

Sexual beginners. The social construction of the debut of Italian young people's sexual biographies.
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Abstract

The paper analyses the process of social construction of the “sexual debut” of a sample of self-identified heterosexual young people living in a North-Western Italian region. The empirical data were collected within a research project carried out in 2006-07, entailing a survey on a regional sample of 1,000 young people aged 18-29 and 51 semi-structured interviews with young people aged 18-34.

Focussing on how young people account for their first heterosexual intercourse, relying on the socially available sexual scripts, that are narrative sequences which represent the legitimised rules and the expected moves of the heterosexual interaction, the paper shows the complex intertwining of compliance with, adaptation, negotiation and challenge of gendered sexual scripts. Moreover, it suggests how research on young people's sexuality should shift from focusing on the contents of young people's narratives (the components of the sexual scripts) to the contexts of their productionⁱ, restraining or enabling different uses of the same scripts.

Keywords: heterosexuality; youth; sexual script; account.

1. Introduction

Research points to a deep transformation of sexual and intimate lifeⁱⁱ, entailing a democratisation of intimate relationships, a pluralisation of relationship patterns and recognition of sexual diversityⁱⁱⁱ.

Within the widening of sexual repertoires generation by generation, what is often assumed as clearcut evidence of the change of sexual attitudes and behaviour is the first engagement in sexual intercourse. Researchers have focussed on the age at which this event occurs or, sometimes, on the features of the first sexual partner, underlining a converging process between the way men and women typically experience their “sexual debut”^{iv}. This seemingly increasing “convergence” between younger men and women is contradictory to a historical understanding of male and female sexualities as ruled by a “double standard”: women were supposed to avoid any sexual activity before and outside heterosexual marriage; whereas men were expected to “sow their wild oats”. While women were pictured within a madonna-whore dichotomy (the good girl vs the easy girl), men were presented as helplessly driven by their sexual needs. From the 70s on, many scholars^v pointed to a progressive fading of the sexual double standard towards the emergence of a single sexual standard, especially concerning experiencing sexual intercourse before marriage^{vi}.

Nevertheless, more in depth qualitative research, exploring the processes of social construction, reproduction and redefinition of the sexualities, outlines a persistence of the sexual double standard in many different features and the complexity for young women of managing their (sexual) reputation. For instance, Thomson (1995), gathering narratives from about 400 American girls, points at the plurality, variability and ambiguity of the boundaries defining what constitutes good and bad sexual conduct, depicting multiple local and subcultural contexts of production of sexual reputations.

Qualitative research, however, grasps also some evidence of a negotiation and redefinition of the sexual double standard that hints at challenging and subverting it. While young women tend to develop more assertive sexual subjectivities^{vii} within heterosexual relationships, some young men seem to “mix up” traditional and non-traditional scripts to make sense of their heterosexual experiences^{viii}.

In sum, while some scholars identify a shift towards a “convergence script” challenging the traditional gendered sexual double standard, others point to its persistence under new and multidimensional forms, stressing the importance of taking into account the multiple local context of production of its rules and boundaries.

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of Italian young people’s first heterosexual experiences, examining the different scripts they use when accounting for their first sexual intercourse and when discussing social expectations about the right “sexual timing” for both boys and girls.

I shall analyse the complex intertwining of compliance with, adaptation, negotiation and challenge of gendered sexual scripts, focusing on the processes and the contexts in which these scripts are produced.

In so doing, I am drawing on two recent research projects carried out in 2006: a survey on sexual attitudes and behaviour of a national sample of 3,000 Italian men and women aged 18 to 70 (ISI 2006)^{ix}; and a survey on the sexual lifestyles of a local sample of 1,000 young men and women aged 18 to 29 living in a northern Italian region and 51 in-depth interviews with young men and women aged 18 to 34 (ISP 2006).

2. Some features of the Italian sexual landscape^x.

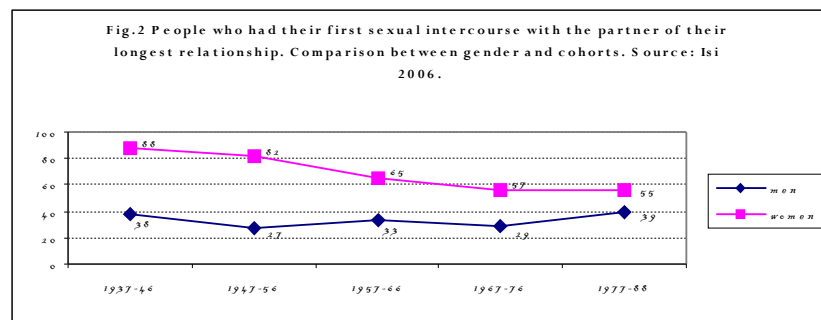
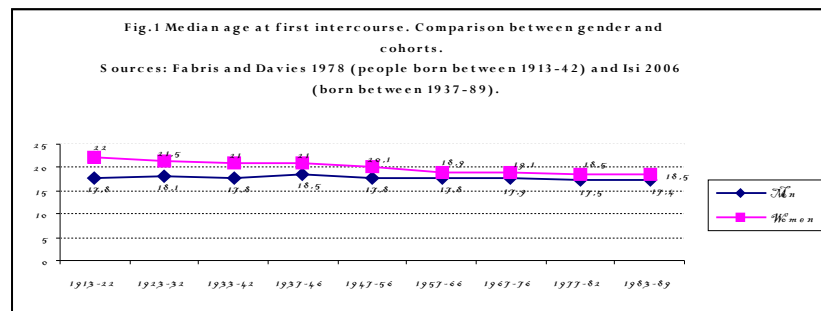
In many European countries, research on young people’s sexual behaviour has shown a decrease of the traditional sexual double standard and thereby an increasing convergence of young men and women’s sexual conduct. This tradition of research has often focused on indicators like the median age at first intercourse, the number of sexual partners or the variety of sexual practices.

As regards family and intimate relations, and gender relations, the Italian situation is often interpreted partly in terms of delay, if compared to other European countries, and partly in terms of long-lasting specificities^{xi}.

In comparison with Central and Northern European countries, in Italy the normative timings regulating the relational life course shows, under some respects, greater stability, due to the long permanence of young people at their parents' home, often until marriage and a relatively strong institutionalisation of marriage, with relatively low levels of premarital cohabitation, marital instability and births outside marriage^{xiii}.

As far as sexual behaviour is concerned, the specificity of the Italian context mainly concerns women. In their sexual lifestyle, the younger cohorts of Italian men seem to have become more similar to their Central and Northern European counterparts, while, despite the great changes that have occurred in Italy in women's sexuality, the differences between Italian women and those of other countries appear as more persistent, outlining stricter boundaries for women's respectability.

Notwithstanding a stronger permanence of the sexual double standard, however, recent research has pointed at the same trend, also in Italy, of convergence of young men and women towards a seemingly degendered single sexual script. This is evident if we compare the median age and the partner at first intercourse, as well as share of more than one partner during lifetime.



These figures show how Italian young people are adopting more and more similar sexual scripts, since women have progressively changed their sexual

behaviour, stepping aside the traditional normative model of the older generations.

What these figures do not tell us, however, is if young men and women not only have experience of more similar sexual conduct, but also whether they give more similar meanings to these experiences. In particular, are we facing a fading of the traditional gendered sexual double standard towards an emerging single script or are we witnessing a process of fragmentation, redefinition and recomposition of sexual scripts under new patterns?

3. Scripting the first sexual intercourse

In order to try to answer to this question, I shall analyse qualitative data from a local sample of 51 young men and women aged 18 to 34 living in Piedmont, a Northern-Western Italian region. I shall in particular focus on the way young people account for their first sexual intercourse as a meaningful experience by referring to the socially available sexual scripts, that are narrative sequences which represent the legitimised rules and the expected moves of the heterosexual interaction.

On the one hand, since the first coitus represents the debut of their sexual biography, we can expect that young people tend to interpret this event by complying to more traditional scripts embedded in the social context they have been raised in, thereby conforming to the sexual double standard. On the other hand, since for the younger generations having sex is a socially legitimised activity detached from the attainment of a marital status, we can expect that they feel more free to negotiate and interpret sexual scripts in a more creative manner.

I have identified four main ideal-typical sexual scripts (partially following the literature^{xiii}, partially as a research finding) that young men and women use not only to depict their conduct, but also to make sense of their experience:

- a) the romance script: the emphasis is on the emotional involvement (being in love) and on the specialness of the event and of the partner;
- b) the pragmatic script: points at the instrumental meaning of sexual experience as a way to get an outlet for a physical urge and/or gain a status (usually within the gendered peer group)
- c) the dramatic script: stresses the negative aspect of first intercourse as a traumatic experience (shame, fear, pain, unease, failure)
- d) the comedy/intimacy script: the focus is on playing a new game, learning step-by-step by trials and error, within symmetrical and negotiated relationships.

Outlining how young Italian men and women use these scripts in accounting for their first sexual experiences, we can identify four “tactics”^{xiv}, showing how young men and women move within the constraints of the sexual double

standard.

3.1 Complying with the double standard

The first tactic is to comply with gendered sexual scripts, reproducing dominant notions of male and female sexuality.

Some scripts appear to be “more gendered” than others in terms of the people who adopt them: the romance script is more frequently adopted by women (11 out of 22), the pragmatic by men (11 out of 29). By using the female-romantic vs the male-pragmatic scripts, many young men and women tend to describe themselves and their partners by conforming to very traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Women using the romantic script talk of love more than sexual desire and describe their male partners as “naturally” more “in need for sex”; moreover, men are acknowledged an active role of guiding women into the discovery of sex.

It happened that I was 18 and a half, I met this guy 10 years older than me I felt in love with him very soon [...]. It was a very beautiful experience, because he is very tender, very mature... we did it at his house, very quietly and with the right pace and that's way it was very beautiful, because he was so nice. It was as when a mother takes the child's hand and goes along with him to the first primary school day, this is the scene coming to my mind. [...] The first time it was only something emotional, with feelings, not just for the sake of pleasure. (Giulia, 34 years old)

On the contrary, young men referring to the pragmatic script, describe themselves as chasers and their female partner as a prey. They usually talk of this experience in terms of getting rid of their virginity, emphasising their active role more than the emotional involvement with their partners, who are often just an occasional acquaintance.

My first time was after the exams of the secondary school, with a younger girl [...] the same night I made her acquaintance it happened what it happened. We were in the attic, she said “I sleep here”, but she didn't have a pijama, one thing and another, it was clear there was a mutual attraction, I kissed her, from one thing another. At the beginning she replied “no”, I didn't make pressure, then she said: “I would like...” it was very fast... it lasted very little. (Samuele, 25 years old)

Other scripts, like the dramatic script, are adopted by a similar number of men and women, but having two very different versions, highlighting very gendered aspects: being pressured and being afraid of pain and blood loss for

women, having a fear of flopping and of premature ejaculation for men. Moreover, while young women describe themselves as “victims” of something that “happened” or “was done” to them, men underline their active role, even if not meeting the hegemonic male standard.

My first time was a bit forced... I mean I hadn't absolutely planned it. [...] We started this sort of physical relationship that one night degenerated more because of his pressures than because of my will. And it happened. It happened on the beach. [...] I do not regret, but I could have surely waited, because he was not particularly interested in me nor particularly sensitive towards me. (Eliana, 23 years old)

I was terrible, it was a flop. [...] I came immediately, in one second. Let's say I was afraid of failing and because of this fear I couldn't do my best. [...] It was horrible. Not horrible... I remember that anyway she was very clever, but however she was more expert than me, she had already done it, she had done it the first time at 16... then women say they have had one cock and they had ten... you can never know... they are never sincere about that... well, I was ridiculous. (Rocco, 25 years old)

What is peculiar of the conformity to highly gendered sexual scripts is the importance that young men explicitly give to or implicitly acknowledge of the peer group as the homosocial context producing and sustaining the validity of the scripts themselves. Behind young men's sexual debut there seems to be always, virtually or actually, a male audience fixing the normative standard of male experience, as Edoardo admits:

It was more in order to boast with the friends than for myself. You know, maybe I was going out with a girl that many friends of mine would have liked to have and they could not. So they asked me how her tits were, how she is... this sort of shit. I was somehow the explorer of the legion, I did not do my exploration on my own. Well, of course it's not that I was never interested in her, but there was always the pack following me everywhere. Also in bed. (Edoardo, 26 years old)

The mechanism is more complex for young women, since they seem to be under the scrutiny of both a male gaze (usually the sexual partner's, but also the male friends') and a female gaze (the female friends'), both entailing and reproducing a differentiated and complementary understanding of male and female sexuality.

3.2 In/subverting the double standard

A second tactic is represented by the inversion/subversion of a traditionally gendered sexual script: it is the case when young women (6 out of 22) describe their sexual experience by referring to typical elements of the scripted male sexuality (like desires, initiative, pleasure, etc.) or when young men (11 out of 29) emphasise typical components of the expected female script (emotional commitment and caring).

In these accounts, some young men and women seem to engage in an open resistance to the conventional definition of gendered sexual scripts. In so doing, a few young men explicitly distance themselves from the homosocial male community, focussing on the heterosexual couple (as a heterosocial context) as the main source of the meanings of their sexual experiences. Therefore, young men adopting a romantic script emphasise their emotional involvement and the meaningful frame provided by their relational commitment. Their first sexual intercourse is less described as a male action and more as an experience shared (at the practical level as well as for the meaning embedded) with the partner. Moreover, they tend to provide a more detailed depiction of the context in which they made love, paying attention to the place, the ambience, etc.

I arrived [to my first sexual intercourse] by joke because at the beginning we talked about making love, this sort of things, but we didn't fix a day because it is beautiful to do it when we were ready, isn't it? [...] so we started this sort of a play, we arranged one day to meet to watch a movie, without knowing we had to do something else. This day we put this videotape on, it was "Shakespeare in love", but the movie was so nice, we were there and I was quite emotionally moved, in fact I didn't soon have an erection because I was moved, and then we made love. (Giulio, 21 years old)

In young women's accounts, the adoption of a typically male pragmatic script seems to improve their sexual agency: these women tend to describe themselves more as sexual subjects, taking the initiative and enjoying the experience. In so doing, they reverse the traditional female sexual script entailing that sexual experience, while increasing male (sexual) reputation and being expected to be reported to the male peer group, endangers female reputation, thereby needing to be hidden or covered. As in Silvia's narrative, boasting about and public celebrating "the event" becomes part of an acknowledged transition to female adulthood, reminding very clearly the typical male ritual of "getting rid of virginity".

The first time I was 18, the other person was about 5-6 years older, 6 or 7, something like that, I was in a party and I saw this guy that was a friend of the other guy that I liked [...] we started to talk and from one thing another and we had sex together, that is. I was very happy, he didn't know I had never had sex with anyone else [...] it was a wonderful experience, also because I was very happy that it was something mine and only mine, that is that there were no questions like "I'm hurting you?" "what's happening?", I was worried by the idea of doing it with someone of the same age, at his first experience [...] into 5 minutes, the day after, more or less all my female friends were informed of the event, and there was a big celebration, yes, yes [...] a top meeting, opening bottles, excitement and happiness, and greetings by everybody. (Silvia, 27 years old)

While in these young men's account the homosocial context seems to lose its priority, in young women's, on the contrary, it acquires importance because it allows and supports a rejection of an objectifying male gaze to embody an empowering understanding of female sexual agency.

3.3 Constructing a single sexual standard

The third tactic is the construction of a single "gender neutral" script, the comedy script, which downplays the differences among the two partners by emphasising the shared elements of the first sexual (in)experience. Holland et al. (1998) point out that, while seemingly involved in the same sexual experience, men and women are never "in the same boat" because what makes sense of the heterosexual debut is the "male in the head" as a single standard. In our interviewees' accounts (even though it is a minority, 2 out of 29 men and 2 out of 22 women), however, we find reference to a "common script" focusing on complicity and fun. In these accounts, the distinction between an active male and passive female roles is challenged by the notion of "learning together"; moreover, the fear of pain for women and flopping for men is replaced by shared jokes and laughter (having fun together instead of making fun of somebody). Besides, in this script the first sexual intercourse occurs within a couple-relational context characterised by mutual emotional involvement and commitment. However, differently from the romantic script, in that case sex is described as a game in which the two players have the same status.

The adoption of this script seems to be favoured by more symmetrical features of the heterosexual relationship: partners of about the same age, with the same lack of experience and the same emotional involvement.

The first time, maybe more for him than for me, because he had

never had a girlfriend before, he was a little wimp, let's say it. [...] I didn't expect such a dreamful experience, like many people say "what an experience!", absolutely not, I kept my feet on earth, I was aware we were both inexperienced, so it was clear it could not have been a performance like "9 weeks and half". I remember we have really laughed, a lot [...] (Betty, 22 years old)

My first sexual time occurred 3 years ago, with the girl that now is my girlfriend. It happened one afternoon that, at last, she had the house free. [...] For her it was the first time too. So, at the end, that afternoon, at last we went all the way, let's say in that way, and clearly we had many things to learn, well, it was nice. Mainly disrupted by some things, you know, at the beginning, first simply to understand, you know, you sit there and "well, now how should we do it?", then you try, you put, do, take... [...] (Filippo, 29 years old)

3.4 Combining multiple scripts

A last interesting tactic is some interviewees' positioning in multiple scripts. This feature has already been outlined by other researchers^{xv}, pointing out how, in the field of sexuality, different (if not competing) discourses (conventional and resistant, hegemonic and alternative, traditional and post-traditional, etc.) tend to coexist and to be composed in young people's accounts.

In our findings, this occurs mainly in young men's accounts: a typical case is when the interviewees combine elements of different scripts, for instance when young men account for their first sexual intercourse by describing the context with a romantic language meanwhile admitting a pragmatic aim focused on gaining status within the male peer group. It is how Giandomenico, 24 years old, talks about his sexual debut:

It occurred one afternoon in my grandmother's house. [...] We used to go there after school, we stayed in my room to talk and listen to music. Sometimes we stayed on the bed, but till then nothing occurred beyond kissing and cuddling. That afternoon we got naked and she asked me whether we could do it. [...] We weren't afraid even though no-one of us had never done it before. We were quiet and we discovered it together. [...] Then I was excited because doing it for the first time was like overcoming something in your life that, till you have not done it, you keep a bit worried, seeing the other guys do it one after another. (Giandomenico, 24 years old)

Among women, it is more typical to combine the dramatic and the romantic script, the first used to describe the actual experience (fear, pain, shame, etc.) and the second to reframe it within the brighter light of love and to reaffirm a sense of control over one's own life. We have partially seen this multiple scripting in Loredana's account.

4. Final remarks and discussion

Even if survey data suggests an increasing similarity in younger men and women's sexual conduct and at a fading of the gendered sexual double standard, qualitative data shows a more nuanced and complex picture.

Focussing in particular on the first steps in sexual biographies, we saw how the majority of young men and women make sense of their sexual debut in different ways, conforming to a gendered definition of heterosexuality. In complying to the socially available traditional scripts, young people make evident the process of reproduction of the sexual double standard which is taken for granted by naturalising a differentiated notion of masculinity and femininity.

However, young people seem to find room for some form of resistance. Some of them engage in a subversion/ inversion of the gendered sexual double standard. It is especially the case of young men adopting a romantic script which let's them express an emotional involvement and downplay the traditional focus on male sexual performance.

Despite this process of subversion/inversion opening some space for an alternative understanding of men's and women's heterosexualities, the ambiguity is that within the romantic script, even when it is shared by both the partners, there are still some relics of a gendered double standard, point towards the different positions of the man and the woman in the couple: they share emotional involvement, but the male partner is still supposed to take the initiative and lead the sexual game.

A very few young people challenge the double standard by constructing a new script, the comedy script, providing the discursive space for a notion of heterosexuality as a matter of equality. This script seems to be the young people's way of taking up the intimacy script as the new dominant cultural script for the adult stage of sexual lifecourse, interpreting sex as a way of creating and maintaining a mutual disclosure and understanding within the couple. Even if this script is adopted by a handful of young people, survey data shows that the contextual conditions of its emergence (more symmetrical features of the two partner) are becoming more widespread, so we can expect that the minority may enlarge in the future.

Finally, some interviewees adopt a composition of scripts. It is interesting that this multiple positioning occurs more between young men than between young women: in fact, as we have seen before, survey data suggest a stronger redefinition of female sexuality and a relatively stable reproduction of male

sexuality. Therefore, some young men may feel that they are not legitimised to adopt a romantic or an intimacy script for openly accounting for their first sexual intercourse, especially when they keep referring, as a source for meanings of their experience, to the male peer group. Only within the safe space of the in-depth interview did they seem to find a space to express their emotional involvement, stepping aside the male gaze of their homosocial community. However, also in this sheltered setting, some young men look for a confirmation of their masculinity by reframing elements of the romanticism or intimacy within a more male shared pragmatic script: the romantic hero remains sensitive and macho at the same time^{xvi}.

On the contrary, young women appear more socially skilled/legitimised to use the romantic or the intimacy scripts. Therefore they tend to less frequently adopt mixed scripts.

This difference hints at the emergence of new forms of double standard, linked to the socially acknowledged accessibility, for young men and women, to the different tactics to manage the socially available scripts. This suggests that research on young people's sexuality should shift from focusing on the contents of young people's narratives (the components of the sexual scripts) to the contexts of their production^{xvii}, restraining or enabling different uses of the same scripts.

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- i A fruitful contribution in this perspective can be found in M. Flood, 'Men, Sex, and Homosociality. How Bonds between Men Shape Their Sexual Relations with Women', *Men and Masculinities*, 2008, 10 (3), pp.339-359, and in C. Paechter, 'Masculinity and Femininity as Community of Practice', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2003, 26 (1), pp.69-77.
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- ix The main findings of this research are going to be published in a collective book: see M. Barbagli, G. Dalla Zuanna and F. Garelli, *La sessualità degli italiani*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010 forthcoming.
- x This paragraph includes some parts written together with Chiara Bertone. See R. Ferrero Camoletto and C. Bertone, 'Coming as a Man. Pleasure in the construction of Italian Men's Sexuality', *Italian Issues*, accepted, under revision.
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