

## **The heterosexual couple: (De)constructing the affective and sexual dynamics**

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**Rationale/Background:** Sexuality in modern societies is assumed as a fundamental dimension of personal achievement and in the maintenance of the marital relationship, which does not mean that both members of the couple express their affections, desires, sexual behaviour or use their body in the same way. Discourses and representations of sexuality and sexual practices are inherently discourses about gender, power relations and symbolic functions (Foucault, 1999). Adopting a constructionist perspective on sexuality, this poster discusses the representations underlying the life of stable heterosexual couples which explain certain sexual practices and discursive logics about marital sex.

**Research Questions:** In a context where the proliferation and media coverage of images and messages about sexual practices and body uses coexist with the silencing of issues concerning intimate and sexual life, we tried to understand to which extent sexual experiences reflect on the one hand, greater gender equality (Giddens, 1992) and, on the other hand, the continuity of clear divide and inequalities in love and intimate relationships (Morgan, 1996; Jamieson, 1999; Bozon, 2004).

**Methods:** To meet this purpose, we rely on empirical data from a qualitative case study of ten heterosexual couples, conducted in Portugal, which aimed to find out to what extent, in modernity, life in common becomes a privileged context to try different sexual practices and indicates the presence of gender equality. From the content analysis of twenty semi-structured interviews, we can determine how the value systems, dispositions and notions of sexual morality influence the decision of adopting or not certain sexual practices. The interviews were conducted with both members of a heterosexual couple in stable cohabitation for at least two years, with and without children, living in the Porto and Viana do Castelo. The interviewees were between 30 and 46 years old, with a schooling degree between the secondary school and the master's degree.

**Results:** The results point to a predominantly hedonistic view of sexuality and a broadening of sexual practices, which emphasize the values of reciprocity, involvement and mutual pleasure, framed by ideals of more egalitarian gender. Nevertheless, a different experience still remains filled with effects of gender, revealing major constraints for women, which are reflected in a more restricted sexual repertoire.

**Conclusions:** Sexual practices adopted by couples are regulated by marital status, by moral and religious values and by social and sexual representations of gender deep-rooted in Portuguese society, which indicates the permanence of an androcentric and phallic view of sexuality, where female sexuality continues to submit to men (Bourdieu, 2002).

**Key Words:** Sexuality, representation, sexual practices, intimacy, heterosexuality.

**Funding Sources:** Not applicable.