

“Thinking like a boy is easier”: constructions of gender relations in the speech of female adolescents*

“Pensando como um menino é mais fácil”: construções sobre as relações de gênero no discurso de meninas adolescentes

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ABSTRACT: Socially constructed gender relations affect the adoption of behaviors related to sexuality, and may have impact on women occupational performance. The objective of this study was to describe and analyze constructions of gender relations in the female adolescents discourse and the possible impacts of them on occupational performance. *Methodology:* exploratory and descriptive study conducted with 34 female adolescents from a public school. The data collected through the recording of interventions to promote sexual and reproductive health and notes taken in a field diary that were subjected to thematic content analysis. *Results and Discussion:* we identified four thematic categories: childhood and gender; gender relations in everyday life; gender relations and sexuality and gender relations and teenage pregnancy. It was observed the traditional conceptions marked by oppression and subordination of women in relation to men, more problem-solving perspectives of gender relations that enable greater empowerment of women in everyday life. *Conclusion:* these data demonstrate the importance of actions and research conducted by occupational therapists focused on possible relationship between sex, gender, sexuality and occupational performance.

KEYWORDS: Occupational therapy; Adolescent; Gender identity; Sexuality; Women/psychology.

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RESUMO: As relações de gênero socialmente construídas influenciam na adoção de comportamentos e atitudes relacionados à sexualidade, com possível impacto no desempenho ocupacional das mulheres. Os objetivos consistem em descrever e analisar as construções sobre as relações de gênero no discurso de meninas adolescentes e os possíveis impactos dessas no desempenho ocupacional. Quanto à metodologia, trata-se de estudo exploratório e descritivo conduzido com 34 adolescentes mulheres em uma escola pública. Os dados coletados por gravação de intervenções de promoção de saúde sexual e reprodutiva e anotações em diário de campo foram submetidos a análise de conteúdo temática. Sobre os resultados e a discussão, identificou-se quatro categorias temáticas: infância e gênero; relações de gênero no cotidiano; relações de gênero e sexualidade e relações de gênero e gravidez na adolescência. Observou-se a coexistência de concepções tradicionais demarcadas pela opressão e submissão das mulheres em relação aos homens, com perspectivas mais problematizadoras das relações de gênero que possibilitam maior empoderamento da mulher no cotidiano. Concluiu-se que os dados apontam a importância da criação de ações e pesquisas pelos terapeutas ocupacionais que se direcionem para as possíveis relações entre sexo, gênero, sexualidade e desempenho ocupacional.

DESCRITORES: Terapia Ocupacional; Adolescente; Identidade de gênero; Sexualidade; Mulheres/psicologia.

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INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA) consider adolescence the period between from 12 to 18 years of age (incomplete)¹. The World Health Organization (WHO) limits the adolescence to the 2nd decade of life (between 10 to 19 years of age)²⁻³. However, the peculiarities of being an adolescent may vary according to cultural and economic aspects and such temporal barriers are not given in a fixed and homogenous way⁴.

This period involves the process in which identity, sexuality, friends, values, experiencing and living new roles are important, because, from them, adolescents can build relationships with their world, seeking to define themselves through activities, expectations, and affective and sexual relationships⁵⁻⁶.

Sexuality is considered a fundamental dimension in all stages of life, involving practices and desires related to satisfaction, affectivity pleasure, feelings and the exercise of freedom and health². However, in the social context, its experience is permeated by taboos, myths, prejudices, interdictions and power relations that are related to it, linked to gender representations⁶⁻⁷.

Gender is the process by which sexual distinctions between the bodies of men and women are brought into social practices, assuming thus cultural significances. It is understood as a social construction based on the differences observed between the male and female genders, and built based on values that refer to everyday life experiences^{3,5}.

Through these values and norms, individuals adopt behaviors and attitudes they judge to be more adequate to what is socially expected regarding what it is to be a man or a woman, therefore building sexual differences and hierarchies⁵.

Men and women are, therefore, not conditioned by nature, biology or sex, but by a social construction historically confirmed and developed from a masculine perspective. Considering this aspect, it can frequently be observed that women have a subordinated view of themselves, from the masculine perspective, characterizing relationships based on inequality and oppression^{3,8}.

According to the hegemonic social construction of gender in our society, the masculine represents superiority and power, always trying to prove its virility³. On the other hand, the feminine is associated with frailty and dependence. Since childhood, women do not learn to know their own bodies, they do not touch themselves, they do not feel pleasure⁵. Furthermore, reproduction is frequently considered an

exclusive feminine issue, due to women's nature, and sexuality would be essentially masculine, due to men's nature^{3,8}.

These gender relations have a considerable influence on the experience of sexuality, and can be converted into significant dilemmas for female adolescents, affecting directly the comprehension and construction of their own sexuality in an autonomous and responsible manner⁹.

It can be understood that sexuality is characterized by a continuous process of learning and discoveries, and it needs to be comprehended in the process of Occupational Therapy and used in a positive way in the occupational performance of adolescents^{6,10}.

Occupational performance refers to the abilities to adopt and to maintain a daily routine, to be able to fulfill social and occupational roles and tasks that have as a goal self-maintenance, productivity and leisure, done in a satisfactory and appropriate manner for the stage of development, culture and environment of the individual¹¹.

Even with the identification of sexuality as being an important aspect, it is still approached in a restrictive manner by the Occupational Therapy, many times being associated to the experiences of the sexuality for people with disabilities and to the analysis of the discomfort and the lack of preparation of the professional that approaches this theme⁷.

Considering that the experience of sexuality is directly related to perceptions regarding gender relations, this article intends to describe and analyze the constructions regarding gender relations in the discourse of female adolescents.

METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAY

This article is part of the research project called "Análise da utilização de recursos lúdicos na promoção de saúde sexual e reprodutiva de adolescentes" ["Analysis of the usage of ludic resources in the promotion of sexual and reproductive health of adolescents"], which was developed with an Extension Program.

The interventions, with which data collection is carried out, took place weekly with groups of adolescents at a public school. The topics of each meeting were defined based on educative materials prepared by the Ministry of Health and Education, as well as on the experiences of Bechara and Gontijo⁶.

Each group participated in 10 meetings with an approximate duration of 1 hour, with themes that addressed: body changes, sexuality, gender relations and sexuality, STDs, teenage pregnancy and experiences with safe sexuality. Moreover, a focal group was used to assess the project.

Ludic resources were used during the interventions, which were elaborated by the project team that mediated the construction of knowledge process on the discussed topics.

In this article, we used data related to the participation of 34 female adolescents, divided into 3 groups, between the 12 and 15 years. In order to participate in the research, the adolescents had to be between the 8th and 9th grade (Elementary School) and they had to have a minimum of 75% attendance in the meetings.

The data was collected after the approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the UFPE (24495), and the signature of the Informed Consent Form by the adolescents and their legal guardians. The privacy and anonymity of the participants were assured through the use of codes ("P" for Participant and "G" for Group, followed by an identification number).

Data collection was carried out through recording of the interventions in digital equipment, and reporting in a field journal. The content of transcriptions and notes was submitted to thematic analysis of the content in a qualitative perspective¹³. The thematic categories articulate the objectives of the study, the empirical data and the literature review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data obtained in the interventions revealed that, although discussions have been focused on the experience of sexuality (theme of this study intervention), the construction regarding gender relations had an impact in other dimensions of the occupational development. In this sense, four thematic categories were identified: childhood and gender; everyday gender relations; gender relations and sexuality; and gender relations and teenage pregnancy.

Childhood and Gender

Since birth, there is an influential social determination of what means to be a boy or a girl, which appears in clothing color and baby ornaments – pink the color most used for girls, and blue for boys.

"If a baby girl is wearing blue without any other details, people ask if it's a boy." (P4- G1- 08/21/2012)

However, some participants question this association, which considered a "taboo," indicating that, when they become mothers, her kids will wear any color.

"There is this taboo that I think is awful [...]: blue for boys, pink for girls." (P6- G1- 08/21/2012).

The representations related to gender also influence how children play – because the boy ought to play with his toy cars, something that is considered inherent and restrict to the boys, whereas the girl must play with dolls.

"It will always be like that, the girl must play with dolls and the boy with cars, and none of them will ever be able to play together." (P2- G1- 08/21/2012)

They emphasized that if the boy wants to play with dolls, people will associate this with a trend or tendency to homosexuality, or that the boy is being influenced to become a homosexual, and the same conception is attributed to the girl who plays with toy cars.

"The boy who plays with dolls since an early age [...], he will be a homosexual when he grows up." (P22- G3- 10/16/2012)

However, other girls challenged this opinion, attributing these labels to "society", and considering that playing is an important occupation for the children and toys and how they play do not influence sexuality.

"Society judges, saying that the boy is gay [...] I don't think so!!! I think that playing with a doll will not change the personality or the boy's character." (P18- G3- 10/16/2012)

These conceptions indicate that questions related to gender are influential as long as the gender of the child is known, therefore determining a set of expectations that will shape the individual's life, affecting its occupational performance since childhood.

Regarding this aspect, Andreoli⁷ states that gender does not express who we are, but a repeated stylization, in the body, of a set of behaviors according to social and cultural norms. This stylization emerges in the ludic sphere, a context in which children become aware of their influences on the world and start to (re)signify their social place, especially regarding the so-called feminine and masculine "roles"¹³⁻¹⁴.

When they are playing (an activity that allow inter-individual relationships, and due to that, cultural relationships), children construct themselves as "little men" and "little women", and experience symbolic meanings that are influenced by cultural impregnation¹³. The conceptions

that are expressed by the adolescents indicate not only elements that divide and differentiate boys and girls, but they also reinforces gender antagonisms, allowing the development and the perpetuation of behaviors that are specific to men and women^{7,13}.

However, the very questioning of these "values" by some adolescents expose the social construction aspect of these relationships and the possibility of problematizing the latter in various aspects of life. This possibility indicates the potential of Occupational Therapy interventions, that, based on participative methodology allow the adolescents to think about the (de)naturalization of the unbalanced gender relationships that are socially built and their consequences since childhood¹⁵.

This questioning and confrontation/change strategies are important, since the naturalized constructions may result in restrictions in the experimentation of new experiences, learning and activities that may contribute to child's development, therefore directly interfering in the occupational performance.

Everyday Gender Relations

This category is about the comprehension of how gender relations influence adolescents' everyday life, including home organization, behavior, social participation and insertion in the labor market.

Regarding home organization, girls attributed the responsibility of taking care of the house as an occupational role restricted to women, justifying this conception by saying that "they did it better" and that it was their obligation. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of men to financially take care of the house.

"It is a woman's job, they do it better." (P2- G1-08/21/2012).

"Men have to bring money to the house. The woman should stay at home doing household chores." (P6- G1-08/21/2012).

The participants argued that men who do not participate in household chores use this as an excuse to affirm their masculinity – if a man helps with household chores he is "identified" as being homosexual, and this is considered something negative by them.

"[...] it is hard to do anything, they start saying 'ah this is a woman's thing, I'm not gay'." (P6- G1-08/21/2012).

In relation to social participation and behavior, the girls mentioned that men have more "rights" to go to bars, to be with other women – the idea that "men can do whatever they want", because they are men, in opposition to women.

"there is this difference, men can do whatever they want." (P2- G1- 08/21/2012).

However, the female adolescents noted some changes in this scenario, pointing out that women have been gaining more opportunities in the labor market in the last decades, becoming more and more autonomous and independent, consequently broadening their social participation and establishing more equal relationships.

"In the past, women were not allowed to work, only men. Nowadays, women work." (P2- G1- 08/21/2012).

"Nowadays women have more autonomy." (P6- G1-08/21/2012).

Regarding the insertion in the labor market, most adolescents understand that there are professions considered to be feminine and others that are masculine. Men have professions like firefighter, police officer and driver, whereas women tend to have professions more associated to care, such as being a nurse. If a man has a profession such as hairdresser, this is directly associated to his sexuality and homosexuality.

"if a man is a hairdresser it's because he is a homosexual! Now, if a woman is a hairdresser there is no problem at all." (P6- G1- 08/21/2012).

On the other hand, other girls say that this is not a mandatory association and to have a certain profession does not have a direct relation with sexual identity, but with talent and personal vocation.

"Yeah, there is this thing that people say that male hairdressers are gay. Not always!" (P2- G1- 08/21/2012).

Just like in childhood, for most participants, to be a man or a woman imply the possibilities of performance in everyday activities, mainly regarding domestic care, and social and labor participation.

It can be understood that gender relations are built in a way to signify power relations, establishing identities, beliefs, roles and values^{3,5}. In this sense, the masculine

universe is marked by activities that are linked to strength, being smart, mature and skilled. On the other hand, traditionally, when referring to girls, the activities related to maternity, household chores, among others¹³.

Within the context of Occupational Therapy, these questions can be contemplated from the perspective of occupational justice. A scenario of occupational justice is recognized as being the one in which the subjects have the right and the possibility of satisfying their basic needs and to have egalitarian opportunities and chances to develop their potential to the fullest, mainly regarding the performance of several occupations that are significant to them¹⁶.

The naturalization of pre-determined behaviors based on the valorization of hegemonic gender conceptions may restrict female behavior, limiting the women to activities that are determined and "inherent" to their gender. This process, which may restrict, deprive and alienate the engagement of women in significant occupations, contributes to the dissatisfaction with their occupational activities in their personal, family, work and emotional spheres, exposing women to situations of occupational injustice.

The possibility of occupational injustice, due to the impact of gender conceptions in everyday life, was also revealed in the discourse of the female adolescents, with references to situations in which men and women adopt behaviors that are different from the "traditional" pattern and that somehow are socially related to homosexual identities.

In this sense, the potential of the development of researches and actions focused on the comprehension and questioning these aspects is emphasized. According to Galheigo¹⁷, when criticizing everyday life, a situation that may have as *locus* occupational therapy intervention, one can embrace human creations, ideas, values and feelings, enabling knowledge of their own society and the creation and strengthening of new social relations. Therefore, when he/she stimulates critical reflection regarding ordinary life and the elaboration of a new view for what it appears to be an immutable life, the occupational therapist contribute to movements of self-determination of individuals, collective reorganization, giving new dimensions and organizations to everyday life and occupational performance.

Gender Relations and Sexuality

In this category, data referring to gender conceptions and the establishment of sexual and affective relations in adolescence were included.

One important aspect refers to the interferences, based on gender, of the family in establishing sexual and affective relations and of the female adolescents.

For the participants, families give more freedom to boys regarding sexuality, but generally control and do not accept the same behavior for girls. Commonly, families feel proud in supporting boys and associate their sexual experience with girls to the affirmation and social valorization of their masculinity. On the other hand, the participants state the existence of a greater family control for women, with restrictions regarding the establishment of affective and sexual relationships.

"The father of a friend of mine always tell him this: if you want to date a woman, be with a different one each day... but he is very jealous of his daughter." (P2- G1- 08/20/2012)

This perception of male sexuality is also manifested in the difficulty on talking about the subject among female adolescents. For the participants, men "think about, talk about and make" more sex, because, for them, who are characterized as "kinkier", this topic is easier to address, since sexual expression is understood as a part of masculinity.

"If I think like a boy, it is easier to answer. Thinking like a girl is different." (Answer to the question: "what is sex for you?") (P6- G1- 08/17/2012).

When questioned on the perception they had about what men consider to be an ideal woman for a stable relationship, the participants presented unanimous opinions, by saying that girls that have less experience and are more quiet are more "valued" and the ones chosen for marriage. It must be highlighted that this conception is understood as "correct" by the girls, given that girls should prove themselves worthy by not having many sexual partners.

"The boys do not want you for marriage, only for sex. The others (the more quiet girls) are only for marriage. I think that is correct!!!" (P1- G1- 08/20/2012).

The interpretation regarding gender differences may imply a relation of complementarity or hierarchy, depending on the culture, having as reference a relationship of two antagonistic poles⁵. It may also corroborate social inequality relations or even violence (concrete or symbolic), through a construction of

culture parameters of superiority of a social group over another⁷.

Specifically regarding female adolescents, this historical process usually limits the experience of sexuality, according to what was noted in the discourse of the participants. These restrictions are generally characterized by repression, by the distinction in behaviors and control of boys and girls; for the "nos" that constantly bound them; for the prohibitions; for the notion of subordination and passivity, among other constraints; as well as for the lack of dialogue and clarification regarding biological, social and cultural events that are part of their lives¹⁸.

To stimulate the participation of the female adolescents in discussions regarding gender relations and the expression of sexuality is an effective strategy for the occupational therapist in the effort to demystify and denaturalize the behaviors stigmatized as "correct" and on the elaboration of life projects, favoring the protagonism of these girls, who frequently perpetuate and value conceptions that put them in a frailty and submissive position.

According to Villela and Doreto¹⁹, an individual may become less vulnerable if he/she is capable of interpreting the social messages that put him/her in situations of disadvantage or vulnerability, because his/her vulnerability may increase if the individual does not have the opportunity to give new meanings to the messages that are disseminated in his/her environment.

Within this context, the occupational therapist may contribute to the comprehension of sexuality as being historically and culturally variable, being a professional that stimulates individual and collective transformation.

Gender Relations and Teenage Pregnancy

The last analysis category refers to the influence of gender relations in the potential experience of teenage pregnancy. It must be highlighted that no participant experienced pregnancy; however, all of them had friends or close relatives that have been through this experience.

Initially the accountability for the pregnancy was discussed, and the participants stated that is very common for the boy to blame the girl, as if it was solely her responsibility to use contraceptive methods.

"He thinks that if she got pregnant it was her own fault." (P5- G1- 08/22/2012).

However, the girls indicated that in this case it is the boy's "fault", he should have been more careful, since men are "sassier" and "kinkier" than girls.

"He is irresponsible; he should have been more careful." (P6- G1- 08/22/2012).

Other adolescents defended the idea that the responsibility belongs to both, given that both should be responsible regarding these precautions.

"If she had been more careful... if he also had been more careful, it is not her exclusive responsibility [...]." (P6- G1- 08/22/2012).

Regarding the boy reaction to pregnancy, some girls indicate that the boy normally does not want to hear about the girl or the child, that he would not support it, preferring to cut all bonds.

"He doesn't want to hear about her, and abandons her." (P1- G1- 08/22/2012).

However, other girls mentioned the possibility of the boy getting moved by the idea of paternity and then supporting the girl and the child, allowing himself the opportunity of experiencing something entirely new.

"He may feel moved." (P2- G1- 08/22/2012).

The reactions of the adolescents in face of an unexpected pregnancy, as well as their attitudes regarding having children or not are strongly influenced by their paternity representations and gender roles²⁰.

According to Costa et al.²¹, as far as the masculine attitudes towards pregnancy are concerned, the man's reaction occurs in different ways, and they can feel enthusiastic, resist to the situation and/or feel ambivalent. The refusal of a man in accepting paternity may generate conflicts that could interfere in the relationship with the children and the family.

For the participants, the attitude of "assuming the responsibility for the child" is related to whether he likes the girl or not. Therefore, if the boy still likes the girl, he would establish a good relationship with his child. If he does not, he would prefer to omit his participation in the care and upbringing of the baby.

"If he likes her, he will assume the responsibility for the kid, if he doesn't..." (P2- G1- 08/22/2012).

Other girls say that if the boys have a relationship with the girl without any commitment, that is, "only for the purpose of making out", he has the right to choose if

he wants to assume the child or not, given that they did not have a well-established relationship.

"She made out with him... how can he assume the responsibility for something that was no more than playing around?" (P10- G2- 09/22/2012).

As mentioned by the female adolescents, the accountability for the pregnancy is attributed to girls, and generally the boys put themselves in a greater vulnerability situation as far as assuming paternity is concerned, therefore confirming the traditional gender conceptions that consider responsibility for care as being the women's prerogative, including the use of contraceptive methods and being submissive to male sexual domination. Hence, health promotion programs have a fundamental influence on the masculine co-responsibility both in the pregnancy and in the upbringing of the child, allowing a more detailed discussion regarding the responsibilities and social roles of men and women in relation to paternity and maternity²².

Concerning the potential impact of a teenage pregnancy on the activities and everyday occupations, the female adolescents said that this experience may have as a consequence a great loss in school activities both for the boy and the girl, who may have to stop attending classes.

"First, they'll have to leave school..." (P18- G3- 10/22/2012).

The school dropout is related to new responsibilities in taking care of the child. In relation to that, different conceptions were observed. For one part of the participants, both girls and boys must work for the financial maintenance of the child. For the others, men must work, because women have to stay at home, taking care of the child.

"Suddenly he'll have to work, to take care of his kid, to buy diapers." (P11- G2- 09/12/2012).

"Both will have to work" (P20- G3- 10/22/2012).

For girls, the child considerably interferes on their freedom, since leisure activities will be heavily compromised.

"Wherever you go, you'll have to take your kid." (P11- G2- 09/12/2012).

"You'll want to go out, and you won't be able to go anymore." (P13- G2- 09/12/2012).

However, apart from these restrictions in the performance of everyday activities, the girls, unanimously, say that if they had a kid during adolescence, the baby would have been considered a blessing and a motivation to look at the future with determination.

"because it is a blessing to have a kid, to reap good things..." (P17/ P15- G3- 10/12/2012).

Teenage pregnancy cannot be considered exclusively a source of social problems – even when unplanned, it is not always undesirable²³. Traditionally, teenage pregnancy has a negative meaning and the potential of interfering in the future due to associations to school dropout and an early insertion in the labor market²⁴.

However, just like for the female adolescents in this study, although being a young mother brings negative consequences, this factor would also stimulate them to outline new life projects, which can take a central characteristic in the life of these adolescents. Thus, teenage maternity may take the form of a social ascension, as a "passport" to adult life, and as a reinforcement to become "somebody" in life with the perspective of obtaining the esteem of others and a better future to adolescents and their child²⁵.

It is understood that Occupational Therapy should favor the performance of adolescents in occupations and tasks that are significant in order to support health and participation of individuals in different contexts, and to contribute to a better life quality²⁶. Within the context of teenage pregnancy, the occupational therapist may intervene in terms of favoring the problematization of teenage maternity, considering its positive and negative consequences in everyday life.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the discussions have been focused on sex and reproductive health, it was noted that the impact of these issues go beyond this sphere, with repercussions in other occupational performance dimensions, influencing ordinary life, behaviors, social participation, insertion in the labor market, sexual experience freedom, and conceptions regarding maternity and paternity.

When they pointed out that "thinking as a man is easier than to think as a woman," the adolescents expose in their discourses the manifestation of the oppressive situations that are experienced daily in the relations between men and women. In this perspective, it can be admitted that gender is a significant factor in

the possibilities of occupational performance, restricting the women's behavior and limiting women to certain gender activities, with the characterization of scenarios of occupational injustice.

However, the coexistence of different conceptions and the emergence of perceptions that understand gender relations in a more problematized perspective were also observed, which can promote the empowerment of women in the assumption of roles within family and society. Therefore, the potential of Occupational Therapy

interventions that address the impact of gender relations on ordinary life should be emphasized, since it is believed that even under strong vulnerability, female adolescents have the conditions to be resilient and to (re)think and (re) build these relationships.

Thus, it is essential that occupational therapist plan interventions, based on a dialogic perspective, so they can contribute to the personal capacitation of individuals, giving space for adolescents to be heard and recognized based on their capacities.

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