

Sexed dolls workshop – an experience report

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This text reports the experience of conducting sexed doll workshops in extension courses and activities with the aim of discussing themes related to gender, sexuality, sexual and reproductive rights, and of stimulating the use of dolls in the identification of sexual violence and in health promotion. The process of constructing the dolls instigates questions about gender and allows explorations in relation to corporeity, when one contrasts the ideal of the perfect body with the real body. The workshops are dialogic meetings where people tell episodes of their life and talk about sexuality, violence and resistance while they sew. This report refers to seven workshops attended by students and professionals, reaching more than 100 people. The workshops enabled a space for reflection, dialogue and creation, and can be considered a permanent health education device.

Keywords: Workshops. Sexed dolls. Sexuality. Corporeity.

Introducing the dolls

Dolls are esthetic objects with a ludic-pedagogical and symbolic-poetic character that have been present throughout the history of humankind and can be found in different cultures¹. There is an infinity of possibilities for the making and use of dolls, like marionettes controlled by strings, puppets that are animated by the artist's hands, shadow puppets projected by lights, and witch cloth dolls. They have been used in religious festivities and celebrations, but also in cultural activities, role-playing, games, and other plays of an erudite or popular character.

The *Mamulengo*, a wooden or cloth doll controlled by a stick, is part of the Brazilian popular repository and is presented in fairs and street shows. The audience appreciates it and is entertained by the role-playing, which has dialogues, improvisation, critical humor, and scoffs².

Dolls are present in the gender socialization of girls, who are subjectivized to play roles that are considered feminine: marriage, maternity, and care. From witch dolls made of paper, cloth or corncobs to the current sophisticated reproductions made of porcelain and plastic, they transmit cultural standards of the feminine universe. Today, the hegemonic beauty model of slimness and whiteness objectifies and standardizes women's bodies³⁻⁵.

Dolls can represent a powerful resource in learning processes. However, students rarely have the opportunity of constructing them, as the presence of artistic activities in schools' curricula has been gradually decreasing⁶.

In the field of health, the human body was one of the first models used in the study of anatomy and medical practice. In the Middle Ages, it was forbidden to manipulate it and anatomists used to search for bodies in cemeteries clandestinely. Liberated in Modernity, the human body has been replaced by dolls that are similar to them, produced by the medical equipment industry.

Thus, sexed dolls produced by companies for commercial purposes have come on stage, advertised as resources to the clinic and presented as "families composed of grandfather, grandmother, son, daughter, father, mother, and a maid. Only the baby does not have sex organs"^(d).

The description applies to a model of family that is considered "normal", formed by two generations of heterosexual, white, middle-class couples, and by the naturalized figure of the "maid", reproducing the classism and even the racism that are present in society.

Sexed dolls are considered tools to support the work of professionals from the legal, psychiatric, and health fields, aiding them in the diagnosis of sexual violence in children, even though there is no consensus about the effectiveness of their use⁷⁻⁹.

The possibility of using dolls as a device to identify sexual violence and the fact that they are not available in the health services motivated us to conduct sexed dolls workshops. The experiences presented in this article refer to sexed dolls workshops held in health promotion spaces, grounded on the idea that the dolls can help in the identification of violence, and based on the desire of making them available for teams at primary care units.

^(d) https://www.elo7.com.br/familia-terapeutica-bonecos-sexuados/dp/9237B5?pp=1&pn=2&utm_content=marketplace&utm_source=onsite&utm_medium=recomendados&utm_campaign=loja-ferias

Methodological (dis)orientation

The construction of dolls occurs in the workshop format, considered a collective space of creation and experimentation. The workshop is based on a theme and on a proposal for practical action, and the group is free to organize it and even to modify the initial idea.

The workshop is a psychosocial and educational intervention tool that can be used with different groups, purposes and age groups. It represents a physical/temporal space for construction of objects and transformation of materials, which are recreated in new forms and meanings; thus, elements like clay and scrap become artistic products or characters in stories. The workshop enables an intentionality that is educational, creative, non-competitive, and collective. Even when the production is individual, there is constant interaction in the group - an inter-help, a group action^{6,10-12}.

This text is based on the experience of seven workshops held in the following venues: Brazilian Abrasco Congress (Porto Alegre, 2012), in which ten undergraduate students participated, as well as one doctor and one nurse; *Rede Unida* Congresses (Rio de Janeiro, 2012, Manaus, 2015) - the first was attended by 31 students and health professionals, and the second, by ten women who worked with recycling, as well as two students; Making Gender International Seminar (Florianópolis, 2017), in which 15 students and professionals were present; Brazil-Cuba-Haiti Cooperation (Port-au-Prince, 2013), in which 15 nurses participated in the workshop. In addition, extension courses were given and Teaching and Work Program (PET/Violence) was promoted in Porto Alegre in 2013-15, in which we worked with 25 adolescents from Junior High School, of both sexes, and six professionals from a Family Health Strategy team, composed of two community agents, one agent, one technician, one nurse, and one safety professional. Overall, more than one hundred people participated in the workshops, not to mention the professionals who animated the activities.

The workshops occurred in at least one encounter that lasted from four to six hours, when they were held in congresses or events, or in many sessions, when they were part of extension projects that lasted longer. The idea was that the groups should have 15 people at the most, but many had a higher number of participants. There were no restrictions in relation to age, level of schooling or occupation, and dolls workshops were held with junior high school students, university students, health services users, teachers, health professionals, social workers, and professionals from the legal and police sector, as well as militants from NGOs and social movements.

The workshops begin with a conversation circle in which the participants introduce themselves and talk about their motivations to participate in the activity. Then, the animators' toolbox is opened, revealing dolls that were constructed in previous encounters and disclosing the materials that will be used in that meeting: paper to make the patterns, fabrics and remnants for the body and clothes, wool, needles, pins, scissors, threads, paints, stuffing, and different adornments. If the workshop is short, the patterns or the fabric are supplied already drawn and cut; however, when there is time, the pattern is made individually, respecting each participant's singularity. The fabrics reproduce the colors of the human skin, but other colors, textures and prints were also offered. The participants could also use a wide range of colors, which allowed to represent ethnic and racial diversity.

The making of dolls begins with the drawing of the pattern on paper. Afterwards, it is marked on the fabric. The fabric is cut, basted, sewn (usually by hand) and stuffed with wool flakes or foam rubber. Then, the hair is sewn, the face is painted or embroidered, the sex organs are made, sewn or glued to the body and, finally, the clothes are made and put on the doll. When the dolls are ready, each participant presents their doll in a conversation circle, gives it a name, tells its imaginary story, and evaluates the process that was experienced, taking it home at the end of the activity.

In the Portuguese version of this text, we used the nomenclature “x” to designate the dolls workshops that we carried out, but we maintained the original gender inflection according to the use made by authors we cited or when it could hinder the reading and understanding of the text. Concerning the use of gender-neutral markers in Portuguese (x, @), Beatriz Preciado¹³ argues that it is neither about privileging one mark, nor inventing a new pronoun; rather, it is about questioning the technologies of writing about sex/gender and trying to change the positions of enunciation.

In this text, we present testimonies, effects of the process, and photographs taken in some of the workshops. These workshops were not a research activity. They were extension encounters or an individual activity in events. Even so, all the participants signed an Image Release Agreement, authorizing the release of photographs.

Sewing and talking: portraits

Workshops that propose manual and artistic activities like the making of dolls enable interaction, dialogue, and exchange of experiences among the members of the group. Dolls are significant objects that stimulate a connection between the individual, singular and subjective world and the world of culture and social representations, allowing the group to travel across the symbolic field, accessing, sharing, and remodeling memories, emotions, and meanings¹⁴.

In the initial introduction, people tell their interests and motivations to construct dolls:

I came to this workshop because I'm interested in the body, in the esthetics of the body, in the plastic possibilities it offers; I work with women in situations of violence; I'd like to know how to apply it to children who experience sexual violence. (Abrasco, 2012, *Rede Unida*, 2012)

In the sexed dolls workshops, while the participants work with their hands, drawing, cutting, basting and sewing, they talk to each other a lot and practical issues related to the technique are mixed with theoretical-conceptual reflections related to the themes discussed by the group.

Concerning gender, our position is that the patriarchy is responsible for maintaining the system of domination/exploitation of women, and we do not deny the strength of cultural aspects, mainly referring to women's capacity for resisting instituted standards¹². We understand gender based on Joan Scott's¹⁵ reflections. She proposes the denaturalization of the binary opposition between men and women and the understanding that sexual identities are plural and constructed both historically and socially. The concept of gender, including its performing character, represents a

refusal of the biological essentialism imposed on sexed bodies and opposes the idea of one single and heterosexual sexuality.

Sexuality comprises the social prescription and regulation of the uses of the body referring to sexual practices, by means of a set of rules that vary according to place and time. This set of rules forbids some acts and prescribes others, establishes which is and which should be the sex of each individual, and determines how and with whom such acts can or cannot be practiced¹⁶. According to Foucault¹⁷, sexuality is a social invention based on multiple discourses about sex, which regulate, normalize, and produce “truths”.

The fact that the dolls are “sexed” stimulates the discussion about social functions in relation to femininities and masculinities, in which sewing is a feminine activity or, as we heard in some discourses: “women sew, men don’t”. In these groups, which were so diverse, the participants reflected on gender, sexual stereotypes, corporeity, sexuality, and violence.

The body, in turn, enunciated by the feminist discourse, is “an agent of culture”, a surface on which norms and hierarchies are inscribed and reinforced by a concrete language¹⁸. To the French feminism, in its line of “écriture féminine”¹⁹, the human body is a text, a sign, and not just a piece of carnal matter. This idea is rather inspirational to the creation of dolls, whose bodies can serve as material for the inscription of signs, of metaphors, of a poetics, but also to reveal wounds and denounce oppressions, repressions, and violence.

The first dolls workshop was held in Seminar Critical Routes IV, held simultaneously with the *Rede Unida* Congress in Rio de Janeiro. More than thirty people participated in it. We took our sewing machines to this event, aiming to help the process, and the group proposed a division of tasks, organizing an “assembly line”, in which some cut the fabric, others sewed and, afterwards, another group stuffed the dolls, put the hair, the sex organs, and the clothes. In the evaluation of this workshop, we observed that the group organized the work process and recreated the technique in a singular way. In addition, the dolls - which we initially viewed as an instrument to help the diagnosis of sexual violence in childhood - were re-signified as devices to trigger other discussions with other themes and age groups.

In this first experience, some participants reported that they had already made dolls in groups of youths and elderly people and that they were the trigger to think and rethink the body we have and the body we want. Like the handcrafted doll, the human body is not perfect; for this reason, it allows to question the notion of “beautiful” grounded on concepts of harmony and on the balance of geometrically perfect forms. This deconstruction affects traditional esthetic values that disqualify popular art and consider it grotesque, irregular or distorted²⁰. The dolls help to understand the limitations and contingencies imposed by time or by life on each person’s body, producing an acceptance between the “ideal” and the “real” body.



Figure 1. Bodies, sexualities, genders

Photo: Vatsi Danilevicz

A second experience with dolls, described elsewhere²¹, took place during the PET Violence Program, held in one of the territories characterized by poverty, black population, and high indexes of violence of the city of Porto Alegre (Southern Brazil). In the PET Violence's itinerary, two sexed dolls workshops were held. The first was targeted at students of a school located in one of the territory's most violent regions, known, because of this, as "Carandiru" (Named after a massacre that occurred in 1992 at the Carandiru Penitentiary, in the city of São Paulo), and the second was requested by the health professionals of the Family Health Strategy in which the school was located.

The sex education policy proposed by the Ministries of Education and Health to be developed in schools recommends clarification about sexuality, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender, understood as the social appropriation of biological sex²². This policy aims to stimulate respect for differences and deconstruction of hegemonic patterns that reinforce prejudice and intolerance of diversity. However, the majority of schools has difficulties in implementing this proposal and outsources the responsibility to the families, which, in turn, fail to talk openly about sexuality.

We chose the dolls workshop to work with junior high school students, thinking about a participatory proposal that might stimulate (or not) a conversation about sexuality and health promotion, grounded on art and on ludic practices, avoiding the normative model traditionally used in activities aiming to prevent sexually transmitted infections/AIDS. The workshop was held with 25 students of the 7th grade of Junior High School, aged between 14 and 16 years. We were favorably surprised at the participation of boys, who did not show gender prejudice in relation to sewing. The boys told that men in their families (fathers, brothers, grandfather) also sewed, making us see that this prejudice was ours and, apparently, it does not affect the working class.



The moment when the sex organs are made, named and put on the dolls is the one in which there is the highest amount of questions, laughs and embarrassments, indicating the participants' difficulty in dealing with the issue. This behavior emerged not only in the workshop that we held at the school, with junior high school students, but also in workshops in which the group was formed by adults.

Children and youths learn gender differentiation and reproduction of sexism, or discrimination based on a person's sex/gender, observing the adults and, like them, they reproduce a vocabulary permeated by prejudice and stereotypes²³. We observed the use of popular names, sometimes offensive names, to designate the sex organs. At school, as the questions were answered and the social or scientifically "correct" names of the male and female genitals were used, the students also started to use them and the laughs disappeared.

Many questions were asked at this moment:

How do I make the doll's vagina? What size should the doll's penis be? Can anal sex make a girl pregnant? How do I sew the penis on the doll? When should I have sex with my boyfriend? What should be done when a woman can't escape an abusive relationship? Where should I put the [pubic] hair? (Workshop participants, 2013-17)



Figure 2. Body lines

Photo: Vatsi Danilevicz

In all the groups, the participants talked openly about sexuality and, whenever possible, they questioned the normative standards and the medicalization bias with which this theme is still approached in health promotion activities. We noticed that, due to its ludic nature, the doll makes it easier to break the rigidity of the society's gender norms, to explore unknown territories, to ask questions, even obvious ones, to discuss difficult subjects, to explore the theme of sexuality - in short, to talk about sex²⁴.

In the territory where the PET Violence was carried out, one workshop was held with the Family Health Strategy team in response to a request made by the health workers when the activities they had performed at school were presented. Thus, we began the workshop interweaving the technical work with the ludic one, in an itinerary that ended in a simulation of a sexual violence assistance that had occurred months before in the territory. They had not known what to do on the occasion because they were not familiarized with the procedures. However, at the moment of the role-playing, the team had already learned the protocols and knew what to do in those situations. In addition, they placed, in the waiting room of the Family Health Strategy, a recipient containing condoms, to which users had free access regardless of their age group, indicating that the “dolls workshop” device lent itself to the proposal of permanent health education.

In the *Rede Unida* seminar held in Amazonas, the workshop proposal was enriched by the idea of dealing with aspects of the local culture. Thus, the story of the *Boto Cor-de-rosa* (pink river dolphin) was included: the dolphin is a character of the Amazonas’ folklore, impregnated with the patriarchal culture, that is blamed when a single woman gets pregnant and no one knows who the father is. The dolphin triggered a reflection on sexual morality, in which the burden of an unwanted pregnancy falls on a stigmatized woman in a country where abortion is criminalized. This workshop, held with women who make a living by picking up recyclable materials in the city of Manaus (State of Amazonas), triggered, in the group, in addition to the pleasure of listening to the dolphin’s story, the desire of sewing to generate income, and they stated their desire of sewing “dolls and pink river dolphins” to sell in the fair.

The dolphin’s story brought the idea of adding, to the workshops, elements from the culture in which the dolls were being created. They may be stories from the folklore, from local artists, and from the group itself. These elements emerged spontaneously and, in workshops held with adolescents, dolls representing fantastic creatures were made: *Saci Pererê* (*Saci Pererê* is a character in Brazilian folklore. He is a one-legged black youngster who smokes a pipe and wears a magical red cap that enables him to disappear and reappear wherever he wishes), the Mermaid and the Devil. However, when we tried to deepen the discussion about these figures, there was no interest on the part of the participants to discuss these elements. It seemed that their representation was sufficient to fulfil the symbolic and artistic function.

In the workshops, dolls of all colors were sewn, which helped to approach the theme of ethnic and racial diversity. Some paints were created on the spot and applied to the dolls. Other dolls were decorated with tattoos and piercings and their hair was braided and dyed with different colors and textures, including a proposal to use birdseed as stuffing so that vegetable hair would sprout. The dolls received turbans and ethnic costumes, reaffirming identities: “I made a black doll with dreadlocks and a turban, because it’s necessary to reaffirm black women’s rights, mainly at university” (Participant in the Making Gender Workshop, 2017).

Still in relation to corporeity, in one of the groups, a nurse who works at a Cancer Treatment Unit represented a doll that had underwent mastectomy, saying she was touched by women who suffer mutilations and cannot reconstruct their breasts. In another group, physiotherapists made dolls with amputated limbs, triggering a discussion about deficiencies and limitations.



Figure 3. Sexed dolls and the pink river dolphin

Photo: Stela Meneghel

In the 13th Women Worlds and Making Gender 11, held in the State of Santa Catarina (Southern Brazil), we proposed a workshop with the objectives of problematizing sexual roles and gender-differentiated education, understanding the determinants and effects of sexual violence, and making sexed dolls and discussing possibilities for their use. The participants were students and professionals belonging to the areas of education, law, health, psychology, and social work, from different regions of Brazil. In this workshop and in others, women predominated, but there were men interested in the experience in many of them. They denounced and overcame interdictions directed at the male sex, questioning gender roles in which “men don’t sew” and stating that “yes, men sew!”



Figure 4. Free mental imageries

Photo: Vatsi Danilevicz



In relation to the dolls' sex/gender, we observed that men usually made male dolls, while women and girls made dolls of both sexes. They made pregnant dolls and dolls with babies, but they also explored other performances and made LGBTQ, transsexual and transvestite dolls.

The occupation of the hands in sewing allows that matters like sexuality and violence, usually wrapped in prejudice, taboos and shame, come out in a spontaneous and open way. The act of sewing, in which each person has autonomy to conduct the work, stimulates honest conversations and the group's protagonism, as its members discard explanations that do not seem plausible or sufficient, like blaming, pathologization, and the medicalization of social behaviors. The choir of voices accompanies the making of the dolls, and the apparent disorganization of materials on the table functions as a sowing place, waving to the power that art has of organizing worlds and breaking taboos.

When the theatrical game [and, we add, the doll] crosses the limit between real and imaginary, it does not intend to reproduce a faithful or technical copy of the reality; on the contrary, it analyzes and questions it, creating space for the word and for interchange, allowing greater knowledge of oneself and of the other, and potentializing the possibilities of expression in the realm of art and creation¹.

Many dialogs were started in the groups, about cases, stories, experiences and examples, allowing that gender, social class, and race inequalities and inequities could be questioned. Misogynistic behaviors at school, at university and in the workplace were denounced: "my macho colleagues are usually aggressive and disqualify gender studies". Moreover, the group reflected on the professional practice of women who assist people in situations of violence and the helplessness they sometimes feel:

I assisted a woman who lived in false imprisonment and suffered gender violence for thirty years. [...] It was very difficult because I felt a strong sensation of helplessness; after all, merely reporting the violence does not change the situation experienced by the woman. (Participant in the Making Gender Workshop, 2017)

In the itineraries of these workshops, the racist and patriarchal capitalism was denounced as the main agent of violence perpetrated against feminized bodies, intensifying women's submission and exploitation process.

A woman's body never belongs to herself. The body belongs to the State, to the man, father, boyfriend, husband, friend. It can't appear naked because the woman is considered a slut; it can only appear in a pornographic magazine for a man to masturbate himself while he looks at it. It's for men's consumption. (Participant in the Making Gender Workshop, 2017)

As it has already been disclosed in other workshops^{11,25,26} and by other authors²⁷⁻²⁹, art and the group process are capable of producing therapeutic effects. These effects certainly derive from the fact that the artistic creation that occurs in group contexts enables the expression and re-signification of wounds and sorrows, deposited in the protected space of the group and metaphorized in images and symbols.

In addition, like in other groups and testimonies¹, the materials produced in workshops can acquire other uses and penetrate in other spaces that were not imagined when the activity was being planned. This occurs when they are taken to the participants' homes and become part of family relationships, being made by other people or used as ludic objects and toys for children. In these workshops, sewing, considered a creative and even artistic activity, is valued as a useful skill in the daily routine and a possibility of professionalization for youths or of generating supplementary income for adults.

In the workshops, the group never stopped believing and betting on the other's creative potential. Likewise, when the participants realize the power of art, they introduce the technique in their toolbox. This fact happened in the itinerary of these workshops and many participants stated they wished to reproduce and multiply the experience, organizing sexed dolls workshops, modified, adapted and recreated for other groups and contexts.

In this sense, even the workshop's initial objective, which was to use dolls as auxiliary resources in the diagnosis of sexual violence, was modified. The itineraries and group discussions enabled to envisage other perspectives for them, and the function of instrument for the diagnosis of sexual violence was minimized, departing from the "large market of diagnoses"²⁸, and leaving to each participant's creativity the prerogative of deciding what uses they would give to the dolls and to the experience of making them.



Figure 5. To the worlds

Photo: Vatsi Danilevicz

Still effects and possibilities

We believe that the workshops reported in this study validated the possibility of use of sexed dolls in health promotion activities and in discussions of themes related to human body and sexuality.



Another consequence that flourished in the group work, stimulated by the imagetic and symbolic figure of the doll, was the sharing of experiences, stories and affections. Many participants stated they felt “summoned” by the dolls to reveal, in the group, experiences of prejudice and violence they had been suffering in their life, including sexism, homophobia, bullying, and discrimination. They asked questions, exchanged answers, and affirmed the importance of never forgetting about art, the ludic aspect, and artistic creation in social work.

The dolls have the power of charming the eyes, producing an enchantment related to fruition and esthetic pleasure. This happens in a workshop, on the street or in the classroom, even if it is a simple presentation, or even if the dolls are very simple. From the Greek theater to the current days, there has always been a kind of magic that makes them acquire life, bringing enchantment wherever they are¹. This was one of the effects that was not part of our initial ideas, but that emerged in all the workshops, regardless of age group, social situation, and even of the workshop’s duration. To the participants, the dolls functioned as a mirror, a projection or as their alter ego. They identified with them, baptized them, produced stories and, magically, gave them life.

I still know little about my doll [...] while I was sewing, many questions emerged: was I representing myself or was I constructing a model to deal with sexuality? (Participant in the Making Gender Workshop, 2017)

Thus, the construction of dolls is a form of mimesis in which, when the person makes them, he/she portrays him/herself, making a mirror of him/herself and of the world that surrounds him/her. To Ana Maria Amaral³⁰, the copy is full of vital energy, which explains humans’ fascination when they see themselves represented: When they see their own image, they reassure their existence.



Figure 6. Time sewings

Photo: Vatsi Danilevicz

Conducting sexed dolls workshops to discuss gender, sexuality and corporeity amplifies the understanding of these themes, enabling participants to escape from approaches that focus on the biological dimension, and betting on creativity, ludicity and invention granted by the symbolic and poetic dimensions, which are part of the creation process. The satisfied smile of the participants, proudly taking their dolls home at the end of the workshops, confirmed the power of art.

Authors' contributions

All the authors participated actively in all the stages of preparation of the manuscript: data transcription, discussion of results, review and approval of the final version of the article.

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Translator: Carolina Siqueira Muniz Ventura

Submitted on 12/20/17.
Approved on 04/16/18.