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## Postmodern psycho-social influences on the dysfunctional sexual beliefs of the Romanian youth

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### Abstract

Post-modern society has witnessed the emergence of new sexual behaviours and beliefs among the youth and of new and revolutionary social communication channels. The present research explored the relationship between modern and traditional sources of information about sexual issues and dysfunctional sexual beliefs on a sample of 599 of young Romanian men and women (age ranged between 18 and 25 years). The results showed that dysfunctional sexual beliefs are negatively associated to reading sexual education books and positively to accessing the internet or discussing with friends. The discussion focuses on the need to develop more efficient tools of sexual education.

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*Keywords:* sexual education, youth, dysfunctional sexual beliefs, pluri-inter-and trans-disciplinarity;

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### 1. Introduction

Our contemporary society is characterized by two distinct developments: on the one hand researchers have documented new sexual behaviors, attitudes and beliefs among the youth (Rotermann, 2008); on the other hand, the social communication channels are undergoing fast and dramatic revolution, with new technologies arising at an incredible pace and radically influencing the life of millions of individuals. Now, more than ever people have easy access to a lot of information through the Internet.

However, in spite of the apparently limitless amount of information that young individuals can extract from the virtual world, they live in a society in which sexuality is still a taboo and is the subject of normative constraints and dysfunctional beliefs. This situation can lead to several interesting phenomena. First, the conflict between the society's expectation and the individuals' informational freedom can generate a double personality of the modern man, which may publicly display socially accepted norms, attitudes and beliefs about sexuality while privately he or she embrace very different behaviors. Second, the accessibility of large amounts of information can create the illusion that adolescents know much more about sexuality than decades before. In fact, researchers have showed that we are talking about a mix of myths, fictions and truths (Bartle, 1998; Hockenberry-Eaton et al., 1996). While the adolescents' vocabulary may seem complex due to modern social communication channels, several studies have found that their knowledge lacks in quality (Crosby & Yarber, 2001; Padilla & Baird, 1991).

Given this complex context it is very important to better understand the relationship between the sources of

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information about sexual issues and sexual beliefs attitudes, and behavior. The current paper is part of a larger study that address this major issue by focusing on the relationship between sources of sexual information and dysfunctional beliefs or cognitions. Cognitions, whether conscious or unconscious are the major determinant of a series of affective, behavioral and psycho-physiological responses (David, 2006). They are deemed dysfunctional based on pragmatic (they are not useful or even dangerous) or logical criteria (they are not sustained by reason or facts) (Dafinoiu, 2002).

We will focus on dysfunctional beliefs as measured by robust questionnaires (e.g. The Sexual Dysfunctional Beliefs Questionnaire) and also measure individuals' main sources of information about sexual issues. The paper will focus both on traditional and modern sources. Theoretically, lack of education in school or family may lead to dysfunctional beliefs but a negative relationship could also be found between the internet and dysfunctional beliefs to the extent that the internet has a rich but unfiltered sexual content.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

Five hundred and ninety nine individuals participated in this study on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Three hundred and seven were females and 292 were males. In the female subsample the age ranged between 18 and 25 years, with a median of 22 years, whereas in the male subsample the age ranged between 18 and 25 years, with a median of 21 years. Eighty one percent of the females and 77% of the males were residents of urban areas.

### *2.2. Procedure*

Participants completed the questionnaires individually, on PCs.

### *2.3. Measures*

Participants completed two questionnaires: (1) The Sexual Dysfunctional Beliefs Questionnaire (SDBQ) developed by Nobre and Pinto-Gouveia (2003) translated and adapted for the Romanian population (Bălănean, 2009). The SDBQ has 40 items and responses range on a scale from 1 – completely disagree to 5 – completely agree; (2) Distorted Opinions, Information and Beliefs about Sexuality (DOIBS) was developed by Bălănean (2010) for the Romanian population. It has 40 items and responses range on a scale from 1 – completely disagree to 7 – completely.

## **3. Results**

Because we administered different measures to male and female participants, we will describe the results separately.

### *3.1. Females*

All measures had very good reliability (Cronbach's alpha was .979 for SDBQ, and .982 for DOIBS) and were significantly correlated with each other ( $r = .845$ ). The strong correlation between the two measures suggests that they could be regarded as parallel forms of the same questionnaire, although the content of their items is not similar. Table 1 offers the descriptive statistics for the general measures as well as for the six SDBQ subscales, whereas Table 2 presents the descriptive for the items measuring the perceived source of information about sexual issues.

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of dependent variables for the female sample.

Source	Mean	SD
SDBQ	2.2257	.52185
DOIBS	3.2706	.95203
Sexual conservatism	2.1064	.60247
Sexual desire as a sin	1.7367	.46352
Age related beliefs	2.8039	.52691
Body image beliefs	2.2638	.59341
Denying affection primacy	1.7704	.54601
Motherhood primacy	2.0936	.50769

Whereas in Nobre's samples (Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia, 2006; Nobre, Pinto-Gouveia, & Gomes, 2003) sexual conservatism usually gets the highest score and body image beliefs the lowest scores, in our Romanian sample the highest score was recorded for the age related and body image beliefs subscales (the difference between them was significant), and the lowest scores for sexual desire as a sin and denying affections primacy subscales.

**Table 2.** Source of sexual information for the female sample.

Source	Mean	SD
Personal experiences	5.86	.636
Internet	5.68	.702
Magazines	5.74	.693
Sexual education books	2.64	1.648
Friends	5.27	.754
School	1.53	1.042
Parents	1.50	.998

Female respondents reported that their own personal experiences, magazines, internet and friends are the primary sources of information about sexual issues. The average score for these sources were twice as large as those for sex education books, school and parents (see Table 2). The relationships between socio-demographical variables, sources of sexual information and sexual beliefs were assessed using a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with level of education (medium vs. higher) and place of residence (urban vs. rural) as independent variables, sources of information as covariates and the scores to the SDBQ subscales and OICDS as dependent variables.

The analyses revealed that residence had a significant effect on sexual desire as a sin  $F(1,306) = 5.07, p < .03$  and denial affection primacy subscales  $F(1,306) = 4.39, p < .04$ . In both cases respondents from rural areas reported more dysfunctional beliefs than respondents from urban areas. Level of education also had a significant effect on these subscales  $F(1,306) = 6.63, p < .02$ ;  $F(1,306) = 9.42, p < .01$ . In addition it had a significant effects on sexual conservatism  $F(1,306) = 7.33, p < .01$  and marginal effects on body image belief and motherhood primacy  $F(1,306) = 3.30, p < .08$ ;  $F(1,306) = 3.21, p < .08$ . Without exception a higher level of education was associated to less dysfunctional beliefs.

### 3.2. Males

Similarly to the female sample, all measures had very good reliability (Cronbach's alpha was .992 for SDBQ, and .994 for OICDS) and were significantly correlated with each other ( $r = .732$ ). Table 3 offers the descriptive statistics for the general measures as well as for the six SDBQ subscales, whereas Table 4 presents the descriptive for the items measuring the perceived source of information about sexual issues.

**Table 3.** Means and standard deviations of dependent variables for the male sample.

Source	Mean	SD
SDBQ	2.720	.826

DOIBS	3.864	1.268
Sexual conservatism	2.277	.703
Female sexual power	2.741	.685
'Macho' beliefs	3.298	.951
Beliefs about women's satisfaction	2.978	1.005
Restrictive attitude toward sex	2.721	1.091
Sex as an abuse of men's power	2.274	.6131

In Nobre's samples (Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia, 2006; Nobre, Pinto-Gouveia, & Gomes, 2003) macho beliefs and female sexual power usually gets the highest score and sex as an abuse of male power and restrictive attitudes toward sex the lowest scores. In the present sample the highest score was recorded for macho beliefs and beliefs about women's satisfaction subscales, and the lowest scores for sexual conservatism and sex as an abuse of men's power subscales.

Table 4. Source of sexual information for the male sample.

Source	Mean	SD
Personal experiences	5.91	.384
Internet	5.53	1.467
Magazines	4.41	.710
Sexual education books	2.18	2.048
Friends	4.52	.788
School	1.26	.440
Parents	1.92	.706

Similarly to the female respondents, males reported that their own personal experiences, internet, magazines, and friends are the primary sources of information about sexual issues. The average score for these sources were, again, much larger than those for sex education books, school and parents (see Table 4).

The relationships between socio-demographical variables, sources of sexual information and sexual beliefs were assessed using a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with level of education (medium vs. higher) and place of residence (urban vs. rural) as independent variables, sources of information as covariates and the scores to the SDBQ subscales and OICDS as dependent variables. This time, the analyses failed to reveal any significant effects of the independent variables. As for the covariates, the internet, the friends, and the books were again the most important predictors of dysfunctional beliefs. Whereas the first two sources were positively related to the dependent variables, the last was negatively related. This means that males who reported the internet and their friends as main sources of sexual information were more likely to hold dysfunctional beliefs, whereas the reverse hold true for those who specified sex education books as their main source of information.

#### 4. Discussion

This study explored the effects of socio-psychological variables on Romanian youth's dysfunctional sexual beliefs. An interesting finding was that level of education and place of residence were associated to dysfunctional beliefs in the female subsample but not in the male subsample. We speculate that these differences may be partially explained by the gender stereotypes that are more prevalent in rural areas and among low socio-economic status Romanian families. In these cases, parents and teachers could avoid talking about sexual issues to girls. Furthermore, girls could be discouraged to explore certain communication channels and so on. Collecting more detailed information about the use of specific social communication channels in future research could help us better understand this finding.

More important, the results confirmed that the sources of information about sexual issues have significant effects on dysfunctional sexual beliefs. In both subsamples we found that dysfunctional sexual beliefs are higher among those who use the internet and their friends as main sources of information about sexual issues but are smaller

among those who extract their information from sexual education books. We believe that this difference could be partially explained by the quality and accessibility of the information collected from these sources. More specifically, sexual education books usually contain reliable information while such information is harder to find on the internet or on the conversation with friends. In the same time, given the correlational nature of our results we may not rule out the hypothesis that this difference may be determined by individuals' knowledge and personality.

In any event, it is important to stress that, although reading sexual educational books can have a positive effect on sexual beliefs, individuals rely less often on this source of information than on personal experiences, internet, or friends. In both subsamples the least frequent sources of information were school classes and parents, followed by sexual education books.

While it is obvious that the high quality sources of information can hardly compete with the less reliable sources of information for reasons of psychological comfort and accessibility of information, the results of the current study strongly suggest that we have to invest more efforts to reduce this discrepancy. Our future research will focus on developing more efficient sexual education tools, based on a post-modern adaptive-dynamic paradigm that embrace a pluri-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary perspective (Bălănean, 2010; Bălănean, 2011).

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