

## Adolescents' perceptions on gender

This issue of *Argentine Archives of Pediatrics* includes an article about gender perceptions among adolescents.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting the relevance of that study. It is part of the rich local tradition of pediatrics of taking an interest in practicing comprehensive health care, including its subjective, social, and biological aspects.<sup>2,3</sup> Having local research projects conducted in relation to this vacant topic is also important because, as referred by the investigators, they did not find local studies about adolescents' perceptions on gender.

Considering this framework of approach, that study took advantage of the outpatient demand in adolescent clinics to query them about the relevance acquired by a recent tendency in everyday life: the increasingly younger manifestation of adolescents that live and express their gender identity escaping the gender binary male-female paradigm and who, in terms of sexuality, express desires and practices that also escape, to various levels, the heteronormative paradigm, which favors sexual desire only for individuals of the opposite sex.

In addition, it can be said that it is not new that there are transgender people who have homoerotic sexual practices. What is new is that we are now facing the first generation of individuals who experience their adolescence in an open and diverse manner and who, at the same time, do not build their identity based on their sexual practices (the article mentions that adolescents do not refer to themselves as gays or lesbians based on their sexual practices), i.e., their identity is not shaped around their object of desire, as has been the case of the modern sexual order to which us, members of previous generations, have been subjected.<sup>4</sup> They are experiencing adolescence at the same time as 2 simultaneous transformations: the digital and the gender revolutions.<sup>5</sup>

It can be said that during this period, adolescents face the reality of sex as a practice that also involves the potential for reproduction, which in turn causes distress and doubts. What is particular of this generation is that the question of this stage of life regarding who we are and whom we fancy takes place in a scenario where identity acquisition and access to sexual pleasure are more nuanced.<sup>6</sup>

And this occurs in the framework of a society that has embraced a greater diversity than just binary options in terms of gender identity and heteronormativity in terms of sexuality. Actually, society has legitimized this with the Gender Identity Law,<sup>a</sup> the Civil Marriage Law amendment (known as equal marriage),<sup>b</sup> and the conveyance of these contents at school as part of the comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) study plan.

This is a message for all generations. However, during adolescence, individuals feel allowed and have new goals that enable them to describe themselves and others as diverse, with no fear of discrimination or feeling abnormal. In another article, I have expressed my opinion about why these processes take place earlier than "before".<sup>7</sup> I understand that now "things are occurring earlier" than what has historically occurred "later" because it had been restrained or redirected to the strategic domestication of a closet to avoid additional suffering from discrimination and lack of understanding. Most likely, this was because both individuals themselves and their loved ones did not have terms at hand to signify such early experiences.

The closet is a strong device to regulate social life, with an impact on dissident sexualities and non-conforming bodies.<sup>8,9</sup> This way, the experience of practices themselves, identity conformations, and love relationships outside the heteronormative binary paradigm are not authorized in broad daylight and can only take place in the privacy of bathrooms, bedrooms, and ghettos. Thus, as a biopolitical device, the closet participates in the subjectivity process by causing specific distress, depression, and anxiety.

The purpose of the above is to say that we are now facing a historic new generation that, at least in some urban areas and across certain social classes and cultural environments, can start exploring sexuality and gender identity

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a. Law no. 26743 was approved on May 9th, 2012 and enacted on May 23rd, 2012.

b. In July 2010, the Civil Marriage Law (no. 26618) was amended and introduced legal unions between same-sex persons.

during adolescence, with all the hesitations and fluctuations typical of this stage, outside the closet and with almost the same possibilities of legitimizing their desires as heterosexual and cisgender identities. Far from the illusion of the end of homophobia and transphobia, we are living in a period that is kinder to gender diverse identities and with fewer children and adolescents deprived of the possibility of exploring their actual desires.

All of this is highly relevant in the field of pediatrics and how it approaches adolescence for several reasons: a) sexual health is part of its competence, b) families include them as part of upbringing supports more often than mental health devices, and c) it is necessary knowing how to name them and their specific health care needs (contraception, sexual health, hormone replacement therapy if required, etc.) without taking anything from granted in advance.

### Findings of this study

The studied population was made up of more females (69.3%) than males (30.6%) because, as of the onset of adolescence, boys tend to stop attending outpatient health services and instead seek care at the emergency department and the on-duty shift.<sup>10</sup>

The study indicated that 3.3% (2.9% of females and 4.3% of males) perceived their gender identity was different from their sex assigned at birth and 5.3% said they had doubts about their gender identity. This describes a striking situation due to the novelty, but, at present, it represents a minority. Most of the interviewed population perceived their gender identity was the same as their sex assigned at birth. Even with little difference, transition from male to female is more common than vice versa.

In addition, the fact that 26% of the study population perceived they did not have a heterosexual orientation—a term I prefer to use rather than heteronormative sexual orientation in this case—is highly significant. Such value questions the “natural character” of heterosexuality, tied to the need for biological reproduction, but which will probably lose its predetermined and majority nature as it loses its normative value.

Another finding is that 44.8% of female adolescents kissed same-sex persons on the mouth compared to 19% of males. This indicates that sexual exploration among girls is less of a taboo and more accepted than among boys. This is

possibly due to the hegemonic masculinity model still in place in our society for the upbringing of males, which implies the demonstration of 3 basic mandates: you are not a woman, you are not gay, and you are not a kid.<sup>11</sup>

Gender-neutral language is also more common among females than males. Most likely, this is related to its origin in feminist campaigns aimed at tearing down the generic use of the masculine gender prevailing in Spanish to encompass the presence of females in language.

It is also striking that the use of clothes socially identified with a sex different from their sex was also more common among females compared to males. This may be explained, in part, by the fact that male clothing is usually more comfortable than that worn by females. “Typically female clothing” tends to exhibit a body as a sexual object. All of this is part of the questions raised by a new generation of women thanks to the “green wave”.<sup>c</sup>

It is also worth noting that data interpretation now includes concepts such as “sexual fluidity” and “mostly’ heterosexual individuals”.

These concepts allow to capture contemporary realities of sexual and identity transitions and also of the prevailing position of a trend, but which do not make up fixed, dichotomous or exclusive practices.

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c. In Argentina, this is the name given to the fourth wave of feminism, identified with the emblematic green scarf representative of the fight for legal, safe, and free abortion law.

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