

# Philanderers, Cuckolds, and Wily Women

## *A Reexamination of Gender Relations in a Brazilian Working-Class Neighborhood*

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*In this essay on working-class families in a Brazilian, urban neighborhood, it is considered how, through jokes and gossip about sexual transgressions, men and women use and are affected by culturally accepted definitions of masculinity. Focusing on spontaneous speech events and placing the husband-wife relationship within a social context in which mothers and sisters exert an enormous influence over their male relatives, new dimensions of male-female power relations are glimpsed that might be overlooked by methodologies more centered on hegemonic norms. The observations suggest that particular economic and political circumstances have contributed to a situation in which images of masculine honor, although ostensibly reinforcing male privileges, are wielded by women as effective weapons against their husbands as well as against female rivals.*

During my 1986-1990 field research in the Vila São João, a working-class neighborhood about seven kilometers from downtown Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), I was taken aback by the frequent references to *guampudos*, the local term for cuckold.<sup>1</sup> I had not solicited these commentaries. They had not shown up in the life histories I had collected during the initial phase of my fieldwork, nor were they present in the answers to a questionnaire I had administered on family organization. But, on rereading my field notes, I stumbled across references to *guampudos* on nearly every page. They popped up in daily banter between neighbors, in risqué jokes, and in succulent gossip.

The middle-aged matrons of the Vila São João were experts on the subject: "Ah, Leco [a neighbor] didn't say hello this morning? It's because he didn't see you—his *guampas* got in the way!" Not infrequently, mothers and sisters would volunteer such information while describing the men in their families. A sister, while showing me her photo album, would quip, "You see the girl in the photo here? That's the woman who put *guampas* on my brother." Or, a mother would sniff, "My son, poor thing, began to drink because of his *dor das guampas* [literally, pain in the horns]." The men, too, join in the gossip. Although they generally avoid direct accusations, they allude frequently to

*Ricardão*, that is, any man who goes out with a married woman. "In this neighborhood," someone observes, "there's more than one *Ricardão* jumping the fence when the husband is gone." Another man sniggers in agreement: "Nowadays, *guampas* come with hinges so they can be raised and lowered faster." The term is even used to classify a specific kind of sentimental music, somewhat akin to country and western: "Listen to those words," a man might prompt. "That's music for *dor das guampas*."

The older women insinuate that in the good old days, things were different. Mary is only thirty-five years old, but she insists that she is "old-fashioned" because, although fully aware that her husband sees other women, she could never consider the possibility of cheating on him. There is some indication, however, that the sexual liberty of married women has long been a popular topic of discussion among women as well as men. The barber on the corner describes the nightclub where he used to hang out in his youth, forty years ago, as a place for encounters. "The girls could find a husband and the married women could find something to keep them busy while their husbands were out working."

At the highest point in the neighborhood stands a white cement cross, in honor of the hill's informal name, *Morro da Cruz* (the Hill of the Cross). The first time I asked a pack of children the name of the area, however, I received a curious answer: "This here is called *Morro das Guampas*." After a good number of snickers, one lad politely added, "It's because the first cross they put up was made of crooked wood. It looked more like a pair of horns than a cross."

In the Vila São João, relatively few subjects escape the irreverent humor typical of daily interactions. However, certain themes are more popular than others. Male-female relations are a particular favorite, running through the stylized jokes built around anonymous subjects, the boisterous gossip about well-known relatives and neighbors, and the chiding jibes flung as half-serious accusations directly at one's partner.<sup>2</sup>

The constant joking about cuckolds was a surprise to me. In over ten years of daily contact with Brazilian university professors, I could recall but one instance involving such ribald humor: when a colleague, known for a certain rustic coarseness, teased another about the possible results of his wife's frequent trips. I had reason to believe that in the working-class neighborhood, where "traditional morality" supposedly weighed heavily on male-female relations, sexual decorum would be still more important. Anthropological literature on working-class populations in other Brazilian cities indicated that, following the general honor-shame model typical of the Mediterranean area, a woman granted her husband exclusive rights to her sexual favors in return for his material support and, in the bargain, that both gained enhanced status as married members of a respectable family (Machado 1985; Duarte 1987; Sarti 1995). The difference between the behavior predicted and the behavior I encountered typifies the sort of anthropological puzzle that inspires closer investigation.

In this essay, therefore, I propose to probe the meaning of ribald jokes by locating them within the complex system of gender relations in the Vila São João. This line of investigation leads to the question of masculinity, but rather than centering on “masculine identity” (a major preoccupation in recent research), I propose to see how men and women, moving through their usual social networks, use and are affected by culturally accepted definitions of maleness. Although these definitions include various virtues, from courage and loyalty to hard work and honesty, I have elected to investigate the attitudes linked directly to the conjugal relationship. Through the analysis of jokes and gossip about philandering men, gold-digging women and, in particular, husbands of unfaithful wives, my aim is to better understand the power relations implied in images of sexual transgression.

In previous considerations of gender relations, I have attempted to dethrone the conjugal relationship, habitual center of academic debate on gender relations, to bring out the importance of other sorts of male-female bonds, be they between generations (mother-son or father-daughter ties) or between siblings (Fonseca 1991; see also Sacks 1979). Shifting the analytical focus away from the husband-wife relationship, the “war between the sexes” becomes an awkward metaphor, and the lines of demarcation between enemy camps begin to blur. In this article, although marital relations have become the central issue, I continue to be interested in how members of the extended kin group view spouses within the group. In this way, rather than approach the conjugal relationship head on (that is, with people talking about their own marital situations), I attack it, so to speak, from its soft underbelly. In the side comments made by informants about other people’s marriages, the idea of marital transgression comes to the fore—in particular, transgressions involving adulterous wives and cuckolded husbands.

### A QUESTION OF HONOR?

Like others who have studied Brazilian working-class families (Duarte 1987; Machado 1985; Woortmann 1987; Sarti 1995), at the outset of my research, I viewed “masculine honor” and “feminine modesty” as notions that might help reveal important aspects of the local residents’ gender relations.<sup>3</sup> As the ethnographic investigation advanced, however, the classical discussion of honor came to appear increasingly inadequate to capture the flavor and, more to the point, the fragility of male status in Porto Alegre. In this context, the reexamination of gender relations called into question the necessary link between masculine honor and extreme forms of male dominance.

In recent years, a number of ethnographies in various Portuguese (Almeida 1995), Greek (Herzfeld 1985), and Latin American (Gutmann 1996) settings have been published that mitigate the Anglocentric

stereotypes of machismo that plagued many of the early studies on southern European men. One might add that even the classical studies did not entirely overlook the fear men had of their women's unruly conduct. Pitt-Rivers (1977), writing on the Andalusian town of Grazalema, aptly pointed out that the object of public shaming rituals such as the *vito* (or *charivari*) was generally the betrayed husband and not his unfaithful wife. Analyzing the situation, he concluded, "Women hold in their hand the power not merely to put pressure on their menfolk, but actually to 'ruin' them" (Pitt-Rivers 1977, 64). Gilmore (1987), in a subchapter of his study on Andalusian masculinity entitled "The Power of Women, the Weakness of Men," evokes a similar male dread of unbridled female sexuality.

Nonetheless, in this literature, there appears to be a consensus that despite episodic threats of individual female rebellion, the male-oriented norms prevail in most everyday situations. Gilmore (1987), in the most explicit example of this perspective, blends psychological and ethnographic insights to conclude that machismo is a sort of "compensatory mechanism [and that the] penis is the man's ticket to a sense of superiority. Andalusian males redeem their manhood by monopolizing the means of sexual reproduction" (Gilmore 1987, 150). Speaking then of women's inevitable "victimization," the author leaves us with the impression that the community's female members have little choice but to go along with the dictates of the masculine ego.

Noting that these ethnographic studies on masculinity were all written by male researchers, one might wonder if, somewhere along the line, there has not been a tendency to take some of the natives' virile blustering too literally. This might result from the researcher's understandable empathy for the male point of view or from the informant's inclination, finding himself in conversation with another man, to exaggerate agonistic displays of maleness. Such skewing of information toward one focus or another is an inherent process of any methodological approach and therefore not in itself a problem. Nonetheless, in this case, circumstances coincide to create a gap: women, one might say, are pretty much left out of the picture. In his review article on masculinity, Gutmann (1997) laments this absence, reminding us that "masculinities develop and transform and have little meaning except in relation to women and female identities and practices," and recommending that ethnographic investigations on men and masculinity include more research on "women's ideas about and experiences with men" (Gutmann 1997, 400).<sup>4</sup> Harking back to Gutmann's recommendation, I do not focus particularly on male speeches and opinions (although, certainly, these are plentiful in the public banter I recorded in my field diary) but rather on the uses that women make of male-related imagery. This perspective, as will be seen, gives us a slightly less reverent view of male domination.

People in the Vila São João, when directly questioned about sexual morality, will no doubt reply that girls should be virgins until their wedding days,

that married women should be chaste, and that men should dedicate themselves to supporting their wives and children. Normative speech may well paint an image of well-respected mutual obligations between husbands and wives. The all-pervasive humor, however, suggests another version of gender relations in which the reciprocity implicit in the conjugal pact, far from spelling out tranquility, seems to open the way for suspicion and one-upmanship as men and women endlessly vie to get the upper hand.

### MEN AS SEXMONGERS

Men, whether married or single, are often kidded about being sexmongers. One hears laughing innuendoes about their sexual antics, both conquests and rebuffs, both extraordinary prowess and possible impotency. Even comments on treatment for venereal disease afford an opportunity to point out a man's "natural" inclinations. It is taken for granted by most denizens of the Vila São João that, in their relationships with women, men just naturally aim for sex, at the least possible cost.

There are various stories about men who, in one way or another, manage to win women's sexual favors without giving much in return. In one illustrative case, women gossiped about their recently separated neighbor whose husband had just come through for a weekend visit: "He arrived with 3,000 *reas* [roughly \$60 at the time] in his pocket, got everything he was after [an obvious reference to sexual favors] and before Vania [the wife] knew what was going on, he had left without spending a red cent." The best examples of male wiliness, however, appear in stories about young virgins.

Virginity, variously described as a jewel or crystal, is normally a serious subject. This "poor girl's dowry" is considered a precious coin, especially useful for achieving a "good marriage," that is, one in which the man will be a good provider. However, the normal system of marriage accentuates the vulnerability of this treasure. Approximately half the couples I had contact with (in general, those who were a bit older) were legally married. In local parlance, no one makes a distinction between the couples who have a marriage certificate and those who are merely living together. They are all termed *casados*. To "get married" is often coterminous with a couple publicly setting up house together. When a girl's parents are opposed to her choice of husband, she may resort to elopement (*fuga*), running away for a day or two with her lover and confronting her parents with the (literally) consummated fact shortly afterward. According to traditional perspective, the girl surrenders to her suitor in return for his promise to "hitch up" with her (*se amarrar*). In the Vila São João, it is quite common, however, for the seducer to try to get out of his commitment by claiming that the girl had other lovers before him. Such cases inevitably inspire a sort of community trial by gossip: Was he the girl's

first lover or not? Was she really a virgin? Milene's son, for example, was being legally pressured to marry a thirteen-year-old girl who had lived with him for about six months at his parents' home. Milene defended her son, saying, "The girl didn't get pregnant. In any case, she'd lost her virginity long before coming to our house." She then elaborated with stories about her own brothers:

Jane [the wife of one brother] was only fifteen years old when she got pregnant. Her mother made a big to-do, but it was OK, my brother admitted it was him. With Caco [her other brother], things were quite different. The girl's parents had to threaten him with jail. That's why he ended up with her. Now, my oldest brother—you know, he still has a record at the police station because of a girl he got in trouble [*incomodou*].

Such gossip is not intended to describe things as they should be but rather as they are. It is "obvious" that a man will try to have sexual relations without assuming conjugal obligations. Rather than see this as proof of one-sided male abuse, however, one should remember that women do not always correspond to the image of shrinking violets. On the contrary, in many stories, they appear to have as many other things on their minds as the men do.

Women, in fact, are teased about their utilitarian approach to the opposite sex. Although young girls (those considered virgins—*meninas moças*) are generally spared this teasing, an unaccompanied woman over a certain age may expect suggestions that she had best *arrumar um coroa* (roughly, hook an elderly sugar daddy) to take care of her and her children's basic needs.<sup>5</sup> Public banter points to this practical aspect of the conjugal relationship far more often than to romantic involvement. As one of numerous examples, I cite the case of Betty, a divorced woman, who was complaining to her neighbors that because she had no way of supporting her children, she might have to send them to live with her ex-husband and his wife. A neighbor retorted (with her own husband's laughing approval), "Get yourself together, woman! All you need do is find some rich *coroa*." Betty responded, in tones of mock tragedy, "I didn't manage to do it when I was fifteen, how do you expect me to do it now that I'm thirty?"<sup>6</sup>

The irony of the suggestion that a woman should try to hook a sugar daddy is that few men in the *vila*<sup>7</sup> would fit this bill. Most of them are unskilled manual laborers: Nei, a young father of five, loads trucks for a living; Giba, twenty-seven, works as a night janitor in the local supermarket; Touro sells lamps from door to door in the nearby upper-class neighborhoods; Zeca sweeps up sawdust in a friend's workshop; Lirio helps his brother sell vegetables at the farmer's market; Cuia did good business for a while fixing up and reselling motorcycles, but after a police crackdown on unlicensed vehicles, he was forced to look for work at a nearby construction site. With such jobs, few men go very far, in terms of prestige or buying power.

Coincidentally, the most highly qualified and prestigious jobs (e.g., police work or driving a bus) are associated with sexual conquest. People say that when a man is in such a line of work, "There's nothing he can do about it. The women are all over him." However, even policemen and bus drivers feel their masculinity threatened by their inferior class situation. I remember, for example, how a recently separated bus driver became very angry when he learned that his ex-wife was looking for a "better marriage": "What does she want," he asked, "a doctor or a lawyer maybe?" He could not understand that his wife was not referring to money or status but to the sort of helpmate who would treat her more kindly.

The inferior status and limited economic opportunities of unskilled manual laborers exacerbate their fear of female betrayal. After all, if a man fails to uphold his end of the implied marital bargain, why should his wife uphold hers? If he fails to provide a comfortable existence for his wife and children, why should the woman feel obliged to be faithful?

### CUCKOLDS AND THEIR WILY WIVES

*Malandragem*, translated as "roguishness," has often been associated in the anthropological literature on Brazil with the male spectrum of activities (Da Matta 1979; Oliven 1987). Women are not generally included in the category of *malandros*. When researchers describe a group's representations of the universe of feminine activities, they tend to emphasize normative images: the *santa* (the good mother and faithful wife) or the *piranha* (the promiscuous woman). In my work on the Vila São João, on the other hand, these exaggerated figures appear less relevant in day-to-day exchanges than images of the *malandra* (wily woman). Particularly in jokes and gossip, one sees insinuations that even if a woman gets the masculine support she is after, she may not fulfill her end of the bargain. She may not grant the monopoly of her sexual favors to the man who supports her, thus inflicting on him the humiliating status of *cornio manso* (tame or willing cuckold).

The abundant anecdotes about such women are not always told in accusatory tones. A respectable lady, married to the same man for over three decades, speaks in frank admiration of her goddaughter: "She's a *malandra*. She hooked up with some senile old man. He gives her everything—a television, games for the children—and she has others [lovers]. Good for her!"

In another episode, a woman rubs together thumb and forefinger (a gesture signifying money) to tell me how "clever" (*esperta*) the neighbor's daughter was: "Her first man—the one who bothered her—had lots of money. Now he sends her an allowance every month, to support her and the kid. He even bought a house for her to live in." Still another woman admires her brother's choice of lover:

His girlfriend was the maid for a rich old couple. When the fellow's wife died, she stayed on with the old man. Now she does what she wants with his money. She bought a motorcycle for my brother. They're just waiting for the fellow to kick off so they can get married.

Despite being described in certain situations with good-humored directness, women's sexual adventures are not condoned as men's are. It is significant that no woman would brag publicly about her own sexual exploits. The admiration she expresses for her "clever" neighbor or sister-in-law may be laden with irony, conveying a more disparaging view of the girl's loose ways. Moments of complicity, when one woman confesses her sexual adventures to another, are also charged with ambivalence. Sinara, for example, on hearing the confession of her daughter's marital infidelities, appeared genuinely concerned. She advised her daughter to be more *malandra*, lest her indiscretions jeopardize a long-standing marriage with "the father of her children" and, coincidentally, a good provider.

Finally, people make a clear distinction between cheating on a *coroa* (an older man, often married to another woman, who, in local logic, "asked for" what was coming) and cheating on a husband, that is, a neighbor and friend. In cases of the latter sort, gossip carries a tone of frank disapproval. It is with a mixture of scorn and pity that Milene speaks of the elderly couple living beside her:

He was a cuckold and didn't even care. I remember that when we were little, we used to tease his son a whole lot. We would say, "Your Ma is there in bed with a big thug." He would cry and cry . . . but his father never did anything.

From the various bits of gossip I registered, I have the impression that this case is not atypical, or, in other words, that most cases of female transgression occur without serious repercussions. Among the dozens of narratives collected on unfaithful women, I registered only one case of separation justified by the wife's adultery and one case of violence by a husband against his wife's lover.

Considering the enormous publicity given to crimes of passion in the national and local papers, the absence of such material in my field notes is surprising. In the neighborhood I worked in, it appeared that the betrayed husband has, in fact, few and unappealing options. If he denounces his wife's wrongdoings, he exposes himself to public ridicule, which only an act of dramatic violence could erase. I deduce from the lack of violence in the stories about unfaithful wives that either the all-pervasive gossip is simply untrue or that most men find the "virile" solution distinctly distasteful. Their basic option is to maintain silence—a silence that, nonetheless, invites others to manipulate the fear of exposure.

### WOMEN USE THE THREAT OF CUCKOLDRY AGAINST OTHER WOMEN

Even if the stories were no more than malicious gossip, and even if they had very little to do with the real behavior of women, one would still have to admit that people believe that female adultery is not uncommon and, in most cases, goes unpunished. The fear of “bearing horns” thus haunts a great many men—a fear that, in able hands, becomes a weapon for powerful manipulation. The question is by whom and against whom? Rather than see the gossip about loose women as a symptom of male domination, one should ask how and why this gossip is activated by certain individuals against others.

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, everyone makes jokes about adultery, but, in general, only women name names. Women, it might be added, do not talk about just anyone but rather about other women with whom they entertain a specific relation—that of competitor for a certain man’s attentions. Occasionally, for example, I would hear a new wife accuse her husband’s previous spouse of having had lovers. By doing this, not only does she highlight her own virtues, she also indirectly allays suspicions that she might be responsible for the breakup of her husband’s previous marriage.

There is still another category of women who seem to make an art of gossiping about their rivals’ misbehavior: Mothers and sisters, in my experience, delight in casting suspicion on their female in-laws. Let us remember the comments quoted at the beginning of this article: “You see the girl in this photo here? That’s the woman who put *guampas* on my brother,” and “My son, poor thing, began to drink because of his *dor das guampas*.” It is no coincidence that these speakers were women defending their male relatives against less than honorable wives and girlfriends.

Ironically, it is these same women—mothers and sisters—who will make jokes to emphasize the sexual virility of their male relatives. According to a certain widow, “My son was so handsome that, at his funeral, besides his wife, there were five other women crying over the coffin.” An adult daughter comments on the escapades of her father, going through a rough period with his present wife: “It would appear that he’s next door all the time, consoling the widow who just lost her husband. Consoling! You can imagine how!” A sister describes her brother’s behavior with an ironic laugh: “He went with me to the bingo parlor but, before I knew it, he had disappeared. When I went to look for him, there he was in a corner kissing and hugging a young black girl.” To sum up her story about her son’s chronic adultery, a certain mother explained to me, “You have to understand, he’s a bus driver. The girls are always all over him. He can’t refuse. If he didn’t take advantage of the situation, they’d say he was a homosexual (*puto*).” On relating her son’s various sexual feats, another woman breaks into laughter (despite her initial efforts to maintain a dispassionate tone):

What a shameless creature! He just won't stop, but it's no use. Some men are like that. Last year, when he was in the hospital, I went to visit him and I ran into his wife blubbering at the door. "What is it?" I asked . . . and then I looked and saw: there were two other women—his little girlfriends—who'd got there before her.

To avoid classifying this apparent contradiction between the exaltation of male relatives' philandering and the accusations against their supposedly unfaithful wives in terms of the long-criticized "double standard" (Pitt-Rivers 1977), one should remember that the women who denounce the shameless behavior of their sisters-in-law and daughters-in-law may well brag about the cleverness of their goddaughters and neighbors for the same sort of adventures. In other words, the difference between "shamelessness" and "cleverness" may not depend as much on what actually occurred as on the relationship between the person who is describing the act and the person who committed it. But why, one might ask, would women be interested in besmirching the images of their female in-laws?

In a previous study on a poverty-stricken squatter settlement, I dwelled in detail on the importance of blood ties and the way these ties rival the conjugal bond (Fonseca 1991). It should be pointed out that just as in many other lower income groups (see Stack 1974), blood relations form the nexus of an extended kin network, guaranteeing the continuity of social ties despite conjugal ruptures and remarriages. In the Vila São João, although slightly more prosperous and with a higher rate of conjugal stability than in the *vila* of my previous study, a great many men still maintain daily contact with their parents or siblings. Wives thus find themselves competing with in-laws for their men's time, money, and services rendered.

Female relatives, like wives, make themselves useful by furnishing their men with minor domestic comforts. Whether separated or still married, a man knows he can usually find a meal or a bed in his mother's home and, often, in his sister's home. Fathering children is definitely a point of masculine pride, but neither marriage nor co-residence with his children's mother is necessary for him to acquire paternal status. A man's mother or sister may raise his children instead of his wife (see Fonseca 1995). In fact, with the exception of begetting his children, the only other feminine role a mother or sister cannot properly perform is that of sexual partner. Is it, then, a mere coincidence that often it is these female relatives who point out brothers' and sons' vulnerability to "unfaithful" wives, and that it is a man's mother and sister who generate gossip and jokes about cuckolds to undercut his wife's principal political advantage? Their banter is a constant reminder that the wife's specific talent of enhancing her husband's prestige and giving birth to his children is accompanied by the constant threat of infidelity. It contributes to the idea that, considering the manifest fragility of the conjugal tie, survival

and reproduction should be organized around more secure relations, that is, the ones defined by blood.

### THE TARGET OF SOCIAL STIGMA

The way mothers and sisters use images of male cuckolds to cast aspersions on the virtue of their female in-laws would not necessarily be incompatible with modes of male domination. One may imagine that to avoid ridicule, men would insist more than ever on their wives' subordination. Certainly, the masculine fear of horns explains a husband's occasional attempt to confine his wife to the house, forbidding her to hold a job outside the home. It also explains in part the zeal with which some men execute their protective roles, staying close to home. There are, nonetheless, a number of other signs indicating that the fear of cuckoldry is a double-edged sword swinging just as easily against men as against their wives.

In the first place, I would argue that there are no firm sanctions against a woman's sexual transgressions. I have already mentioned that men rarely impose publicly perceptible sanctions on their allegedly adulterous wives. But, other members of the community might be charged with this responsibility. For example, according to the ethnographic literature on Mediterranean honor, a woman's blood relatives are often the major guardians of her sexual behavior. The shameful behavior of a mother or sister could mar a man's reputation as much as his own wife's (see, for example, Kressel 1981; Bourdieu 1972; Pitt-Rivers 1954, 1977). An extreme example would be that of Corsica, where the term *cuckold* is applied not only to the brother, father, or husband of a dishonored woman but also to any man who lacked the courage to avenge other offenses (such as murder) committed against the clan (Knudsen 1988). The Vila São João is a different story.

Similar to the pattern in most Western countries, I find, among verbal offenses employed in the *vila*, references to the morality of a man's female relatives: expressions such as "son of a bitch" or "I 'ate' your sister."<sup>8</sup> However, I never saw signs of anyone taking these insults literally. Men may make it a point of honor that their sisters and daughters be respected. If, for example, a reputed virgin's first lover refuses to marry her, he may well be confronted with serious threats from her male relatives. On the other hand, punitive measures are hardly ever brought against the girl.

Barring masculine retaliation, one should not ignore the possibility of community sanctions—ostracism, for example—against unchaste women. But there, again, my material fails to yield supporting evidence. Despite the presence in the *vila* of numerous single mothers as well as many women on a third or fourth "husband," only two or three of them—all particularly poor—were regularly criticized by their neighbors. The implication was that

these women were stupid rather than immoral. They had not managed to "hook" a stable partner and so, along with their children, were condemned to a lives of hardship.

At one point, I was convinced I had found evidence of belief in divine sanctions against adulterous wives. The death of Dona Lucia, struck down by a heart attack at age forty-eight, was interpreted by Gina, one of my key informants, as a punishment from God because the deceased woman had supposedly been unfaithful to her husband with a string of different lovers. ("I heard this," claimed Gina, "from Dona Lucia's own niece.") However, close evaluation of my field notes helped me to contextualize this incident. I met Dona Lucia several years before she died. At the time, I had a series of conversations with her neighbors and adult daughters who, when they spoke of her, inevitably brought up her husband's shameless behavior: "He kept another woman for years, abandoned his family, sold the house, and gave everything he had to his new lover." Some time later, the "abandoned" woman, Dona Lucia, got together with a new helpmate, a "widowed gentleman" who lived with his mother a couple of blocks up the street: a "good husband," owner of various city lots, and an abstemious teetotaler. In other words, for years, this woman's escapades, if they were indeed real, seemed to have evoked little if any indignation among the people around her.

Gina's particular interpretation of Dona Lucia's untimely death could possibly be attributed to her Evangelical upbringing. It is, nonetheless, evidence of the existence in the *vila* of a more normative discourse on female morality, one close to that seen by other researchers as a sort of "hegemonic ideal." As I see it, however, the question is not whether or not this sort of normative discourse exists but rather how much weight it carries. In the case of Dona Lucia, it does not seem to have seriously affected her lifestyle.

In my notes, women targeted by gossip as possible adulteresses suffered no particular discrimination by their neighbors. They received visits, took part in *rodas de chimarrão*,<sup>9</sup> and shared child care responsibilities just as any other woman in the neighborhood. With the exception of Gina's condemnation of Dona Lucia, I never heard a woman accused of adultery except to sneer at her poor or naive cuckolded husband. On the other hand, several men were pointed out to me as cuckolds by people who offered no particular comment or information on their guilty wives.

It would appear that, in the *vila*, the socially accepted sanctions against female adultery are not sufficiently ominous to ward off occasional offenders. One might add that men seem to suffer as much, if not more, stigma than their unfaithful wives. In fact, there appears to be a basic asymmetry in the social stigma attached to the breach of the conjugal pact. The girl, seduced and abandoned, especially if she has gotten pregnant and had a child, may find it hard to muster a living. However, in general, she will suffer no stigma for having been abandoned. On the contrary, people will tend to take pity on

her. She will spin laments about how her husband spent all his money on other women, leaving his children to go hungry. She will tell long stories about how much she has suffered, thus garnering a reputation as a courageous fighter who, despite all odds, has been able to keep her family together and raise her children. An ex-husband, on the other hand, will usually not dare to publicly complain about his wife's treatment of him. Even if his wife breaches the marital contract, taking lovers or bearing children out of wedlock, he must suffer in silence because any reaction on his part would cause him to publicly assume the humiliating status of cuckold. In short, to call a man a cuckold appears to be a more frequent and searing accusation than to call a woman shameless.

Nothing illustrates this masculine vulnerability better than the scene I witnessed one day while chatting with Dona Rosa, a plump, sixty-year-old matron, at her front gate. She was going on, misty eyed, about all the hardships she had been through, giving considerable emphasis to her drunk and philandering husband's perfidy. Suddenly, changing her focus to a figure behind me, a passerby on the other side of the street, she cackled, "Hello there, you old cuckold, did your wife let you out to graze?" Waiting only for an affable wave from the elderly gentleman in question, she resumed the refrain of her story in the same tragic tone as before. Were I to heed only her narrative, the one spun specifically for my ears, I might reinforce the hypothesis of woman's eternal victimization. But, after reflecting on Dona Rosa's humorous assault on her old friend, I was forced to concede that things are not that simple.

This story gains still more significance when one considers that Dona Rosa was kidding the same man commented on by Milene: the one who, in his youth, "was a cuckold and didn't even care." No doubt it could be dangerous to openly taunt a younger man in this way. But, now an old man, this fellow had little choice but to play along with the joke, accepting the part of clown, and publicly exhibiting the Achilles heel of the masculine ego common to all men in the *vila*.

### HOW WOMEN USE THE THREAT OF CUCKOLDRY AGAINST MEN

In the Vila São João, humor, "like humor in any society, uses things which are ambiguous or taboo and plays with this in different ways" (Seeger 1980, 69). In his work among the Suya Indians, Seeger, like many researchers, sees humor as a sort of escape valve that permits people to let off steam about society's repressive norms rather than change them. It would be imprudent, however, to presume that jokes serve this function in every situation. For example, Natalie Davis (1975), in her essay on early modern France, "Women on Top,"

suggests that the boisterous humor surrounding images of “unruly women,” from carnival costumes and charivaris to plays and picture postcards, undermined as much as it reinforced conventional patterns of authority.

I want to argue that the image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate . . . to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage. (P. 131)

Following this logic, I suggest that humor holds an important part in the transmission of values from one generation to another. To illustrate this hypothesis, I cite an anecdote from my field notes. Dona Alcina vigorously bemoaned the “shamelessness” of her ex-daughter-in-law, who “took up with somebody else”: “When she and my son separated, she got everything. The sound box, the color television, the set of crystal, everything!”

There is no doubt that the emphatic tone of her discourse was due in part to the presence of three nieces (*meninas moças*) for whom she was caring at the time. Certainly, she would not want her charges to copy the example of her unfaithful daughter-in-law. However, one might ask which message the youngsters were picking up: the shameful aspect of the daughter-in-law’s behavior or its lucrative rewards? After all, the woman was able to exert her liberty and still get away with “everything.”

The inspirational character of this irreverent humor comes out even more strongly in the following apocryphal story told by a woman to her female cronies:

A recently married woman was strolling through the countryside with her new husband when she saw two lovebirds grooming one another. “Isn’t that beautiful?” she said to her new spouse, “the way they court one another with such tender care.” A few minutes later, they encountered a bull coupled with a cow. “That’s the way I like it,” said the husband. “Bam, slam, and you’re finished.” The wife’s response: “Yes, I see. However, please take note: Birds do not grow horns.”

This is an explicit example of how women may turn conservative morality dictating female fidelity to their own advantage.

The notion of “variant masculinities” has permitted researchers to deconstruct pejorative stereotypes of “traditional” (or in this case “Latin”) peoples, showing that not all individuals adhere to hegemonic cultural patterns of male dominance.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, according to anthropologists working in various settings from northern Brazil to Mexico, many members of the younger generation have adopted practices not so different from those embraced by their North American counterparts (see Rebhun 1999 and Gutmann 1996). Such observations would no doubt be valid in the Vila São João as well. However, in much of this literature, there has been a tendency to rank these variant

masculinities in value-laden terms (“transformative” versus “archaic” consciousness, for example). Such an approach, I might argue, keeps us from exploring the subtleties imbedded in the so-called traditional modes of behavior—those that differ substantially from the researcher’s (and some feminists’) idea of politically correct gender relations.<sup>11</sup>

Working with jokes, kidding, gossip and other “spontaneous” discourses emanating from the inhabitants of this urban *bairro*, I have tried to bring out some of these subtleties. I would not dare to affirm that humor is the key to understanding male-female relations in my Brazilian setting. Certainly, the stereotypic images behind ribald jokes do not take into account much of the simple, ordinary affection and companionship between men and their wives. They do, however, have the advantage of being different from the stereotypes that underwrite normative discourse and, consequently, help to counteract the juridical bias that casts people’s experiences in terms of univocal laws. In my ethnography of Vila São João, spontaneous speech events—jokes and gossip—serve as an opening onto “variant” discourses that might be overlooked by methodologies more centered on hegemonic norms.

## NOTES

1. Throughout Brazil, as in much of southern Europe, the husband of an adulterous wife is depicted as having horns, which in Portuguese may be rendered as *guampas*, *cornos*, or *chifres*. Thus, the cuckold is referred to, depending on the region, as *guampudo*, *chifrudo*, or *cornudo*.

2. See Leal (1987) and Motta (1998) for more on the playful manner in which men and women from working-class populations in Porto Alegre deal with the subject of sex.

3. Researchers working in other parts of Latin America have developed alternative theoretical frameworks centering on *machismo/marianismo* in Mexico (Stevens 1998) and respect/reputation in the Caribbean region (Giraud 1999). In central and southern Brazil, where neither Spanish American Catholicism nor the closed nature of island contexts pertains, researchers have traditionally preferred the analytical perspective provided by the literature about Mediterranean honor.

4. Recently, female researchers have made inroads into the study of masculinity, touching on dimensions of male identity, such as sexuality and emotional fragility, that may be more easily probed by female interviewers (Leal 1989; Buffon 1992; Jardim 1995; Victora 1992; Lecznieski 1995; Boff 1998). In the area of gay studies, there is yet another important approach to Brazilian masculinity (see Fry 1982; Mott 1987; Perlongher 1987; Parker 1991; Silva 1993).

5. See Goldstein (1999) for the racial overtones of this “*coroa* complex.”

6. Men also may be accused of being fortune hunters, trying to “hit the jackpot” (*fazer o golpe do baú*) by marrying a well-off, generally older woman for her money. But, in the case of women, such tactics appear to be tolerated and, at times, even encouraged, whereas in the case of men, they are commented on with snickers bordering on ridicule.

7. *Vila*, a synonym of *bairro*, is the term used in southern Brazil to designate an urban neighborhood.

8. “To eat” (*comer*) is a slang way of referring to the active partner’s role in a sexual relationship.

9. *Chimarrão* (or *erva mate*) is a hot tea served in a single gourd normally passed between the different participants in a group.

10. The term *variant masculinities* has been inspired by the work of Lindisfarne (1994) and Connell (1987).

11. Recent studies that explore this terrain include Leal (1989), Gregori (1992), Muniz (1996), and Grossi (1998).

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