Learning about the birds and the bees: information about sex in three Brazilian communities in 1996-97

Paula Miranda-Ribeiro

1. Introduction

In the 1990s, Brazilian teenagers knew very little about human reproduction. This indication comes from the Demographic and Health Survey, which has an entire section devoted to knowledge about contraception and reproduction. In the case of Northeast Brazil in 1991, the results suggest an astounding lack of knowledge about the reproductive cycle – only 12% of the 15 to 19 year-old females answered the question “when a woman is most likely to get pregnant” correctly.

How much did teenagers know about sex in Montes Claros, Vila Feliz, and Macambira in 1996-97? This paper presents evidence on the sources of information about sex that teenagers from those places relied on – peers, the rua, parents, relatives, school, books, magazines, and television. Data come from thirty-six focus groups conducted by the author between September 1996 and January 1997 with teenagers and mothers of teenagers. In addition to reviewing what I found regarding the ways that teenagers in the mid-1990s learned about sex, I also review what their mothers told me about their own learning experiences, or the lack of it, in this realm. Special focus is given to the methodology. Results indicate that parents and schools did not seem to provide sufficient or accurate information. Moreover, many teenagers felt ashamed or embarrassed to talk about sex with family members or teachers. Thus, in order to avoid shame, teens in these communities relied on peers and the mass media as their main source of information about sex.

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1 This paper is based on chapters 4, 6, and 7 of my PhD dissertation, “The sexuality transition among teenagers in Brazil,” supervised by Joseph E. Potter and presented to the Department of Sociology, the University of Texas at Austin in December 1997.
2. Data and Methods

This research project was part of a larger endeavor called “The Social Impact of Television on Reproductive Behavior in Brazil,” a multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary project involving researchers both in the US and in Brazil, organized around one specific telenovela, the Globo Network’s eight o’clock O Rei do Gado (The King of Cattle), which aired between June 17, 1996 and February 21, 1997. The project was carried out in Vila Feliz, a favela (shanty town) in the city of São Paulo, the city of Montes Claros, state of Minas Gerais, and Macambira, a rural village in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. The idea was to contrast three different settings: a large metropolitan area, a mid-sized city not very close to or directly influenced by any metropolitan area, and a small community in the Northeast – the poorest region of the country. Between September 1996 and January 1997, I conducted thirty-seven focus group meetings with teenagers and mothers of teenagers at the three sites, as well as a quota-sampling survey of 550 14 to 17 year-old teenagers in Montes Claros. My research design was approved by the Human Subjects and Institutional Review Board from the University of Texas at Austin.

By the mid-1990s, Montes Claros was a rapidly growing mid-sized city of 250 thousand inhabitants in the northern portion of the state of Minas Gerais. Its economy was based on cement and biomedical industries, as well as grazing, sugarcane, and commercial forestry for industrial fuel. The Catholic Church was very strong in Montes Claros and part of the city’s cultural traditions.

Vila Feliz was among the largest favelas in the city of São Paulo, with an estimate of 32.5 thousand inhabitants. It was surrounded by a very upscale neighborhood where the upper-middle class lived in mansions and highly guarded skyscraper condominiums with a view to the favela. The two worlds were separated by an avenue and met when the favela inhabitants “crossed the border” to work in the rich neighborhood as security guards, nannies, cooks, cleaning ladies, personal drivers, gardeners, and other domestic workers.

Macambira was a village of two thousand inhabitants located off the coast in the Sertão do Seridó, an arid region 190 miles from Natal (the state capital) and 15 miles from Caicó (the fifth

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2 The methodologies utilized in that project included a historical and institutional analysis, a content analysis of telenovelas over time and of print material (newspapers and magazines) about O Rei do Gado, a GIS (Geographical Information Systems) analysis, three household surveys with males age 20 to 59 and females age 20 to 49, three ethnographies, and focus group discussions with adult males and females.
3 Although this slot is known as the “eight o’clock telenovela,” it actually aired at 8:30 PM, following the national newscast.
4 Following the anthropological tradition to assure that participants will not be identified, the real name of the favela was omitted.
5 Once again, because of confidentiality problems, the real name of the village was not used.
6 According to the 1991 census.
7 According to the 1991 census.
largest city of the state with approximately 50 thousand inhabitants). Embroidery, a predominantly female occupation, was Macambira’s main economic activity. The City Hall was also an important source of employment. Despite the adverse weather conditions, agriculture was another option of employment for males. Due to the lack of good opportunities for males, temporary migration took place frequently.8

2.1 The Focus Groups

2.1.1 Theory

Focus group discussions first began with Robert Merton (Merton et al, 1956) and were developed originally for research on radio morale programs during World War II. It started in November of 1941, when Merton was invited by Paul Lazarsfeld to watch a test of audience response to be conducted by one of his assistants. After the test, as Lazarsfeld asked Merton his opinion about what he had seen, Merton had a long list of critiques and suggestions to improve the interviewing procedure. Lazarsfeld invited Merton to conduct the next session of tests that was about to begin and to implement the changes he had just suggested. The technique was later named focussed group-interviews (with double “s”) (Merton et al, 1990). That author prefers the word grouping rather than group because, sociologically speaking, a group implies shared norms and goals, common identities, and a continuing unity that the individuals brought together for the meeting do not share. Yet for the purpose of this work, I will use the word group and grouping interchangeably.

Focus group research is used for obtaining in-depth information that would be impossible to obtain otherwise. Its main strength lies in the fact that the data are generated through interaction among individuals. Focus group discussions have been used by social researchers to provide insights into the dynamics of attitudes, opinions, motivations, and concerns. Unlike other qualitative methodologies, focus group discussions provide information about norms, as well as discussions around what constitutes normative behavior. The technique can be easily combined with surveys, participant observation, ethnography, and individual interviews. Yet focus groups can be self-contained so that “the results of the research can stand on their own” (Morgan, 1988: 25). The participants are recruited from a specific target group -- according to the profile defined by the researcher -- and have a set of common characteristics that are of interest to the investigation. The group is composed of six to twelve participants who are usually but not necessarily unfamiliar with each other. Members of one particular grouping should have the same socioeconomic status in

8 For a more detailed site description, see Miranda-Ribeiro, 1997.
an attempt to avoid inhibition and embarrassment. The conversation is facilitated by a moderator, who tries to create a non-judgmental, relaxed and permissive environment so that the participants can freely express their points of view and perceptions about the subject. The moderator can have a high to low level of involvement, depending on the degree of control the researcher wants to impose on the conversation. The conversation generally follows an outline but there is flexibility to change the order of the topics, talk about emerging issues that had not been previously planned, and even change the outline as a response to previous meetings. The group discussions should be conducted in a neutral and quiet environment. Separate meetings with participants of different profiles allow comparisons between views of individuals with distinct characteristics. The meetings are usually tape-recorded and sometimes video-taped. There is an ethical issue of confidentiality that has to be resolved before the meetings take place and announced to the participants -- who will be allowed to listen to the tapes and/or watch the tape. The analysis can be more ethnographic -- using quotes to illustrate the topics of interest -- or closer to content analysis -- where the number of times each topic is mentioned is taken into account (for more details, see Morgan, 1988; Krueger, 1988; Merton et al, 1990; Folch-Lyon and Trost, 1981; Knodel and Pramulratana, 1987; Knodel et al, 1988).

Focus groups discussions have been successfully used in Demography -- both in a self-contained form and combined with other methods, especially surveys. Pioneered by John Knodel and colleagues in Thailand, focus group findings have helped demographers answer some questions that traditional survey methods are unable to tackle (Knodel et al, 1987). Family planning research has relied on focus groups as a means of getting individual’s responses on sensitive topics such as contraceptive use and preferences, ideal family size, sexually transmitted diseases, and other reproductive- and sex-related issues (for an example, see Blanc et al, 1996).

Back in the 1990s, focus group research was a relatively new and unused methodology in Brazilian Demography. For instance, the method was used to gather qualitative information on issues raised by the Pesquisa sobre Saúde Reprodutiva e Sexualidade do Jovem (Survey on Reproductive Health and Sexuality among the Youth). Carried out among 15 to 24 year-old males and females in three metropolitan areas (Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and Curitiba) in 1989, the survey was followed by a set of eighteen focus groups conducted in Rio de Janeiro in 1990 (BEMFAM, 1993). In 1994, Diana Sawyer’s research project on land use and health in the Center-West region used focus groups with miners and settlers to “apprehend the social representation, beliefs and behavior developed by the population who is massive(ly) exposed to malaria” (CEDEPLAR, 1995).
2.1.2 Practice

In a Training Seminar class in the Fall of 1994, while presenting ideas of what I thought would become my dissertation proposal one day, one of my fellow students criticized me for planning to conduct focus groups without any prior experience. This person suggested that I hire a professional to moderate the groups. Based on my intuition, I responded saying that I might not know how to conduct a focus group meeting, but I knew exactly what I wanted to get out of the discussions. My argument was that it was easier to learn how to moderate a focus group discussion than to brief someone about all I wanted to learn from the participants. Later on, reading one of Knodel’s papers on the subject, I learned that he and his colleague also share my opinion and caution researchers against the “[temptation] to hire a professional marketing firm with experience with focus groups” (Knodel and Pramulratana, 1987: 5). The Summer of 1994 offered me the opportunity to watch several group discussions conducted by professionals in Brazil. In the Summer of 1995, I conduct five meetings with low-income female teens based on my own outline. Today, after the thirty-seven focus groups I conducted for this project, I am glad I followed my intuition and Knodel’s piece of advice. Although I have made mistakes along the way, I had the chance to explore new territories, try new approaches, and talk about topics that were not initially planned. In addition, the fact that I conducted the meetings helped me with the data analysis. I feel I know the data thoroughly. More than designing the outline, I was part of the whole enterprise. After all, I was there. It is always easier to report on something that was experienced first-hand.

2.1.2.1 Selection of Participants

Due to the number of meetings that I conducted, I had a chance to try different recruiting processes as well as distinct ways to mix and match participants. I recruited teenagers at schools and through natives (residents of the city) and/or the ethnographer in residence at each site. Most of the meetings were single-sex except for the final round, when I conducted three coed meetings with teenagers. Table 1 presents a summary of the thirty-seven focus group discussions conducted for this project. Among the thirty-six groups that were used in the analysis, seven of them were composed by mothers of teenagers and twenty-nine had teenage participants; nineteen of them were conducted in Montes Claros, nine in Macambira, and eight in Vila Feliz; fourteen of them brought together lower income participants, thirteen had upper income participants, three were

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composed by teenage mothers or mothers-to-be, three had dropout girls, and three of them used other recruiting criteria. Among the twenty-nine groups with teens, four of them were coed, nine were composed by male participants, and sixteen had female participants only.

**TABLE 1**

*Focus Group Discussions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>where</th>
<th>when</th>
<th>who</th>
<th>how many groups</th>
<th>type of recruitment</th>
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<td>03</td>
<td>school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>school</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-17 F, upper income</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-17 M, upper income</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jan.1997</td>
<td>14-17 coed, lower income</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-17 coed, upper income</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-20 coed, drug users</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>ethnographer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-17 F, dropouts</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-17 M, dropouts</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14-18 F, teen mothers</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>adults F, lower income</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
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<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>adults F, Catholic</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>ethnographer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>01</td>
<td>school</td>
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<td>14-17 F, upper income</td>
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<td>14-18 F, teen mothers</td>
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<td>native</td>
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<td>14-17 F, dropouts</td>
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<td>14-18 F, teen mothers</td>
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<td>adults F, lower income</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>adults F, upper income</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>native</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10 The idea of including dropout girls came from Romo and Falbo's (1996) work with Latino high-school girls who, despite the high proportion of school dropouts among Latino students, have defied the odds and graduated. The authors followed one hundred students in Austin, Texas, between 1989 and 1993, in an attempt to identify the factors behind school dropout and the strategies used by those who earned a high-school diploma.

11 Drug users and Catholic mothers in Montes Claros, and females studying in Caicó, close to Macambira.
Because my target group consisted of teenagers 14 to 17 years of age, I decided to work with 8th grade students. I had every 8th grader in five schools\(^\text{12}\) answer a recruiting questionnaire\(^\text{13}\). The questionnaire was administered by myself and my assistant on an individual basis\(^\text{14}\) and aimed at getting the profile of the student in terms of age, race, religion, living arrangements, socioeconomic and family background, and telenovela viewing. The students were told that the participants in the group meetings would be randomly drawn -- to avoid anxieties -- but in reality they were chosen according to sex, age, and socioeconomic background. Socioeconomic background was defined by ABIPEME criteria -- widely known and used by the commercial media industry in Brazil\(^\text{15}\) in the 1990s, it took into account the existence and the number of certain appliances and some characteristics of the household, as well as the education of the head of the household\(^\text{16}\). Each item contributed to an overall index that increased as the number of items existent in the household and the education of the head increased. According to the number of points the interviewee scored, he/she was classified into classes ranging from A (higher) to E (lower). Whenever possible, all participants were viewers of *O Rei do Gado*. Although this selection could impose a bias, even the teenagers who claimed not to watch the telenovela under study knew the plot quite well. The group discussions were held in each of the respective schools and were fully filmed and recorded. The five schools had television sets and VCRs but the rooms were not always quiet, which affected the quality of the recording and, later, the quality of the transcription. The principals at the three public schools allowed me to conduct the meetings within school hours, whereas the private schools offered me a room but did not let the students miss any class periods for that purpose. The fact that I had to conduct the meetings after school hours created a problem -- some students were not willing and/or not able to return to school later in the afternoon in spite of the fact that those selected promised to return. The result was meetings with smaller groups than I had previously expected. For example, one of my focus groups at Secular Private School contained only three participants but the small size may

\(^{12}\) Medium Public School, Low Public School, Evening Public School, Secular Private School, and Catholic Private School.

\(^{13}\) In one of the public schools I interviewed teens who study in the evening shift (usually from 7 to 10:30 PM). As these students tend to be behind in terms of age, I decided to cover teens from 4th to 8th grades. In this particular school, a census type of recruiting questionnaire was not possible because of the size of the school and the lack of a person to guide me around the classrooms.

\(^{14}\) The Catholic Private School did not allow the students to leave the classroom on a one by one basis and therefore we had to hand the questionnaires out in class and help them answer the questions. Thus, in this school the recruiting questionnaire was self-administered.

\(^{15}\) Despite the criticisms that involve these criteria, I decided to apply it because of its wide use and acceptance.

\(^{16}\) The items included in the ABIPEME criteria are: radio, television set, car, living maid, refrigerator, bathroom, VCR, vacuum cleaner, washing machine, dishwasher, microwave oven, and CD player. In addition, it also takes into account the education of the head of the household.
have enhanced the quality of discussions at certain times. 17 Although the literature suggests that meetings with young participants should not be conducted in places ruled by adults (Krueger, 1988), my experience indicates that it would have been impossible to take the teens someplace else during or after school hours. Despite the fact that some principals requested that someone from the school participate as an observer, I did not comply with the request and made sure that there was no “adult” in the room.

Another issue that deserves attention is the large number of meetings (including the recruitment of participants) that I conducted in a very short period of time. Contrary to advice given by Krueger (1988), I conducted my interviews in a relatively short span to reduce the costs of being in another city. Yet the personal costs were high in terms of physical and especially mental exhaustion. Moderating a group meeting means paying close attention to every single detail that is said to be able to change subjects, ask questions, and probe at the right time. However, after two (and sometimes three) meetings in the same day, I had problems concentrating and intervening at the right moment. This problem was easily noticed when I later heard the tapes -- several times I forgot what I was going to say next, especially if it was the last meeting of the day. Another disadvantage was the fact that there was less time (and energy) to take notes after the meetings were over. The organization of the material -- tapes and participants’ names -- was not as comprehensive as I would have liked.

The first round of focus group discussions took place in Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, between September 8 and 18, 1996. 18 Only teens attending school were included. With the help of Heloísa Buarque de Almeida, the ethnographer in residence, I contacted a sociologist who worked at the City Hall as well as at the teachers’ union and the state university. I explained to her the type of diversity I wanted -- public schools serving the breadth of socioeconomic levels, and private schools with different orientations (one Catholic, one secular) -- and she gave me names of schools and directors that I should contact. From there, I called several principals and ended up working with five schools -- three public and two private. A total of ten groups were conducted in these five schools -- a male and a female group in each of them. In order to assure confidentiality, I will call the schools Medium Public School, Low Public School, Evening Public School, Catholic Private School, and Secular Private School.

17 Although methodologically complicated due to the limited number of participants, this discussion was profoundly enlightening of many of the issues I wanted to uncover.
18 Sandro Andrade Batista was my assistant and note-taker for this first round of focus groups. Heloísa Buarque de Almeida was an observer at some meetings.
The second round of focus groups took place in Macambira, Rio Grande do Norte between October 25 and 31, 1996. In addition to lower and upper income male and female teens attending school, I had meetings with mothers of teenagers, teen mothers or mothers-to-be, girls studying in private schools in Caicó, and dropout girls, yielding a total of nine meetings. The definition of upper and lower income had to be flexible and adapted to the reality of the town -- if I had followed the ABIPEME criteria strictly, I would not have found upper income teens in the public schools. Thus, I used a measure of relative wealth -- teens classified as class C were considered upper income, vis-à-vis teens classified into classes D and E, who were the lowest income group. Antonio La Pastina, the ethnographer in residence, applied the recruiting questionnaires to the teens attending school prior to my arrival and contacted a resident of the town to help recruit the participants that had to be reached outside the public schools of Macambira. It proved extremely helpful to have someone taking care of the logistics before my arrival, especially when my colleague was a highly qualified and educated person living in the community for six months. The group meetings were held at a senior citizen’s social center located close to two of the three schools in town. Although there was a television set and a VCR in the location, we experienced technical problems and had to rent equipment from a native. My camcorder did not want to cooperate, either, but this same native happened to be the town videomaker and had a professional one I was able to use.

Following the advice available in interview literature, I decided to hold a methodological experiment and asked La Pastina to conduct one of the male groups. The same experience had taken place in Montes Claros, when Sandro Batista, my assistant, conducted one of the male meetings with no female present in the room. According to some specialists, the moderator and the respondents should be the same sex so that males talk to a male interviewer and females talk to a female interviewer (Krueger, 1988). Despite La Pastina’s lack of experience with focus groups, he had already watched a few that I had conducted and was completely aware of the research interests I had. His group went quite well, although I was sometimes uncomfortable by the method he used to elicit the answers he wanted. The male group I conducted the next day did not go as well. The participants only answered my questions monosyllabically and I got very frustrated. In the middle of the meeting, we decided to shift gears -- La Pastina took charge and I left the room. I was hoping that the boys would feel more comfortable talking to him without having a female in the room. However, the conversation kept the same tone after I left. The same was true with Batista’s meeting in Montes Claros. Therefore, in that case, the sex of the moderator did not seem to matter. That evidence further supported my argument that

19 Antonio La Pastina was the note-taker for this round of meetings.
my gender was not an impediment to my research with males. During one of meetings, I had noticed that the male teens were aware of my presence as a female but yet felt very comfortable belittling or disparaging girls in front of me as they did not perceive me as having anything in common with the girls they were talking about. Thus, I was a complete outsider as Amuchástegui found also to be the case in her research in three Mexican communities (Amuchástegui, 1996).

PARTICIPANT: Nowadays you can see that today’s woman is more shameless. You can see that nowadays, to find a girlfriend, you have to have at least a motorbike. Otherwise it’s difficult.

PARTICIPANT: Self-seeking.

PAULA: Really? Are they self-seeking?

PARTICIPANT: Indeed. It’s not discrimination against you women, but it’s reality. [Laughter]

PAULA: Feel free to say whatever you want.

PARTICIPANT: I’m not talking about you. It’s in general.

PAULA: Of course it’s general! We are only talking in general. We’re not saying anything personal about anyone. It’s all general.

(Medium Public School boys, Montes Claros)

The third round of meetings was carried out in Vila Feliz, São Paulo between November 25 and 30, 1996. Thanks to Esther Hamburger and Ronaldo de Almeida’s ethnographic work, I was granted access to the favela and was able to make contacts with the principal at the public school, as well as with a native resident who helped recruit the participants outside the school. In this case, the native was the videomaker of the favela and also the coach for the female teen soccer team. He had very good access to the community. As in Macambira, I conducted focus groups with lower and upper income male and female students between 14 and 17 years of age, dropout girls, teen mothers or mothers-to-be, and lower and upper income class mothers of teenagers. Two meetings were held at the school and the remaining meetings took place in the neighborhood association building.

The fourth and final round of focus groups took place in Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, between January 25 and 30, 1997. The recruiting process was different from the first round in the same city and, instead of recruiting at schools, I decided to hire two natives and have them recruit every participant, including students. I thought it would be interesting to have teens from different schools in the same meeting. Coed meetings with teens were conducted in an attempt to witness their tension and friction between males and females, as well as to observe their difference in attitudes and opinions in front of each other. Ten groups participated in this round: two with private

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20 Esther Hamburger and Ronaldo de Almeida alternated as observers in this round of discussions.
21 Dulce Benigna Dias de Alvarenga Baptista and Mariane Miguel Chaves alternated as assistants and note-takers for this final round.
school teens (males and females at the same time), one with public school teens (also coed), one with dropout girls, one with dropout boys, one with a group of drug user teenage male and female friends, one group of teenage mothers or mothers-to-be, one group of low income mothers of teens, one group of upper-income mothers of teens, and one group of “active” Catholic mothers of teenagers. The meetings were held in a hotel meeting room.

2.1.2.2 Outline and Meetings

The outline for the focus group meetings was developed with the aid of vignettes from *O Rei do Gado*. I selected thirteen scenes from the beginning of the telenovela (up to August 1996) dealing with thirteen topics of interest -- family relations, divorce, infidelity, domestic violence, condom use, virginity, pregnancy, marriage, gossip, reputation, female initiative, prostitution, and abortion. At some point, I thought of having new vignettes for the last round of groups in Montes Claros because the telenovela was about to end by then and much had transpired. However, using new scenes as stimuli would make comparison between different rounds of meetings more difficult and would add one more “variable” to the already complicated web of data. Thus, I decided to use the same vignettes for the four rounds, and I am glad that I did.

After each participant briefly presented him/herself, the plan was to talk about telenovelas in general and *O Rei do Gado* in particular -- why they watched it, how often, with whom, their favorite characters, if they thought telenovelas influenced people’s lives and, if so, how. The second part was based upon the vignettes -- after watching one at a time, they gave me their opinion about what they had seen, including if they thought the scene seemed real or not. Finally, I wanted to see how much they knew about sex and sex-related topics. I invented a game called “Play Magazine” where I would play the part of a teenager who had written a letter to an advice column in a magazine and I would ask them to respond to the question for me, “the teen.” The correct answers to the questions were offered at the end of the meeting. Most of the participants said they knew enough about sex and did not need extra information thus declining to hear the correct answers, but in some cases the participants were willing to know not only the correct answers but also my personal opinion about certain topics. Due to time constraints, this give and take did not happen in all meetings and, in order to improve continuity, was moved from the third to the second topic after the first few meetings.

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22 This group was dropped from the analysis.
23 One of them was older than my target group --20 years-old. However, I decided to keep him because this was a special group and I thought his opinions were worth listening to despite his age.
The meetings with mothers of teens were a little different. Although I followed the same outline, the mothers did not play the game and, in some cases, did not even see the vignettes. They did not need any type of stimuli to talk about the topics of interest which appeared spontaneously during the conversation.

Time was a constraint in many of the meetings (especially the ones with mothers of teenagers) and some meetings would have lasted twice as long if I had let them go. Most of them lasted between one and a half and two hours. I was aware that I had many topics to be covered and that the vignettes were time-consuming. Most of the groups did not see all the vignettes as the topics the scenes were supposed to raise came up naturally during the conversation. Krueger (1988) suggests that group discussions with teenagers be short to avoid boredom. My meetings were by no means short due to the number of topics I wanted to cover. However, the vignettes helped make the meetings more dynamic and less predictable — the participants never knew which scene they would watch next. Nonetheless, I did notice fatigue and, whenever that happened, I tried to cut the meetings short.

The meetings began with an explanation of what was going to happen and why I was filming and recording everything in regular and micro cassettes (whenever the equipment allowed). I assured them that despite all the electronic paraphernalia, our conversation was confidential and no names would ever appear anywhere. I told them I was there not to teach but rather learn from them and would appreciate everyone’s contribution to the discussion, even (and especially) when participants disagreed. There was always a note-taker/observer in the room and I made sure that he/she did not disturb or inhibit the conversation. Food, candies, chocolate, and sodas were available on the table and participants were encouraged to help themselves at any time. The normal pattern was to see participants relax as the conversation progressed. Although they were never asked to talk about personal experiences but rather about young people’s experiences in general, I often heard personal stories and comments.

The literature suggests that participants in a focus group tend to talk in the third person, trying to transfer their own experiences to someone they know — a friend, a relative, a neighbor. A female teenager in Vila Feliz was the perfect example of that. First, she told the story of a friend that might have to have an abortion against her will because of ectopic pregnancy — or, in the participant’s own words, pregnancy in her tubes. Some time later in the conversation, when the topic had switched...
from abortion to domestic violence, she said her boyfriend physically abused her and then she finally told the true story about the abortion and admitted to be the one who might have to have it.

PARTICIPANT: The case I was talking about, the pregnant girl, it’s me.
(Dropout girls, Vila Feliz)

At the end of the meeting, each participant received a small gift as my acknowledgment of his/her participation. Although the literature suggests monetary compensation, dealing with teenagers requires extra caution and the distribution of money seemed inappropriate for teens. In addition, a small gift seemed more personal and more appropriate as a way of demonstrating my appreciation for their presence and their cooperation.

2.1.2.3 Data Analysis

The thirty-seven group discussions were recorded, filmed25 and later fully transcribed.26 Due to equipment failure, it was important to have a second tape recorder27 operating as a backup to the first one. Sometimes the recording apparatus had problems and I only found out that the tape had blanks or did not run as expected long after the meetings were over. I also found out about other tape problems during transcription. One of the transcriptions was made out of the VCR tape as it was the only recording that actually worked. The quality of the transcription varied according to the quality of the recording, which had to do with the level of outside noise during each meeting. School libraries were not the best place to conduct such meetings because they were noisy during class breaks, or sometimes because of some outside activity carrying on at the same time. However, I had no choice and was grateful to have been granted a room in the school -- it would have been impossible to take students elsewhere during or after the regular school hours. The neighborhood center in Vila Feliz was under construction, and quite often there was too much noise to hear. The senior citizen’s center in Macambira tended to be quiet, as was the hotel meeting room in Montes Claros.

The data analyzed here was drawn from the transcriptions of thirty-six focus groups. One of the original thirty-seven was discarded due to my incapacity to get answers worth using (the dropout boys who were recruited by a native in Montes Claros only laughed at my questions and only two of them were actively speaking and their answers tended to be yes or no). Their lack of experience with the school system probably played a role in their failure to adapt to the classroom-like situation. My

25 When equipment permitted. In same cases, the videocamera was professional; in others, I used my own camcorder.
26 The interviews were transcribed by Sandro Andrade Batista, Eduardo dos Santos Andrade, Adriana Miranda-Ribeiro, and Juliana Velloso.
27 There were no digital recorders back then.
lack of experience with this type of teenager made it so that I was unable to conduct the meeting and find an alternative to the predetermined outline when things began to deteriorate.

After the transcriptions were done, the first step in the data analysis was to read the material -- one transcript at a time -- in an attempt to capture the wholeness of the group and, at the same time, to identify topics that emerged during the conversation. The search for topics proved to be crucial, tiring, and yet very dynamic. I did not find the right classification at first and had to go back and forth several times before the quotes were grouped in a coherent manner. I am afraid a final classification has never been achieved. While analyzing the data, I still found myself moving quotes from one topic to the other.

Having refreshed my memory about each group and the topics that were discussed, a second step involved a second subsequent reading to select interesting quotes that illustrated each one of the topics. The quotes were cut and pasted, and grouped by topic in four computer files -- one for each round of meetings.

A third step was the mixing of rounds and the creation of a file for each topic, drawing from the four original files. Thus, I had one file for each topic, as well as a file for each round. In other words, I had the same quotes grouped in two different ways -- by round of discussion and by topic. In addition to two groupings of selected quotes, the original transcripts were also used whenever recapturing the whole was necessary.

With 340 pages of selected quotes, the fourth step included the color coding of the citations. I chose to code the quotes grouped by topic as I thought they would be easier to handle when writing the analysis. First of all, the mothers' speeches were separated from teens' voices by different colors to have an idea about generation differences. Then, each of the four rounds also got a different color, so that it would be easier to identify regional differences. Socioeconomic background and sex of the participants were also color coded. In the end, each citation had four colors attached to it: a generation color, a geographic color, a socioeconomic color, and a gender color. Yet some quotes had no socioeconomic color as the group was selected based on another underlying characteristic -- such as being a school dropout or a teenage mother. In addition, comments were handwritten on the margins.

Last but not least, the quotes had to be translated. This is no easy task for a non-native speaker of the language of the final report and the amount of work should never be underestimated. In addition, teenagers use a great deal of slang in their conversations and it was sometimes hard to find the best word to keep the original meaning. I chose to leave some words in Portuguese and try to explain them later. In an attempt to save time and energy, I translated only the quotes that I was going to use in the final text.
I am aware there was available computer software to help with the coding and the grouping of quotes. However, I acknowledge my laziness to learn one of them and my necessity to be able to see and touch each and every one of my transcripts and quotes. Thus, I am a user of the "scissors and sort" method of using markers and scissors to color, cut apart, sort, and pile the quotes by topic (Morgan, 1988).

I have lost track of how many times I have read the quotes and the transcripts. Dozens, maybe hundreds of times. I feel that I know my material well enough but, at the same time, I am absolutely sure that I would find more interesting quotes were I to read my material one more time.

The data were analyzed according to the steps listed above. In addition, I tried to follow my advisor’s as well as Golden-Biddle and Locke’s (1997) same piece of good advice: “Just tell your story.” Using the voices of teenagers and mothers of teenagers, I discuss the teenage demand for information about sex to suggest that the mass media play an important role in satisfying this demand as well as promoting changes in ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. Whenever possible, I point to regional, gender, and socioeconomic differences.

3. Information about sex?

3.1 Peers and the Rua

The majority of the mothers of teenagers who participated in the focus group discussions in the three communities did not receive any kind of information about sex from their parents. Sex was a taboo topic and talking about it was usually not allowed within the domains of the household. On the contrary, information about sex came from the street. Borrowing DaMattia’s (1991) terminology, although acceptable sex – for reproductive purposes – should be done in the casa (house), learning about sex could only happen in the rua (street), with peers. It seems that, in the past, not only unmarried females could not have sex but also they did not know very much about it. Why should an unmarried female know about sex if she was not supposed to do it? After the marriage, the husband, expected to be sexually experienced, was supposed to be in charge and teach his wife the secrets of sex. Mothers of teenagers complain about being naive and ignorant about sex at the time of marriage. One mother reported she tried to scream for her parents when her husband wanted to touch her. After all, she had always been taught that touching was wrong and bad.

PARTICIPANT: (...) my mother didn’t have the habit [of talking about sex] with us. Mother didn’t come and talk about sex, about this, about that, so, what happened was that we looked for that in the rua, [we] learned in the rua, you know?
PARTICIPANT: Our generation learned everything in the rua.
PARTICIPANT: In the rua, because our parents [didn't talk about it].

(Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: Some times [we learned about sex] with our [female] colleagues. I learned with my [female] classmates at school, with my [female] friends in the rua. And my [mother] was also too strict [to tell us anything about sex].
PARTICIPANT: Mine too.

(More educated mothers, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: Because my mom never said anything, I didn't know [anything]. When I got married, it was hard because my husband wanted to sleep with me, you know, he wanted to touch me, and I told him “This is wrong, my mother said this is sinful, you shouldn't do it, it's sinful. I'll scream for my dad and mom.” He covered my mouth and said “But we are married!”

(Upper income mothers, Vila Feliz)

Teenagers in the mid-1990s certainly had more options than their mothers did in terms of learning about sex. Yet their voices suggest that the rua (or peers) was still both males’ and females’ main source of information. Word of mouth – “one teaches the other” – was not restricted to the mothers’ generation. As one teenager explained, the advantage of learning from peers was to avoid the embarrassment one would feel if one had to talk to a teacher or to parents about sex. Differently from their mothers’ generations, they mention TV as a source of information.

PARTICIPANT: I think my mom and dad lived in a time that didn't exist for real, because they discriminated, I think, everything. (...) my mother says something like, “Oh, be careful about diseases,” this kind of thing, “Look at what you're going to do,” every time I go out she says ‘Juízo’ [literally judgment; means take care], that's the only thing she says, ‘Juízo.” But she's never come to me and said like, “Bia don't deal with this,” “Bia don't do that,” “Bia take care with this”, “Bia (…)” No, it's like I said, everything I know, I know from life, life taught me, you know?

(female at Drug users, Montes Claros)

PAULA: And where do girls your age learn about sex?
PARTICIPANT: I think it's more in the rua.
PARTICIPANT: Yeah.
PARTICIPANT: In my house, at least, my father never sat down and talked to me about sex.
PARTICIPANT: My father does.
PARTICIPANT: My father doesn't even know how old I am!

(Catholic Private School female teens, Montes Claros)

PAULA: Where do today’s teens learn about sex?
PARTICIPANT: In the rua.
PARTICIPANT: In the rua. Most of them.
PARTICIPANT: One teaching the other.
PARTICIPANT: Because there is always one who knows more, and says "Ah, you didn't know [that]?""No, how can that be?"
PARTICIPANT: My mother is very old-fashioned, you know? My 11 year-old sister went to her and asked "Mom, what is menstruation?" She didn't want to explain, she said "No, you don't (...)"
PARTICIPANT: My mom also never explained [to me].

(Dropout girls, Vila Feliz)

PAULA: And where do teens like you learn about sex?
PARTICIPANT: (...) in books, conversations.
PARTICIPANT: We talk.
PARTICIPANT: On television, at school. (...) 
PARTICIPANT: But it's more among friends.
PAULA: Really?
PARTICIPANT: [We] make a circle, and each one says what we think, what we know, what we don't know.
PARTICIPANT: I think this is very good, [it] helps, because sometimes one clears up the [other's] doubt (...)
PARTICIPANT: Because also when it's at school, people are like, ashamed to ask the teacher, and among friends they're not ashamed.

(Public School teens, Montes Claros)

As daughters, mothers of teenagers had one complaint regarding the way they learned about sex when they were younger – they all wished they had some form of dialogue at home. They resented the fact that they could not count on their parents and especially their mothers as a source of information about sex-related matters. But how did they act as parents when it comes to talking about sex with their own children? Were they doing things differently? How did teenagers feel about that?

3.2 Parents

As mothers, part of the older generation was trying to do things differently. Some of the mothers tried to avoid repeating the same pattern they experienced as daughters and report taking the initiative to talk to their children about sex. As one mother in Vila Feliz explained, she wanted to avoid that her children had the same difficulty in having a relationship with their partners as she had experienced with her husband.

PARTICIPANT: I think that sex, we are mothers, we have to call our sons and daughters, whatever [the problem] is, and talk to them. This is how I do it [instruct them].

(Lower income mothers, Montes Claros)
PARTICIPANT: But I don’t think it is right for the parents not to orient their children, just like I wasn’t oriented, and I think many of them [the other participants] here as well. We were raised in the same rhythm and it takes a lot of sacrifice to have a relationship with men later on in life, you know? It’s very bad, it’s very difficult.

(Upper income mothers, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: Some times I talk about that [how ignorant I was about sex when I was young] to instruct my children, I don’t know if this is wrong (...)

(Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

Other mothers were a little ashamed but yet tried to fulfill the role they believed parents should have – despite the fact that they tended not to take the initiative to talk about sex, they claimed to be available and willing to answer whatever questions their children might have. Yet their children did not feel comfortable enough to approach them with questions about sex.

PAULA: Do you talk to your children about sex? I mean, if they ask you something?
PARTICIPANT: If he asks, I answer.
PAULA: Really?
PARTICIPANT: Yes. But for me to talk about it, I don’t.
PAULA: What about you?
PARTICIPANT: If they ask, I answer, but if they don’t.
PAULA: Do they usually ask you anything?
PARTICIPANT: No, it’s very difficult [rare].
PARTICIPANT: No.
PARTICIPANT: No, mine doesn’t, either.
PARTICIPANT: Mine neither.
PARTICIPANT: All I tell my boy is to take care and use a condom. That’s all.

(Less educated mothers, Macambira)

Finally, some mothers were too embarrassed to talk about sex at all. The explanation for the embarrassment and even shame of their own bodies seemed to come from the way mothers were raised and how they experienced their own coming of age. For some, any bodily manifestation was considered wrong and bad, even if strictly biological and totally unavoidable such as menarche. As Parker (1991) points out, “Menarche makes visible and real [female] sexual potential in its most concrete sense, and thus calls into action a complex set of processes aimed at circumventing, controlling, and even denying this new reality” (1991: 56). By the mid-1990s, some mothers considered sex still a taboo topic and relied on other sources of information to their children, such as television or the school. In some cases, there was more to it than just embarrassment. Some mothers acknowledged they did not know enough about sex to be able to teach their children.
PARTICIPANT: The men didn’t see our bodies, we didn’t see theirs, we lived with a man for years and didn’t know what [how] our husbands were. But today, today it’s different. We were raised like this, I doubt that Mara, Dona Candida, and others here (...) Do you have the courage to be naked close to [your husband]?

PARTICIPANT: Close to [my husband]? Never (...)

PARTICIPANT: (...) trauma (...)

PARTICIPANT: (...) shame [because of] the way we were raised. I would never [be] naked close to my husband. Nowadays a couple walks naked around the house.

(Lower income mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: I say that my husband has never seen me naked.

PARTICIPANT: Mine neither. (...)

PARTICIPANT: I’m too reserved.

PARTICIPANT: Of course he’s seen [me naked], but I didn’t feel him looking [at me], I was too ashamed.

PARTICIPANT: Look, I’m 53 years-old and my husband has [never] seen me naked like this (...)

PARTICIPANT: I hide because I’m fat, you know.

PARTICIPANT: (...) I leave the bathroom wrapped in a towel, you know, then when he wants to enter the bedroom he asks me “Cida, have you changed?” Then I say “No, I’m here,” then he says “OK, you can change.” He knows perfectly well that I don’t like it [being seen naked], I mean, I really don’t like it, you know?

(Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

PAULA: Are you in favor of the school teaching about sex? Or do you think they shouldn’t teach it?

PARTICIPANT: I’m not against it.

PARTICIPANT: It’s easier, you know?

PARTICIPANT: Because for us who are mothers, we don’t have the courage to talk [about sex], I don’t have the courage to talk to my daughter, so I think.

PARTICIPANT: But they [the children] know everything.

PARTICIPANT: If the school teaches, it’s easier to explain.

(...) PAULA: Do you talk to your children about sex?

PARTICIPANT: I don’t.

PARTICIPANT: I’ve never talked [about it].

PARTICIPANT: I don’t.

PAULA: Do they ask anything?

PARTICIPANT: Mine [daughter] doesn’t.

PARTICIPANT: No.

(Lower income mothers, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: We had this thing, I had this thing in my mind, more or less. You know, it wasn’t like sex that I knew. I thought: because the young ladies who get married, they have babies; we, who never married, don’t have babies. Because I had this foolish idea in my mind, you know, but [it was] not a reality. Did you understand? So this is very hard for
us. That’s why, I’m not against it, I cooperate with the mothers, with the kids, but I don’t know how to talk right, to go to my son and talk openly, because when they were born, it was cesarean, so later my son asked me and I was ashamed to tell. Then he said “Mom, how was I born?” So I wasn’t embarrassed to say, the doctor cut and took him out. But he learned this recently, [because] he sees everything on television. And the teachers tell (...) even I didn’t know exactly how it was, so how could I teach my son?

(Upper income mothers, Vila Feliz)

Switching to the teenagers’ perspective, some of them acknowledged receiving information from parents, suggesting changes if compared to the world their mothers lived in. Yet there were parents who talked openly about sex and took the initiative and there were others who were embarrassed and talked about the subject only when questioned by their children. It is interesting to note that, sometimes, the children were the ones who were embarrassed to talk about sex with their parents. Some mothers noticed their children’s embarrassment and used it to explain the fact that teens preferred to talk to peers about sex rather than with parents.

PARTICIPANT: In my case, as I said before, my information I always got at home from my dad and my mom, always, always. It’s even embarrassing, you know, when your dad and mom sit and start [saying] “It’s like this, it’s like that, this is how it happens and this is how you should do, this is how you take care,” you know, all this leaves you like, you know, [embarrassed].

/Private School teens I, Montes Claros

PAULA: What about you? Where do you learn [about sex]?
PARTICIPANT: My mom, she tells [me] everything. What’s right, what’s wrong, [she advises me] to do the right things.
PARTICIPANT: She starts speaking, but she gets embarrassed to talk.
PARTICIPANT: She’s ashamed to talk in general (...)

(Low Public School female teens, Montes Claros)

PAULA: And do you talk at home about this subject [sex]?
PARTICIPANT: With my father and my mother?
PARTICIPANT: No, no way!
PARTICIPANT: I just can’t talk [to them].
PARTICIPANT: I talk [to them], you know?
PARTICIPANT: My mom, no way.
PARTICIPANT: She [mother] told me to talk to her. But I’m embarrassed to talk to my mother, I’m ashamed. (...)
PARTICIPANT: I think I don’t have the courage to have a conversation about this [sex] with my dad and my mom.

(Upper income male teens, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: They [our children] don’t come to us and open themselves and ask [questions about sex]. They prefer to learn out there.

(Lower income mothers, Montes Claros)
Despite the fact that some parents did talk to their children about sex, many teenagers had the same complaint their mothers’ generation had – they could not count on their families as a source of information about sex. For those, more dialogue with parents seemed to be part of their wish list.

PARTICIPANT: (...) if I depended on mom, poor little me. I wouldn’t see [know] anything [about sex].

(Private School teens II, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: I think mothers have a very important role in explaining [about sex].

(Young mothers, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: I can’t talk to my mom [about sex]. If I go to talk to her, she says “This is a lack of morality for you to come and say this to me.”

(Dropout girls, Macambira)

3.3 Relatives, Schools, and Books

In addition to peers, the rua, and parents, other options those teenagers had in terms of learning about sex included school, books, older siblings and other relatives. Some female teens also reported learning about sex with their more experienced boyfriends.

PAULA: And where do young people learn about sex nowadays?
PARTICIPANT: At school.
PAULA: Really?
PARTICIPANT: The school explains a lot.
PAULA: Really? Did everybody here learn at school?
PARTICIPANT: I learned at school because my mother didn’t tell [me] anything.
PARTICIPANT: Yeah. Our parents are like, they don’t, my parents didn’t talk to me. And they thought it was wrong for the school to teach [about sex], they thought the school.
PARTICIPANT: It’s lack of shame.
PARTICIPANT: It was lack of shame. Then, when we make mistakes, like, then they keep saying “You didn’t learn this, we gave you so much advice.” I’ve never heard any advice.

(Young mothers, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: I learn with my older sister, because she, I think she’s gone through a lot of stuff in her life, you know? So, she learned a lot with life. So, she talks to me a lot and is always giving me advice, something we don’t like but is always good, and in the rua too, with friends, with the group.

(Catholic Private School female teens, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: I have a boyfriend that she [another participant] met. He doesn’t live here, he lives [elsewhere]. So the first time I had intercourse with him, I was very ashamed (...) but the next time I went back there he bought me a magazine, “Positions to love.” He gave it to me as a gift.
PARTICIPANT: Yeah, but not all [boyfriends] are like that.
PARTICIPANT: Nowadays in general even the girls, the boys learn everything in the rua. With friends.

PARTICIPANT: Or you get an experienced guy who has years of experience in the business and learn [from him].

(Dropout girls, Vila Feliz)

Books were mentioned only a few times, reflecting the fact that the participants that I talked to were, in general, poorly educated. One mother of high socioeconomic background reported reading a book her older sister had for brides-to-be, which apparently taught all a bride should know about sex. Despite the book, which she read without permission, she admitted she did not know anything about sex when she got married.

PARTICIPANT: (...) like me, for example, [when] I married I was a complete little fool, what I learned I learned in books because my oldest sister, when she got married she bought this book, “Questions and Answers.” So it had everything.

PARTICIPANT: I [also] read it.

PARTICIPANT: You did? Well, I took the book without anyone knowing, put it under my mattress, and every small opportunity I knew there wasn’t anyone [around] I ran I read this book. (...) I learned a lot of things.

PARTICIPANT: My mom never taught me, because if she was talking, like, with someone, a friend of hers, who were we to stay around? She only did, (...) She only looked.

PARTICIPANT: But I gave some amassos [hugs and kisses].

PARTICIPANT: (...) It’s funny, but [only when I was] 17 did I hear how sexual intercourse took place, I was already engaged (...) It doesn’t seem true, you know, that with 17 years of age [I didn’t know what intercourse was like].

PARTICIPANT: But I also was like that when I married.

PARTICIPANT: I [didn’t know] anything, I knew what I couldn’t do, you know, I knew [I couldn’t] hug, kiss (...) (Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

A few teenagers also learned about sex from books, which were used by more educated parents as a strategy to provide information about sex without having to actually approach their children and talk about it. The book mentioned by one participant in Montes Claros in the next quote is authored by Marta Suplicy.28

28 In the mid-1990s, Marta Suplicy was Brazil’s most famous sexologist, a feminist, a federal representative in the House (deputada federal) affiliated to PT - Partido dos Trabalhadores (the worker’s party), and married to Eduardo Suplicy, a PT senator. She was a pioneer in the 1980s, when she appeared on a daily morning show called TV Mulher (TV Woman) on Globo Network. In addition to the anchors, the show had several specialists in different areas such as law, consumer rights, and sexology, among others, who answered letters from viewers.
PARTICIPANT: (...) in the beginning they [my parents] didn’t talk to me [about sex], they bought books and told me to read them. Dad bought the first one when I was 10 years-old, he gave me a book called “What is happening with me” and that transformation from child to pre-adolescent to adolescent. And then they gave me a book, what is it? “Sex for adolescents,” a big book by…

PAULA: By Marta Suplicy.

PARTICIPANT: Yes, exactly, I read that book.

(Drug users, Montes Claros)

3.4 Magazines and Television

In the case of the United States, television and other mass media have become the most important sources of sex education for adolescents (Strasburger, 1995). The explanation, according to Ward (1995), lies on the fact that teens frequently cannot find adequate information elsewhere. Although there are no statistics for the Brazilian case, the voices of teenagers who participated in the focus group discussions suggest that magazines (both porno and female teen-oriented) and television (basically telenovelas and films) played an important role in providing them with information about sex in the mid-1990s.

3.4.1 Pornographic Magazines

Parker (1991) suggests that pornographic magazines play a role in the process of identification through which males define themselves individually and as a group. In addition to verbal instructions and sometimes even arrangements for sexual initiation, males provide other males with printed (and graphic) sources of information. The author indicates that this type of publication became available in Brazilian newsstands during the 1970s not only in urban areas but also in rural communities, although on a smaller scale. The law that forbids minors to be able to buy such publications was not enforced and, indeed, some male participants reported they learned about sex from porno magazines.

PAULA: (...) Do you think young people learn about sex in any other place rather than biology classes?

PARTICIPANT: In films, porno movies you learn a lot about sex.

PARTICIPANT: I learned from magazines.

PAULA: Really? What kind of magazine?

PARTICIPANT: Porno magazines.

PARTICIPANT: I think it’s the main source of learning about sex. It’s like, it’s kind of bad because you see a type of sex that scares you (…)

(males at Drug users, Montes Claros)

ANTONIO: Where do you learn about sex, besides from telenovelas?

PARTICIPANT: There are magazines.
PARTICIPANT: Yeah, there are magazines that talk [about sex]. There’s that one, Ele & Ela, it talks a lot about sex.

(Upper income male teens, Macambira)

Although porno magazines were a source of information about sex for some males, the readers seemed to be aware of the type of sex they learn from those publications. Females also reported learning from magazines -- not porno, but teen-oriented. In this case, the information provided was more accurate if compared to porno magazines. In addition, female teen magazines did not rely on images of naked to boost their sales and maintain their “reader’s” interest.

3.4.2 Female Teen-Oriented Magazines

According to female teen participants, they learned about sex from several teen-oriented magazines such as Capricho, Querida, Carícia, Toda Teen, and Atrevida. But how much information about sex did these magazines really have? In a content analysis of 275 letters to the editor of Querida29 published between April 1994 and December 1995, I found that 43% of the letters asked sex-related questions, including topics such as virginity, masturbation, orgasm, first time, contraception, menstruation, and STDs. The remaining letters asked about beauty (49%) and other topics such as careers (8%) (Miranda-Ribeiro, 1996). The letters to the editor were an indication that female-teen magazines rely on information about sex to attract readers, and the results of the focus group discussions suggested they were successful in doing so. Magazines constituted an important source of information not only to females of higher socioeconomic status -- those who could afford to buy those magazines. One way or another, even lower income female teens managed to have access to this type of magazine. Their circulation also seemed to overcome geographical distance -- female teens relied on magazines not only in Vila Feliz and Montes Claros, but also in Macambira. However, the focus group data do not allow the assessment of possible differences regarding access to the magazines. It is impossible to know how often the female teens who report reading the magazines in fact had a chance to do so. Some females reported subscribing to the magazines while others borrowed them from friends and schoolmates.

PAULA: What about television? Do you think it teaches [about sex], besides telenovelas?
Television in general, like movies, documentaries?
PARTICIPANT: Magazines.
PARTICIPANT: (...) There’s Capricho, Carícia, all of those.
PAULA: Really? Are the girls used to reading these magazines here?
PARTICIPANT: Yeah, a lot!

29 Querida was a teen-oriented magazine published by Editora Globo every other week.
PARTICIPANT: (...) I know a lot of friends of mine (...) [who] subscribe to it.
(females at Private School teens II, Montes Claros)

PAULA: Do you think magazines teach anything about sex?
PARTICIPANT: They do.
PARTICIPANT: Capricho has, talks about, you know, everything about sex. [There is] always a page talking [about that]. You write to them, what you want to know, and they answer you. But you don’t need to put your name, just your initials. I love this part because everything you want to know, they answer.
PARTICIPANT: (...) There’s Querida that also talks [about sex].
(females at Public School teens, Montes Claros)

Some mothers seemed to be aware of the fact that their daughters trusted on teen-oriented magazines for information about sex. According to one mother in Montes Claros, female teens liked those magazines so much because it is always easier to read about sex than have to overcome the embarrassment of asking parents about it. In addition, many females did not have the option of talking to parents anyway. This same mother was critical of those magazines because, according to her, they had too much sex. One male teenager also had a critical position regarding female teen-oriented magazines because he claimed they were too superficial.

PARTICIPANT: You asked how they [teenagers] are getting information [about sex]. I think that, at the level of information, it’s very much [based on] magazines. Capricho, Querida, Atrevida, Toda Teen, I thinks it’s very much like that. Because they [teenagers] have a certain shyness to come to us [mothers] and ask. I notice that, you know? In my house I believe that things are a little different because there we’re a bit messy. We’re open. But I notice my daughters’ friends, that they are really ashamed, and I think the last person they would ask is their mothers. She can ask even to a teacher, to a friend’s mother, but to her mother, I think [she] still has too much shame. So, it’s still very much [based on] these magazines (...) 
PARTICIPANT: But don’t you think it’s in an exaggerated manner? The subjects are like: how to win your gato [literally cat, means cute boy], how to give up your gato. Isn’t it? I’m going to send them some suggestions, because it can’t be like that.
PARTICIPANT: How the first time is, how to do it. (...) 
PARTICIPANT: Everything. Those are the subjects. The magazines are saturated with sex.
(Upper income mothers, Montes Claros)

3.4.3 Television

In addition to printed material, teenagers also relied on television as a source of information about sex. However, there was no consensus whether television actually taught about sex. Some teens were less specific and reported learning about sex in general. Others, such as a female group in
Macambira, recalled learning from *Malhação* what menstruation was. One female in Montes Claros noted that, although she learned about sex from her parents, she actually saw how sex was on television.

PARTICIPANT: [We] learn a lot [about sex] from television, you get to learn, you know? PARTICIPANT: Television teaches a lot of stuff. PARTICIPANT: Yeah, [television teaches] about sex, you know? (Lower income male teens, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: (...) television shows, television has a lot of information about that [sex] all the time, if you don’t see it is because you don’t want to see. [In] telenovelas, newscasts, documentaries, there are a lot of things, if you look for it, you find it. (Private School teens I, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: There are some mothers that don’t explain to the daughter what menstruation is. In the telenovela there are people who talk about that. PARTICIPANT: Malhação. PARTICIPANT: In Malhação they showed this [about menstruation]. Then she gets to know [about it] from the telenovela. (Caicó girls, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: There are those [girls] who learn from television, too. Like me, [although my parents explain everything to me], I found out how it [sex] was, because my dad and my mom aren’t going to show me, you know? [I found out] how sex was (...) on television. (Secular Private School female teens, Montes Claros)

Television and telenovelas may play a role in bringing about the changes observed between the two generations being compared. Telenovelas may influence viewers in two different ways. First, telenovelas produce short-term changes recognized by the audience which are coherent with Greenberg’s (1988) drench hypothesis. Telenovelas influence the way people dress, talk, dance, how they style their hair, the kind of songs they listen to. In addition, telenovelas may induce changes that are beyond the perception of most viewers. As Meyrowitz (1985) suggests, telenovelas expose certain ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that originally belonged to the backstage, helping change the perception regarding their appropriateness.

When it came to sex, there was no consensus whether television teaches about it or not. Some claimed television just showed sex but did not teach about it. Others reported learning with television on that matter. The participants indicated television satisfies the teenagers demand for information about sex.

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30 *Malhação* is a slang related to exercise. It is the name of a telenovela like series that airs every weekday in the afternoon on Globo Network and targets adolescents. In 1996-97, the plot took place in a gym and there were very few adults among the characters. It was (and still is) very popular among teenagers.
PAULA: Does the telenovela teach anything about sex? Do you think (..)?
PARTICIPANT: Ah, I think it shows a lot but teaches little.
(Catholic Private School male teens, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: It [the telenovela] shows only how sex is, you know, but I think that teaching, [it doesn't].
(Lower income male teens, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: When it’s only my husband and I [watching sex scenes on telenovelas]. I think it’s good, because it’s giving me more experience about things that I don’t know. I think it’s good, I feel like doing it [sex].
(Young mothers, Macambira)

Whether focus group participants learned about sex from television or not, sex was one aspect they disliked about telenovelas. This idea seems contradictory at first but reflects the ambivalence the viewers felt with regard to sex on television. With very few exceptions, both teenagers and mothers of teenagers claimed there was too much sex on telenovelas and some of them even pointed to sex as the reason why telenovelas were so successful. They seemed to perceive sex as something that sells.

PAULA: And why do you think people like telenovelas so much?
PARTICIPANT: (…) I think it’s because a lot of things happen in the telenovela, that they are indecent, you know?
(Dropout girls, Montes Claros)

The participants’ main concern regarding sex scenes on telenovelas lied on the fact that it could be used as a source of script, especially by children, who are not old enough to understand and may want to imitate what they see. Therefore, the viewers seemed to perceive sex as being harmful to others and not to themselves. As the literature suggests (Davison, 1983; Gunther, 1991), viewers tended to point to a third person when talking about influences of mass media -- the media do not influence either “you” or “me,” but a third person. Teenagers and mothers of teenagers provided several accounts of children who had mimicked behavior that was not considered appropriate for their age. Yet some participants recognized telenovelas were not as violent or sexually explicit as other television programs.

PARTICIPANT: There was a neighbor of my aunt who had a boy and a girl, you know, a couple. Then they watched these things and one day she found them kissing in bed, but a child is not like a grown-up. (...) [They were] saying they were going to do the same as in the telenovela.
(Dropout girls, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: I was watching some kids play, they exchanged kisses, “I only accept it if it’s in the mouth.” What? Six, seven year-olds? So, what is this? Television. The telenovelas. Because they [the kids] are there, it’s the mass media. They are there, watching. So, if
they are watching, they think they can also do it, “Oh, I’m going to do it, too.” They are innocent, you know, children like that are innocent. But there it begins.

(Upper class mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: I also think that telenovelas, each one has a different mind, you know, depending on the child’s mind, she mirrors on that actor, on that stage of that character, and so “I’m like him, I want to be like him.” (...) But [telenovelas] aren’t as heavy, such as other things that are on television.

(Lower income mothers, Montes Claros)

Even some teenagers agreed that sex scenes could serve as a source of script for themselves. Other teens, on the contrary, tended to think it was OK for them to watch those scenes because they knew (all) about sex.

PARTICIPANT: Because, let’s suppose. We, young people, see this thing [the characters Léia and Ralf lovers in bed], you know? Then we want to see it, you know? And then we want to do the same, and we can get screwed up. It’s not a very good idea to see these things, you know?

(Medium Public School male teens, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: Because look, (...) it showed in the telenovela, I don’t remember the name of it anymore, that [he] took the woman to the beach, and all the drama with her happened there, I mean, they had sex on the beach. This shouldn’t be on television, because many people have never done these things, they may try and get screwed. Because many of them [females] do it but the guy doesn’t take responsibility. So I think it shouldn’t be [on telenovelas].

(Dropout girls, Macambira)

PAULA: And what do you think of this type of scene [Léia and Ralf in bed], what do you think of it?
PARTICIPANT: Well, I understand, because I know about it. [But] for the little ones [it may be harmful] (...)  

(Upper income male teens, Vila Feliz)

Some mothers completely disagreed that teenagers were mature enough to watch sex scenes on television. They did not consider teenagers old enough to distinguish right from wrong and believed certain things that television showed -- such as sex or violence -- were responsible for certain behaviors children and teenagers had, functioning as a source of bad scripts.

PARTICIPANT: I think like this, I think that they see it, so they think they have to do it, too, and they grow up, you know, with that in their minds, day by day they see more and more of it. So, I think it happens more that adolescents give of themselves more quickly, earlier, because of this kind of thing.

(Lower income mothers, Vila Feliz)
PARTICIPANT: (...) we are adults, we know how to distinguish what’s right from what’s wrong, the adolescent doesn’t, he only sees, you know, the fantasy, he doesn’t know (...) “Oh, I saw that in the telenovela, so let’s do it?”

(Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

Other mothers recognized television as a window to the real world and believed their teenage children should not be shielded from it. Even if reality meant exposing them to sex scenes. Some teenagers also agreed with this view and noticed that, compared to their peers, those who were not allowed to watch anything on television were too “naïve.” Mothers perceived television as mirroring reality and, therefore, it would not present something that was “abnormal” or “unreal.” It is worth noting, in the next quote, that homosexuality was not considered “normal” behavior.

PARTICIPANT: I approve any scene on television, sex scene. Because on television, they are not going to show a man having intercourse with another man, they are going to show what really happens, so (...) they have to see what is normal. (...) Television teaches, they [the kids] are watching, they learn.

(Lower income mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: The problem I think is that, I think it’s right not to hide reality, because there are so many people (...) there are some friends of mine that are naïve because of too much protection. (...) The father doesn’t let her watch (...) The father doesn’t say anything, doesn’t discuss about anything (...) [She] learns everything outside [of the family], sometimes [she] becomes too rebel or too protected. And [she] isn’t prepared to the world (...) 

(Secular Private School female teens, Montes Claros)

Some mothers agreed that children should watch anything on television as long as parents supervise them and show them right from wrong. Mothers who shared this point of view tended to be interested in what their children watch and frequently watched television along with them.

PARTICIPANT: I think it’s our role to orient [our children] about the scenes they’re watching. (...) And sometimes, they watch [it but] there isn’t preparation. I think it’s the parents’ role to orient [them]. [We have to show them] that everything has a limit: they cannot go beyond it. This is my opinion.

(More educated mothers, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: I think education, the real education, comes from home (...) I have a sister, I raised her since she was 7 years-old [because my mother died], you know, she watches everything, everything on television and if she comes to me and asks if I find that right or how you do that, I’m not ashamed to tell her -- it’s like this, it’s like that, if you want to do it it’s your problem, but this is wrong and this is right. I think true education comes from home. If you know how to raise children, television, at least in my house, doesn’t influence anyone, as long as you know how to educate [your children].

(Young mothers, Montes Claros)
Besides influencing people’s way of dressing, talking, and dancing, telenovelas also influence the way people behave. They offer scripts and teach viewers about political, social, and economic problems. Sex on television is a controversial issue but most participants believed television showed too much too often too early. Some viewers were concerned with the influence sex scenes might have on children and even teenagers. Yet some supported television’s attempt to portray reality, even if it included sex.

Several mothers considered television a source of conflict and friction. Some of them did not agree with the content of certain messages conveyed by television in general and telenovelas in particular. They felt that television invaded their homes and tried to erode family values. They perceived television as going against the way schools and families tried to educate their children.

There’s no way, there’s no way the school can educate, and also we at home, because we say one thing, [school] says something else, they see on television in a different way, (...) “Oh, Mom, but I saw it like this, and this.” And what do you [do], you understand? It’s difficult.

(Lower income mothers, Montes Claros)

(...) The telenovelas, they invade our homes without giving us a chance to give our opinions about what is being presented at lunch time, at dinner time, during leisure time, at any time of the day.

(Upper income mothers, Montes Claros)

Some mothers took advantage of telenovela scenes -- even the ones they disapproved. They discovered telenovela content as a very powerful way to approach their children and discuss certain issues that might affect their children’s lives. Some teenagers also used that same avenue to communicate with their parents.

PARTICIPANT: I take advantage of the telenovela topics to talk with my daughters about it [sex], because sometimes it’s hard for you to just say “And so, have you kissed your boyfriend, has he touched you?” There’s no way, you know. So, I sometimes like to watch the telenovela, and exactly for that [purpose] -- to try to show them a little bit of what I consider good.

(Upper income mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: I don’t get to my mom like that and say (...) I take advantage when the telenovela is on like this (...) then I go and insinuate (...) 

(Medium Public School female teens, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: I’m with my mom, sitting there, then a sex scene appears, then my mom many times tells me “This is on television, you can see how much she’s suffering. It’s about the same thing (...) You can’t do it either because it’ll be worse for you later on.”
She always advises me, tells me what I should do, what I shouldn’t. Many times it’s from television.

(Evening Public School female teens, Montes Claros)

Other mothers said they hoped to use telenovelas to raise their children to be critical of what was not good for their future life and relationships. As Meyrowitz (1985) suggests, telenovelas offer the audience certain social situations that otherwise would not be visible to everyone. Therefore, being exposed to a situation that is considered bad or inappropriate may help teenagers try to avoid it in the future.

PARTICIPANT: The telenovela, many times, brings unpleasant scenes, heavy ones, which harm the family, you know, a family that wants to keep the family values. But if we manage to raise our kids to be critical, they’ll also criticize that [telenovelas] end up not being good for family relationships, you know? (Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

Indeed, some mothers seemed pleased with the fact that television was taking over the role of educating children and teenagers about certain issues such as sex. In reality, some of them did like the fact that television might be replacing the school or the family as the sources of reliable information about sex -- they either considered television as the most appropriate means for that or they felt too embarrassed to talk to their sons and daughters about it. Teenagers also noticed the role television played in providing information about sex in the cases in which the family failed to do so.

PARTICIPANT: It’s better for them to see [sex scenes] on television than learn from the teacher, you know?

(Less educated mothers, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: But I like [the fact] that children [learn about sex on television] (...). At least I don’t need to say anything to her. When she asked me something, I don’t know if what I felt was embarrassment to answer that. I don’t know, I didn’t have words to answer. [You] weren’t prepared, right?
I wasn’t prepared for that, she saw it on television! She said “Oh, mom, this is like this, this and that.” I thought it was much better [that she saw it on television]!! I had, I wasn’t prepared to answer what she asked. I didn’t know how to answer.

(More educated mothers, Macambira)

For the people who don’t have dialogue at home, I think it [television] teaches [about sex], but for me, all that they show I already know! I talk a lot with my mom and my dad, so for me it doesn’t teach anything. But for those people who have an absent mother or father at home, I think it helps a lot.

I agree.

(Secular Private School female teens, Montes Claros)
During a telenovela chapter, it is not unusual to see a scene with some kind of sexual content. What happens when the family was watching the telenovela together and a "hot scene" was aired? Although the families were not always together during telenovela watching, the reactions were very diverse. Some reported embarrassment, depending on who else was present in the room. Others said they did not mind. Some viewers deceived and pretended not to be paying attention to the TV set. In other living-rooms, there was silence. As expected, male teens were more ashamed of their mothers whereas female teens felt more embarrassed in front of their fathers. Yet there were exceptions in which teens tended to be ashamed in front of both parents or none of them. In the most extreme cases, parents turned the television off or changed channels if they disapproved what was being showed. In this case, as the second part of the third-person effect hypothesis (Davison, 1983) suggests, parents take action against the messages they believe to be harmful to their children. Finally, there is an interesting pattern that deserves mention -- the fact that, very often, the parents were the ones who left the room, embarrassed to see sex scenes in front of their children.

PARTICIPANT: In my home there's argument, it's a war, because my husband doesn't like it [telenovelas] and doesn't let my daughter watch because he says she isn't mature enough, but I like it.

(Catholic mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: In my house fortunately she [my mother] stays in her room and we stay in the living-room.

(Upper income male teens, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: With mom I don't feel ashamed. But with my dad it's not shame, I am (...)
Participant: When I go like, because it's very late, you know, the telenovela, and I'm at home, dad is watching, then I (...) scenes, then I think "I'm going to pretend I'm sleeping" (...)

(Caicó girls, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: When these things are on, my dad goes and turns the television off. [researcher changing audio tapes] Then he says that television only has stupidities, that we keep watching and that's all we learn and nothing else, and that's why we don't want to know about school.

(Evening Public School female teens, Montes Claros)

Although turning the television off is a radical solution for the conflict, some mothers saw it as a temporary solution only. Because they were working mothers and/or did not stay at home twenty-four hours a day, they were aware of the fact that they could not control everything their children watched. One case in Montes Claros illustrates the argument that parents did not have full control over what their children watched. A female teen reported taking advantage of the absence
of her father to watch even “heavier stuff” such as porno movies. It also gives an example of how important and strong the father figure is in Montes Claros, vis-à-vis the other two communities.

PARTICIPANT: Nowadays, as the majority, we are working mothers, we’re out of the home. (...) And this is what bothers me, because how are you going to treat a (...) not to let [him/her] watch television? How are you going to be present in the moments when the erotic scenes, those distortion of values are aired? You’re not going to be there.

(Upper income mothers, Montes Claros)

PARTICIPANT: [Children] know much more than we do, it’s true. They know about such things, they ask us such questions that sometimes we get a little confused to answer to their questions. This is all [because of] the telenovela they learn from. Sometimes we go out, and they stay at home. There’s no way they’re not going to watch it.

(More educated mothers, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: It’s like in my house, when dad’s traveling, we get a lot of movies [from a video store] to watch, and these movies [porno] are always among them, but I’ve recently lost interest in them.

(Catholic Private School female teens, Montes Claros)

The story I have told so far indicates that, in the mid-1990’s, television had a strong presence and an important role in people’s lives. But how was life before television became so widespread and so accessible to every age group? In other words, how different were teenagers’ lives in 1996-97 if compared to the lives of their mothers?

Mothers of teenagers did not know as much as their children knew in the mid-1990s, especially regarding sex. They complained about their lack of information during adolescence, suggesting that television had played a key role in making information about sex available.

PARTICIPANT: In the past, in our epoch, wasn’t it true that everything was forbidden to us? And we didn’t have that curiosity and didn’t do [and know] what children do today.

(More educated mothers, Macambira)

PARTICIPANT: I think like, a child sees that [sex on television], they know many things that are happening, you know? They aren’t, in fact I think they’re right because they’re not from my time, they’re not like me. I got married a moça (virgin) when [I was]28, almost 28, I was 27 years-old, and I didn’t know how a man was. I didn’t. So I think like this. I never saw it in telenovelas, I never saw sex anywhere, neither on television nor anywhere else. And they, my kids, see [it] and know all about it.

(Upper income mothers, Vila Feliz)

PARTICIPANT: Sometimes in the telenovela, couples practically naked, only covered with sheets, [are] doing love scenes. So the children, I don’t know, they just stay there [watching it]. Because in our time there wasn’t television, so we weren’t well informed about things.
(...) In the past, 12 year-old children didn’t know anything. Today, 12 year-old children know everything.

(More educated mothers, Macambira)

Telenovelas seemed to be an object of desire for those who could not watch them. It was not uncommon to find mothers whose parents completely forbade telenovelas and set a specific bed time. Yet some of them found a way to watch telenovelas.

PARTICIPANT: In my time, in my house, telenovelas weren’t allowed, especially the 8 o’clock ones, after the newscast, it was a forbidden telenovela.
PARTICIPANT: There was this thing [parental advisory] on television, 18 years-old, 16.
PARTICIPANT: It’s because my dad was very rigorous, so we really wanted to watch, we went to our friends’ houses to watch it, we didn’t miss it.

(Upper income mothers, Montes Claros)

Mothers criticized telenovelas but, at the same time, seemed to recognize their importance as a source of information about sex. They acknowledged the difference television and telenovelas made in the lives of their children with respect to what teens knew about sex vis-à-vis what they knew about it when they were teenagers. Despite the fact that mothers thought there was too much sex on television, I did not hear any of them wishing their teenage children were as naive and ignorant about sex as they were. Therefore, it seems that mothers recognized the importance of information about sex and, somehow, acknowledged the importance of television as a source of information.

Concluding Remarks

If information is the key element for empowerment, the withholding of information is the key element for control (Parker, 1991). Silence or lack of information used to be a strategy to control female sexuality in the mothers’ generation. Their only sources of information were peers and the rua.

In the mid-1990s, the teenagers in Montes Claros, Vila Feliz, and Macambira had a variety of sources to satisfy their need for information. However, the rua was still the main source of information about sex for those teenagers, similar to what happened in their mothers’ generation. In addition to peers and the rua, teenagers also relied on television and magazines, which are impersonal sources of information and avoid the embarrassment of a face-to-face interaction. With very few exceptions, schools and parents – the most important institutions – failed to provide teens with the type of information about sex they need.

These findings have important policy implications. First, schools must be prepared to offer reliable information about sex-related matters. Second, the mass media must be aware of its importance, so that they also offer reliable, correct information. Third, parents must be aware of the
media in general and television in particular, so that they monitor the kind information their children are receiving through them. Fourth, parents should change their attitude regarding sex-related matters. Learning about the birds and the bees should not happen only away from home.

References


