

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (6), Serial No. 23, November, 2011

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v5i6.28>

An Appraisal of the Axiological Dimension of Sexual Relationships among Adolescents (Pp. 350-360)

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Abstract

Once the adolescent experiences puberty, he becomes more sexually matured and begins to take new role as he identifies as a male or female sexual being. At this level of sexual maturation, and given the “new morality” too, they could become more difficult beings who care less about values concerning sexual matter. This tends to imply a misconception that the supposedly permissive sexual relationship with affection is immoral with negative undertone. In other words, one could say that the attitudes of adolescents towards dating, masturbation or even sexual intercourse are rather negative. Significantly, however, the crux of this article is to establish and appraise the axiological dimension of the permissive sexual relationship with affection, thereafter, suggests ways of educating adolescents for more positive disposition towards such sexual relationships.

Introduction

Adolescence is perhaps one of the most challenging times in the life of an individual and the family. It is a long transitional period of about six years during which the individual is “suspended” between childhood and adolescence. This period could be a difficult one for the young person who is attempting to be free from the role of a child, but not fully equipped to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. Generally, when one talks of the adolescent stage society considers a group of people at a given period of physical, sexual, emotional and intellectual maturity, who are no longer children, nor strictly adults. The focus however, in this article is the sexual maturity and the expected behaviour that goes alongside it.

At adolescence, both males and females undergo significant primary and secondary characteristics. The primary characteristics are those associated with the development of sex organs and the structure of the body that directly relates to reproduction. The latter, are the visible signs of sexual maturity that do not involve the sex organs directly. The expectation is that with this sexual maturity these young ones will begin to take new roles. They could turn out maturely behaved beings or become very difficult to handle. Culturally, in defining the roles of the adolescent in terms of social attitudes (especially as it relates to sex), circumstances have been created that has caused this period of life to be what is termed in Western culture, - “anticipated state of extreme disequilibrium associated with adolescence and the period of “storm and stress”. It is on this score that this article tries to elicit sexual values or the ethics (morals) and aesthetics (beauty) of adolescent sexual behaviour. Can beauty be entrenched in permissive sexual relationship for a more positive sexual disposition?

On becoming an adolescent

Most societies have their youths attain the stage of adolescence mostly through initiations and ceremonies, for both sexes. Taking the case of Africa, the neophytes could be subjected to bodily mutilations either through circumcision or clitoridectomy or some others which highlights some form of collective differentiation. (This coming-of-age is actually meant to leave an indelible mark on the individual transitional period between late childhood and adulthood). It is also at this stage of his life that he is imbibed with tribal mythology, knowledge and skills, and appropriate attitude for living in his society. As illustrated by Colson, (1958), the Tonga people of the traditional Zambian society believe like most traditional Africans, that growing up was not a simple process of maturation, but a thorough preparation for adult roles.

Today, with rapid urbanization and modernization the “beauty” in terms of culture associated with puberty rites are more appreciable in traditional, rural communities than in towns and cities.

This initiation into adolescence as performed in the African culture is most times seen as quite gruesome in the eyes of the western world. This may not be unconnected with the bodily mutilations and other physical trials the initiates are made to go through. In making this distinction, Myerhoff (1982) and Dunhan et al (1986) have said that there are initiations into adolescence in the western culture too, but thankfully, less fearsome. They cited examples of such rites of passage into adolescence like the bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs at age 13 for Jewish boys and girls, and confirmation ceremonies in many Christian denominations. Irrespective of the differences in rites of passage into adolescence across cultures, the symbolic fact remains that society considers the (adolescents) a group of people at a given period, who by virtue of the physical, sexual, emotional and intellectual development are no longer children but not strictly adults. Society has so grouped them because they deserve a special kind of treatment. Indeed, attention need be paid to the physical, sexual and psychological growth and change that come with adolescence.

Physical and sexual maturation at adolescence

Notably, menarche or the onset of menstruation is probably the most conspicuous signal of puberty in girls. The timing for menstruation of adolescent girls varies. For most girls it comes between the ages of 12 and 13; for others as early as 9 years, while for some others as late as 15 or 16. In the explanation of Evelton and Tanner, (1976), the onset of menstruation occurs earlier in most economically advantaged countries, than those that are poor. But even then, in more wealthy countries, girls living in more affluent circumstances begin to menstruate earlier than girls in less affluent situations. In other words, healthier and more nourished girls begin menstruation earlier than their counterparts who are malnourished or suffer some form of disease. Still on timing in menstruation, Werson, Long and Forehand (1993) are of the view that other factors like environmental stress borne out of parental conflict, divorce or separation could bring about the early onset of menstruation.

The timing of menstruation, nonetheless, menstruation is one of the several significant changes that comes with female puberty. This is quite related with the development of primary sex characteristics and the development of

sexual organs and structures of the body. A girl's first menstrual period could be quite scary. They term the menstrual period all kinds of ugly names, especially as it comes with stomach cramps, irritations and sometimes it could be very painful. The menstrual period is called the "curse", "the visitor" "Uncle Jack", "old woman's visit," etc. In spite of the cramps and messiness that come with menarche, most societies try to emphasize its positive aspect. Parents, especially female adults and mothers try to explain the beauty in menstruation, as the first step to womanhood. As Brooks – Gunn and Reiter (1990) rightly explain "menstruation is quite positive and has been quite demystified and discussed more openly". For instance, one finds these days that there are quite some beautiful commercials (billboards and Television) on sanitary towels. Adolescents are made to appreciate the fact that this period could be less stressful and less messy. This gives the young adolescent an increase in self-esteem, a rise in status and a greater awareness on issues pertaining to menarche. The adolescent is also educated on sex matters, especially as it pertains to menarche. Even though most parents tend to shy away from this, the argument is that if a teenager is not equipped with her "calendar" on the "safe" and "risky" periods in this cycle, we might be faced with daily stories of teenage pregnancies.

Like their female counterparts, the teenage boy experiences ejaculation. Unlike ejaculation at adulthood, what the adolescent experiences is more of a "wet dream". As the name implies, it mostly occurs during sleep; usually while the boy is dreaming. He wakes up to find his pants wet and sticky. A first time experience could sometimes make the young boy feel guilty. Significantly and in some ways one can say a boy's first ejaculation is roughly equivalent to the girl's onset of menstruation, but as Stein and Reiser (1994) have noted, "while girls feel free to discuss menarche with their mothers, boys are quite secretive and will not even discuss with parents nor friends" The explanation here may be that boys see this experience as part of sexuality and growth that needs no explanation from anyone. It is more of an experience to treasure.

From the foregoing discussions, it has been established that at adolescence both males and females undergo significant bodily changes which manifest as primary and secondary sexual characteristics. Furthermore, it could be said that once the adolescent experiences puberty he becomes sexually matured. The adolescent now takes new roles as male or female beings. At this level of maturity, given the "new morality", too, they could become more difficult beings. Could this be as a result of their "new" self-perception? Or is it the

value they hold for sexual matters? Significantly, what are their views for permissive sexual relationships like dating, masturbation, sexual intercourse etc. It is on this score that subsequent discussions will focus on the ethics and aesthetics of these permissive sexual relationships amongst adolescents. This is with a view to appraising the beauty therein and articulating what ought to be morally acceptable sexual dispositions.

The ethics and aesthetics of permissive sexual relationships amongst adolescents

The argument here is that for some sexual relationships to be termed as “permissive”, the adults in society may have appreciated some goodness by way of beauty in them. But the question is bearing in mind the youthful exuberance that goes with adolescence, can it be truly said that a good percentage of teenagers abide by the moral conduct that ought to go with such permissive sexual relationships? When one talks of permissive sexual relationships, the focus is on dating, masturbation and sexual intercourse. These relationships are commonly practiced among adolescents. They may be taken to extremes but in one way or another, they prepare the adolescent for sexual relationships in adult life too! So, they are activities in a stage of life that cannot be ignored. (The plea in this article is that some ethics be injected into its practice).

Dating in our contemporary society can be described as (even though) a complex world, but an important ritual of adolescents. By the time most girls and boys turn twelve into fourteen years, they are already initiated into the world of dating. As McCabe (1984) clearly puts it, “by the age of 16, more than 90% of teenagers have had at least one date and by the end of high school, some three quarter of adolescents have been steadily involved with someone”. Traditionally, dating may simply be seen as part of courtship that could lead to marriage. But it has been found too that it also serves other functions for the teenagers. It serves as a means of learning how to establish intimacy with their peers. It also provides some form of entertainment for these youngsters. As Sanderson and Cantor (1995) have also asserted, “dating can be used in developing a sense of one’s own identity”. But as most specialist in adolescence have noted even though one of the major aims of dating is to facilitate some form of psychological intimacy, it is not often times wonderfully successful. In the opinion of Savin, William and Bernatt (1990), dating at adolescence is often times a superficial activity. It is a situation where the participants rarely let their guards down. Ultimately they never really become truly close, nor expose themselves emotionally, to one

another. But even with this lack, one cannot rule out dating as a permissive sexual activity for adolescents. Sometimes, dating based on “genuine” intimacy could develop in later adolescence and even lead to marriage! In typical traditional settings, cultural influences tend to affect dating patterns. The situation here is that parents may try to control the dating behaviour of their adolescents in an effort to preserve traditional values. For instance, in most traditional African setting, parents tend to be conservative in values concerning dating. This may not be far from the fact that they too, may not have experienced all it takes to be engaged in dating. In many cases, marriages were pre-arranged, thus, making the entire concept and practice of dating quite novel. Even when dating is accepted, it is quite partial as it is conducted with chaperones, and under keen supervision, too. This certainly, is not the ideal for modern day adolescents.

Even with this, dating still has its place in the phase of adolescence across cultures, whether modern or traditional. For instance, the Xhosa speaking people of South Africa may not single out dating, but see it as a part of socialization process of adolescence. Notably, they see it as a period of gratification of both sex and self identification, to be encouraged. They are also cautious that such practice does not lead to impregnation (of future wife). So, the community looks up to the family and kinsmen to provide lessons to exercise restraint on sex matters. Still citing from the Xhosa experience, they are not puritanical on matters of sex. Sex play or dating is for them an activity that is accepted and even encouraged. But as play, just like cudgel play, it has its own norms. That is, just as in cudgel play the players abide by rules and regulations, so also sex play or dating has instructions in erotic techniques as well as prescriptive and proscriptive rules. These are provided by peers and supervised by older siblings. It is also important to note that rules governing such sex play could serve a dual function of encouraging a vigorous gratification of sex, as well as exposing them to likely dangers in illicit sexual activities. Thus, in early adolescence Xhosa girls learn the “metsha” technique of external sexual intercourse. This is aimed at minimizing the dangers of getting pre-maturely pregnant. This aims also at discouraging “private love” which may lead to full sexual intercourse. In effect, pre-marital “sweet hearting” or dating should occur within full peer group publicity. The idea is that dating may be allowed as it discourages illicit pregnancies. This can be said to have its ethical underpinnings.

In matters of sexual intercourse as a permissive sexual relationship with affection, one is not too sure of where to place the modern day adolescent. Once dating begins and contact is permitted, what one finds is that most adolescents want to experiment the sexual act itself. In other words, most sexual thoughts of the adolescent is usually manifested in their attitudes. In the expression of Coles and Stokes (1985), “sexual behaviour and thoughts are among the central concerns of adolescents. Almost all adolescents think about sex, and many think about it a good deal of time”. Supporting this view and citing from the Italian and Puerto Rican experience, Lewis (1977) has said that sex is a favourite subject, if not an activity, though strong restraints are put on them. As he clearly puts it, “all the adolescents can think of is sex, no wonder they cannot learn anything in school. They seem to have sex on their minds twenty-four hours a day”.

In effect, it is common place that when adolescents sit together either in boys’ or girls’ cliques, they may discuss music, football, hairstyles, share friendly jokes, but most times, share sexual talks and feelings. In other words, modern day adolescents have suddenly become quite liberal in their thinking and attitudes towards sex. However, one is still convinced and happy too that the gratification of sex drives is still complicated by many social taboos across cultures, as well as a lack of accurate knowledge about sexuality. This, one can say has helped to bring about some healthy decorum in the sexual disposition of this age. As Carroll (1988) also believes, sexual attitudes may now be reverting ever so slightly in a conservative direction largely as a result of the AIDS scare.

Talking about customs and social taboos concerning sex, one finds that even in modern times, it has helped to give some ethical values to the practice of sexual intercourse amongst today’s adolescents. Taking the case of the Bini tradition (in Edo State, Nigeria) as the young girl grows, she is taught to appreciate the beauty of the celebration of the “white cloth”. Sexual intercourse before marriage in the Bini tradition is sacrosanct. This severity in the customary tradition makes the adolescent girl of 14 to 16 years a prospective wife. If the wife was “met at home” by the husband, that is, she was proved a virgin; the mother of the bride was showered with gifts for a job well done.

In dealing with promiscuity amongst adolescents, the Urhobos in Delta State of Nigeria opt for female circumcision even though there were other social and cultural explanations to circumcision; most important was to prevent

promiscuity. It was believed that the removal of part or the entire clitoris of the young woman reduced their sexual appetite. This invariably reduced, if not eliminated any tendency toward promiscuity. Circumcision was usually done on teenage girls from about fifteen years and above. It was more or less a rite of passage, a transition from puberty to motherhood. However, thankfully because of the crude nature of the surgery, female circumcision has since 1990 been banned by the Nigerian government. There are other humane ways of marking puberty as a major milestone in the life of the young Urhobo girl. Significantly, though the major argument here is that most cultures abhor sexual intercourse at adolescence. It is seen as quite illicit and could lead to teenage pregnancy. Generally, in the traditional Nigerian society, parents saw to the moral discipline of their children and wards. They would rather remain childless than have children who will bring shame and dishonour to them. To drive home their points, parents and older siblings told their children proverbs, songs and folk tales on the consequences of illicit sexual behaviours. In some localities parents deliberately put temptation in the way of their adolescents to test their abstinence from sex and endurance.

In today's society, sexual intercourse at adolescence tend to remain a major milestone in their perception. They may begin with other sexual intimacy like kissing, massaging, petting etc. But their goal is actually having the sexual intercourse. In the analysis of Seidman and Reider (1994) "the age at which adolescents first have sexual intercourse has been steadily declining over the last fifty years" They go on to argue that on the whole, about half of adolescents begin to have intercourse between the ages of 15 and 18, and at least 80 percent have had sex before the age of 20. What seems quite evident is the fact that sexual activities tend to take place earlier these days than in the past. Maybe one of the most probable reasons for this is that societal norms that govern sexual conduct have been tremendously weakened by a dramatic change in social relationships and life styles. Premarital sex and other social activities are seen as more permissible for both sexes. The adolescents no longer cherish purity, the "virgin-self" or abstinence. Instead, they will put up a lot of defense on the need for premarital sex. They see it as entertaining, a way of socializing and quite fashionable (in vogue). To compliment this view, Reis, (1960) and Hyde (1994) have variously explained that in matters concerning premarital sex, today's adolescents may have coined a more suitable concept for it. The new norm terms premarital sex as "permissive with affection", especially within the context of

committed and loving relationships. They too set the standards for such context!

Another factor that tends to lower moral standards governing sexual conducts among adolescents is that most cultures are more lenient on males than females, undermining the fact that the males are most times greater offenders. According to Johnson et al (1992) in Mexico, there are strict laws that are enforced on girls concerning illicit sex practice, while boys live the way they want. Rubel (1992) still on the Mexican experience asserts that at puberty the boy's tie to the home become loose and may spend most of his free times with his peer groups. Here, common interest and the pleasure of social interaction tie such groups together. It is within these groups the boys may learn the terminology and techniques of sex, more as sex instruction within the home is a rarity. Moreso, there is need for sex education for the adolescents.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the thrust of the argument tends to establish the fact that adolescents involve themselves in one form of relationship or another. As previously highlighted too, this important ritual could lead to marriage, help to establish intimacy and most of all, encourage socialization. In other words, the question as to its aesthetic underpinnings cannot be underestimated. But the bane of argument centers on whether moral conduct or the ethical values that should accompany this beauty in permissive sexual relationships amongst adolescents is so upheld. Take the instance of dating, so far there tends to be some consensus on its experience as quite acceptable. But are there established norms governing its practice? If there are, do the participants (in this case adolescents) pay enough attention? Whose role(s) is it to teach matters of sex to these young ones? The church, parents or schools? What we find most times is that a lot is left to chance – learning from peer groups. As Uko-Aviomoh and Omatseye (2003) explain, many parents still see discussions of sexual matters as quite sacred. A mother does not feel at ease educating her daughter on “safe” and “risky” periods of her menstrual cycle. She feels doing this is like giving the girl freedom to have sex when it's safe for her. But the truth is that not very often do we find young girls telling their mothers when they were first disvirgined. If our mothers did not have that extreme cordiality with their mothers, why do we expect our daughters to be free with us? The argument here is the need to educate the teenage girl on sex matters so that she does not end with pregnancy, an inexperienced mother, or worse still have an illegal abortion.

Essentially, one is saying there is need for sex education, believing that this will be reflected in the sexual disposition of the adolescent. It is only when the adolescent is educated on such matters that he respects the norms guiding its practice. As Tiefer (1984) notes, “it is a stage where their sexual fantasies encompasses a wide imaginary range of sexual activities”. So, if they have no lesson on its moral conduct, they are bound to making mistakes that could have great implications. Significantly, therefore, the submission in this article is that even when beauty is said to lie in the eyes of the beholder, there are yet some standards to beauty. In other words, the whole notion of permissive sexual relationship amongst adolescents has its aesthetical implication.

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