

## **Teenagers and their sexuality**

### **An interview with Peter Bearman**

by Ivan JABLONKA

*Peter Bearman is the Cole professor of social science at Columbia University, where he directed the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy between 1998 and 2008. His work embraces a broad range of interests, including the influence of education on same-sex preference, a project on the autism epidemic, and a fascinating ethnographic survey of New York doormen. In this interview, Peter Bearman comments on his work on American youth, based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a database that he has co-designed. He shows how the youth's life is shaped by sexual networks, circuits of disease transmission, and informal rules (such as virginity pledges and dates) that codify juvenile sex.*

#### **Love and sex**

**La Vie des Idées** – I would like to talk about the "social shaping process" (in your own words) that affects children, from the point of view of gender socialization. How do social standards weigh on individuals through parents, relatives, institutions, or the media?

**Peter Bearman** – It is a deep question. It has so many parts, that I guess the answer I will give is that in terms of social influence or social shaping on adolescence, the principal power

arises from peers and it is through peer influence that distinctive adolescent cultures emerge and you begin to see local normative scripts for all sorts of behaviour, sexual behaviour, academic behaviour, and so on.

The role of parents is interesting. Clearly parents have enormous impacts on kids and they probably do so in ways that are much more subtle than they think. For example parents who have meals with their kids have an enormous impact on them. Parents who have conversations, directive conversations with kids about sexual behaviour for example have almost no impact on their kid, and that is principally because the way in which parents can structure and shape kids' orientations is by modelling a whole array of social behaviours, for example, having conversations, sitting, discussing things, doing things – interaction is the currency that works. So parents who set out to influence their kids ironically probably have significantly less influence than parents who simply spend time with their kids. For parents, there is this idea that peer influence is always negative, at least in America. It's almost humorous. All parents think that their kid is at risk for the negative influence of other kids. But obviously if there is a good kid and a bad kid in interaction with each other such that the so-called bad kid is going to influence the good one then it is naturally the case that influence can be bidirectional and the good kid can influence the negative kid. In fact parents do not think about that. But the biggest impacts on peers are positive behaviours. So while peer influence is not uniformly positive, it is demonstratively more positive than negative, and parents have a hard time seeing that. So those shaping processes are critical.

As regards the media, you read a lot of studies that show media impact on the analysis of behaviour. And there are obviously media impacts, there are pretty interesting studies that show when very aggressive anti-drugs campaign were initiated, and the saturation of the media on those drug campaigns, that the consequence is that the kids will take more drugs. So there is clearly a media effect that is possible. But this diverse effect that media are shaping kids' risk behaviour, sexual behaviour. I think that it is pretty hard to accept.

Schools are in America enormously important for those kids who feel attached to school even if there is very little that schools can do to shape attachment. The dynamics of scheduling, the perversity of tracking, all create energies within the schools, that are segregative, so that kids literally start hanging around with other kids similar to themselves. Schools force kids to live with their structures. So parents can figure out if kids are attached to school

by their orientation; that they want to go to school, that they feel as if they are part of the school, and so on, then it is great. If they do not, then parents can exert enormous influence when they are moving with their kids. Of course, that is the benefit of being upper-class, the capacity to get out of one setting into another. But if parents can do anything for kids it is to figure out how to shift settings if the one they are in does not work.

**La Vie des Idées** – You studied the sexual networks that exist within the youth in a small Midwestern town that you dubbed “Jefferson City”. What are the cultural and sexual models according to which young people define themselves?

**Peter Bearman** – This study is now a decade old. The first wave data for Jefferson arose out of National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health that was conducted in 1994. So those kids are now in their mid-twenties. Those kids, then 15 to 18 in high school, have the most phenomenally normative orientation to relationships than you can imagine. If you give them as we did, cards and ask them to order their ideal relationship, “what in the ideal would you like to have happened next year”. The order starts off with going out with a group, meeting the parents, maybe holding hands, exchanging presents, kissing, then another affective demonstrations saying ‘I love you’, getting an ‘I love you back’, touching underneath the clothes. This is really an ordered progression to sexual behaviour. It is incredible and it is uniform. It is not just that school, it is pretty much uniform across the culture. Obviously there are some kids who have a different model. The boys have a slight preference to have physical encounters before social encounters. Girls would like to have affective, communication before sex, but these are really tiny marginal differences. So the incredible thing about American kids and actually something people really do not get, is how normative they are.

Then the second thing is how American kids are overwhelmingly so-called ‘good kids’. 95 % of them are engaged, try hard in schools, would like to go to college, prefer to do well, want to take care of themselves, prefer not to be overweight, and would like to exercise more, so they have all sorts of normative, positive ambitions and goals and of course they engage also in risk behaviour. That is what being a kid is. So the kids’ orientations to a kind of relationships are just surprisingly conservative. Their orientation to sex is different than our orientation to sex, by our generation of 50. First, oral sex is an ambiguous and liminal category, somewhere between sex and just petting. And I think that was not true for our generation. Secondly anal sex – which is really something that only Southern girls did in a

kind of sick strategy to preserve their technical virginity – is a more diffuse behaviour than you might anticipate. So a quarter of kids will have experimented with it, so there are differences, and there is a more interest in exploration.

But in general the really striking thing is incredible conservative progression to full-blown relationship. Of course their relationships are shorter than those of adults. They are significantly shorter for boys than they are for girls. So if we have couples and if we have relationship start and end dates for couples, the boys' relationship with the same girl is four months shorter than a girls' relationship. So boys are simple creatures in the sense that they do not even know they are in relationship for many months, whereas the girl already knows it. The average is already eleven months long, so it is about a semester, maybe about a year. Adolescent relationships are also sporadic, in the sense that there is an in and out engagement in them, and they do not have the same names that we use to give it to. So this kind of shortness and sporadicity and the lack of naming like going steady make adults uncomfortable. I think kids do a pretty good job of practising intimacy. They have very few models and again it goes back to a comment about parents. Most parents really do not have a strategy for modelling intimacy. We do not teach intimacy, we do not teach kids in sexual relationships what it means to be intimate, so there is a shyness around the fundamental reason of being in a relationship. This culture is absolutely silent on this aspect of life.

**La Vie des Idées** – I was thinking about the conformity and conformism of the American youth. I would like you to talk about the date. It is an American institution and it does not exist in such shape in Europe and in this 'romantic' country as France. How would you explain this vivid institution?

**Peter Bearman** – All intellectuals would deny ever being on one as the first rule. But a date is an organized moment in which you have an opposite sex couple who do something together in a very scripted manner that is out of the ordinary. So I think the trick to understanding the date is the puritanical culture that is America. In Europe, boys and girls in high schools interrelate with each other, you do not have the same incredible sex-segregation of friendship groups and in relation, in just hanging around. And there is not this kind of organic set of opportunities for boys and girls to bump into each other, hanging out at the beach, to go shopping together, to do things that they do in their every day life. So the date is the liminal, abstractive moment from every day life for couples. It is the falsity of the activity that makes

the date real. So the date is the bringing together of the stranger, the people on the other side do something together that they would not ordinarily do in their every day life. Even the most mundane thing, like going to MacDonald's which they might do all the time by themselves, becomes sacred by virtue of its bringing together the two sexes. That is why you do not have dates and we have dates.

In other puritanical countries if there could be self-organized coupling, they would have things like dates. It think that is the trick of dates and then there is a kind of interesting thing: double dates which are an attempt to embed the dating couples into everyday life, a little bit more, like groups, double dates are very good for that. The other thing about our puritanical culture is that relationship tend to privatize quickly. Relationships move towards sex when they become privatized. So there is an elision of peers and an elision of family as the couple becomes intimate. And again, in America, the parents privatize intimacy. So the dynamics of intimacy are the rejection of the outside which also creates danger for the partnership. Obviously privatized relationships are subject to control struggles within the relationship, to abuse in ways that collectivize relationship, that are embedded in everyday life.

**La Vie des Idées** – Does it mean it always ends with sex?

**Peter Bearman** – No. Most of kids do not want to have sex, most of kids do not know how to have sex, they might want to have sex with but they have no idea how to get there and the most interesting thing about partnership relation in the United States is that sex tends to be a predatory activity. Sexual experienced boys will prey on sexuality inexperienced girls. But the beauty is that sexually experienced girls prey on sexually inexperienced boys. And that preying is really just like learning how to smoke pot, you have to do with somebody, otherwise you will not get stoned. You have to know somebody who knows how to do it. It is complicated to get there. I think that is why there is asymmetry.

## **Health**

**La Vie des Idées** – Your research is strongly related to public health, especially within the youth. How is the AIDS epidemic related to partnership patterns in a small Midwestern town?

**Peter Bearman** – Probably not... The other STD epidemics should be related to those. The probability of getting AIDS on unprotective sex is so low -- one in 2000 -- that you really need an other kind of dynamic to go on. But the chlamydia epidemic, trich, syphilis, all the other STDs, are really strongly related. It is complicated because the structure of analysis reveals that adolescent sexual networks do not have cores. They do not have core structures which will give rise to endemic pools of infection. The traditional model will be that there is an endemic pool of infection, people reinfect each other and somebody comes into the core and gets an STD and goes out a little bit. But the epidemic is sustained by the pool. In our data we see the opposite kind of structure; we observe long chains and very thin connections which means that you have this endemic capacity for extremely rapid spread or transmission of STDs but at the same time the structure is very fragile because at any moment you can get a break in the chain. But actually the structure we observe is great for public health. If you actually could just get kids to use condoms more often, you could really make a fundamental difference. There is another interesting implication which is given that every kid is in one of these chains then the characteristics of individuals are really not predictive about their STD acquisition risk. And that means that we should have a much different targeting strategy for influencing kids. The public health implications are pretty important.

**La Vie des Idées** – Do you think that virginity pledges, as a personal and public refusal of sexuality, are a way to extend the pledger's childhood? Is there a link with anorexia?

**Peter Bearman** : This is a sweet question. The first part, I do not think they are about extending a kid's childhood. First of all, kids who take pledges are thinking about sex. The adolescent boys who are playing with guns in the backyard are not thinking about sex. They are not going to take a pledge. So already there is a selection on the transition to adulthood. So pledges are really effective for kids who cannot negotiate the grey zone of intimacy. If they do not know how to say 'No, but I like you' that is a subtle communicative device. It is easier to say I cannot have sex because I took a pledge. So pledges are really effective for kids who are less able to negotiate intimacy. As a consequence pledges are attractive for kids who have slightly lower IQ than kids who have higher IQ. But it is not about a longing for childhood. For those kids for whom it is really beneficial, it is really about a language to have discourse about intimacy. And it works for them.

For those kids who are pledging because their parents want them to pledge it is about the parents' desire to extend their childhood, but really, perhaps their own. And in that regard it has very little to do with anorexia. It is the girl's desire to express control over at least some areas of her world, or his world if it is a boy, around which they have almost no control because they are buffeted by powers that seem alien to them. So anorexia seems to be, I am not really an expert, but seems to be a response, it is an attempt to gain control over what it is impossible to nail down in their life and weight is one thing that kids can control on their own, on their own volition. Both pledging and anorexia are probably unhealthy. Pledging is unhealthy because it does not really teach that humans can interact with intimacy, and of course, for most kids, pledging means sex without condoms which simply puts them and others at risk to some subsequent STD.

**La Vie des Idées** – You have been conducting a general survey on autism and autistic children. What does it consist in? What are your goals?

**Peter Bearman** – I have totally shifted research. At the moment I am really interested in trying to understand what causes increased prevalence of autism. In the United States but also France, it has been a phenomenon increasing since autism the mid 1980s. Generally there are three or four theories for the increased incidence of autism. One if that there is a diagnostic dynamic at work, and that the increased prevalence arises from changes in diagnostic criteria that lead to diagnostic substitution. It is one idea. Another idea is that there really is an environmental toxin that is dangerous and is producing development disorders in kids. The third idea is that you get some form of genetic expression in a context of environmental change and a fourth idea is that there are technologies of reproduction and technologies of obstetric practices that are associated with the increased incidence. Trying to disentangle all of this factors or causes is pretty much what we are doing at the moment. The long-term interest is to try to understand the social dynamics of contagion for health outcomes that are non-contagious, which could also be seen as the diffusion of the capacity to be ascertained.

**La Vie des Idées** – I have been struck by how present the issue of autism is in the US compared to France. How different are Europe and the US in terms of how public institutions take care of autistic children?

**Peter Bearman** – I do not know the answer to that question. I know that in the United States, there is a vast set of resources that are deployed to children with autism in terms of schools. The parents' organizations have been very powerful in mobilizing collective resources to take care of their children.

I focus mainly on epidemiology. It is very clear that first of all autism is hugely variable. For those children with autism who are not also comorbid with mental retardation, it is a disorder that always reveals pockets of ability. The trick of treatment is to capture these high areas and work with those pockets of ability. And that typically is easier and more effective the earlier the intervention comes. The other thing that I think is also true for autism that is not comorbid with mental retardation is that it is an attention disorder. Fundamentally it is related to our attention. It is disorder that at least makes it hard for kids to attend, and so one-on-one intervention is effective in helping kids with autism reach their potential. I have not gotten to that side of the problem yet, and so am not really that knowledgeable.

### **Youth and public policies**

**La Vie des Idées** – Could you explain to us what the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is? What kind of information does this program provide? How does it help you in your research?

**Peter Bearman** – The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health is very large, very well funded study that started off with kids aged 12 to 18 or in grades 7 to 12 in 1993. The group that leads Add Health now, under the direction of Kathy Harris, has taken it into the fifth wave. The beauty of that study is the measurement of context. Most studies up until that point were designed to think about individuals. And so the design abstracted them from context, taking one or two individuals from particular settings and then tried to make inference to kids as a whole. Add Health adopted a completely difference design which was essentially to make it possible that all descriptions of context, the relevant context in which kids live: their family, their peers, their schools, their neighbourhood, their work place, were based on multiple voices from those contexts, multiple points of view from which we can induce descriptions. Thus there is incredibly rich data on peers, we have one hundred of thousands kids on this social structure in over 140 schools describing millions of relationships

that they have with others. There is an incredible data on family composition. So we have a complete genetic design, we have thousands of twin pairs, thousands of full sibling pairs, thousands of half sibling pairs and kids who live in the same household but who are unrelated to each other.

So from its conception, it is a sociological study that takes the sociological element of taking context seriously, embedded context into the design. And in that regard it was radical, important in our thinking. It has enabled scientists to measure context and move forwards. I think it transformed the way people think about health. Now the real value comes from watching these individuals become adults. Add Health is following these 20 000 respondents: they are now married, they have kids on their own and it is going to be quite remarkable resource in the future. We have collected a lot of biomarkers and first of all series of STD biomarkers and then subsequently DNA. So it is an incredible resource for social scientists.

**La Vie des Idées** – At the end of your articles, you provide advice for policymakers. This might sound surprising to European sociologists. Some of them do try to advise policymakers, but not directly through their academic publications. Could you tell us if your research holds sway over public policies?

**Peter Bearman** – I think our research on the pledge, showing that the pledging work for some kids sometimes, and for most kids did not work at most times and that subsequently taking virginity pledges did not reduce the risk of STDs, had the effect of mobilizing the right wing, policy machinery to try to develop counter-arguments to those facts empirically. And in the long run this counter-scientific mobilization will have, and has had an effect. Of course on the lives of adolescents harmed by the pursuit of a failed policy there is already an effect. Under the current political claim, under the Bush administration, there has just been a wide spread anti-scientific culture that has prevailed all of the policy domains. They make up data when it is convenient for them, they distort data when it is convenient for them, and our work has no impact whatsoever, except that it bothers the right wing, and thus leads them to make up more junk science and parade it around as legitimate.

For example we wrote in the second pledge paper in the *Journal of adolescent health* that virgins who take virginity pledges compared to virgins who did not take virginity pledges are more likely to have any oral sex. And that is true. And it just bugs them and it grosses

them out. And it got under their skin and it should not have got under their skins because the beauty of the pledge movement again is that kids who take the pledges are thinking about sex. So if virgins who are thinking about sex, cannot have sex they are going to figure something out. Kids are super creative but the right wing fears the creativity of kids. That is why they are trying to crush them under the regime of enormous cultural restriction.

**La Vie des Idées** – But do you feel the need for taking stand in such a debate or policy?

**Peter Bearman** – I got bored and that is one of the reason why I left the sex field. I got tired of that. So I think when I do work and when I work on autism, we are going to find the causes of autism and then we are going to have policy recommendations. Whether they will pay attention to, this is another story. We social scientists, we can always say, we can make the recommendations. It is up to them to choose them. I am not that optimistic. It takes a long time to get expression as policy.

**La Vie des Idées** – In their book *Broken Promises* (1982), Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson contended that “the development of cost-benefit analysis has extended utilitarian logic to all public programs”. What do you think of this statement?

**Peter Bearman** – The development of cost-benefit analysis is greater now than it was earlier to the detriment of public policy. So I think the classic example is Jencks. Jencks shows that resources allocated to schools for school lunch programs make no difference in terms of reducing cognitive inequality but lunch is good for your kid. So lunch has no benefit but it is good, it is good to have lunch. So if one were solely looking at outcomes that institutions or programs are intended to achieve – for example schools should achieve declines in cognitive inequality – we might end up eliminating lunch. A lot of policy gets into this kind of conundrum, and I suppose it is because of the hegemony of cost-benefit analysis.

Interview by Ivan Jablonka  
(Transcription by Émilie Boutin)

Bearman's work includes:

- *Relations into Rhetorics: Local Elite Social Structure in Norfolk, England, 1540-1640*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1993.

- “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse” (with Hannah Brückner), *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 106, No. 4, (January 2001): 859-912.
- “Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction” (with Hannah Brückner), *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 107, No. 5, (March 2002): 1179-1205.
- “Chains of Affection: The Structure of Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Networks” (with James Moody and Katherine Stovel), *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 110, No. 1, (July 2004): 44-91.
- “Suicide and Friendships among American Adolescents”, (with James Moody), *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 94, (2004): 89-96.
- “After the promise: the STD consequences of adolescent virginity pledges”, (with Hannah Brückner), *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 36, (2005): 271-278.
- *Doormen*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2005.

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