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SOCIAL DISCOURSE AND NORMATIVE INFLUENCE

By Alexis Ferrand and Lise Mounier

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Sexual behaviour and AIDS,

edited by A.Spira, N.Bajos, and the ACSF Group, Aldershot, Avebury, 1994, p.140-148.

People's sex lives are mainly interpersonal: from the most basic impulses to the most institutionalised forms of marital union, sexuality is a movement towards another person, a tension between oneself and another person. Thus, it is one of the essential components of sociability, in that it situates the individual in a collection of relationships, voluntarily chosen and maintained to a greater or a lesser degree. In this chapter, we aim to understand how certain interpersonal bonds, on the one hand, and belonging to social circles, on the other, contribute to shaping sexual behaviour.

Our hypothesis is that it is in the uncertain situations of the social game and in situations of normative contradictions that new behaviour may be invented or that representations of the legitimacy of behaviour formerly considered "unthinkable" or only engaged in by others may change. We shall therefore attempt to analyse how the variety of milieux frequented and of people known and the heterogeneity of values and behaviour encountered place individuals in potentially contradictory situations.

Of all interpersonal relationships (impossible to describe except in a specialised survey), we look firstly at relationships with confidants, in which people are able to speak of emotional and sexual matters. If we assume that the possibility of speaking of personal and sexual matters with confidants encourages the reorienting of sexual behaviour, it is important to

identify which individuals have or do not have such exchanges, and which individuals move in heterogeneous networks, networks which more easily enable the developing of new norms. As prevention messages aimed at the "general public" are in part relayed by interpersonal exchanges, it is important to find out about the nature of the relationships in which communication takes place.

Analysing the interpersonal relationships which people establish at work, with neighbours, during leisure activities, etc. has mainly been developed in English-speaking sociology, under the heading "analysis of personal, networks". In 1985, the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, after consulting with the main American specialists, asked in a national survey: "Who are the people who you talk to about subjects that are important to you?" (Marsden, 1987). By stressing discussion, it was possible to isolate a nucleus of close relationships which were particularly significant for the participants.

In a pilot survey, we showed that it was possible to specify a more specific network of confidants: those people who respondents talked to about emotional and sexual subjects (Ferrand, Mounier, 1990). The question was phrased as follows: "With how many people besides the person with whom you are living do you discuss love affairs, sexual problems or sexually transmitted disease or your relationship with your partner?"

We were interested here firstly in the possibility of talking about one's sex life with people who, in most cases, were not sexual partners. Such discussions are not always simple and "natural". The rules of modesty make the sexual organs and sexual activities private, hidden things (despite spectacular productions which play on this taboo without removing it). These things can not be shown publicly, but can they be named? Who can people talk to about them? In the same way, feelings, passions and romantic attachments are mainly assigned to the personal and private domain of existence. In the "public" sphere of work or urban life, it seems only to be possible to mention sexual activities or feelings in very ritualised forms (in particular in jokes and various rather Gallic variants).

More specifically, speaking of one's sex life and creating an image of oneself as a sexual being call into play both social rules and tactics. Sometimes disclosure is possible due to the distance between speakers or the fact that they are strangers and sometimes disclosure creates or seals the intimate, close, deep character of a relationship. Knowing the social and interpersonal context in which sexuality is discussed sheds light on the conditions under which people's sexual cultures are developed.

Secondly, we look at a more collective reality of interpersonal environments: social circles such as the family, the work environment, neighbours and friends. Some people live among people who act and think like they do. Others spend their time in settings and with people where behaviour is varied and values heterogeneous. We will analyse the way in which an individual perceives the consensus or normative heterogeneity of these circles in terms of sexual behaviour.

Having confidants: a specific component of sociability

An initial global image of confidants in French society can be given in three figures: 40% of people reported no confidants, 20% only reported one and 40% reported at least two. Two confidants or more represents the beginning of possible heterogeneity in this' mini-network of discussion.

Table 6.1

Distribution of the number of confidants reported, by sex and age at time of survey

Age	Number of confidants reported			Total	N
	0	1	2 or more		
18-29	19	27	54	100	1.089
30-39	31	24	44	100	589
40-49	45	21	34	100	371
50-59	55	15	31	100	182
60-69	60	16	24	100	115
Men	47	17	36	100	1.303
Women	31	27	42	100	1.039
Overall	39	21	40	100	2.342

Men belonging to the categories "senior managers and professionals" and "intermediate occupations" were most likely not to have a confidant (54% and 50% respectively, cf. appendix p. 194). Women in these categories were two times less likely not to discuss their sex lives (25% and 27% respectively): this was the greatest difference between men and women in terms of rationale for talking. Among senior managers, known to have numerous personal relationships and whose professional activities often involve high rates of sociability, this low tendency towards openness in men was surprising. Non-manual workers of both sex were, relative to other categories, the most talkative about their emotional and sexual lives.

The results of another survey showed that the number of partners for discussions "about anything and everything" decreases as one rises up the social ladder (Heran, 1988). The high numbers of non-manual

workers having confidants was in large part due to the high proportion of women in this category. The differences between men and women, by age, were more marked for discussions about personal problems.

Examining the number of sexual partners in the last 12 months showed a difference in behaviour (cf. table 6.2); men with multiple partners were two times less likely than those with one partner not to have a confidant (26% compared with 50%); women with multiple partners were three times less likely (11 % compared with 31 %). In women with multiple sexual partners, nine out of ten had at least one confidant. The ability to find people with whom to discuss one's sex life seemed overall to go hand in hand with the individual's degree of sexual activity: we found that greater openness to other people in both word and action occurred in the same respondents.

Table 6.2

Distribution of number of confidants reported by number of partners past 12 months

Men	Number of confidants reported			Total	N
	0	1	2 or more		
No partner	61	6	33	100	35
One partner	50	16	34	100	686
Multiple partners	26	19	55	100	566
Overall	47	16	37	100	1,287
Women	0	1	2 or more	Total	N
No partner	43	18	39	100	64
One Partner	31	29	40	100	626
Multiple partners	11	23	66	100	297
Overall	31	28	41	100	987

Similarly, 44% of people living as a couple reported no confidant, as against 26% of those living alone. Solitude at home was partially compensated for by a greater openness to discussion: one person in two had at least two confidants (as against 35% of those "living as a couple"). However, this difference may be due to the fact that a stable sexual partner could not be named as a confidant.

Although those with multiple partners had more confidants overall, the same patterns were found among them as in the population as a whole: men confided less than women, older respondents less than younger ones and managers less than other categories. Thus, resistance

to interpersonal discussion about sexuality seemed to be similar in different subgroups of sexual activity.

Confidants are female

Of the 1.420 people who reported at least one confidant, each one reported 2.1 confidants on average, aside from the spouse or stable sexual partner. Among women, 69% reported at least one confidant, whereas this was true of only 53% of men. Although overall men were more likely to have no confidant, when they report at least one confidant, they reported on average 2.3 confidants, whereas women only reported 2.0.

The questionnaire allowed each respondent to describe in detail their relationships with three confidants. The majority of confidants were women; in 62% of cases, discussions were with women. Women reported confidants of the same sex, i.e. other women, in 84% of cases, whereas only 63% of men's confidants were themselves male. Thus, women chose confidants of the same sex more often than men did.

In total, 74% of relationships were between people of the same sex; 58% were between people belonging to the same age group; and 40% to the same socio-professional category.

Bonds which facilitate confiding

Relationships with confidants can be defined not only by the characteristics of the people with whom respondents talked, but also by the type of bond.

Table 6.3

Distribution of types of relationships with confidants by sex

	Colleague	Family member	Older family member	Friend same age	Friend age different	Other	%	N
Men	19	12	6	39	23	1	100	1,843
Women	9	22	7	35	26	1	100	1,703
Overall	14	17	7	37	24	1	100	3,544

“Older family members” refers to relationships with family member at least 18 years older than respondent

“Friends of same age” refers to friends with up to a three years age difference with the respondent

Among the different types of bond facilitating discussion of respondents' emotional and sex lives, friendship largely predominated (37+24=61 % of bonds reported). Relationships with relatives occupied a place more or less identical to that indicated in the "Contacts Between People" survey (Heran, 1988) and "colleagues" were less likely to be confidants than in relationships that discuss "anything and everything".

Confiding in someone is part of sociability in a selective way: certain types of bonds preclude emotional discussions¹; others, on the contrary, seem to encourage them or even to exist so that discussions are possible. In "friendship", the importance of affinity between the two people and the private nature of the bond, which is hardly restricted by institutionalised social roles, are characteristics of the relationships which agree, with the subject of the discussion: people's personal emotional and sexual lives². Women speak more readily with members of the family, and this "family" trend in female sociability is recognised. We noted that the importance of friendship in confidant relationships was the same for women as for men, contrary to what is observed for other subjects of discussion. Although sexual jokes sometimes abound in conversations in the workplace, this was not the preferred setting for discussions about individuals' private lives.

The perception of confidants' sexual behaviour

The ACSF questionnaire enabled us to know how the respondent perceived certain dimensions of his confidants' sexual behaviour:

- the number of partners that he or she had had in the past twelve months ("one steady partner"; or "a steady partner and few other occasional affairs"; or "several different partners" or "has not had any sex");
- the possibility that "this person has sexual relations with individuals of the same sex as him/herself" (yes, perhaps, definitely not, no answer);
- two possible changes of behaviour "since the discovery of AIDS" ("limited the number of his/her sexual partners"; "asks that condoms be used").

¹ In a specific pilot survey, we saw for example that relationships with neighbours or with acquaintances from clubs were very rarely mentioned. (Ferrand, 1990).

² C. Bidart (LASMAS-CERCOM) is carrying out a qualitative study funded by ANRS in order to analyse the dynamics of confidant relationships overall in an individual's interpersonal relationships. (NB. See also Bidart 1997.)

The non-response rates were low (5% for the number of partners and 3% for homosexuality). By accepting in such large numbers to give an opinion on these aspects of their confidants' sexual behaviour, the respondents were telling us that they had quite a precise idea of it. Whether they were right or wrong is not important. This point is fundamental. If a respondent's environment has an influence, it is based on the representations of what people close to him do. On the other hand, the non-response rate recorded was almost 12% for the question on changes in behaviour linked to the discovery of AIDS: the contrast with the preceding aspects allows us to think that this reflected uncertainty more than a refusal to respond. The non-response rate was lower when the confidant was the same sex and the same age as the respondent.

We constructed the sexual profile of confidants by highlighting the information relating to changes in behaviour and grouped the responses in mutually exclusive classes:

- no change since the discovery of AIDS and one partner or no sex;
- no change since the discovery of AIDS and more than one partner;
- has adopted the condom (one or multiple partners);
- has limited the number of partners (one or multiple partners).

The distribution of these profiles indicated respondents' own representations of the sexual behaviour of people close to them. This social image was very different for male as opposed to female confidants (cf. appendix page 194).

One woman in two was perceived as having one partner and not having changed her behaviour since the discovery of AIDS, whereas only 36% of men corresponded to this profile. Conversely, 30% of men were thought to have adopted the condom and this was true for 21 % of women; men were also more likely to be perceived as having multiple partners and not having changed their behaviour (9% compared to 5%). On the other hand, an equal proportion of male and female confidants (20%) were thought to have changed their relationships in order to manage their risk level by limiting the number of partners, possibly to one partner. Respondents estimated that about 4% of their male and female confidants had had homosexual intercourse.

This social image was the result of respondents' perceptions of the behaviour of confidants of very diverse ages and status. Our aim was not to determine whether this image was "objective" or "projective" (by looking at how similar or different it was to the behaviour that similar sub-groups of respondents reported for themselves). For the respondents, the

behaviour of others is reality as they see it. It is this conception of reality that is "normative" and may influence their behaviour.

The nature of the bond between the respondent and the confidant influenced the sexual behaviour which the respondent attributed to the confidant. Thus, for example, confidants of the same sex and age, more often reported that friends or relatives used condoms and less often that colleagues did so.

Sexual variety in networks of confidants

Individuals who only reported one confidant are by definition exposed to only one type of sexual behaviour (36% of respondents). Almost one third of respondents (31 %) reported at least two confidants perceived as having the same behaviour. 33% of respondents reported at least two confidants with varied sexual profiles³. Thus, two thirds of respondents had a unified network and, in the interpersonal discussions examined by the survey, were exposed to a single model of sexual behaviour (cf. appendix page 196). Those who had a mixed network were in a situation of normative contradiction, probably predisposing more to changes.

Men were more likely than women to report mixed networks (37% as compared with 29%). The proportion of unified networks among those with several confidants rose from 44% for respondents aged under 50 to 65% for those over 50. This evolution was mainly due to an increase in the number of individuals only reporting as confidants those with one steady partner. Of senior managers and professionals, one individual in two (51 %) had a network with varied sexual behaviour, as against one in three (33%) for all those in active, non-agricultural, employment (the difference persisted when only individuals with several confidants were compared). Managers, which category also included a higher proportion of individuals with multiple partners, maintained close relationships with individuals with contrasting sexual profiles.

The normative variety of social circles

Relationships involving discussion constitute an interpersonal environment perceived as being mixed to a greater or lesser extent. This changing normative homogeneity was found in the

³ Of 1,420 individuals reporting one confidant, 54 did not give total details about their relationship and must be excluded from this analysis.

idea that respondents generally had of what the people thought who were in the social circles and environments in which they spent time (Degenne, 1986).

In the ACSF survey, three types of circles were explored: friends, colleagues and family⁴. To the question, "What do you believe your mates and close friends think about having love affairs or sexual relations outside a stable relationship?" respondents could answer according to the degree of consensus perceived ("all in favour", "some in favour, others not", "all opposed").

Although similar, and quite low, proportions of respondents perceived the members of the different circles as being all in favour of occasional infidelities (friends: 11 %; colleagues: 9%; family: 6%), there were marked differences when respondents believed that the members were unanimously opposed to such behaviour: one respondent in four (24%) believed that all his friends were against infidelity, but only one in two attributed the same opinion to family members (56%). As "members of the family", individuals were reputedly against infidelity, whereas, as friends, they were thought to be tolerant by twice as many respondents.

Statistically, the people whom some respondents met as friends were the same as those known as colleagues by other respondents. It could be assumed that the opinions and values expressed by these people would be perceived in a unique and homogeneous way and that circles of friends, colleagues and family would be equally tolerant. In fact, circles were perceived as collective environments with contrasting moral climates.

The orientation of the normative consensus varied, and so did its degree: friends were perceived to have contradictory opinions ("some in favour, others not") by one respondent in two, whereas only one in five had the same perception of the family (22%). The situation at work resembled that with friends (46% of those in active employment perceived a mixture of norms).

The difference between male and female respondents here reinforced the previous remark on the mixed nature of interpersonal networks: men reported circles with mixed opinions more frequently than women did.

The interaction which exists in a verbal exchange about an individual's emotional and sexual experiences corresponds to social rationales, of which we have given several dimensions here. Such interaction emulates or moves the boundaries between the public domain (facts that

⁴ This part of the questionnaire was designed by A.Degenne

everybody is allowed to know) and the private domain and thereby establishes audiences and interpersonal spheres which are specific to each domain: who can hear what (Ferrand, Mounier, 1990),

Understanding how this interaction is produced may enable us to understand in which contexts prevention messages are likely to be relayed in the best way possible.

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Distribution of respondents by occupation and number of confidants reported (in %)

	Number of confidants			Total	N
	0	1	2 or more		
Male respondents					
Farmers	55	19	26	100	21
Tradesmen, shopkeepers, heads of companies	45	13	42	100	48
Senior managers and professionals	54	12	34	100	217
Intermediate occupations	50	13	37	100	253
Non-manual workers	38	25	37	100	140
Manual workers	46	19	35	100	331
Pensioners	61	10	29	100	79
Not in active employment	17	22	60	100	206
Overall	47	16	37	100	1,295
Female respondents					
Farmers	0	0	0	100	4
Tradeswomen, shopkeepers, heads of companies	43	22	35	100	19
Senior managers and professionals	25	20	55	100	82
Intermediate occupations	27	27	46	100	219
Non-manual workers	22	31	47	100	382
Manual workers	48	24	28	100	90
Pensioners	58	25	16	100	36
Not in active employment	22	21	57	100	205
Overall	30	27	43	100	1,037

N.B. Data refer to socio-professional category at the time of the survey. People no longer in active employment were not classified by their last occupation.

Distribution of male and female confidants' behaviour by type of relationships (in %)

	Type of relationship with confidant					
	Colleague	Family	Older family member	Friend of same age	Friend of different age	
Confidants' sexual behaviour						
Male confidant						
One partner, always the same one	47	29		32	36	36
Has adopted the condom	17	35		38	25	30
Has limited number of partners	22	26		16	26	21
Multiple partners, no change	13	7		10	8	9
Same sex partner	1	3		4	5	4
Total	100	100		100	100	100
Number of male confidants	161	168	34	737	324	1,424
Female confidants						
One partner, always the same one	43	59	72	42	48	50
Has adopted the condom	17	18	9	29	20	21
Has limited number of partners	31	17	18	20	18	20
Multiple partners, no change	8	5	0	6	5	5
Same sex partner	1	1	1	3	9	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number of female confidant	201	340	217	814	443	2,015

Distribution of networks of confidants, by size, and by sexual profile of confidants in networks (% col.)

Sexual profile of confidants	1 confidant	2 or 3 confidant
<i>Unified networks (all confidant the same profile)</i>		
One partner, always the same one	50	58
Has adopted condom	18	25
Has limited the number of partners	25	17
Multiple partners, no change	7	1
Total	100%	100%
Total number of networks (= of respondents)	490	373
<i>Mixed networks (at least two profile different among confidant)</i>		
One partner, always the same one and has adopted the condom		26
One partner, always the same one and has limited the number of partners		22
One partner, always the same one and multiple partners, no change		13
Has adopted the condom and limited the number of partners		21
Has adopted the condom and multiple partners, no change		6
Other		12
Total		100%
Total number of networks (= of respondents)		634

NB Mixed networks with three confidants were classified according to the reporting of two different sexual profiles, irrespective of the combination.

“Others” include those networks containing three profile.