

# Conceptualizing « Sexual Health » from a multi-cultural/ethnic point of view

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# Sexual Health - Emergence of a concept

- A recent emergence:
  - Major increase in last ten years, vast majority focusing on sexual functioning, STI's and reproductive health
  - Number of citations in Medline and PsycINFO:
    - early 90' less than 20 references per years,
    - 2002 more than 80 in PsychINFO and 150 in Medline (7)
    - June 2005: more than 1600 (cumulative) in Medline only !
- A regularly used concept, as self evident and obvious
  - But “the concept is by no means uniformly understood and applied” (1, 7)
  - Depends on national and political agenda (4,5)

# Definitions of Sexual Health in the literature

- *Similarities on conceptual definitions :*
  - From 150 articles providing a discussion on SH, 8 definitions of SH were identified (2). An historical evolution is noted, but still wide similarities with WHO definitions.
- *World Health Organization, 2002:*

***“Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.”***

## Critics of WHO definition (4, 6)

- Whose sexual health has been defined?
- Individualistic perspective
- Implies societal and psychological norms of the expression of sexuality, these norms clearly relate to values... whose values?
- Actual use of the concept of SH varies, and is in part affected by political, historical and economical circumstances
- Potential risks: **becoming the standard**, medicalization/essentialist vs. socio-historical and psychological/constructivist view of sexuality.

# Sexual Health in a multi cultural/ethnicity context...

- *To what extent a multi-cultural view of sexual health is possible?*
- *How can we apply conceptual sexual health to empirical research ?*
- *What does a group of professional in sexual health (from different cultural/ethnicity backgrounds) think of what sexual health is? How will they operationalize it?*

**Focus Group “exploring/sharing the concept of sexual health”**

# Methodology

**N = 10**

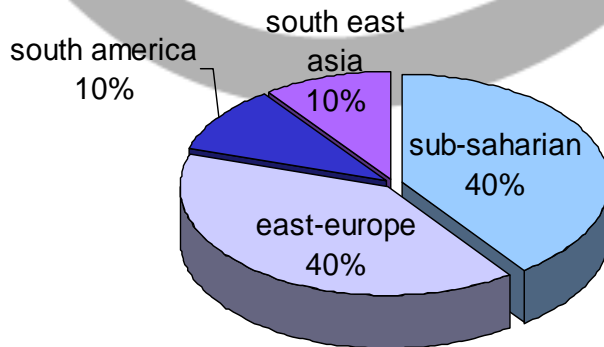
- Researchers and professionals working in the field of sexual health in their country
- Selected and founded to attend the first intensive course “*Training in Sexual Health Research*” organized by the GFMER, Fonds Chalumeau and WHO (14 February to 24 March 2005)

# Methodology - participants profile

7 women, 3 men

Age from 27 to 49 (mean 38,9)

## GEOGRAPHICAL AREA :



## RELIGION :

- 2 declare none
- 2 Muslims
- 6 Christians

## PROFESSIONAL

- 4 medical doctors
- 3 human sciences
- 2 public health
- 1 nurse

All have at least types of activity (*give the approximate percentage of the time you spend in one week doing*):

- 0 -50% Working with patients
- 10-80% Research
- 0-70% Education, teaching
- 0-75% Organizational and health management.

# Methodology - focus group

- Participants were free to participate and agreed for publication of the results. They were consulted before this presentation
- Asked to express their personal views, to focus on observable facts and behaviors.
- Group discussions on specific themes:
  - Individual, personal knowledge, representation
  - Elaboration of consensus vs divergence
- Themes :
  - characteristics of a sexually health person,
  - measurable indicators,
  - values and rights,
  - SH and reproductive health,
  - sexual behaviors in their cultural setting,
  - needs in SH in their cultural setting



# Methodology - results and analysis

- Focus group ran by 2 psychologists:
  - one leading and taking notes on consensual evolution of the discussion
  - one observing and taking notes on individual views expressed
- Analysis in a dialectical process
  - First by thematical analysis of group discussions (on a consensual perspective)
  - Second by looking at differences: between questions, between participants
- This focus group will be the first step of the **development of an on-line questionnaire** to evaluate :
  - Cultural representations of SH, sexuality and research on SH
  - And develop a discussion on how professionals in SH from different cultural and ethnical backgrounds can share and construct operational representations of SH

# Results

- Relatively consensual group who share some universal ideological positions held by WHO
  - Values of equity, consensual sex, hedonistic, different dimensions of sexuality
- Cultural differences appeared more when asked:
  - To be practical : describe practices and methods
  - Concerning reproductive health, e.g.:
    - In one country services for SH and family planning are only addressed to married persons
    - In some having children is a characteristic of a sexually (and socially) healthy person

# Map of cultural differences

Relatively stable geographical distribution of views on sexuality and SH:

## **Sub-Saharan Africa vs. others**

### **- The IDEA OF SOCIETAL PROGRESS - (to more equitable gender role)**

- Pleasurable sex and gender roles:
  - “Women cannot express” vs. “now it’s more acceptable”
- Age at marriage (from earliest age to considered late):
  - 13/14 to 30 years old vs 18/20 to 40
- Links between reproduction and SH

# Conceptualizing SH by trying to define what is

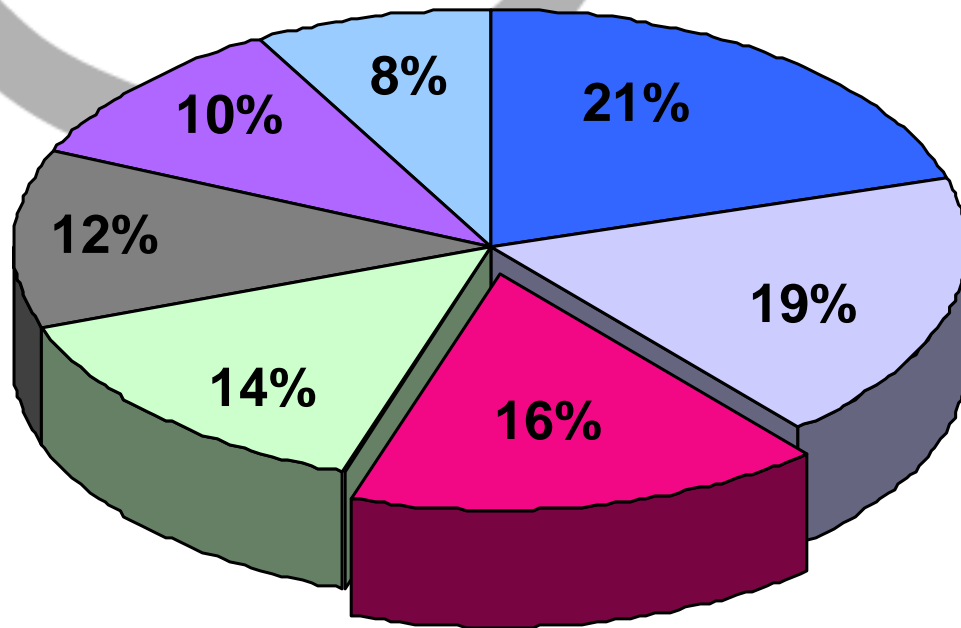
## “to be sexually healthy”:

“Give three characteristics that a sexually healthy person needs to have to be present, and three that this person can not have”

- Group discussion focused on ideals:
  - **Relational perspective**: sexuality implicitly was conceived as a dyadic experience, ability to fulfill and respect the partner
  - **Quest for happiness** :
    - As an individual and intensity oriented: sexual satisfaction, orgasm, sexual satisfaction
    - Or a question of integration in society, psychological well-being and stability (psychological and of the couple/family)
  - **Emphasis on the variety of sexual expressions**, not only intercourse but also gender differences
  - **Free of violence and coercion**, gender power relations

# Characteristics of a sexually healthy person

*% = proportional number of answers linked with...*



■ Relational, partner's perspective

■ Sexual rights

■ Hedonism

■ Biological Health

■ Psychological Health

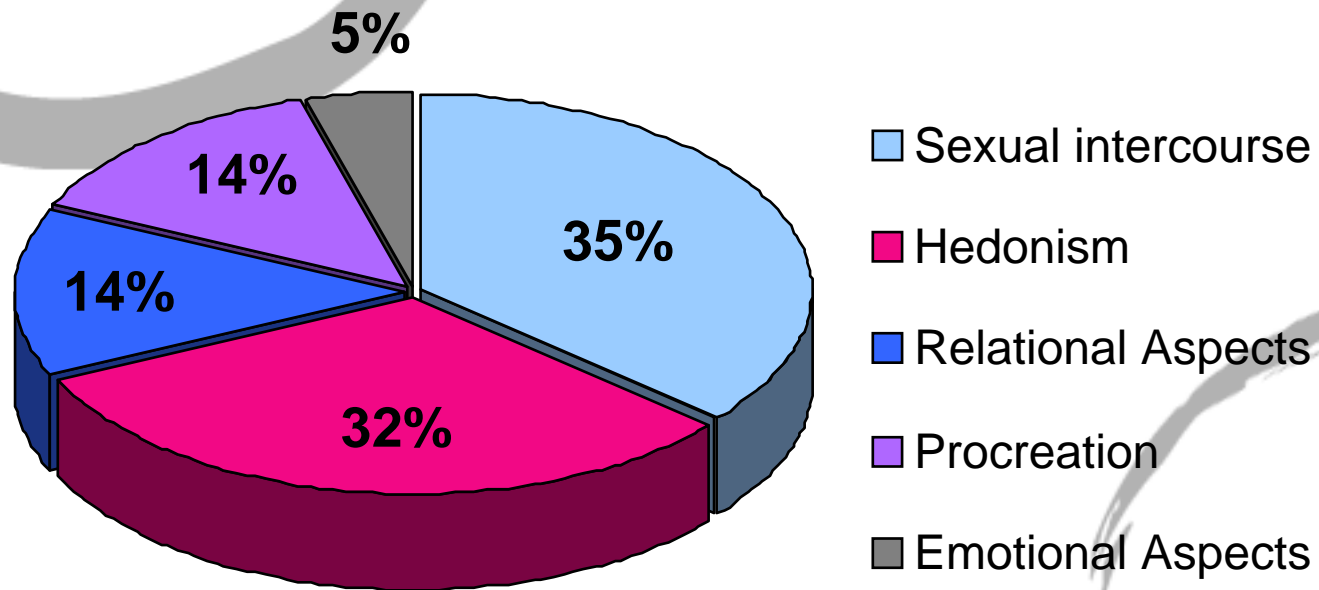
■ Respect of social norms and family

■ Actualization of sexuality

# Measurable indicators

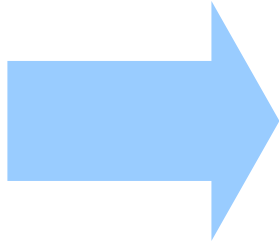
*“if you had 3 questions in a global survey to assess sexual health, what would you ask?”*

*% = proportional number of answers linked with...*



# Discussion: Discrepancies between questions

- Characterize a SH person: relational, rights and hedonist centered
- Operationalize SH in measures: frequencies of sexual intercourses, hedonism and procreation

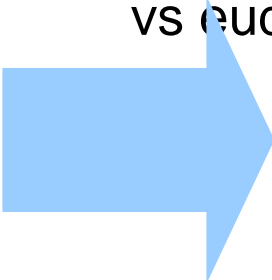


How do we analyze this? Discrepancy between values, sexual rights promoted by SH definitions and application on the field ?

Which representation of SH is the one which guides interventions?

# Discussion: SH and hedonism in sexuality

- Hedonism: an essential dimension of sexuality for our group
- Present in almost all definitions of SH and policies
- But, in the practice of research and program implementations:
  - usually left apart (6)
  - and especially in research on SH in racial/ethnic context that has focused on preventive sexual health (of a disease) vs eudemonic sexual health. (3)

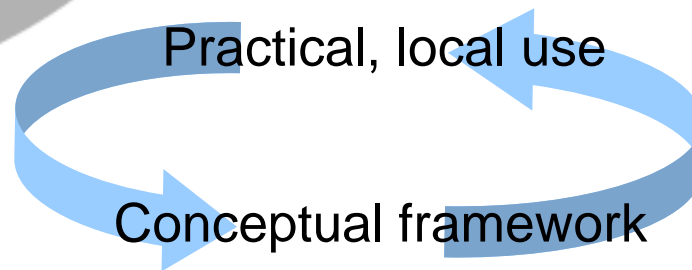


Research and interventions on SH should work on integrating better this dimension to be closer to people's sensitivity




# Discussion: defining SH between local and global

- Need to develop the basic grounds for comparison not only on concepts and ideal values, but also:
  - **Focus on the study of sexuality in a particular socio-historical context**



- **Sensitive to the different dimensions of sexuality and to the purpose and meanings of sexuality... like pleasure and quest for happiness**

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- [denise.medico@bluewin.ch](mailto:denise.medico@bluewin.ch)
  - To access the presentation (pdf) :  
[www.gfmer.ch](http://www.gfmer.ch)
  - To access the on-line questionnaire (from mid august 2005): [www.gfmer.ch](http://www.gfmer.ch)
  - To access information on the 2005 and next Training in sexual health research:  
[www.gfmer.ch](http://www.gfmer.ch)

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