



Acculturative processes and adolescent sexuality: A comparative study of 115 immigrant adolescents from cultures influenced by Islam and 115 French adolescents from cultures influenced by Christianity[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on the assumption that adolescents from cultural backgrounds influenced by Islam have first-hand knowledge of the same sources of information on sexual behavior as their native-born peers. We worked from the premise that the processes inherent to cultural integration and adolescence have a propensity to create a marked cultural gap between first and second generation immigrants. We also hypothesize that these shared sources of information, as well as the cultural difference between generations will result in a common body of knowledge, thus leading to a reduction in the differences between young people from immigrant backgrounds and their native counterparts. The specific status of women in societies influenced by Islam, and the hyper-control which is exerted on them, is expressed through the unreserved submission of adolescent girls to patriarchal values, leading to a gap between these girls and the adolescent boys from the same group.

Our purpose in this study is to examine factors which both separate adolescents and bring them together in one particular area – that of representations and sexual experience.

Accordingly, we compared findings on this divide by distributing a questionnaire to two groups of young people aged between 13 and 20 (average age: 17.3, standard deviation: 3.11). The first group (G1) was made up of 115 adolescents from immigrant backgrounds (Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian or Turkish), from geographical areas strongly influenced by Islamic culture. The second group (G2) was a control group made up of 115 French adolescents whose culture comes under the sway of Christianity and the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Feedback obtained from the questionnaire shows that birth or early arrival in the host country notwithstanding, young adolescents from the various cultures influenced by Islam stand in sharp contrast to those born into cultures influenced by Christianity (G2). Differences between the groups are even more striking in girls than in boys.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time of sexuality discovery. For both boys and girls, it results in metamorphosis of the body, new and increasing concern about one's sexual attractiveness and a need to distance one's self from one's parents (Braconnier, 1999;

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Kestenberg, 1999; Marty, 2001). Sexuality is subject not only to pubertal development, but also to educational, psychological, social, and cultural pressures.

Within the social and cultural realms, over the last few decades we have witnessed growing permissiveness in Western societies, subjecting young people and children to a steady stream of information and highly explicit sexual imagery. Young people are often incited by the prevailing eroticized culture to indulge in sexual activities, even if they are not yet psychologically mature. Obstacles which previously existed, such as the fear of sin, shame or social stigma, are a thing of the past (Bajos & Bozon, 2008; Braconnier et al., 2003).

We have often wondered how adolescents from immigrant backgrounds, especially those whose culture is influenced by Islam, are able to build a sexual identity in this prevailing, and occasionally provocative, sociocultural context and media influenced environment. We have also asked ourselves how these pubescent boys and girls deal with their budding sexual drives while being subjected to sexual pressure on the part of their family, society at large, and permissiveness in the host country. The following questions have led us to conduct this research.

- Upon which beliefs, family and socio-cultural sexual schemata do adolescents base their representations and experience of sexuality?
- Are these adolescents similar, or do they differ from the native adolescents in their peer group?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *The role of school*

Sex education should be conducted both within the family circle and at school (Mohr, 2003). In France, a circular dated April 15, 1996 provided for a minimum of 2 h of sex education for seventh and eighth graders (13–15 years old). This circular has since been supplemented by the 4th July 2001 Act, which advocates the teaching of sex education in primary schools and in junior high schools from sixth grade to eighth grade (11–15 years old), and in high schools for at least three sessions annually.

It stands to reason that school constitutes a valuable source of information for young people in terms of sexuality, for both the native population and second generation immigrants. The latter have in fact grown up and lived in the host country. From their school's point of view, they have therefore, acquired the same body of knowledge, even if the sex education taught there may irritate their parents (Chinichian, 2005).

2.2. *Peer influence*

Faced with this steady flow of information and the unlimited supply of imagery on display in the media, young people are somewhat at a loss regarding their sexuality, and at times feel helpless and unable to tell what is true from what is false. Teenagers are often at a loss regarding sexuality and tend to turn to their peers for help. When asked where they obtain most of their information, they cite firstly their peer group, then their parents, and lastly the media. Interestingly, it has also been shown that adolescent boys are more willing than girls to talk about sexuality with their peer group than with their mothers (Hampton, Jeffery, McWatters, & Smith, 2005).

As far as the native-born participants are concerned, peer groups play a major role during adolescence. 48% of young people aged between 13 and 15 admit broaching the topic of sexuality with their friends (Dillard, 2002). In the case of the immigrants, the group and the sense of belonging and allegiance to a group seem to be of paramount importance.

The majority of young immigrants surveyed acknowledge that they are only able to talk about sexuality with their friends. The peer group fosters sexual values and is a means of comparison. Adolescents identify with their peer group and the set of values it embodies. Indeed, the peer group has always had an influence on its members (Steele, 1999). It plays a significant part in decision making and in fostering the feeling that sexuality is a normative behavior (Hampton et al., 2005). Thus, peers represent a seminal source of information, both for the native population and for migrants (Gabora, 2002).

2.3. *The role of the media*

It is at this particular period of adolescents' lives that they feel empowered and seek information on their own. It is to the media at large (i.e. TV, music, magazines and the Web) that they turn their attention in order to come by the relevant information on sexuality quickly, easily and anonymously (Brown, 2002; Werner-Wilson, Fitzharris, & Morrissey, 2004). Nowadays, "Sex" is the most searched for term on the Web (CyberAtlas 2001, quoted by Brown, 2002). Adolescents who do not talk about sex at home are most often the ones who use the media to search for information on the subject. The problem lies in the fact that what they see on television is internalized as "a must-do," while what is conveyed via the media does not always have a bearing on reality (Brown, 2002).

It is worth noting that the influence exerted by the media as a preferred source for general knowledge on sexuality also holds true with respect to the Muslim population. In the research paper by Masmoudi-Soussi et al. (2006), 35.8% of native Tunisian adolescents opted for reading magazines, and 31.3% chose audiovisual media (video cassettes, TV channels, etc.).

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