

YOUTH SUBJECTIVITIES AND STI /HIV-AIDS PREVENTION POLICIES

Dr. Natividad Guerrero Borrego

National Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX, its Spanish acronym)

natividadguerrero@infomed.sld.cu

Doctor in Psychological Sciences, professor, in charge of the Scientific Department, CENESEX.

ABSTRACT

YOUTH IS A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CATEGORY WHICH HAS GAINED RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES. ITS DEFINITION BEARS THE MARK OF DIVERSITY; IT IS A POLYSEMOUS CONCEPT. ACCORDING TO UNO-ECLAC (2007), YOUNGSTERS CONSTITUTE AN IMPORTANT HUMAN GROUP ACCOUNTING FOR APPROXIMATELY 37% OF THE IBERO-AMERICAN POPULATION, INCLUDING THE GROUP BETWEEN 15 AND 24 YEARS OF AGE. LIKEWISE, THEY ARE INFLUENCED BY THEIR LIVING CONTEXT AND TIME WHICH QUALIFIES AND DISTINGUISHES THEIR GROWTH AND MATURATION EVOLUTION. LIKE OTHER HUMAN GROUPS, THEY ARE DIVERSE AND UNIQUE. THEY REPRESENT A COMPLEX LIFE PERIOD DEMANDING TRANS-DISCIPLINE RESEARCH AND MULTISECTORIAL EDUCATION AND PREVENTION WORK. SUBJECTIVITIES REFER TO THE INTERPRETATIONS MADE BY YOUTH ON THE REALITY SURROUNDING THEM. THERE IS A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE DIFFICULTIES PRESENT IN OUR ENVIRONMENT. THOUGH THE CURRENT IMPACT CAN BE CONSIDERED POSITIVE IN GENERAL, IT HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED THAT A LONG AND DIFFICULT ROAD HAD TO BE TRAVERSED IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE CLOSE INTEGRATION OF EVERYONE IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL SPACES WITH THE PURPOSE OF CONTINUING THE PROGRESS AND SENSITIZATION OF THE POPULATION AT LARGE, ESPECIALLY THE MOST VULNERABLE ONES, TO ATTAIN INCREASINGLY RESPONSIBLE, HEALTHY AND FULL SEXUAL CONDUCTS.

KEY WORDS: YOUTH, SUBJECTIVITIES, PREVENTION POLICIES

INTRODUCTION

Youth is a socio-historical category which has gained relevance in contemporary times. Its definition bears the mark of diversity. "It is a polysemous concept which cannot be restricted to merely one definition" (1). It is a concept that must be understood from the plurality, that is, from YOUTHS.

Official actions such as the declaration of August 10th as the International Youth Day, the Pre-Regional Conference (May 2011, Brazil), and the World Conference for Youth (August 2011, Mexico) evidence the willingness of participating governments to consider this population segment as a guarantee for the future. Therefore, they are ready to invest in this segment to attain a greater development for future societies.

Youngsters constitute an important human group accounting for approximately 37% of the Ibero-American population (2) including the group between 15 and 24 years of age. The most significant anatomical-physiological and psychosocial transformations take place in human beings during this stage of life. Likewise, they are influenced by their living context and time which qualifies and distinguishes their growth and maturation evolution. Like other human groups, they are diverse and unique. They represent a complex life period demanding trans-discipline research and multisectorial education and prevention work.

From the Cuban perspective, one of the more comprehensive definitions is the one provided by Master in Sciences L. Gómez, historian at the Center of Youth Studies, who considers youth as

a socially produced historical category assigned to a human group formed and developed with common social and demographic features

defined in accordance with their place in the social structure. It includes youngsters between 15 and 30 years of age distinguished by their own social relations which, in turn, correspond to the specific qualities of that stage, where youth identities are acknowledged by they themselves or by the society [1].

In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning some universal premises that might be taken into consideration in any analysis involving the youth:

- They are bearers of values generated during their social interaction. In this regard, emphasis is placed on this population sector, as social actors echoing new values in contrast to those already existing. Youngsters are distinguished by their interest in everything that is original.
- Not only youngsters, but also adults accompanying them during their formation process, grow throughout the interrelation established in socializing spaces. In general, adults interested in contributing to the formation of new generations try to look for, incorporate and assimilate the way in which they can work with youth, how to better understand them, and how to achieve positive outcomes in their educational efforts. Likewise, they recognize that any interaction includes rights and duties, and that bonds established should be mediated by mutual respect and limits.

As revealed by researcher María Josefa Luis, authors like Bourdieu refer to youth as a social development which, inter alia, is a process aimed at instilling abilities, values and standards promoted through different ways, especially the family, the school and the mass media (3).

- The different socializing spaces in which youngsters are formed should convey coherent messages providing a greater consistency and soundness to the process. Nowadays, traditional spaces are displaced by others which are more effective, namely, the mass media and the new information

technologies. The latter are very effective since their information is provided through virtual networks which progressively affect the formation of new generations for they become consumers and addicts when they manage to have access.

- A heterogeneous social product (the natural, what is provided by society, what is assimilated from it) converge on the youth. Therefore, we cannot formulate homogenous strategies or think about youngsters from a single perspective. They need several opportunities. What is different is legitimate too.
- The heterogeneous chronology of these ages facilitates the understanding of their behaviors. They might be undergoing a biological development which does not correspond to the psychological development, and something similar happens to their social development when they have to assume new responsibilities.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CUBAN YOUTH

In the case of our specific study, every reference to youth or youth population includes adolescents and youngsters. Among adolescents, relations with their peers are typical and allow them to confront and develop their own characteristics and construct their own appraisal and knowledge. Among them, they find understanding and identification, not only of tastes and preferences, but also of conflicts and contradictions with the surrounding environment.

As L. Domínguez states, between 15 and 18 years of age an increasing dependence is found in the establishment of criteria and identification of preferences. This is the most dynamic stage in the individual's life (4).

During adolescence, there are higher possibilities to assimilate elements from the cultural universe closer to them. Likewise, youngsters have a stronger presence in cultural institutions.

Currently, and in contrast with the world population dynamic, youth is decreasing in Cuba, though it is still a group deserving great attention by the State which is making considerable efforts to provide them with a better education.

According to Master in Sciences Juan C. Alfonso, director of the Center for Population and Development Studies from the National Office of Statistics and Information, some social, demographic and economic trends can be summarized (5) as follows:

- The number of youngsters (15 to 29 years old) between 2002 and 2011 decreased from 21.2% to 20.4% of the population. Similar proportions are also found in the behavior of the variables sex and residence area.
- The average age was still 22.6 during the same period, though with different proportions per groups. Within the context of the social and demographic change of the Cuban society, the youth has not "aged," though they have decreased in quantity and will continue decreasing.
- Despite the fact that, in absolute and percentage terms, its number is slightly lower between 2002 and 2011, their participation in economy is still a fifth of the total number of employees, though with a tendency to have higher qualifications. In 2002, approximately 56% of all employed youngsters in the country had a middle-higher to higher educational level. In 2011, the figure increased to 82%, though the economically active youth population, between this period, still remained the same as already mentioned.
- In the period mentioned, Cuban youth decreased in number and proportion within the total formalized marriages (49 to 44%) in the country, and in divorces (28 to 21%).
- On the contrary, the number of consensual unions has increased in the establishment of young couples and the rest of the population.

- Likewise, between 2002 and 2011 fertility rates increased in each group and in general. Besides, from 2002 to 2011, life expectancy increased, meaning that births mainly took place between 15 and 29 years old (from 70 to 75 births), and 1.5 deaths only.

Subjectivities refer to contemporary forms of life production and expression, looking for self-recognition and self-assertion, which are constructed both in the social sphere, from the interaction with others within a particular historical context, and in the intra-psychic sphere of unconscious elaborations determining the psychic constitution of the subject within a context of power relations (6).

Based on this perspective, youth subjectivities can be understood as every action, statement or discourse aimed at reaffirming and self-asserting the idea of himself/herself produced by youngsters. That is, the identity anchorage evidenced in their expressions and from which the sense of life is constructed (6).

There is no such youth subjectivity, but expressions, externalizations, so to speak, of their subjective condition; stances regarding the world grouped in an orderly fashion, though not always coherent with the social world; rational or rationalized stances around old redefined identities, new identity cores, emerging practices, discourses or collective imagination (6).

In the last two decades, the youth population has been included among the main consumers of the new information technologies. In this regard, there are different considerations contributing to youth subjectivities.

Norma Alejandra Maluf, in her article entitled *Las subjetividades juveniles en sociedades de riesgo. Un análisis en contextos de globalización y modernización* (7) (Youth subjectivities in risk societies. An analysis in globalization and modernization contexts), expresses:

It is assumed that youngsters suffer risk conditions because “they have lost values” and because now the ideals of hedonism,

individualism and consumerism prevail over family, school and even religious traditions and frameworks. Youngsters are still bearers of the great symbolic society vacuums.

An analysis of the so-called value crisis notes that the problem lies in the belief that such values constitute an unchanging truth, not a historical construction, which change with culture and, above all, consist of significant processes. Subjects are rather the ones who provide values; values do not recover or provide sense by themselves.

According to Lipovetsky, the youth forms part of a radically new global society, with new values and aspirations. Thus, it is not a value crisis led by the youth, but contradictions between the new and old forms of behavior, and the daily social assessments we all have to make despite the fact that they are considered as the youth's responsibility.

Balbeny, in turn, affirms that everything is framed within the context of a disparity between two contemporary cultural spheres: the information and the valuation cultures in the so-called information societies; a disparity in which information provided by the mass media is descriptive and easy to assimilate, while the valuation information refers to behaviors, habits and beliefs demanding its assimilation by subjects.

In the last decades, the communication theory emphasized the importance of the exchange and of inter-subjective relations linking subjects with mass media. That is, every media message should undergo an interpretation process which is essentially inter-subjective. If this is so, then the pedagogic mediation would not come

from a technological device per se, but from the personal interactions in the linking process between the individual and the media. Then it is not a technological mediation, but an inter-subjective and interpretative mediation.

The value crisis does not depend on the influx of or access to global information, but on the local deficit to generate assessments associated with legitimate standards and duties and the impossibility to defend the current prevailing values derived from concrete behaviors and practices of political and social actors.

Maluf points out that:

the main risk conditions in the construction of youth subjectivities are found in institutions established or transformed under a globalized modernization, and in their capacity to provide senses.

It is in the externality and cultural nature of (family, educational, religious) institutions that we expect to find sense production and generation processes, in their interaction with the inner world, and a close relationship between the objective and the subjective.

Subjectivity really stems out from this sense providing linkage [7].

We agree with Norma A. Maluf on the need to make media more effective, not only the technological ones, but all those aimed at forming the new generations and influencing those already formed. We are now living under a foreign influence which is more or less intense depending on those who consume it and their possibility to be more or less authentic and critical against what is offered for them to consume.

The Cuban youths are not exempted from these influences. They are also consumers of a wide variety of foreign products, in our case associated with sexuality.

Youth expressions on HIV-AIDS in Cuba reveal the need to take actions at institutional level, so as to continue our influence throughout the national territory.

In this regard, we can summarize that:

- The Cuban youth expressions refer to an intense sexual activity. The current trend in protection indicates that youngsters are already assimilating the need to be sexually protected, perhaps because they were born under HIV-AIDS times. However, young adults are not equally sensitized and are exposed to more risks.
- There are a significant number of adolescents and youngsters who are not always sexually protected, especially when experiencing occasional sexual relations.
- The selection of educational and preventive options depends on the different life experiences and the context in which they take place.
- The STI/HIV-AIDS information level is not enough. Besides, there are adolescents and youngsters who do not perceive any risk associated with these issues.
- There are homosexual practices demanding protection and they are not always protected.
- Sero-incompatible couples are increasing.
- There are persons practicing transactional sex who are not always protected.
- Access to protection devices (sale of condoms) is not adequately guaranteed. There is a wide use of intrauterine devices and pills as contraceptive methods, though this does not guarantee protection against STI and HIV.

However, for more than twenty years, the State has been implementing a National Program for STI and HIV-AIDS Prevention and Control and has progressively

improved its strategies, which has resulted in a low prevalence of HIV-AIDS in Cuba.

Some of the more effective prevention policies implemented by the Cuban government include:

- creation of a National Center for STI/HIV-AIDS. This center has been created at provincial and municipal levels including the most important actions, namely, screening process to identify new cases and provide primary care to the population, as well as a systematic assistance to persons requiring it;
- creation of an STI/HIV-AIDS operational multisectorial group (GOPELS, its Spanish acronym) under the State leadership for the systematic evaluation of actions aimed at reducing the presence of these infections in the country;
- systematic actions to train competent human resources to develop preventing actions;
- creation of telephone and personal counseling services;
- elaboration of factual educational materials for STI prevention;
- elaboration of audiovisual materials for STI prevention.

Cuba has been receiving some funds from the United Nations and the Global Fund to strengthen prevention and assistance. This has improved the quality of services provided, the contraceptive coverage, information level of the population, and the effectiveness of prevention-oriented communication campaigns. In this way, special care is provided for vulnerable populations such as men having sex with men, and persons practicing transactional sex.

Despite these preventive strategies implemented by the government and non-governmental institutions, the work is not as effective as required; I believe this is due to:

- The subjectivity of individuals in general and of the youth in particular is facing different complexities. There are those who believe that the (mass media, face-to-face, and school) preventive work and the information provided in recreational, cultural, sport and other informal spaces has nothing to do with them. There are others who ignore the opportunities they have. Therefore, they are all identified as vulnerable population.
- The service quality is heterogeneous and/or not adequate in places selected for this purpose due to the presence of these infections there.
- The distribution of technical means and inputs is not always the adequate to guarantee service quality.
- According to the behavior shown by many women, especially young women, they are in a disadvantaged position since, due to the nature itself of their bodies, they have more possibilities to be infected by HIV-AIDS than men. Moreover, they are not always aware of it.
- Female adolescents still live under power relations with men, so many of them agree on having intimate relations due to fear of losing their partners, or not being considered as "grown-up women," or not trusting their partners. All in all, they agree on practicing unprotected sexual relations, thus becoming more vulnerable.
- In general, youngsters have a "magic thinking" ("This will not happen to me," "Just once, nothing will happen,"...), leaving consequences of irresponsible sexual practices to spontaneity.

While objective gaps can be bridged with political will and resources to eliminate them, it should be stress that the main difficulties derive from the subjective interpretation made by the population and, especially, by the youth who are not aware of the importance of this problem.

There is a close relationship between the subjective and the objective difficulties still existing in our environment. Though, in general terms, the current impact can be evaluated as positive, we have entered into a long and difficult path demanding the full integration of everyone in the various formal and informal spaces to achieve further progress and raise awareness of the diverse populations, especially the most vulnerable ones, in order to promote increasingly responsible, healthy and full sexual conducts.

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