1955, p. 45).

In defining this idea, Kelly tells us that in their anticipations, people are always faced with two alternatives in which one is the better or, in some cases, "the lesser of two evils". At this point, even the so-called "disturbed behaviour", or the symptom, makes more sense: it is a solution, the best which the person was able to consider.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH SOFIA? WHAT DOES SOFIA ANTICIPATE?

Perhaps, in light of this, all statements about Sofia by other people may begin to lose meaning - the fact that for many she is thoughtless and doesn't consider the consequences of her own actions and doesn't listen to those who know how to help her. All this does not help us to understand her experiences!

Let's try, instead, to consider Sofia as a moving person, in continuous evolution, an active interpreter of her own experiences.

Deepening Sofia's knowledge, and looking at the world through her eyes, we can begin to understand some of her choices: the urgent need to distinguish between the adult world and her own emerges - practising unprotected sex as a way of exercising control over her own experiences, which, previously, she may not have felt as having.

Speaking with her we understood that for her, adulthood may have also represented the embodiment of constructions such as responsibility, "full" self-awareness, full reliability, and the need to act or to be in a certain

way. Rejecting the healthy suggestions of adults, Sofia would have been able to foster an attempt at choosing her own constructions instead of adhering to meanings which are too narrow and immutable for her.

Moreover, these meanings could have had unattainable implications: for Sofia being an adult meant becoming boring: "if you are like that you do not think by yourself, you are not fully yourself".

Starting to look at the world with her eyes we can grasp the sense of a dichotomous choice: on the one hand recognizing herself as a victim of social expectations about her. Alternatively, it is choosing to live in a world where sex becomes a passport to an immediate taking a stand, a choosing for herself.

ADOLESCENCE: A TALE ABOUT TALES

If we look at the story of Sofia and other people's reports about her, an intricate narrative circle becomes evident: the way we look at adolescence will channelize the way we tell the stories of who we consider adolescent. And the teenager will inevitably have to deal with this way of narrating adolescence.

Reflecting on it, it is a way of telling, or defining the narrative boundaries of a story, being rather inconvenient for those who find themselves immersed in it. It is a story of stories that seems to reserve only two possibilities for us: either rebellion or endurance. And indeed, these are often the ways in which the adolescent sees and treats the experienced adult.

Let us then resume the metaphor from which we started: the person as a scientist, as a researcher. Like any other person, the teenager (Sofia in our case) will be committed to making sense of herself in the world.

A curious researcher who is testing his new physical, cognitive and relational skills, reviewing anticipations that until now have channelled their flow into the world so well.

One may think that the adolescent is actively looking for a point of observation, a view of oneself and the world, more useful and usable than that of a child who has served them until recently. They are active builders of their own experiences of their own identity, which when compared to that of childhood become as multifaceted and varied as are the multiple and different contexts they begin to navigate, and that for them become as important as the family has been until then.

Contrary to what it is usually thought, we think

adolescence is not so much the moment of separation from parents and identification, but rather the process where the identity itself become more complex and articulated.

Engaged in this continuous, adventurous experimentation and testing of new and old parts of themselves, the adolescent may find difficult to anticipate the evolution of these swirling experiences. The exploration of something new, in the end, leaves us all inexperienced and, to some extent, clumsy. We should not be surprised, then, at times in feeling uncertain, sometimes disoriented or frantic, in finding the way he or she finds more useful ways to move within relationships (occasionally conflicted and confused) – for example with themselves, with their own body, with lovers, peers, adults, their own past and the difficulty in foreseeing their future.

Whether we talk about "impulsiveness", "recklessness", "provocation" (as in the case of Sofia), these seem to be points of view on adolescents rather points of view of adolescents about themselves; and this tells more about the observer than the observed.

Nevertheless, what emerges and is observed cannot be separated from the one observing it. And if the observer changes (e.g. the adult rather than the adolescent), the importance given to one aspect or another also changes. For instance, the adult seems to look at the negative impact of the adolescent's choices, whereas adolescents would view the outcomes, the validations or invalidations, while experiencing and testing new clues about themselves.

Considering this gap can guide us toward a reflection on how the story and the choices of adolescents can be channelized and not predetermined.

It is important to remember that the challenge in working with adolescents is to commit oneself to continuously construing their processes and their anticipations. At the heart of education, we need to make a continuous effort to construe adolescent experiences that are sometimes too different or too threatening from the adult point of view; an effort aimed at bringing out the construction processes of adolescents and fostering mutual understanding among the players involved. Only in this way is it possible, as Bannister and Fransella said, to be in a relationship with adolescents, and not only do something to them.

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