

BYP: New Approaches to the Study of Adolescent Sexuality
Marissa Guerrero

For all we know about young people and sex, we still know so little. Acting on the concern of parents, politicians and society-at-large to stop (or at least delay) sex amongst young people, researchers of adolescent sexuality have made it their project to identify who is having sex when, with what negative consequences. This fixation on sexual behavior and risk is especially pronounced in research that focuses on urban youth of color. We consequently know very little about how adolescents, especially adolescents of color, experience and understand their own sexualities. This is problematic no matter one's moral standpoint. Granting the assumption that stopping or delaying adolescent sex is a worthwhile goal, to end something requires an understanding of it. There is little evidence, however, that we *can* stop young people from having sex; furthermore, there are strong reasons that we *shouldn't* try to stop youth from engaging in this natural and integral part of life. Instead, we should aim to provide them with the knowledge and resources necessary to incorporate sexuality into their lives and relationships in a healthy, safe, and responsible manner.

In this paper, I discuss the state of research on Black youth sexuality. I take the position that understanding how Black youth themselves think about sex is central to understanding any aspect of their sexuality – whether contraceptive use, sexual initiation, pregnancy, or sexual orientation. The paper opens with a brief review of the major findings on black youth sexual health and behavior.¹ It then calls attention in part I to the limits of the traditional literature on black youth sexuality, and ends in part II by synthesizing new approaches to studying youth sexuality that promise its more thorough

¹ This paper should not be taken as a thorough review of the literature on black youth sexual health and activity; that body of literature is simply too broad to recount here. For a more thorough account, see Leigh & Andrews, "The Reproductive Health of African American Adolescents: What We Know and What We Don't Know," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; Washington, DC, 2002.

understanding. In particular, I argue that we must move away from the problem-centered approach to studying black adolescent sexuality. Innovative research of recent years provides a promising alternative framework: a positive perspective that emphasizes healthy sexual development and attends to the meanings and contexts of sex for young people. Only when we know how adolescents understand and experience sexuality can we begin to help them navigate this potentially difficult terrain.

What We Know

Sexual Initiation

Since the late 1970s, African American adolescents have reported having sex earlier and at higher levels than other racial groups. While the gap has narrowed over the years, African American young people remain more sexually-active than others.² Sexual activity is most widespread amongst black males; 73.8% of black male high school students report that they have had sex before, and they are followed most closely by black women, 60.9% of whom have sexually initiated.³ In addition to initiating at greater rates, Black youth do so earlier than other young people.⁴ Around half of black high school students report current sexual activity: 54% of Black male high-school-aged respondents and 44.2% of Black female high-school-aged respondents reported having intercourse

² Leigh and Andrews, 2002. See also Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance 2003 [2004].

³ Compare this to 56.8% of Hispanic men, 46.4% of Hispanic women, 40.5% of white men, and 43% of white women. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance 2003 [2004].

⁴ The Center for Disease Control's annual Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance found in 2003 that 31.8% of Black high school males reported having sex before the age of 13, compared to 11.6% of Hispanic males and 5% of white males. Rates for female early initiation were lower than males of their racial group across the board: 6.9% of black females, 5.2% of Hispanic females, and 3.4% of white females. For more on this, see Leigh & Andrews, 2002.

over the past three months.⁵ Black respondents were also most likely to report multiple past partners.⁶

Condoms and Contraceptive Use

While black youth report higher rates and earlier initiation of sexual intercourse, they also report much higher rates of condom use. Condom use among teens has been increasing overall since the 1980s, but black adolescents report higher rates of consistent use, as well as use during most recent encounter.⁷ 73% of black males in the National Survey of Adolescent Males reported condom use (either alone or in combination with other birth control methods) during all heterosexual intercourse over the past year.⁸ Furthermore, 81.2% of Black male high-school-aged respondents reported using condoms during their last sexual encounter, compared to 62.5% of Hispanic men and 69% of white men. Black female respondents also reported comparatively higher rates of condom use at 63.6%, compared to 52.3% of Hispanic females and 56.5% of white females.⁹ Another study found that of its black female sample, 86% reported using one or more contraceptives in the past sexual encounter.¹⁰

Young black people, however, lag behind other racial groups in birth control usage. Of black female high-school-aged respondents, 11.7% reported using birth control before their last encounter. This rate is higher than that for Hispanic females (12.1%), but

⁵ By means of comparison, 38.5% of Hispanic males and 28.5% of white males reported that they were sexually active. 35.8% of Hispanic females and 33.1% of white females reported this same thing. African-American female adolescents are less likely than African American males to report being currently sexually active, and the gap between the sexes has grown. African American females' reported rates of current sexual activity reportedly declined during the 1990s, while African American males' remained constant (Joint Center Report 2002).

⁶ "Multiple" is defined as more than four partners in one's lifetime. 41.7% of Black males reported compared to 20.5% of Hispanic males and 11.5% of white males. Likewise, 16.3% of Black females reported multiple partners, compared to 11.2% of Hispanic women and 10.1 % of white women.

⁷ Reported in Leigh and Andrew 2002. See also YRBS 2001.

⁸ Reported in Leigh and Andrew 2002.

⁹ YRBS 2003 [2004]

¹⁰ Reported in Leigh and Andrew 2002.

lower than white females' (26.5%). Black male respondents reported the lowest rates overall, at 4.4%, compared to 10.3% of Hispanic males and 17.3% of white males.¹¹

Teen Pregnancy, Early Childbearing and Abortion

Given the cultural anxiety around and fixation on teen pregnancy, one would expect the rates of it to be much higher. Black high-school-aged respondents reported the highest rates of past experience with teen pregnancy: 10.4% of females and 7.6% of males, compared to 7.3% of Hispanic females, 5.2% of Hispanic males, 2.8% of white females, and 1.7% of white males.¹² Rates of teen pregnancy declined from peak rates through the 1990s at a rate of 23% for African American teens and 26% for white teens. Rates of birth likewise decreased over the 1990s for female teens across racial groups, most dramatically for black female teens.¹³ White females continue to obtain abortions at the highest rates for every age group. White female teens 15-19 account for 58.6% of abortions in their age cohort, compared to 35.4% of black female teens. Hispanic female teens account for 16.4% of abortions in their age cohort.¹⁴

HIV/AIDS and other STDs

African American young people report higher rates of all STDs, including HIV/AIDS. The figures on HIV are particularly striking – African American female teens accounted for 73% of cases of infection among all female teens, though they make up only 15% of all female teens. Likewise, 59% of African American teen males account for

¹¹ YRBS 2003 [2004]. The measure the CDC uses is somewhat strange, in that it asks specifically about birth control *pills*, thus most likely missing other forms of contraception such as the ring and the shot, both of which are prevalent methods among women of color.

¹² YRBS 2003 [2004]

¹³ Leigh and Andrews, 41-42.

¹⁴ Abortion Surveillance – United States 2001 [2004]. These percentages add up to more than 100% because of the way the data is structured. The report gives figures based on race in one table and ethnicity for another. The race table contains black, white, and other, while the ethnicity table contains Hispanic and non-Hispanic. It is thus likely that Hispanics, if they were forced to choose a race, account for some of the abortions reported for white teens.

HIV infection among male teens, though they make up only 15% of male teens overall.¹⁵

African American teens also report higher levels of concern about becoming infected.

One study found that 60% of African American teens were very concerned about becoming infected, compared 44% of Latino teens and 28% of white teens.¹⁶

Part I: Limits of Predominant Sexuality Research

A great deal of the research on adolescent sexuality has been geared toward developing the kind of information reviewed above. This work seeks to identify which young people are sexually active, and why they started having sex. It furthermore focuses on the prevalence of potential negative consequences of sexual activity: teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other STDs. As DiMauro aptly assesses, inquiring into “what percentage of a population engages in which behavior provides few answers concerning the origin of the behavior, the reason for it, and the context in which it occurs.” (1995, 18) The data yielded by traditional sex research on black youth is helpful in identifying what groups are sexually active, but it cannot enable understanding of Black youth sexuality.

Central to the constraints on sexuality research are the theoretical assumptions that inform it. Assumptions dictate researchers’ questions and research design, thus constraining the knowledge we have. (Welsh et al. 113) The following section discusses each of these assumptions and how it limits the literature. First, most of the literature assumes that adolescents experiencing sexuality is a problem that should be blocked or delayed. Sexuality among young people is conceived of as problem of both social and public health import. Racial stereotypes about sexuality inform the problem-centered approach and its proposed interventions in important ways; I also discuss this below.

¹⁵ Leigh and Andrews, 39-40. They report on the HIV/AIDS surveillance report, 2001.

¹⁶ Leigh and Andrews, 40. They get this figure from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000.

Furthermore, attention to race and gender in this literature are often limited to their use as a demographic variables that predict sexual patterns. The literature needs a truly intersectional approach that goes beyond establishing whether and in which direction race and gender impact sexuality to *why* they do so. Furthermore, the concept of sexuality, as well as that of sex, is very constrained. Sexual behavior is operationalized in most studies as vaginal intercourse, which misses many of the sexual activities in which young people engage, as well as eclipsing sexual minority adolescents. And beyond behavior, sexuality encompasses norms, attitudes, and relationships that research fixated on sexual intercourse cannot access.

Aggregate reports of behavior won't suffice

Much of the research on adolescent sexuality uses large-scale, quantitative analysis of sexual behavior. These analyses seek to find out how many adolescents are having sex, and who those adolescents are. They do not ask *why* adolescents are having sex or engaging in other sexual behaviors. This approach furthermore eclipses diversity in attitudes and experiences. In aggregating thousands of responses to discrete behavioral measures, researchers reach generalizable findings concerning behavior, but lack the attitudinal and contextual information to make sense of these findings. Respondents in any sample, just as the population they are meant to represent, have a diverse range of attitudes and beliefs, histories, relationships, and environments that inform their sexual behavior. They furthermore experience and understand the same sexual behavior in multitudinous ways. Without knowing the psychological, environmental, and relational context in which the behavior occurs, we cannot fully understand adolescent sexuality, much less influence it in a positive way.

The limits of a language of crisis

Most research in this area starts from the assumption that sex is an undesirable activity for adolescents that should be prevented at all costs. This problem-centered approach speaks of adolescent sex as a crisis and is consumed with the undesirable consequences of pregnancy and contraction of HIV/AIDS and other STDs. Sex among young people is, in this framework, a social and public health problem, “medically pathological and in need of treatment (or better, prevention).” (Welsh et al. 115)¹⁷ Welsh goes on to point out that looking at youth sexual activity as inherently problematic and pathological fundamentally structures how we talk about it. To view sexual behavior as pathological casts it as an illness, setting the stage for research focused on epidemiology in the interest of finding a cure. This “epidemiological” work searches for causes of adolescent sex and pays particular attention to its relationship with other pathologies.¹⁸

The increasing attention to both reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases encourages the pathologizing of youth sexuality through its medicalization. Reproduction began to receive heightened attention in the 1960s due to the confluence of growing moral panic surrounding teen pregnancy (Nathanson 1991) and increasing availability of contraception and abortion as a result of public acceptance, changing legislation, and Supreme Court sanctioning. Likewise, the rising prevalence of AIDS and other STDs has reified the discursive focus on risk, disease, and death in contemplations of adolescent sexuality. (Irvine 1994) The negative outcomes of unwanted pregnancy and contraction

¹⁷ Welsh, et al. say this about adolescent girls, but it is applicable to the study of black youth sexuality on the whole. Welsh et al. pay particular attention to the role of race in the study of adolescent girls’ sexuality. See below for a discussion hypothesizing why innovative research overwhelmingly confines its focus to women.

¹⁸ Problem Behavior Theory, which hypothesizes a positive correlation between sexual activity and other problem behaviors (such as crime and drug use) does not fit well with the realities of Black youth. Studies have consistently found that, for Black youth, sexual activity is not related to other activities labeled as deviant. (Leigh and Andrews 2002, Stanton et al. 1993)

of STDs must be avoided by all means. It is not productive, however, to constrain inquiry into adolescent sexuality to these foci. To do so leaves little room for understanding sexuality as a natural, healthy, and normal part of all stages of life.

Sexual behavior among adolescents, however, “is persistently equated with deviance rather than development;” adolescent sexual behavior is in fact considered a *departure* from what is natural, healthy, and normal.¹⁹ (Tolman 1996, 257) This proves particularly damning for black adolescents, who are cast in stereotypes dating back to slavery as inherently sexually deviant by virtue of their race (Collins 2004) Black sexuality has been historically characterized as unbridled and animalistic. Black males were viewed as dangerous and sexually predatory, inclined to prey on pure white women (Collins 2004). Black females were constructed as equally animalistic; sexually voracious jezebels who always want sex, and thus cannot possibly be raped (Roberts 1997, 31; Tolman 1996). Black youth are thus doubly deviant; assumed as sexual because of their race, and condemned for it because of their age. Race is central to the problem-centered approach – it determines the culpability of adolescents for their own sexuality.

There are two dominant and racialized conceptions of young people in discourse surrounding youth sexuality: the *romantic child* and the *at-risk child*. The *romantic child* is a white, middle-class child who starts out as an innocent blank-slate that can be corrupted if exposed to dangerous sexuality.²⁰ The *at-risk child* is a poor child of color

¹⁹ Janet Lauritsen (1994) helps bring this to light in describing how she developed her theoretical approach to race and gender differences in sexual activity. She explains that there are many theories that attempt to explain adolescent sexual behavior that are seemingly diverse, but all concur that adolescent sexual activity is deviant. Lauritsen thus builds on this consensus by deriving her hypotheses from theories of deviance. I note Lauritsen’s work not because I support her framework, but because her explanation of how she came to her own theories speaks volumes about the almost-universal assessment of engaging in sexual activity as going against societal rules and expectations.

²⁰ This discussion of the romantic child is informed by Irvine (2002) and Moran (2000).

who was born deviant, and who must be trained to resist the internal, social, and environmental forces that conspire to impel her toward deviant behaviors, sexual or otherwise. The predictors of sexual activity are outside the *romantic child*, but within the *at-risk child*. The difference lies in whether the deviance is constructed as learned or inherent. These conceptions shape research questions, policies, outreach agendas, and popular thinking about the sexuality of young people. They furthermore inform the discourses surrounding welfare, abortion, sex education, and other policy arenas that concern themselves with adolescent sexuality.

The romantic child is sexually ignorant, and any information she receives about sex is damaging because to discuss it is to introduce it as an option. Irvine discusses the romantic child as central to the support of abstinence-only education. Those who subscribe to the ideal of the romantic child view sexuality as something that can be “contracted,” and this informs their support for silence rather than teaching on contraception, sexual orientation, and other issues surrounding sexuality. It furthermore informs their beliefs about deviant sexualities; if they can be contracted, they can also be cured.²¹ In short, adolescents will not (and should not) engage in sex or become otherwise sexually deviant if they are kept from learning about the spectrum of sexualities and sexual behaviors.

Contrast the romantic child with the at-risk child. While the romantic child is sexually undetermined until she encounters sexual information or activity, the at-risk child is determined, sexually and beyond, at birth. Thus the at-risk child cannot lose innocence because she never had it. In this sense, black children are “adultified;” they are

²¹ A perfect example of this (and one that Irvine addresses in the discussion cited) is the movement to cure homosexuals of their sexual orientation.

responsible for their own fate and actions because of their inherent deviance.

Adultification is central to gender framing and informs the way we think about children and adolescents in terms of their sexuality. (Ferguson 2000).

How does the assumption of sexual deviance among young black people inform inquiries into adolescent sexuality? Tolman offers an answer specific to “urban” girls (of color), but generalizable to African American youth:

“In a society myopically focused on individual characteristics, the quest to identify ‘bad’ girls and predict their egregious behavior (premarital sexual intercourse) dominates the study of adolescent sexuality ... unlike most research on adolescent development, where urban girls are ignored or eclipsed by the perpetual use of white, economically and educationally advantaged samples, The Urban Girl has historically been, and continues to be, the subject of choice for research on adolescent sexuality.” (Tolman 1996 256-7)

As Tolman points out, sexuality research is exceptional in its attention to black youth, though hardly commendable.²² Informed by racist stereotypes about sexuality, the problem-centered approach dominates research on black, low-income adolescents. In fact, Welsh and his coauthors point out that black youth are often studied as an example of pathological sexuality, while studies of “normal” sexuality take white males as their subjects.²³ Researchers, for the most part, have been uninterested in discussing how black youth think about, experience, and define sexuality.

Instead, they have treated race as nothing more than a predictor of sexual behavior. Tolman (1996) notes that this association of race with sexual activity often comes with no theoretical explanation. Treating race as a demographic variable including black respondents in a sample does not automatically shed light on black adolescents’ lived experiences of sexuality within their cultural contexts. (DiMauro 1995, 64). These

²² This is generalizable to literatures on all problem and risk behaviors. Research on crime, drug use, violence, and other deviant behaviors pay consistent attention to black youth, who are considered destined for such activities.

²³ Deborah P. Welsh, Sharon R. Rostosky, & Myra Christen Kawaguchi, “A Normative Perspective of Adolescent Girls’ Developing Sexuality,” in C.B. Travis & J.W. White (eds.), *Sexuality, Society, and Feminism*. (114-140).

approaches furthermore cannot get at the impact of intersectional identities. To truly understand the racialized and gendered dynamics of youth sexuality we must look to social context and construction. And we must furthermore consider that different populations might (and probably do) necessitate different research questions and theorizing.²⁴

Sexuality research must move beyond the currently unproductive and damaging dominant approach to understanding the sexual experiences of Black youth.²⁵ To do so requires that researchers interrogate their assumptions about the predispositions of Black youth that are informed by longstanding racist stereotypes about Black sexuality. It also requires reconceiving youth sexuality as something we should aim to understand, rather than a problem we should attempt to fix.

Equating Sex with Intercourse

The literature is furthermore limited in its confining the study of sex and sexuality to the act of heterosexual intercourse and, more specifically, sexual initiation. (Welsh 2000) For instance, most of the research that attends to important domains of sexual attitudes, norms, and decision-making of young people is solely interested in these psychosocial variables as predictors of sexual initiation (O'Donnell, et al. 2003; Carvajal, et al. 1999; DiIorio, et al. 2001; Stanton, et al., 1996) and condom use (DiIorio et al. 2001, Stanton et al. 1996, Colon et al. 2000). While these studies have inarguably paved

²⁴ I revisit this point later in the paper when I discuss the importance of gender in theorizing sexual development, as argued by Tolman, et al. 2003.

²⁵ This should not be taken to imply that *all* research on sexuality of youth of color takes the problem-centered approach. The works on which this discussion draws are all outstanding examples of research that breaks away from this approach and concerns itself with how young people experience and conceive of sexuality.

the way for measuring psychosocial aspects of sexuality, they can tell us little about how adolescents experience it and what it means to them.

Furthermore, even granting the behavioral focus, it does not make sense to concentrate so much energy toward the single point of initiation. Young people, both initiated and non-initiated, engage in non-coital behaviors that are equally as important to understanding their sexual development. Fixating on the specific act of intercourse furthermore reifies the constrained focus on “risk” behavior. Welsh, et al. argue that this approach is problematically narrow and heterosexist. It works against developing richer, positive models of adolescent sexual development.

Heterosexism in sex research

Research on adolescent sexuality overwhelmingly focuses on heterosexual behavior, populations, and norms. Given the strong interest in heterosexual intercourse initiation, it is not surprising that the literature does not reflect the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. The theories and empirical findings on heterosexual youth cannot translate easily to sexual minority youth (Harper, Jernewall, and Zea 2004). Furthermore, most of the work on sexual minorities focuses on adults; this literature cannot get at the sexuality development and experiences of adolescents (Nesmith, et al. 1999; Hillier and Rosenthal 2004). Within this subpopulation of under-researched adolescents, LGBT youths of color fare particularly poorly (Harper et al. 2004, Edwards 1996). Research on sexual minority adolescents is furthermore plagued with the same sorts of deficiencies as that on heterosexual adolescents. It overwhelmingly focuses on sexual behavior and the frequency and severity of the problems that homosexuality might bring: homophobia, emotional distress, strained relationships, suicide, HIV/AIDS, and

abuse. The literature that does not address these topics is almost exclusively concerned with the processes of “coming out” and homosexual identity development. Edwards (1996) points out that what a majority of the literature lacks is the voices of homosexual adolescents; and what does incorporate them is hardly ever representative. In the name of sampling convenience, studies based on interviews have drawn their participants from counseling groups and community organizations geared toward LGB youth.

Future research on adolescent sexuality must include the voices of sexual minority youth and move beyond behavior and pathologies. While the personal, social and relationship difficulties that accompany homosexuality in our heterosexist society are important areas of inquiry, they cannot give us the full story of sexual minority adolescents of color. We need research that takes a positive perspective on black gay and lesbian youth and envisions a model of sexual health for them, built on their lived experiences.

Part II: New Directions for Research on Black Youth Sexuality

The Black Youth Project is dedicated to moving beyond the documentation of aggregate sexual behavior and knowledge; it inquires into the sexual norms and attitudes of black youth. We aim to answer the questions: what are the norms, values, and attitudes young Black men and women hold about sex and sexuality? How do these influence their sexual decision-making? What leads to responsible decision-making? And more generally, what does Black adolescent sexual health look like? The bulk of current research addresses what is sexually *unhealthy*; it dedicates itself to identifying risk factors of the risky and discouraged activity of sex. Even more important, however, is what is sexually *healthy* for young Black people.

In this section, I stress the need to assess youth sexuality in terms of development, meaning, and context.²⁶ These three aspects combine to illuminate the behaviors by which current research remains so captivated. I begin this section with a discussion of what is at stake in reconceiving adolescent sex using a positive perspective. I then move on to a discussion of recent literature that puts the positive framework into practice. The section ends with a discussion of the importance of methodological innovation and diversification to advancing richer, developmentally-focused understandings of black adolescent sexuality.

Positive Perspectives on Adolescent Sexual Development

As discussed above, sex research on adolescents has historically focused on identifying what factors engender risky behavior among young adults (di Mauro, 29). To encourage sexual health among young people, however, we must understand it as more than simply the absence of risk factors. Currently, there is no consensus among adults as to what is sexually healthy for young people (Haffner, 1998). Reaching one is made difficult by the common assumption that young people shouldn't have sex. Those who accept this see no reason for developing an understanding of young people's sexual agency, efficacy, desire, and relationships; they view all of these as outgrowths of a behavior that must be stopped. This approach is simply out of touch with reality. While the traditional ideal of the abstinent teen may persist, young people, in large numbers, *are* engaging in sexual activity and experimenting with dating, relationships and intimacy. (Haffer, 1998, Russell, 2005a, Smiler, et al. 2005)

²⁶ Welsh, et al. (2000) offer a similar three-pronged framework for understanding adolescent girls' sexuality. I use it in this paper because it aptly encompasses and groups the dominant themes I found in the literature. Interestingly, Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg, in their oft-cited 1989 piece, also called for work that addresses the meaning and context of sexuality for young people. Given that others proposed similar "new directions" 11 years later, it is safe to say that their earlier call went unheeded.

Starting from an understanding of sex as normal and healthy opens up the field of questions to ask and knowledge to gain. It is the responsibility of society to help adolescents understand and accept sexuality, make responsible sexual choices, and develop healthy sexual attitudes and skills – all of which are centrally important to sexual health as adolescents and adults (Haffner, 1998). Adolescence is the formative period for sexual attitudes and skills; it is thus also an important entry point for ensuring sexual health among adults. Adult sexual health is thus something that is already developing in adolescence.

Furthermore, forming a sexual identity is a key developmental task of adolescence: this is when adolescents develop sexual self-concepts, gender identities, and sexual orientations. The dynamic nature of adolescent sexuality makes a developmental framework useful to its study. Those who take a positive perspective on adolescent sexuality approach it as a developmental process. Adolescents develop physically and psychologically into sexual beings. Sexual behavior is part of this process – most adolescents begin having romantic feelings, on which they progressively build.

Lucia O’Sullivan’s work has focused in part of identifying the romantic development of young inner-city girls of color. With Meyer-Bahlburg, O’Sullivan found that young adolescent African-American and Latina inner-city heterosexual girls described romantic and sexual involvement as intensifying with age. (2003) They reported that interest in boys normally begins around 7 years of age, and in the 9-11 year period many have their first boyfriends (with whom they minimally interact: standing together may be the extent of it). They expressed that girls start wanting boyfriends in part because of competition and peer pressure (African-American girls were more likely

to report the latter). By 12-14 years of age, girls are experimenting with private sexual activity in established dating relationships, with sexual initiation following soon after. In another piece, O'Sullivan reports a similar evolution, with sexual activity following the predictable path from kissing to fondling to genital touching, ending with intercourse. She poses this as a refutation against those (e.g. Smith and Udry 1985) who say that minority adolescents do not experiment with precoital behaviors; they simply start with sex. Many of the ethnically diverse 12-14 year-old girls in her study reported having romantic sexual interactions and dating boys around their age, though only a handful had initiated (2005).

O'Sullivan's interest in the development of sexual experience through noncoital behaviors is meant to directly respond to the obsession in the literature with sexual initiation, which she laments is the almost exclusive focus in the studies of the sexuality of women of color. Other researchers are also moving away from the initiation paradigm, preferring to think of sexual experience as multifaceted. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck, in their study of late Australian adolescents look at coital and noncoital sexual experience, experience with masturbation, and noncoital orgasmic responsiveness. They look for a relationship between one's level of sexual experience and one's sexual well-being. They find that sexual exploration can be a healthy way to develop sexual competence. (2005) While these findings cannot speak for African Americans, the extended categorization of sexual experience is nevertheless useful to sexuality researchers interested in this

population.²⁷ These findings suggest that inhibiting discussion and discouraging exploration can be detrimental to adolescent sexual development.

Despite the handful of innovative studies, current literature most often distills sexuality and sexual activity down to the discrete event of sexual initiation, casting as the act that initiates someone into sexual being. This new research calls attention to the equally important psychological and experiential build-up to this moment. As with other maturation processes, youth look to adults in forming their sexual identities. (Haffner 1998) Only when adults acknowledge young people as sexual beings can they help them become healthy ones.

Research that takes a positive perspective on youth sexuality is thus centrally concerned with identifying what constitutes normative, typical, and healthy sexual development. (Russell, 2005b) It focuses on experiences that make for healthy sexual development, and gives great weight to the role of context in this, particularly relationships. (O'Sullivan 2005) Healthy sexual development encompasses development of sexual self-esteem and self-efficacy, which enable safe-sex behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making both in adolescence and throughout the life course.²⁸ These analyses do not confine themselves to the individual level; they adopt a social constructivist approach that holds that meaning-making is not an individual process. Russell argues that “we must turn to more complex explanations that take into account the social and cultural bases of personal meanings and understandings of sexuality by adolescents.” (2005b, 1)

²⁷ Welsh, et al. also suggest that noncoital experience is beneficial. In their study, they find it to be positively associated with relationship quality. Their sample is also predominantly white and all heterosexual.

²⁸ Stevens (2002), for instance, found that self-esteem impacted sexuality management and gender development among one of the groups of young black women that she studied (138).

Overall, acknowledging adolescents as sexual beings, and understanding how they operate in this capacity is important to developing effective interventions (Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg, 1989). Teenagers are capable of responsible sexual relationships and activity: the majority initiate in middle and late adolescence and use protection most of the time (Haffner 1998). Not attending to healthy adolescent sexual development, however, may increase risk of negative consequences. Faced with disapproving adults, adolescents may refrain from seeking out protection, contraception, or STD testing in the interest of hiding their sexual activity. (Haffner 1998) Furthermore, adolescents are differently equipped to protect themselves and their partners from negative consequences. We know little about the relative sexual competence of individuals, much less how to assess it. Ability to engage in sexual activities in a healthy manner differs among adolescents, and responsible sex research must attend to these disparities (Russell, 2005a).

Gender is central to these differences in sexual attitudes, skills, and self-concept. Researchers have found, for instance, that young women of color feel they are held to traditional gender norms and sexual double standards (Fullilove, et al. 1990; O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg 2003). While some young people are able to resist these norms,²⁹ not all are able to accomplish this difficult feat alone. Research is lacking on the effects of subscribing to these standards on Black youth in particular, but findings about other groups suggest that gender scripts prevent women from experiencing sexual agency,

²⁹ O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg found that African-American girls in their study were more frank about sex, and romanticized their interactions with boys less, compared to Latina girls. They suggest, following Coates (1999) that the African-American girls may have developed an oppositional framework that enables them to reject idealized conceptions of love. Their qualitative project involved 8 semi-structured group interviews with 25 Latina and 32 African-American girls, 10-13, from inner-city neighborhoods of Washington Heights and Upper Harlem in New York City (the groups were all predominantly one race or the other).

expressing sexual desire, and practicing safe-sex (Tolman et al. 2003).³⁰ It is important that the new, improved models of adolescent sexuality focusing on healthy sexual development include gender as more than just a dichotomous variable of biological sex.

Tolman et al. in “Gender Matters: Constructing a Model of Adolescent Sexual Health” push for a model built on a social constructionist conception of gender, understood as a set of practices and performances that together make up a social and political institution impacting sexual understanding, experience, and health. “Social constructionist research is typified by investigations of the cultural and personal meanings of girls’ race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation in understanding their sexuality.” (Tolman et al. 2003, 5) It is furthermore interested in the discourses available for constructing these meanings. The authors seek to understand how these meanings influence sexual health. Toward this end, they propose a model of sexual health that addresses the domains of the individual, dating/romantic relationships, social relationships, and the sociocultural/sociopolitical. [see figure 1.1] It is motivated by the authors’ concept of *gender complementarity*, which holds that the heterosexual gender mandates are very integrated: “masculinity and femininity, which infuse constructions of adolescent male and female sexuality, fit together to reproduce particular and limited forms of sexuality that are deemed to be ‘normal,’ all in the service of reproducing and

³⁰ There is a great deal of research that supports this point but does not focus on black adolescents. Tolman discusses the Women, Risk, and AIDS Project, which found that dominant cultural conceptions of female sexual passivity and subordination made safe-sex practices in heterosexual relationships difficult for women (6). She also points to Fine’s (1988) finding that girls feel they can’t access empowering sexuality because they fear being punished for doing so. Smiler, et al. (2005) find that women who held traditional gender beliefs and were taught by their parents the gatekeeper sexual role had less satisfying initiation experiences. Concerning adolescent males, Joseph Pleck et al. (1993) found that subscription to traditional male role attitudes was related to lower intimacy with initiation partner, resistance to close relationships with women, less acceptance of pregnancy prevention responsibility, and lower condom use. Tolman and Szalacha (1999) found that more traditional gender beliefs were inversely associated with positive sexual health, as measured by sexual self-concept and agency.

sustaining compulsory heterosexuality.” (10) Though they fit together and work toward a common traditional goal, they result in fundamentally different sexuality experiences for girls and boys. Tolman et al. point out that the barriers these two groups face are very different: while girls need support accessing sexual desire and empowerment, contraception and protection, boys need help in experiencing and acknowledging sexual emotions and resisting peer pressure to objectify women and sex.

This model is commendable in its attention to both individual agency and structural constraints on sexual experiences, attitudes, and self-concepts. It furthermore points to the importance of developing theories of sexuality informed by gender differences. Neutral models of healthy sexual development cannot get at the differences in understanding and experience by gender.³¹ The model that Tolman et al. present is limited (as the authors acknowledge), however, in its inability to account for structural variation in people’s lives that arises surrounding race, sexual orientation, class, and other identities. It is still useful in establishing a picture of the components of ideal sexual health that is arguably universally applicable.

Meaning

What do sexual experiences mean to the adolescents engaging in them? How do youth think about sex, both in terms of and outside of their own sexual activities? What motivates them to share sexual intimacy with others? In this section, I look at the role of desire and confusion in shaping adolescent sexual experience, paying consistent attention to the role of power. These concern what young people are feeling

³¹ Stevens (2002) similarly argues we cannot have a gender-neutral theory of adolescent development because gender impacts that process.

when they think about and engage in sex, which is different from (but surely related to) their attitudes and norms regarding sex discussed above.

Desire

Feminist researchers of adolescent sexuality, most notably Michelle Fine and Deborah Tolman, have called attention to the missing (or often absent, at least) discourse of desire when girls talk about their sexuality. Fine (1988) was the first to comment on the “missing discourse of desire” concerning the sexual education and school-based clinic messages about sex to which female adolescents are exposed. She argued that the prohibitory nature of the school’s discourse on sexuality prevented females from developing sexual subjectivity and responsible sex practices.^{32,33} Without access to a desire discourse, many young women come to feel that experiencing and expressing desire is wrong.³⁴ The discourse is thus “missing” in the language of the schools, adolescent girls, and, until recently, research on adolescent sexuality. Traditional work on adolescent sexuality tested a barrage of predictors such as family structure, neighborhood, SES, other risk behaviors, and race; it did not take into account the variable of desire, however. It seems entirely more intuitive to say that a young person

³² Fine’s work was based on a literature review and research in schools with poor African-American and Latina girls.

³³ Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2005) offer a useful definition of sexual subjectivity: “the perceptions of pleasure from the body and the experiences of being sexual. Sexual subjectivity has been described as ‘a necessary component of agency and self esteem.’” (Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck 2005, 28; quoting in part from Martin 1996, 10) It thus encompasses desire in a wider inventory of perceptions of sexual experience. The researchers found that sexual subjectivity increased with experience and was associated with higher self-efficacy concerning condom use, higher levels of self-awareness and overall self-esteem, lower levels of sexual anxiety, stronger resistance to sexual double standards, lower self-silencing in intimate relationships, and happiness derived from sexual self-efficacy. (28) This framework has not yet been used much in research on Black youth sexuality (although it is commonly invoked in theorizing on race and sexuality), but it is a promising construct. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck’s work is not otherwise discussed at length here because it concerns mostly white college students from Australia.

³⁴ There is some evidence that being in touch with one’s desires encourages sexual health. Thompson (1990), for instance, found that girls who had experienced with noncoital sexual behaviors and had received nontraditional messages about sex from their mothers reported pleasurable first intercourse experiences, while the others expressed feeling little about initiation and said it just kind of happened.

has sex because she wants to than to say it is because she is black or from a working class family.³⁵

In thinking about sexual justice, it is important to consider *why* young people may not couch their sexual decision-making in terms of desire. To be able to express and experience desire is a privilege to which many do not have access. Tolman and Szalacha (1999) found that exposure to violence prevented the urban girls in their study from experiencing and expressing sexual pleasure.³⁶ They associated desire with vulnerability, while suburban girls associated it with pleasure. Tolman and Szalacha suggest that urban girls divorced their minds from their bodies in order to deal with the daily violence surrounding them.³⁷ In another publication on urban girls' negotiation of desire, Tolman (1996) finds that themes of self-control, caution and conflict repeatedly surface.³⁸ The negative consequences of sex – AIDS pregnancy, damage to reputation – have been hammered home for these girls. They are well-acquainted with the stereotype of the oversexed, deviant urban girl and do not want to fulfill it. This causes them to silence and suppress their desires – to give in to them is to let one's guard down.

Burns and Torre (2005) also argue that desire is difficult for young urban adolescent females to access; it is a good of the privileged. They conducted focus groups

³⁵ Desire, of course, is not the only reason for engaging in sexual activity that traditional research misses. Other psychosocial motivations, such as wanting to please one's partner, seeing sex as integral to a relationship, and wanting to fit in with one's peers can all play a role in sexual decision-making (Rosenthal, et al. 1996).

³⁶ This is based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of their interviews with 30 adolescent girls 15-19. 15 of these were from an urban school (7 Black, 3 Latina, 5 White); the other 15 were from a suburban school (14 white, 1 Latina). Through indirect means, Tolman determined that the urban girls were from poor and working class families and the suburban girls were from middle- and upper-middle-class families. "Exposure to violence" concerns past experience with sexual violence or regular exposure to a violent environment.

³⁷ Tolman makes a similar claim in *Dilemmas of Desire*. She argues there that girls solve the dilemma of desire either by distancing themselves from it (repressing desire or avoiding situations in which it would arise) or creating safe spaces for experiencing it.

³⁸ This piece appears to use the same data from Tolman and Szalacha, which is summarized in footnote 10.

with women of color who worked as peer reproductive health advocates and community researchers in New York City.³⁹ The women they talked to said that sexual pleasure could not be a priority for them – it was temporary fluff, at best. When asked what they desired, they responded with hopes for academic success and good jobs and homes. “For young women of color, with little social privilege, a sense of personal responsibility and delayed gratification (of all desires) become the most available strategies for success.” (22) They note that sexual education policies that couch discussions of sex in terms of risk and danger can only exacerbate this putting off of pleasure.

The works of Tolman and Burns and Torre point to how social regulation of desire and sex translates into self-regulation. Young women who want respect and success in life shy away from desire because they view it as a distraction that makes them vulnerable. They actively ignore their bodies and minds because there is too much at stake in giving in to one’s urges. At best, there is no room for desire in one’s life; at worst, desire is directly at odds with it. The social location of young, poor women of color makes desiring particularly precarious. Sexuality serves here as a means to control marginalized populations.

Confusion

Adolescent urban girls of color aren’t the only ones experiencing dissonance between their desires and social messages about sex. Haffner argues that it is no surprise that adolescents have trouble dealing with sexuality conceptually given our cultural confusion about it. America, she says is “moderately erotophobic” and sexually

³⁹ Given their politicized work, urban context, and small number, these findings are not generalizable. They offer, however, a useful hypothesis about expression of pleasure – we should expect to see it among those who do not have material concerns.

unhealthy.⁴⁰ In our society, sex is surrounded by guilt and shame. Adults are no less sexually confused and no more sexually responsible than the adolescents who look to them for a model of sexual health (1998). In the following section, I discuss one of the most common themes that surfaces in the literature: sexual confusion.

Adolescents need guidance during the important process of sexual development about negotiating and embracing their desires in a sexually healthy way. They are met instead with silence or discussions of sex that are either medicalized or couched in terms of danger and deviance. Russell states the problem aptly:

“aside from information on physical maturation and proscriptions on sexual behavior, there is almost no publicly sanctioned discourse on adolescent sexuality that includes the possibility of positive sexuality development and expression or that is accessible to adolescents themselves” (2005a, 6)

He goes on to say that adolescents are very aware of the tensions among competing values of sexuality; negotiating these is one of the central challenges of sexual development. (9) Silence surrounding sex only leaves adolescents confused.

So about what exactly are adolescents⁴¹ confused? They are unsure how to incorporate sexuality into their lives, identities, and relationships (Rosenthal et al. 1996, Tolman 1996) and they experience conflicting pressures to engage in and abstain from sex (O’Sullivan 2005), as well as pressures to have romantic relationships but maintain sexual propriety within them (O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg 2003). These conflicting pressures surely contribute to the confusion over integrating sexuality into one’s life.

In their study of the sexual decision-making of inner-city adolescent girls, Rosenthal et al. find that girls exhibit confusion about how to integrate sexuality into emotional relationships. They do not have access to education about how to go about this,

⁴⁰ Haffner borrows this fitting phrase from SIECUS.

⁴¹ While Russell and Haffner were talking about adolescents in general, the literature I move on to discuss concerns urban women of color. Later in the paper, I address some possible explanations for why so much of the innovative work on adolescent sexuality focuses on girls.

and lack trusting relationships in which they could discuss it. Interestingly, the researchers suggest that due to this confusion, these girls enter into purely physical sexual relationships in which sex is used as a means to gain control and mastery over others. This is, however, only one possible way in which young people might rectify their confusion surrounding sex. Tolman (1996) finds that girls seemed to have difficulty in making sexuality part of their identities and relationships at all, much less in a healthy fashion. This is due to their understanding of sexuality as forbidden: they are afraid to even broach the subject because they believe their desires are in conflict with social and relational expectations of them. (Tolman 1994) “Their experiences of sexual desire are strong and pleasurable,” she states, “yet they speak very often not of the power of desire but of how their desire may get them into trouble.” (338)

This awareness of punitive norms surrounding sexuality proves especially confusing for girls in relationships. O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg saw in their respondents “a tension between achieving the status associated with being romantically involved with boys (which involves opportunities to experiment with ever-increasing levels of sexual activity) and avoiding condemnation from peers for having strayed from these strongly endorsed, but vaguely defined, sexual norms.” (231) While they felt that some level of sexual activity was allowed within the context of romantic relationships, they remained concerned about going too far and violating sexual norms. To do so could result in harassment by boys as well as damage to one’s reputation. These girls are faced with conflicting pressures to both engage in and refrain from sex, with no guidance as to what is sexually healthiest for them (O’Sullivan 2005). O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg conclude that “these paradoxical standards for adolescent girls appear to create

considerable tension in their development of a sexual self-concept and jeopardize their ability to develop the skills required to clearly communicate or negotiate sexual interest, desire, and intentions.” (236)

This confusion that adolescent girls experience points to the necessity of “erotic education” (Thompson 1990). Having access to honest and non-judgmental conversations about sex that sanction pleasure and desire helps young people become comfortable with their desires and have better sexual experiences. “Erotic education” cannot be limited to any one sphere: it is important that young people can learn about sex from their families and schools (via sex education). It is furthermore imperative that the United States attends to its cultural anxiety surrounding sex.

Context

The discussion thus far has repeatedly hinted at the importance of context, especially relationships. Family, peer, and romantic relationships are influential forces in the sexual development of adolescents. The fixation on behavior in traditional literature, however, casts black youth sexuality as an isolated, individual phenomenon. Sexuality is, in fact, a developmental process and an identity that is shaped by the social context in which it occurs. Relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners are especially influential on adolescent sexual development and experience. Current literature overwhelmingly misses the impact of context. To build on existing literature, we must answer the question: how do one’s life experiences condition and constrain sexual choice? New research must examine sexuality’s relationship with other areas of life, and recognize it as a sociopolitical domain rather than a set of individual behaviors and attitudes. (diMauro 1995, 29)

Individual sexuality is thus a social product that is shaped in part by the relationships in which it develops. Researchers have long considered the family an important influence on sexual behavior, but other social networks are important as well. Stevens, for instance, calls attention to the influence of romantic relationships on females' friendships with each other. In her study of inner-city black girls, she found that romantic interests sometimes strained friendships, but also pushed girls to clarify their attachment to their friends. The strain occurred in part because girls competed with each other for attention from boys. (2002)

Peer relationships also have a more direct effect on sexual development, particularly in sexual activity exposure and gender script learning. Kornreich et al. find that older siblings influence adolescent girls' gender script subscription. (2003) The researchers interviewed 180 girls, ages 12-14 and living in New York City, about their sexual behaviors and attitudes. They recruited participants from community sites and recreational agencies (places where girls gather socially). The girls were 61% Latina (mostly Dominican), 33% African-American, and the rest were white or "other." Most lived in areas characterized as impoverished. Earlier research has found that brothers impact gender roles concerning social interactions – making girls more traditionally feminine and gender-typed (Widmer 1997). The researchers hypothesize in this study that having an older brother will yield a more traditional approach to sex, and they find some evidence for this. They find that having an older brother is associated with stronger parenting values, while having an older sister is associated with valuing parenting less.⁴² Girls with older brothers furthermore reported lower levels of sexual responsiveness,

⁴² These groups are in comparison to those without an older brother and those without an older sister, respectively.

although scores were low across all respondents. This reflects subscription to the traditional gender role of sexual gatekeeper for women. The impact of the gender of the older sibling on this measure is questionable; older sisters were also associated with lower responsiveness, and having an older sibling in general was associated with lower sexual agency. This last result was unexpected, and the researchers suggest that it occurred because the girls they interviewed have not had enough sexual experience to have strongly developed cognitions. They also found that girls with older brothers reported smaller age discrepancies between themselves and the person they first kissed, and girls without older siblings were twice as likely to report having experienced romantic kissing. O'Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg find that girls also learn gender scripts from their same-sex friends. (2003)

Friends also provide entrée into the world of sexual activity. O'Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg (2003), as well as O'Sullivan (2005), argue that unmonitored and unsupervised mixed-sex contexts at school, in neighborhood spots, and at parties are where girls first see and try sexual activity. Three-quarters of O'Sullivan's respondents had been in this kind of situation. O'Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg express concern about the particularly strong peer pressure that these contexts produce; "the group nature ... may preclude effective individual decision-making and planning." (235)

As discussed above, research has found that urban female adolescents believe that sexual activity can be acceptable within the context of a relationship. At this point we know little about the role of relationships in the sexual development, behavior and attitudes of black youth. O'Sullivan (2005) observes that existing research on adolescent sexuality attends to relationships mostly in order to explain how peers contribute to

sexual information gathering or how they provide sexual attitudes, values, and norms. They are interested in this information gathering and attitude formation, she continues, only as a predictor of sexual behavior (as we saw earlier in this paper). (15) She grants that looking at social context is central to understanding sexual behavior; it is also important in its own right. O'Sullivan also calls attention to the importance of the meaning of relationships to the adolescents involved in them. Her study, for instance, found that girls were invested in relationships that they viewed as rewarding.

To understand the role of relationships in sexual development and experience, we must also look at the power dynamics that shape them and occur within them. Rosenthal et al. (1996) note that the amount of power a woman feels she has in a relationship is associated with her ability to make sexual decisions. They inquire into how inner-city adolescent girls negotiate power in sex by conducting a focus group with 11 young women, all of whom had sex except one who had been abused by adult men. Their average age of sexual initiation was 13.7, which is far below the average for any group of women. The members of the focus group discussed how they made sexual decisions and how they viewed relationships and men. The girls discussed concern about the risk of a situation getting out of control because of the behavior of themselves or their partner. Perceived lack of control diminishes decision-making ability (Bandura 1989).

Traditional gender norms also impact the relationship and sexual experiences of young people. In Fullilove, et al. (1990), lower-income Black women and teenage girls express frustration about the sexual double standard for Black women, which members of the group accepted to different extents. Black men are allowed sexual freedom, while Black women are punished for "looseness" if they are not faithful to their unfaithful

boyfriends. This double standard enforces traditional sex roles and translates into an imbalance of power between the sexes. Economic problems exacerbate all of this, and together these factors do not bode well for communication between sexual partners. To avoid being characterized as “bad girls,” many black women follow the sexual double standard. This especially concerning given Rosenthal, et al.’s (1996) finding that closeness with a partner may prompt women to make poor sexual decisions. The study specifically cites having unprotected sex with a man one knows is unfaithful.

Stevens (2002) suggests that these traditional gender dynamics are reinforced by the marginality of black men. Racist society, she argues, complicates dating. “It may well be that black males are emotionally and sexually exploitative in romantic relations as a way to compensate for the diminished self-efficacy experienced in the larger society.” (135) Complementing the male behavior, Stevens finds that females in her study adopt more vulnerable stances in their relationships with men than with other women. (139) This should be treated as nothing more than a hypothesis at this point; Stevens did not study men, so her statement is speculation. She also, along with other researchers of gender in the black community, calls attention to the damaging impact of racialized and gendered stereotypes on romantic relationships. (Collins 2004; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003) Traditional gender scripts lay out a black masculinity and femininity that are detrimental to the sexual health of individuals, couples, and communities. Likewise, Rosenthal posits that social disenfranchisement puts urban youth of color at risk sexually.

It is still not established, however, to what degree Black youth subscribe to traditional gender roles, and how this effects their sexuality. Kalof, for instance, finds that Black female adolescents reported participating in unwanted sex at much lower rates than

other groups. The strongest factor producing this lower rate was the non-traditional gender role attitudes to which the Black female respondents subscribed. (1995)

In closing, we know little about how family, friend, and romantic relationships impact sexual development, behavior, and attitudes. Russell calls for more work on how adolescents define and experience romance, what they learn from relationships, and what skills they have to navigate them. He furthermore draws attention to the dearth of research on relationship satisfaction and duration for adolescents. (Russell 2005a) These are important areas for future research. To his list, I add the role of power in relationships and the romantic relationships of same-sex youth.

Where do we go from here? Tools for New Inquiry

In order to rectify the overwhelming focus on aggregate reports of sexual behavior and its predictors, we need work on adolescent sexuality that focuses on its development, meaning, and context. These areas of inquiry are often best accessed with qualitative studies that can get at the diversity of context and experience. Research at the micro-level resists homogenization and generalization of experiences, and takes subjects' own perspectives. (Williams 1991)

Using a mixed-methods approach is also fruitful, as Tolman and Szalacha (1999) demonstrate in their piece on adolescent female sexuality. They combine quantitative and qualitative analysis while maintaining focus on and interest in lived experience. They conducted qualitative analyses on how girls voiced their desire and the relationship between social location and sexual violation. Their quantitative analysis assessed the differences between urban girls' expressions of desire. The Black Youth Project also uses a mixed-methods approach to studying black youth sexuality. It combines data from a

nationally-representative survey of young people ages 15-25 with in-depth interviews of a subsample of black survey respondents in Chicago.

Attention to the voices of those we study is especially salient in the study of young people of color. Leigh and Andrews argue that researchers of this population simply cannot speak for it, as many are not black and most are no longer adolescents. This outsider perspective “can detrimentally affect the definition of key variables, the conceptualization and formulation of models to gauge relationships, and the interpretation of research findings about sensitive issues with African American adolescents.” (Leigh and Andrews 2002, 45)

Time is also an important methodological consideration. Sexuality as understood in the sexual health model is a process that plays out throughout one’s life. Progression through the life course is accompanied by a progression through stages of sexual development. It is thus important that sexuality is something studied at every age. For adolescents in particular, this points to the importance of expanding the scope of the population of interest. It is important, for instance, to look at pre-teens, even though they might not be considered adolescents. This stage of life is a formative period for sexual self-concept, and sexual behavior patterns are not yet entrenched. (O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg 2003) Understanding sexuality during the preteen stage will enhance our knowledge of adolescent sexuality.

Limitations

My review of the literature suffers limitations that are somewhat reflections of the literature’s own constraints. Most glaringly, heterosexual girls are the population of choice for innovative work on sexuality. It seems to be in part in continuity with past

literature and in part a reaction against it. Researchers of adolescent sexuality have historically been motivated to focus on girls toward the aim of controlling their fertility (in particular, preventing teen pregnancy). (Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg 1989; Tolman 1996) It may be that newer generations of researchers are changing the questions without much thought to changing the population. In somewhat contrasting fashion, Tolman et al. (2003) argue that recent literature has focused on girls in reaction to the earlier focus on males as universal subjects from whom we can learn about human sexuality. This is a more feminist account for the gender imbalance we see in the literature. Another explanation could simply be that feminist sexuality researchers are more interested in studying women than they are men. Researchers of the work reviewed here, however, acknowledged the imbalance as problematic. Tolman et al. (2003) decided to incorporate boys into their model of sexual health that was originally focused on girls only, and O'Sullivan (2005) acknowledged that the type of work she does on females needs to be done on males as well.

Sexual minority youths of color remain almost absent from studies of youth sexuality. As discussed above, there is virtually no work on young black gays and lesbians. This is a crucial gap in the literature that hinders our understanding of how sexual development plays out differently for different groups. In the literature I found on this population, I was especially struck by the lack of attention to sex. While there is some work on sexual behavior, we know even less about the sexual understandings and experiences of homosexual youth than we do about their heterosexual peers.

African American youth outside of the urban poor and working class are also relatively understudied in the domain of sexuality. (Leigh and Andrews 2002) While this

focus is justifiable, given it mirrors the structural conditions of many black youth, it is not representative of others from suburban and middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

Conclusion

New research on black youth sexuality must pay attention to development, meaning and context, as well as how this varies among and within race, gender, class, and sexual orientation subpopulations. It is impossible to understand young people's sexual lives without asking them to tell us about them. This call for new, positive perspectives is not meant to diminish the importance of attending to the risks involved in being sexually active. Unwanted pregnancy, AIDS and other STDs, and sexual violence are real problems that must be addressed. Understanding how youth conceptualize and experience their sexuality, however, will help in developing effective interventions that target these negative outcomes. It will furthermore bring to the fore other important sexual issues that young people need help in negotiating, such as confusion about integrating sexuality into their lives and identities. Equipped with knowledge of how young black people understand and experience sexuality, we can provide them with the resources, policies, and safe-spaces for discussion that are necessary to developing sexual health and accessing sexual pleasure.

Works Cited

- Abortion Surveillance – United States 2001 [2004]. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (CDC Surveillance Summaries)* Vol. 53, No. SS-09 (November 26).
- Bandura, A. (1989) Perceived self-efficacy in the exercise of control over AIDS infection. In V. M. Mays, G. W. Albee, & S. F. Schneider (Eds.), *Primary prevention of AIDS: Psychological approaches* (128-141). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne, and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.(1989) Adolescent Sexual Behavior [Health and Development], *American Psychologist*, 44(2), 249-257.
- Carvajal, Scott C., Parcel, Guy S., Basen-Engquist, Karen; Banspach, Stephen W.; Coyle, Karin K.; Kirby, Douglas; Chan, Wenyaw (1999) Psychosocial Predictors of Delay of First Sexual Intercourse by Adolescents, *Health Psychology*, 18(5), 443–452.
- Cole, Johnetta B., Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2003) *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities*, New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Collins, Patricia H. (2004) *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rose M. Colon, Dawn Elise Wiatrek, Richard I. Evans (2000) The Relationship between Psychosocial Factors and Condom use among African-American Adolescents, *Adolescence*, 35(139), 559-69.
- DiIorio, Coleen, William N. Dudley, Maureen Kelly, Johanna E. Soet, Joyce Mbwarra, and Jennifer Sharpe Potter (2001) Social Cognitive Correlates of Sexual Experience and Condom Use Among 13- Through 15-Year-Old Adolescents, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 29, 208-216.
- DiMauro, D. (1995) *Sexuality Research in the United States: An Assessment of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, New York, NY: The Social Research Council.
- Edwards, Willie J. (1996) A Sociological Analysis of an Invisible Minority Group: Male Adolescent Homosexuals, *Youth & Society* 27(3), 334-355.
- Ferguson, Ann A. (2000) *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press
- Fine, Michelle (1988) Sexuality, schooling and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58,1, 29-53.
- Fullilove, M., Fullilove, R., Haynes, K., & Gross, S. (1990) Black Women and AIDS Prevention: A View Towards Understanding the Gender Rules. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 27(1), 47-64.

Haffner, Debra (1998) Facing Facts: Sexual Health for American Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 22, 453-459.

Harper, Gary W., Nadine Jernewall, and Maria Cecilia Zea (2004) Giving Voice to Emerging Science and Theory for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People of Color, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 10(3), 187-199

Hillier, Lynne and Doreen Rosenthal (2001) Editorial: Special issue on gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, *Journal of Adolescence* 24, 1-4.

Horne, Sharon, Melanie J. Zimmer-Gembeck (2005) Female Sexual Subjectivity and Well-Being: Comparing Late Adolescents With Different Sexual Experiences, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 2(3), 25-40.

Irvine, Janice (1994) *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple Press.

Irvine, Janice (2002) *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education in the United States*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kaiser Family Foundation reported in 2003

Kalof, Linda (1995) Sex, power, and dependency: The politics of adolescent sexuality, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24(2), 229-249.

Kornreich, Jennifer L., Kimberly D. Hearn, Giovanna Rodriguez, and Lucia F. O'Sullivan, Sibling Influence, Gender Roles, and the Sexual Socialization of Urban Early Adolescent Girls, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 40(1), 101-110.

Lauritsen, Janet (1994) Explaining Race and Gender Differences in Adolescent Sexual Behavior, *Social Forces* 72(3), 859-883.

Leigh, Wilhelmina A., Julia L. Andrews, *The Reproductive Health of African American Adolescents: What We Know and What We Don't Know*, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; Washington, DC, 2002.

Martin, K.A. (1996) *Puberty, sexuality, and the self: Girls and boys at adolescence*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Moran, Jeffrey P., *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2000.

Nathanson, Constance (1991) *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women's Adolescence*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple Press.

Nesmith, Andrea A., David L. Burton, T.J. Cosgrove (1999) Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth and Young Adults: Social Support in their Own Words, *Journal of Homosexuality* 37(1), 95-108.

O'Donnell, Lydia, Athi Myint, Carl R. O'Donnell, Ann Stueve (2003) Long-Term Influence of Sexual Norms and Attitudes on Timing of Sexual Initiation Among Urban Minority Youth, *Journal of School Health* (73)2, 68-75.

O'Sullivan, Lucia F., Heino F.L. Meyer-Bahlburg (2003) African-American and Latina inner-city girls' reports of romantic and sexual development, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 20(2), 221-238.

O'Sullivan, Lucia F. (2005) The Social and Relationship Contexts and Cognitions Associated with Romantic and Sexual Experiences of Early-Adolescent Girls, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 2(3), 13-24.

Pleck, Joseph H., et al. (1993) Masculinity Ideology: Its Impact on Adolescent Males' Heterosexual Relationships, *Journal of Social Issues* 49(3), 11-29.

Roberts, Dorothy (1997) *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Rosenthal, Susan L., Lisa M. Lewis (1996) Issues related to the sexual decision-making of inner-city adolescent girls, *Adolescence*, 31(123), 731-739.

Russell, Stephen T. (2005a) Conceptualizing Positive Adolescent Sexuality Development, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 2(3), Sept. 2005, 4-12.

Russell (2005b) Introduction to Positive Perspectives on Adolescent Sexuality: Part I, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 2(3), Sept. 2005, 1-3.

Smiler, Andrew P., L. Monique Ward, Allison Caruthers, Ann Merriwether (2005) Pleasure, Empowerment, and Love: Factors Associated With a Positive First Coitus, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 2(3), Sept. 2005, 41-55.

Smith, EA, JR Udry (1985) Coital and non-coital sexual behaviors of white and black adolescents, *American Journal of Public Health* 75(10), 1200-1203.

Stanton, Bonita F., Xiaoming Li, Maureen M. Black, Izabel Ricardo, Jennifer Galbraith, Susan Feigelman, and Linda Kaljee (1996) Longitudinal Stability and Predictability of Sexual Perceptions, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 18(1), 10-19.

- Stanton, Bonita, Daniel Romer, Izabel Ricardo, Maureen Black, Susan Feigelman, and Jennifer Galbraith, Early Initiation of Sex and Its Lack of Association with Risk Behaviors Among Adolescent African-Americans, *Pediatrics* 92(1), July 1993, 13-19.
- Stevens, Joyce W. (2002) *Smart and Sassy: The Strengths of Inner-City Black Girls*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Sharon (1990) Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls' Accounts of Sexual Initiation, *The Journal of Sex Research* 27(3), 341-361.
- Tolman, Deborah L. (1994) Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls' Struggles for/with Sexuality, *Gender and Society* 8(3), 324-342.
- Tolman, Deborah L. (1996) Adolescent Girls' Sexuality: Debunking the Myth of The Urban Girl, in Leadbetter, B. & Way, N. *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 255-271.
- Tolman, Deborah L. and Laura A. Szalacha (1999) Dimensions of desire: Bridging qualitative and quantitative methods in a study of female adolescent sexuality, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 23, 7-39.
- Tolman, Deborah L. (2002) *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tolman, Deborah L., Meg I. Striepe, Tricia Harmon (2003) Gender Matters: Constructing a Model of Adolescent Sexual Health, *The Journal of Sex Research* 40(1), 4-12.
- Deborah P. Welsh, Sharon R. Rostosky, & Myra Christen Kawaguchi (2000) "A Normative Perspective of Adolescent Girls' Developing Sexuality," in C.B. Travis & J.W. White (eds.), *Sexuality, Society, and Feminism*. (114-140).
- Widmer, E.D. (1997) Influence of Older Siblings on Initiation of Sexual Intercourse, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59, 928-938.
- Williams, Constance W. (1991) *Black Teenage Mothers: Pregnancy and Child Rearing from Their Perspective*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States 2001 [2002]. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (CDC Surveillance Summaries)* Vol. 51, No. SS-4 (June 28).
- Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States 2003 [2004]. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (CDC Surveillance Summaries)* Vol. 53, No. SS-2 (May 21).