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Sexuality Research Training in Brazil

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This article presents some points we consider to be illustrative for understanding of the recent sexuality research training experience in Brazil. We begin by setting forth the general characteristics of scientific literature particularly in social science, (1) enumerating the factors that have exerted most influence on the analysis of sexuality and gender in Brazil, correlating them with the context of Brazilian society. There follows (2) a brief description of the major analytical tendencies in academic production on sexuality and (3) a history of sexuality research training courses in Brazil, pointing out the favorable elements and the major obstacles faced in the recent efforts in training researches with different academic backgrounds for doing research into sexuality, which is the main topic of this article. This was a relatively recent initiative with the object of meeting the recent demand for research training among professionals interested in dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic as well as themes related to sexual and reproductive health. This initiative had financial support from international private foundations. The character of this initiative reflected the conclusion, arrived at in other parts of the world, that the behaviorist explanatory model was not fruitful for an understanding of sexual behavior (Paiva, 1988). For this reason emphasis was given to the socio-anthropological approach that sees the sociocultural context as more relevant to the interpretation of sexual behavior than explanations based on individual psychology.

1. The Academic Background

Brazil is a large country in the Southern Hemisphere that displays both a marked diversity of regional subcultures and puzzling national unity probably brought about by its singularity as a Portuguese-speaking nation in a Spanish-speaking continent. In Brazilian social thought, sex has always aroused interest as a possible explanation of the national character. The notion that the

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Portuguese colonizers found here in the tropics “a land with no king and no law” played a significant role in the emergence of a sexual imagery about Brazil as a country where sexuality was more spontaneous or more frenzied. This perception of Brazilianness, with its ensuing readings (for instance, Freyre, 1946) and misreadings (Prado, 1997), is part and parcel of the values in terms of which Brazilians see themselves. But this construct is largely dependent on the literary and scientific writings of the European travelers who have visited Brazil since the eighteenth century. It is in this complex context of production and incorporation of values concerning a supposed Brazilian sexual culture (see Parker, 1991) that the existence of a significant literature about sexuality in social science can be understood. Even more important is the fact that ethnographic studies of alternative sexualities in Brazil has been undertaken long before the advent of the AIDS epidemic turned sex into such a relevant topic for social research.

Another notable characteristic of academic production in social science in Brazil has been the growth of gender studies ever since the beginning of the women’s movement in 1975. To understand why gender studies have developed in this particular way, one must examine the social history of Brazil and its higher-education system, and compare the particularities of the institutionalization of women’s studies in Brazil, with the way this process took place in North America. In the U.S., the origin of women’s studies, as well as of ethnic studies, can be traced back to the protest movements that rocked American campuses in the Sixties. These movements led to a questioning of the depoliticized views and practices of the professional and academic social-science establishment. Feminists were in the vanguard of the critique of the prevailing order in the scientific and professional worlds, disciplinary divisions, criteria of scientific authority, academic hierarchy and deference, and scientific foundations of the dominant currents in sociology. It was mostly by creating and teaching new college courses in “feminist studies” or “women’s studies” that feminist scholars attempted to foster reflection on women’s experience and feminist aspirations.³

In Brazil, relations between the women’s movement and the academic world take place in a quite different context. To begin with, feminism in Brazil has never been as radical as in the U.S. or Europe.⁴ The social problems of a society marked by dramatic inequality have made the Brazilian women’s movement much more moderate as regards confrontation between the sexes and more attuned to the dominant discourse of the Left. Secondly, from the beginning feminism in Brazil has involved a large number of scholars, to such an extent that according to some versions of its history the movement began in the academic world, and was disseminated among women in other social spheres only later. Because they had greater contact with ideas circulating internationally, women scholars were in a privileged position for the reception, elaboration and dissemination of the new issues that feminism had been raising in advanced capitalist countries since the late ‘60s. So it

³ For the history of women’s studies in the U.S., see Boxer (1982).

⁴ See Goldberg, 1989.

was that when, around 1975, the Brazilian women's movement became more visible, many of its activists and sympathizers were already working in universities.

Feminist scholars in Brazil did not devise strategies of confrontation with scientific organizations and the departments in which they worked. Rather, their efforts were concentrated almost exclusively on social research. Eventually a number of study centers were created in many universities and research institutions around Brazil, but none of them ever matured into an autonomous teaching unit.⁵ Thus the fundamental difference between the institutionalization of women's studies in the U.S. and in Brazil is that Brazilian academics, instead of creating alternative institutions, have attempted to join the existing scientific establishment by earning acknowledgment of the scientific value of their intellectual interests from professional social scientists.

The attempt to construct a sociological issue differentiated from the political problem raised by feminism characterizes much of the effort to institutionalize the theme. However, this original association still has its effects on the organization of the field of study in a number of ways. Firstly, for all the recent changes that have occurred, it is clear that gender studies still interest relatively few male scholars. On the one hand, this highlights the impact of the hierarchy of prestige of the sexes on the ordering of objects of scientific study and on scientists themselves; on the other hand, the perception that there is a strong association between gender studies and women's movements discourages male researchers from entering the field. Secondly, the privileged themes in the area of gender studies are still those that are closest to women's actual experiences: family, sexuality, work, education (Heilborn & Sorj, 1999). The growing interest in gender studies among scholars should also be seen in the light of the general social context of the period. From 1964 to 1985 the country was living under a military dictatorship, and at the same time profound changes were affecting the position of women in Brazilian society as a whole. The '70s and '80s were marked by social modernization, which implied the spread of individualistic values and egalitarian practices. Women's participation in the labor market increased; divorce was legalized; and changes occurred in sexual mores, including greater social acceptability of homosexuality. These factors explain the choice of objects for research and the style of academic training in the country. Also, feminism spread throughout Brazilian society, affecting, even if only in subtle ways, the organization of women in different sectors. A good example of this is the fact that the women's movement in Brazil had a major influence on the creation of a National Health Program for Women (PAISM). Although this health program cannot be seen as a specific achievement of women, since its conception was very much influenced by the so-called health-reform movement – a joint effort of various health professionals which became one of the most active forces in the struggle for redemocratization,

⁵ Since the National Association of Graduate Studies in Social Science (ANPOCS), in the '70s, was first established, work groups on gender have been present at its annual meetings; disciplines concerned with gender studies are to be found in the curricula of various graduate-study programs;

with special emphasis on the creation of public policies that would give citizens greater access to the health system – the PAISM raised the issue of all-round health services for women, and not only to mothers and infants. This new approach was also reflected in the growing interest of health professionals, particularly nurses, for training in the area of sex and gender from a sociocultural angle.

A large number of nurses took part in one of the practical experiences of training researchers on sexuality, the Interinstitutional Program for Regionalized Training in Research on Gender Sexuality and Reproductive Health (in which the two authors of this article participated as coordinators).

Another point that should be made in this presentation of training in sex research is the importance of psychoanalysis in Brazil, not only as a social practice but also as a qualified form of knowledge. Psychoanalysis plays a central role in the diffusion of views on sexuality. In the '80s, Brazilian society greatly respected the opinions of psychoanalysts, and their interpretations were invested with much legitimacy. By the '90s this was no longer true. The reasons for this loss of legitimacy are various, some of them certainly not restricted to Brazil. The development of new drugs for use in psychotherapy in the '90s has contributed to a lessening of interest in long-term speech-based therapy around the world. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis, a discipline in which sexuality occupies a fundamental position, still enjoys much prestige in the country (Figueira, 1981 and Birman, 1998), and plays a significant role in interdisciplinary studies of sexuality. There is also sexology, which in Brazil is not a medical specialty but is institutionally represented by the Brazilian Society of Human Sexuality, whose members are physicians or professionals in psychology, education or other areas related to health. The Society's function is to train professionals to work in *sex education* and *sex therapy*. At times medicine plays a dominant role in Brazilian sexology, because of the need to legitimate the practices and services involved, but it is not numerically significant (cf. Corrêa, 1998: 70).

These two elements – interest in sexuality in the history of Brazilian social thought, and the importance and the peculiarities of gender studies in Brazil – explain why the sexuality-research training experience in Brazil has assumed its present shape. In addition, as a Latin-American country, Brazil has a significant number of graduate-school programs, due to educational policies adopted by the Brazilian government in the '80s.

In Brazilian social science, sociology and anthropology have approached the topic of sexuality from different angles. Power relations in the intellectual world have had the effect of endowing anthropology with increasing legitimacy since the '80s. This fact has had a major impact

feminist scholarly periodicals are produced in close association with graduate-study programs.

on the choice of specific approaches and on the overwhelming predominance of qualitative methodologies in research.

2. Theoretical Approaches in Sexuality Research

Any analysis of the history of sexuality studies leaves no doubt that this field has experienced a significant boom with the rise of gender studies. Indeed, the field of sexuality is intimately related to that of gender which is closely associated with such social movements as feminism and gay liberation. This connection underscores one of the most striking characteristics of social science: its permeability to issues that galvanize social life in a given historical moment (Heilborn & Sorj, 1999).

The analytical approaches on sexuality that have predominated in Brazil are influenced by cultural anthropology. In particular, they are characterized by the belief that themes under investigation can make sense only on the basis of the network of meanings and social relations that support them in a given context. The assertion of the nonunivocity of the sexual meaning has been one of the guidelines, pointing to the influence of such authors as Foucault (1977), with many followers in Brazil, and others, less well-known scholars such as Gagnon & Simon (1973) and Herdt (1981). While the premise of anthropological relativism has been applied to relevant categories, at the same time there has been a concern with the establishment of an arbitrary point beyond which the deconstruction of presuppositions must stop: there must always be something that is understood as sexual activity. Certainly this point is not always the same in every investigation, for much depends on the questions and problems that guide each research.

Thus the famous clash between two opposite positions in the theoretical debate on sexuality – *essentialism* vs. *social constructionism* – has left its mark on Brazil, but constructionist positions have by and large won the day (Terto Jr, 1999), keeping up with the dominant anthropological tendencies in the country. This opposition, as has been shown, is not of a linear nature, taking place as it does on two different planes: first, a simple opposition between two views; second, the contrast between different ways of conceiving social constructionism. Essentialism holds that there is something inherent in human nature, built into bodies, in the form of a sexual drive or energy that impels action. Sexuality is seen either as a physiological mechanism at the service of the reproduction of the species or else as the manifestation of a psychological drive that must find outside expression.

Social constructionism, on the other hand, includes a number of approaches that question the universality of a supposed sexual drive. The discussion has focused on culturally specific forms of bodily contact between persons of the same sex or of opposite sexes, whether or not they are associated with the reproductive activity that is generally known in the West as sexuality, and this

has led to an emphasis on the existence of different meanings among distinct groups in a given culture. A good example is the discussion of the fact that in Brazil not every man involved in same-sex practices is categorized as homosexual (Fry, 1982 & Parker, 1991). It follows that sexual meanings – in particular, the very notion of sexual experience or sexual behavior – cannot be generalized, since they are anchored in networks of meanings interconnected with other modalities of classification, such as kinship and gender systems, age classifications, or the structure of social privilege and the distribution of wealth (Heilborn & Brandão, 1999).

The constructionist position can give rise to different interpretations, depending on the degree of autonomy granted to sexuality vis-à-vis reproduction. Within the paradigm of social constructionism there are tensions, not always made explicit, associated with different cultural approaches, ranging from moderate to emphatic. Carole Vance (1995) has convincingly demonstrated the existence of two models of social constructionism applied to sexuality. The first, the cultural-influence model, is based on the premise that there is a fundamental split between body and reason, the body being a sort of substratum upon which culture is overlaid, altering or modeling behaviors, experiences and meanings related to sex. Sexuality is believed to be universal and biologically determined, each society shaping the sexual drive in its own way.

The second model is more emphatic. It holds that the sphere of bodily sensations is entirely made up of cultural constructions. Thus it is necessary to identify the mediations that define what is sexual for each historical moment, and to determine how these meanings are combined with gender classifications, with reproduction and with the kinship system. It is assumed that the postulation of what is sexual is radically arbitrary.

The basic theoretical orientation given in sexuality-research training courses in Brazil has been emphatic constructionism. Stress is laid on the need to identify the interconnections between the different axes of social classification, given that sexuality relies on socialization, on learning specific sets of rules, on cultural scenarios that determine the meaning and practice of sexual activity. The sexual, it is taught, is not to be identified with the merely reproductive, nor should it be reduced to the psychological. Rather, it is seen as impregnated with cultural conventions about what erotic excitement and satisfaction are supposed to be, symbolic constructs that shape physical sensations themselves (Parker, 1991).

We believe that a reasonable evaluation of the content of sexuality-research training courses is closer to the second model than to the first, although it is quite clear that the target public is not always convinced of its appropriateness. Later we shall return to this aspect of the training of new researchers.

The attempt to grasp and achieve theoretical understanding of the different possibilities of construing sexual trajectories of individuals or groups of couples points to different cultural scenarios. These are permeated by forms of affection (in all its variants, including the ideal of

romantic love), by violence, by different networks of sociability, by the place occupied by reproduction and family in social imagination and, critically, by the potential for validation or censorship that the social world exerts on each subject. Emphasis is given to gender as a basic category to understanding the way sexuality is experienced by subjects.

Such topics are included in the study programs, seminars and researches that make up the training courses on sexuality, which always take into account the dominant role of gender in the structure of sexual experience.

3. The Trajectory of Courses

In the past two decades, it has become clear that issues related to sexuality and gender play a central role in the field of public health. Demographic issues, at first, then those that are more strictly related to the reproductive health of women and, most recently, the HIV/AIDS epidemic have made the information generated by sex research not only relevant but also fundamental for any examination of cultural, social and political dynamics and contexts and their interconnections with health issues. Because for many decades this field of study lacked legitimacy, not only were limits imposed on the production of knowledge – it was only in 1999 that the first population based study focusing on sexual behavior of the Brazilian population was concluded – but also education and research institutions were not encouraged to train researchers in this field.

In the last two decades a number of important initiatives have gradually sought to redress the widespread neglect of research on sexuality in Brazil. An increasing number of community-based organizations concerned with women's reproductive health or with the struggle against AIDS in Brazil have emerged and have turned the question into sexuality a key area of concern. Also, a number of leading investigators, as well as centers and institutions on the university level, have become involved in sex-related research.

The Fundação Carlos Chagas, through its Research Contests on women and gender relations, begun in 1978 and funded by the Ford Foundation, played a pioneering and fundamental role in the construction of this field of study (see Bruschini, 1998). With the purpose of training researchers, with research grants, regular monitoring of the different stages of financed studies and the publication of books,⁶ this program was throughout the '80s the only effort outside academia to support sex-related studies, and it served as a model for other proposals started in the following

⁶ The Research on Women Contests have already resulted in the publication of seven books: *Vivência* (1980); *Trabalhadoras do Brasil* (1982); *Mulher, mulheres* (1983); *Rebeldia e Submissão* (1989); *Entre a virtude e o pecado* (1991); *Novos Olhares: mulheres e relações de gênero no Brasil* (1994) and *Horizontes plurais* (1998), in addition to a special issue of the *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, a quarterly publication of the Fundação Carlos Chagas, in 1985.

decade. Of the 169 research projects funded in the eight contests held up to 2000, the program gave support to 39 researchers whose projects were related to the topic of sexuality.

In the academic sphere, the '80s were marked by a proliferation of study and research centers focusing on gender issues em todo o Brasil, which led to the creation of networks attempting to articulate these centers. Particularly, in the area of reproductive health, a number of initiatives structured as research groups or centers have been attempting to respond to a growing demand for information.

In the late '80s, under the impact of the growing AIDS epidemic, interest in research strictly related to sexuality underwent considerable expansion, reinforcing the already existing convergence between social science and health studies. From a theoretical and methodological viewpoint, this convergence was invaluable for the production of knowledge in the area of reproductive health, by incorporating the concept of gender and promoting the acceptance of qualitative studies. Quantitative studies, however, are still restricted to the field of epidemiology, since in Brazil the social sciences dedicated to the study of sexuality so far have no tradition of effecting quantitative studies. An exception is "Comportamento Sexual da População Brasileira e Percepções do HIV-AIDS,"⁷ mentioned above; and there is an ongoing project titled "Teenage Pregnancy: Multicentered Study on Sexuality and Reproduction in Brazil," sponsored by the Ford Foundation.⁸

Investigation also increased considerably within institutions and groups involved with health services and social movements, particularly those related to feminism and, more recently, to AIDS.

Accordingly, the '90s have been marked by the proliferation of research on gender, sexuality, reproductive health and AIDS. While this growth has helped to consolidate the importance of this field of investigation, it has also become clear that the material produced does not necessarily amount in every case to a natural increase in the production of quality knowledge. This fact has posed a new challenge to institutions: the imperative to improve and strengthen researcher-training programs.

Two kinds of initiatives were organized in response to this challenge. The first was directed to graduate courses, and its object is to strengthen this area of study in existing master's and doctoral programs⁹.

The second, which is the object of this section of this present article, aimed to foster the interchange between academia, social movements and health services, integrating the process of

⁷ Brasília, Ministério da Saúde, 2000.

⁸ This is a sociological investigation (Heilborn, Bozon, Aquino & Kanuth, 1999), combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques, of the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy and its consequences for individuals and society, focusing on systems of social representation and practices in the sphere of sex and reproduction, involving 4,500 young people of both sexes in the 18-24 age range, living in three state capitals in Brazil: Rio, Salvador and Porto Alegre.

⁹ Anthropology, social psychology, preventive medicine and collective health are the disciplines that best accommodated the theme of sexuality and gender.

production of knowledge in these different loci. This initiative gave rise to two strategies that are historically dated and that reflect both the challenges that had to be faced in the field and the interests of the funding agencies that are active and leading in this particular area in Brazil: the Ford Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation.

The first of these strategies, which began to take shape in the early '90s, consisted in improving professional training programs by strengthening the thematic content of the area and perfecting the theoretical and conceptual discussion of this field of studies. Two training programs were organized in two academic institutions: the Program for Study in Research in Sexuality, Gender and Sexual Health, at the Instituto de Medicina Social, Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (IMS/UERJ), in Rio, and the Program for Study and Research in Sexuality and Reproductive Health at the Núcleo de Estudos em População, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (NEPO/UNICAMP), in São Paulo. In both programs, courses of short or medium duration are conjoined with research training through direct participation in projects. Another common characteristic is the fact that the activities offered by the two institutions are open to professionals from the various states of Brazil, with a view to extending the production of knowledge into those regions where there are fewer investments in research and human resources. In this way those who take these courses become, when they return to their original institutions, propagators of the knowledge they have acquired, thus widening the network of researchers who have access to the content of these courses and favoring the circulation of information. In its courses IMS tends to emphasize theoretical and conceptual discussions and the interface between sexuality and AIDS. Training of researchers takes place through small research studies focusing on five theoretical and conceptual problems: power and gender relations; theories of sexual desire; social/sexual networks; sex, gender and personhood; and changes in sexual behavior.

NEPO, in contrast, underscores the interface between sexuality and reproductive health, and also privileges training through the participation of researchers in multicentered studies related to such reproductive-health themes as female morbimortality and the sterilization of women. Courses are also organized in thematic modules, such as: sexuality; conception and contraception; sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS; prenatal care, childbirth and puerperium and abortion. All these topics are necessarily approached from a multidisciplinary perspective.

The public that effectively profits from these two initiatives is basically the same. Quite often the same professionals take part in both programs, since their approaches are complementary. Over 300 persons have taken part in these training programs – professional health workers (physicians, nurses, psychologists and social workers) and social scientists working with health issues in nongovernmental organizations, health services and (less often) universities. An interesting characteristic of this public is that males and physicians are minorities, which perhaps reflects the fact that the field of studies of sexuality and gender still suffers from lack of legitimacy.

The second strategy, which took shape somewhat later, in the latter half of the '90s, focuses on specialist training in research methodology. Here there have been four distinct initiatives.

The first one, started em 1997, at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul by the Faculties of Medicine's Department of Social Medicine and the Department of Anthropology of the Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas (IFCH), in response to the growing demand by researchers for methodological alternatives allowing a qualitative approach to health studies. It is not a continuous training program, and it receives no outside funding (see Victora, Knauth & Hassen, 2000).

The second, the Programa de Treinamento em Pesquisa sobre Direitos Reprodutivos na América Latina e Caribe – PRODIR (Program for Training in Research on Reproductive Rights in Latin American and the Caribbean), started in 1997, is coordinated by the Fundação Carlos Chagas and funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Aimed at researchers living in all countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, this program aims to develop theories and practices that will provide alternatives to the dominant discourse as regards population issues, through research contests, systematic monitoring of different stages of funded studies and dissemination of the results through the publication of books.¹⁰ The first two versions of the PRODIR elicited 450 proposals from 19 countries, 18 of them from Brazil. The program's third version had a pioneering role in encouraging proposals on the theme Men and Masculinities, which had a very positive response; of the 300 entries 18 projects were funded (see Costa, 1994 and 1997).

The third one, also started in 1997, is coordinated by the Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa sobre AIDS (NEPAIDS/USP) and funded by the World AIDS Foundation. So far the NEPAIDS has trained 80 researchers through its courses and provided support to 13 research projects.

The fourth initiative, the Program of Research Methodology in Sexuality, Gender and Reproductive Health, started in 1996, is coordinated by a consortium of institutions (NEPO/UNICAMP, IMS/UERJ, ENSP/FIOCRUZ, Institute of Health/São Paulo and Institute of Collective Health/UFBa) and financed by the Ford Foundation. Up to the present 127 researchers have taken the seven courses already taught, and 49 research projects have been financed. Seven different courses have received 536 propopsals mainly from Brazil. In both of them - the third and fourth initiatives above described - methodology courses are taught and fellowships are granted so that research may be conducted. The researchers are monitored by mentors individually or in groups. Another hallmark of these programs is their emphasis on the dissemination of investigations results, since the publication of this kind of material tends to be difficult for many

¹⁰ The first two versions of the PRODIR produced two books: *Alternativas escassas: saúde, sexualidade e reprodução na América Latina* (1994) and *Direitos Tardios* (1997).

reasons¹¹. The results of the studies conducted by the young researchers are presented in papers that are submitted to revision by outside referees with the purpose of publication.

Both initiatives are interinstitutional and interdisciplinary. They involve a number of institutions or departments, and are structured to allow training in qualitative and quantitative research, which is unprecedented in such training programs. Interdisciplinarity is a challenge and also a goal of these programs organized in the past five years.

Interinstitutionality reflects a number of issues: a response to the challenge posed by the need for an interdisciplinary perspective of these studies; institutions' desire to fill in gaps in their graduate-studies programs; the desire to keep researchers near their workplace; the interchange of experiences for the purpose of broadening and strengthening other training centers, thus helping to bridge the interregional gaps (Southeast and South vs. Northeast and North, capital cities vs. the interior) that make Brazil a country marked by huge contrasts and inequalities.

On the other hand, the difficulties experienced by those initiatives are partly due to the fact that the target public of these training programs is largely drawn from the area of health studies, where the incorporation of gender as an analytical category is still taking place. Resistance against the adoption of anthropological view of sexuality is sharply in disagreement with the biomedical perspective, clashing with the professional training of a significant part of the public, in spite of their strong commitment to the topics brought up by the women's movement. The problem of AIDS has had the effect of reinforcing the legitimacy of biomedical and epidemiological studies of sexuality, stressing the use of techniques that emphasize measurement and control of sexual behavior, taken as a set of acts and practices isolated from their cultural context (Giarni, 1994). Such studies often have normative tone concerning individual behavior in relation to disease prevention. The relativizing effort of social science seeks to question a set of beliefs rooted in common sense or in the professional training of specialists, beliefs that tend to reify specific behaviors and sexual identities. They usually take no account of the slow and complex process of sociocultural learning, permeated by the gender marks that shape representations and practices in the sphere of sexuality.

Another important element of all these programs is the fact that nowadays in Brazil funding for research is decreasing, and a general reformulation of federal educational policy has had the effect of sacrificing funding for graduate-school programs. Thus these above mentioned training programs in methodology result in financial support and are particularly attractive. Indeed, for many young researchers, there is no other way to obtain a research grant: about 20 percent of the projects supported by these programs have led to doctoral dissertations or masters' theses.

¹¹ The publication of a book including the articles produced in the first three courses of the Program of Research Methodology in Sexuality, Gender and Reproductive Health is scheduled for 2001. Of the 12 articles, 6 deal specifically with sexuality.

Another attractive although challenging feature is the short term period involved in those training programs, which allows gathering highly qualified professors from various institutions and disciplinary fields.

At the same time, one of the major contribution of those initiatives is the grounding of research on sexuality, gender and reproductive health as a form of social response aimed at producing knowledge that can be used by public health professionals and actors in prevention and health promotion, as well as a new form of understanding sexuality as a cultural construction that enables social change. This review of the origins of researcher-training initiatives open not only to an academic public but also to professionals involved in public health and in the elaboration of public policies leads to a positive evaluation of the knowledge produced in the last few years in the interface between the sphere of medicine and that of social science.

CONCLUSION

The training of new researchers is profoundly influenced by the way how the subject of sexuality has been treated in the history of Brazilian social thought, by the way the women's movement was structured in Brazil and by the policy of knowledge production encouraged by the formal graduate-school system and the various training programs. Last but not least, one must consider the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on everyday life in Brazil. The need to face the disease laid bare social habits and costumes and gave greater legitimacy to sex studies. Brazil now plays a leading role in the effort to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic efficiently and democratically.

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