

## Technical Report

### Who launches a new method to study adolescents' sexual behaviour

The World Health Organization has developed a new methodology for studying the sexual behaviour of young people – the so called „Narrative Research Approach” – with the collaboration of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World conclusions and findings of this study, which began in 1988, were reviewed in a meeting held in Dakar, Senegal between 22 and 26 April. Consequently, the experts will develop action programmes both in the 11 African countries where the research was undertaken (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe), and in other regions of the world.

The reason for the launch of this study was the realization that young people's health has become a subject of increasing importance throughout the world, both because of a better understanding of the importance of this age group to public health and the increased health hazards for young people due to changing behaviour patterns. This is especially true with regard to sexual and reproductive health.

Adolescent girls who marry young have always been at greater risk of illness, injury and death arising from pregnancy at too young an age and childbirth. But, in recent decades population growth in developing countries, urbanization, the crossing of cultural boundaries by rapidly expanding telecommunications, early menarche combined with delayed marriage, and the decline of the family, have given rise to new patterns of sexual behaviour. Unprotected premarital sexual relations are taking place at earlier ages, giving rise not only to problems of pregnancy at too young an age and childbearing, but also to induced abortion in hazardous circumstances, to sexually transmitted diseases, to increase in prostitution and to the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus leading to AIDS.

The study explores the way in which adolescents give narrative expression to one of the defining moments of the „coming of age“ experience, which is believed to be one of the most formative but potentially traumatic events in adolescents experience: the initial sexual relationship and its possible consequences. The project also investigates the ways in which adolescents describe the beginning of a relationship between a girl and a boy which leads to a sexual encounter and eventually, a pregnancy.

Based on their collective judgement the youth leaders in the eleven countries created the most prototypical story of adolescent sexual experience from an array of narrative possibilities. The stories, one in English and one in French were converted into a questionnaire and tested on some 13,000 young people in the eleven countries. This approach attempts to empower people in a community to study their own needs in their own ways and produce knowledge which is both relevant and understandable to the participants themselves. This study was designed specifically to capture aspects of the narrative mode of thinking which people use to organize and interpret their life experiences. Stories are cultural repositories of commonsense or folk psychology; they portray the human being as intentional agents whose actions flow from their beliefs and goals. They explain the behaviour of characters in the common sense terms of individual motives and reasons for acting. „The ultimate purpose of the questionnaire constructed for this investigation was to study the ways adolescents explain their own behaviour.“ states Dr. Herbert Friedman, Chief of the WHO Adolescent Health Programme. „This approach emphasizes general observation, rather than personal revelation and it offers a methodological advantage thanks to its distanced perspective, as it does not force personal confidences and self-disclosure. Thus, the respondents are not placed in a position of censoring or falsifying accounts of their own „immature“ or „immoral“ behaviour.“

Over 13,000 adolescents in the eleven countries, were asked to describe the most typical story of initial sexual experience, using a set of standard story options. The key finding was that there was substantial agreement on one particular story in all the countries investigated, which implies the existence of a common adolescent culture which crosses national and cultural boundaries. This theory is reinforced by the fact that the predominant story tended to be shared by both female and male respondents.

The overall findings reveal that sexual relations among young people don't simply come about between two strangers, but develop over time with the boy showing more interest than the girl; contraception is not used, no reference is made to the possibility of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or AIDS, and a little reassurance from the boy that the girl does not have to worry about

getting pregnant serves in place of contraceptive use. Moreover, as many as one-third of the young respondents believe that contraceptive methods cause infertility. The families are kept in the dark about the relationship, including, at least initially, the resulting pregnancy. Once a pregnancy is suspected, the boy will resist responsibility, and self induced abortion or abortion in unsafe circumstances is a main consideration, even if not always acted upon. When the pregnancy finally comes to the attention of the mother, the family takes over, but the girl's fate will also depend on the attitude of the boy's family. Whatever their intentions at the time, the future well being of the girl and her baby are very uncertain. The health service plays no role in the provision of contraception, pregnancy detection, or pregnancy care or induced abortion. More specifically, the findings also show that 33% of adolescents recognized that they had had a pregnancy problem, and 20% among them declared that they had contracted a sexually transmitted disease; and 25% of the girls had turned to prostitution as the only solution, after having been chased from their homes.

These findings provide evidence of a great need to prepare young people of both sexes for dealing with

relationships and sexual encounters before they occur. There is also a need to prepare families, and other responsible adults such as teachers, in such a way that they are both seen to be and are able to serve as viable resources for this purpose. Furthermore, there is a need to understand better and modify health services and service providers so that they are used early for preventive purposes, care diagnosis and treatment by young people.

These results will be used to develop programmes for adolescents throughout the world, and will be spearheaded by youth leaders themselves, who "because of their age, their motivation in the youth organizations, and their field experience with this study, are the best to suggest the right initiatives and projects to solve this public health education problem", says Dr. Friedman. A video featuring this new methodology is envisaged for distribution worldwide, to promote national programmes for adolescents. Already, similar studies based on this method have been undertaken in Brazil and Thailand, and a team from the University Institute of Preventive Medicine in Lausanne is thinking of undertaking this study in a project targeted to Swiss adolescents.

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