

The Trouble of Teen Sex: the construction of adolescent sexuality through school-based sexuality education

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the reliance of American school-based sexuality education (SBSE) programs on a moralistic agenda and several presuppositions of adolescent sexuality, resulting in a biased and inadequate approach to sexuality education. Furthermore, by virtue of its authoritative position, SBSE serves as an influential force in the construction of 'normal' adolescent sexuality and in the production of a particular kind of sexual teen. A multidisciplinary collection of comments and criticisms of SBSE are organized into a three-pronged critique: (1) SBSE attends exclusively to the dangers and risks associated with teen sex; (2) SBSE reifies narrow definitions of normal teen sex as heterosexual and coital; (3) SBSE fails to address the interplay among gender, race, class and sexuality, while simultaneously propagating sexist, racist, and classist notions of sexuality. Through these presumptions and stereotypes, SBSE (mis)informs teens, projecting a particular message and vision of who and how teens are and should be.*

Recent statistics make clear why sexual behavior, specifically that of teens, rightfully occupies a prominent place on our national (USA) public health agenda: one million teenage women become pregnant per year; 78% of these pregnancies are unplanned; one in four sexually experienced teens acquire a sexually transmitted infection (STI) per year; and chlamydia and gonorrhoea are more common among teens than adult men and women (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999). School-based sexuality education (SBSE), which has been in existence for almost a century (Moran, 2000), represents a formalized attempt to prevent such negative sexual outcomes through the provision of information and the cultivation of sexual knowledge and values.

Despite a wealth of empirical research on the efficacy of SBSE in the transmission of information and the prevention of disease and pregnancy, there has been relatively little focus on the values and norms that are implicitly conveyed to teens in sexuality education classrooms and the role of SBSE in the very construction of adolescent sexuality. Indeed, the relationship between adolescent sexuality and SBSE is not

unidirectional. It is not a (relatively) simple matter of analyzing the given element of teen sex and constructing a pedagogical program to meet those needs and shape behavior. Rather, what makes this issue particularly compelling is that SBSE not only plays a significant role in guiding teen sexual behavior, as if adolescent sexuality is an absolute and naturally occurring entity, but also that it is a fundamental force in the very construction and definition of adolescent sexuality. Since Hall's (1905) 'discovery' of adolescence, sexuality has been habitually recognized and treated as one of the inherent, essential features of being a teenager. However, as a growing number of researchers in the area are beginning to assert, the preeminence and substance of sexuality during adolescence is far less inevitable than conventional theories presume, and far more a result of adult and expert expectations. This paper concentrates on notions of adolescent sexuality, the SBSE programs that both respond to and perpetuate such notions, and the ways in which concepts of 'normal' adolescent sexuality construct and regulate the sexual lives, experiences, and identities of adolescent men and women, oftentimes to their detriment.

Essentializing Teen Sex

Over the course of its relatively short life thus far, adolescence has been thoroughly integrated into American conceptions of development, age, and cohort. Teens are identified as a distinct social group, with a unique culture and experience. The common 'Sturm und Drang' characterization of adolescence identifies the teen years as a time of considerable emotional and behavioral upheaval, emphasizing the supposed 'inner war' (Erikson, 1968) experienced by teens as they struggle with pubertal changes and identity concerns. This belief that adolescence is necessarily tumultuous, what Offer and Schonert-Reichl (1992) refer to as one of our primary myths of adolescence, has become ingrained in our academic and popular concepts of youth [1].

This characterization of teens results in a particularly volatile product when combined with the prevailing drive reduction model of sexuality. This biologically deterministic perspective saturates dominant theories of sexuality and presents sexuality as an intense, instinctual drive that is overpowering if left unchecked by civilizing social mediators such as laws and morality. In the case of classic psychoanalytic theory, Freud (1940) argued that the Id, the embodiment of all hungers and desires, will ceaselessly pursue satisfaction of these appetites unless the moderating Ego and punishing Superego intervene. According to psychoanalytic and other drive reduction theories, this innate and powerful sexual drive threatens to overwhelm all common and moral sense.

The discursive intersection between adolescence and sexuality yields a fundamental assumption: teens are hypersexual, their lives driven by sexual desires and impulses (Lesko, 1996). According to this model, adolescence is wholly directed by biology, with social context relegated to a supplemental role rather than a central one. There is an interesting parallel between the identification of the hypersexual adolescent and Foucault's (1976/1990) writings on the transformation of the behavior of sodomy into the identity of the homosexual. As Foucault states, the interest in sexual perversion was not about suppression, '... but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d'être* and a natural order of disorder' (p. 44). Similarly, the infusion of a biologically determined hypersexuality into the identity of the adolescent succeeds in giving inevitable and natural cause for adult intervention and surveillance. It is not predicated on what behaviors teens actually

engage in, but rather on the constructed identity of 'teen.' In this way, our construction of adolescent sexuality justifies our efforts to control it (Lesko, 1996). Subscription to a drive reduction theory of adolescent sexuality provides the rationale for a fear-based, crisis intervention approach to SBSE—drastic, absolutist measures are necessary to reduce and subdue the hypersexuality of teens (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

School-Based Sexuality Education

Sexuality education has been both a consideration and a concern since the appearance of adolescence on the social science and policy stage. Its form and content dictated by the moral, ideological, and theoretical trends of the day, a survey of the history of SBSE actually serves as a record of the shifting notions of adolescent sexuality in academic and public opinion. Such a survey is provided by Moran (2000), who thoroughly outlines the evolution of SBSE programs over the last century. Although space does not allow for an overview of each of the developmental stages of SBSE, a consideration of the earliest form of SBSE reveals its investment not only in conveying sexual information and facts but also in producing a specific kind of sexual individual and experience. The social hygiene movement of the early 20th century had gained popularity by tapping into the concerns and anxieties of the white middle-class regarding the perceived moral deterioration and social decay taking place in the growing urban centers of the US, particularly among poor and immigrant and/or non-white communities (Trudell, 1993). Not unlike the case of child welfare and family support programs from this same period, SBSE was championed as a means of saving those children whose poor, immigrant and/or non-white parents were deemed unfit and incapable of providing them with proper moral guidance (Trudell, 1993).

Although current forms of SBSE eschew such blatantly classist and racist biases, reliance on an implicit moral agenda remains in place. Currently, only 14% of all public SBSE programs are comprehensive, meaning that they include information regarding all methods of contraception and STI prevention (Landry *et al.*, 1999). Far more numerous are abstinence-only and abstinence-centered programs, which represent 35% and 51% of all public school sexuality education programs, respectively. Whereas abstinence-centered programs discuss safer sex, albeit as inferior to abstinence, abstinence-only programs exclude any mention of condom use and contraception (except to reference rates of failure). It is important to note that as part of the welfare reform of 1996, \$250 million in federal funds were earmarked for abstinence-only SBSE programs. This bill is currently under review for renewal, and is heartily supported by the Bush administration (the president has recommended a \$33 million increase in the budget for abstinence-only SBSE for next year).

The apparent political popularity of abstinence-based programming, even in the absence of empirical evidence of its preventive efficacy (Kirby, 2001), and its inclusion in a conservative and moralistic package of 'family values' highlights an important obstacle confronting sexuality educators today. Although this paper's main purpose is to review and organize criticism and identify flaws of current SBSE, it is essential that this be coupled with an acknowledgment of the substantial resistance from teachers, parents, and/or legislators that sexuality educators often experience. Many sexuality educators and organizations such as the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) endorse and advocate broader curricula and raise the same questions as this paper regarding current sexuality education practices (e.g. Kantor, 1992/1993). However, given the hostility they encounter at community, state, and federal levels as

well as the considerable fiscal support provided to narrow, abstinence-only curricula, sexuality educators face formidable obstacles to enriching and improving practice.

It remains the case that despite the efforts of many sexuality educators, current SBSE is largely founded on essentialized notions of adolescence and sexuality. Teens are not only generally in need of adult regulation, but are particularly at risk in the realm of sexuality: their underdeveloped sense of judgment and restraint make them vulnerable to an insurgent sexual drive. However, a challenge to the dominant conceptualization of adolescent sexuality and its components is mounting. The following represents an attempt to organize these various criticisms, particularly in the domain of SBSE, into a unified, yet multifaceted critique. When examined collectively, three primary factors emerge from the pool of objections: (1) there is a preoccupation with the negative outcomes and consequences associated with teen sex, to the exclusion of any discussion of the positive aspects of sexuality, and the capacities of adolescents to successfully manage their sexuality; (2) the working definitions and prescribed norms of adolescent sexuality are narrow and exclusionary; (3) much of SBSE fails to address the interplay among gender, race, class, and sexuality, while simultaneously propagating sexist, racist, and classist notions of sexuality. Each of these three factors and their multiple component parts will be explored next.

Teen Sex: dangers and deficits

Originally, SBSE was conceived as a remedy to the physical problems of masturbation and STIs, in addition to the social problems of perceived moral decay (Moran, 2000). This instrumentalist, problem-oriented model has endured over the past century, though the target problem has been substituted many times to fit contemporary concerns. In the past few decades, SBSE has only become more entrenched in this problem-oriented stance with reports of teen pregnancy, HIV infection, and sexual assault in both the academic and popular presses. According to current standards, a federally subsidized abstinence-only program must teach ‘that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects’ and ‘that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society’ (Dailard, 2002). The SIECUS Report, ‘Scared Chaste? Fear-based educational curricula’ (Kantor, 1992/1993), presents an effective overview and sampling of the methods and messages used by many popular sex-negative sexuality programs.

The saturation of SBSE with fear- and morality-based messages has been increasingly highlighted as a fundamental flaw in our approach to sex education (Morris, 1994; Whatley, 1994). Gagnon and Simon (1973) suggested that ‘... learning about sex in our society is learning about guilt; conversely, learning how to manage sexuality constitutes learning how to manage guilt’ (p. 42). Both comprehensive and abstinence curricula rely on a dichotomy of good and bad in conceptualizing and talking about sexuality, the only difference being the behaviors they assign to each of those points (Tolman, 1999a). Through a groundbreaking ethnographic study of SBSE programs in New York City, Fine (1988) emerged as one of the original critics of this negatively skewed perspective on teen sex. Over the course of classroom observation, Fine noted that three discourses appeared to be driving SBSE: *Sexuality as Violence*, defined as the belief that sex is inherently coercive and damaging; *Sexuality as Victimization*, which differs from the first discourse in that sexuality is not posited as inherently violent, yet nevertheless rife with possibilities for physical and psychological victimization; and lastly, *Sexuality as*

Morality, which is infused by Cartesian and Judeo-Christian moral ideals such as self-control, willpower, and purity. Despite being subjected to far less regulation and scrutiny than SBSE counterparts, the online frontier of sexuality education web sites does not appear to have escaped this habitual reliance on fear-based messages (Bay-Cheng, 2001). This finding indicates that the treatment of teen sex as a social problem by sexuality education is not simply a response to political mandates regarding content (to which web-based sexuality education is not subject), but a reflection of a more deeply entrenched and pervasive perspective of teen sex.

Although the concerns of unwanted pregnancy, infection, and assault are certainly well-founded and substantial, a growing number of experts in the field of adolescent sexuality argue that a singular focus on these threats constrains our understanding of adolescent sexuality and hinders our ability to provide teens with needed knowledge, guidance and support (Ehrhardt, 1996; Kyman, 1998; Tolman, 1999a; Welsh *et al.*, 2000). They argue for the presentation of sexuality as a positive and healthy aspect of life, one which exists in various forms for each individual throughout the life course, and for the need to help adolescents determine not only when to say ‘no,’ but when to say ‘yes,’ as well (Morris, 1994). Such an approach prioritizes not only the prevention of negative sexual outcomes, but the promotion of positive sexual health, as well [2].

A sex-positive approach to SBSE challenges the use of scare tactics and the silence of existing SBSE around issues such as pleasure and desire. As part of her study of SBSE discourse, Fine (1988) noted the omission of a discourse of desire, particularly in relation to adolescent girls. Her work on the ‘missing discourse of desire’ stimulated further research on the role of desire in adolescent sexuality. The link between sexual desire and sexual agency—the ability to advocate for one’s interests in the sexual arena—has been explored by a small but growing body of researchers. In their theory of adolescent sexual self-concept, Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996) postulated that sexual self-efficacy was one of three primary components. One’s sexual self-efficacy, they argued, is in turn comprised of three parts: the ability to say ‘no’ to unwanted sexual encounters; the ability to assert one’s own sexual desires and wishes; and the ability to take responsible precautions in sexual encounters. Their conceptualization makes explicit that true sexual agency consists of more than the ability to simply say ‘no.’ It involves the negotiation of sexual desires, contextual factors, and the ability to assert the resulting decision, whether yes or no.

In Tolman’s (e.g. 1994a,b, 1999b) work on adolescent female sexuality, desire and agency figure prominently. Tolman strongly argues for the inclusion of desire in discussions of adolescent sexuality and SBSE, theorizing that the acknowledgment and ownership of one’s embodied sexual desire is the first step in achieving a sense of sexual entitlement, which in turn provides the necessary foundation for sexual agency. Without a strong sense of sexual agency, teens will be unable to assert and protect their sexual interests (Wyatt & Riederle, 1994). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that an adolescent girl who does not know about the positive aspects of sexuality, or does not believe she has a right to a sexual voice, will be able to advocate very effectively for herself sexually, including the ability to ‘just say no.’ As Raymond (1994) points out, the disproportionate reliance of SBSE on a discourse of victimization may present teens, particularly girls, with few alternative models for ways of being a sexual person and woman: ‘Ironically, in our indiscriminate portrayals of teenage girls as sexual victims, we may be failing to teach them about genuine sexual autonomy and consequently ensuring that they *will be* victims’ (original emphasis, p. 132). This issue will be revisited at a later point in relation to gendered constructions of sexuality.

This theory of the preventive power of sex-positivity has been borne out in the handful of studies that have considered it. Indeed, a study by Ward and Wyatt (1994) indicated that White women who received sex-negative, cautionary parental messages engaged in more high-risk sexual behaviors than the White women who received sex-positive and instructional messages from their parents. Similarly, adolescents who express more sex-positive attitudes have been found to be more responsible users of contraception (Fisher *et al.*, 1983). Thompson's (1990) work revealed that girls whose mothers had candidly discussed sexual desire and pleasure with them reported experiencing a higher degree of agency and pleasure during their first sexual experience, a finding echoed by Wyatt and Lyons-Rowe (1990). The silence of SBSE around issues of desire and pleasure risks not only missing the opportunity to foster sexual agency, but also implicitly shaming teens' private experiences of these embodied sensations and emotions, and alienating those who rightfully perceive the failure to acknowledge the positive and gratifying aspects of sexuality as disingenuous.

The inclusion of sexual desire and pleasure, as distinct from emotional intimacy, in SBSE programs would add another missing element to our current notions of adolescent sexuality, the embodiment of sexuality. In what Spelman (1988) refers to as our 'somatophobic' culture, there is not only an intellectual separation of mind and body, but also a hierarchical positioning of mind over the body. Evidence of this deeply embedded Cartesian duality can be found by scanning our most common references to the need to train or discipline our bodies, to give up indulgences, to resist temptations of the flesh. To openly discuss desire and its attendant embodied cues (e.g. swellings, secretions) locates sexuality firmly in the body—quite a challenge to the conventional emphasis placed on the more mental components of sexuality such as intimacy.

In addition, such a conversation slips easily out of the procreative and heterosexual mold that is typically imposed on SBSE. Talking about girls' and women's experiences of wetness and orgasm as distinct or independent from penile-vaginal intercourse might legitimate non-coital sexual behaviors, raising the specter of homosexuality and deviance. In the next section, the centrality of the hypersexual and heterosexual assumptions in our construction of adolescent sexuality will be exposed and explored.

Teen Sex: narrowly defined

Our interventions, such as SBSE, in the field of adolescent sexuality are grounded on the drive reductionist belief that unless actively stopped, teens will have sex at every opportunity. However, it is mistaken to believe that SBSE is invested only in curtailing the frequency of sexual behaviors among teens. In fact, as pointed out by Haywood (1996), SBSE plays a far more complicated role than this. SBSE is invested not simply in reducing the frequency of sexual behaviors among teens, but also in producing a specific kind of sexuality in teens. Examinations of SBSE curricula and programs reveal a distinct heterosexist bias. Queer sexualities, including questioning one's sexual orientation and attraction, are largely omitted from SBSE curricula (Redman, 1994; Buston & Hart, 2001). Even sex education web sites, the content of which is unregulated, predominantly neglect sexualities other than heterosexuality (Bay-Cheng, 2001). Furthermore, in the rare cases when non-heterosexuality is mentioned in SBSE, it is tacitly marginalized. For instance, Whatley (1994) detected a linguistic trend among sexuality education textbooks to shift from using the inclusive pronoun 'we' when describing heterosexual experiences and expectancies to the alienating pronoun 'they' when

discussing homosexual ones. This marginalization (at best) or neglect (at worst) stigmatizes all things queer: identities, desires, behaviors.

In relation to sexual behaviors, it is important to note that queerness is not only constituted by a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered identity or 'lifestyle.' Similarly, straightness is not simply achieved through a relationship with a partner of another gender. The delineation of normal and deviant sexualities by SBSE is exacting at the behavioral level, as well—normality is located within a *monogamous, coitus-centered* relationship between a man and a woman, both of whom generally conform to *conventional gender roles* (Redman, 1994; Haywood, 1996; Elia, 2000). Indeed, no one is exempt from the binds of a rigid and narrow definition of normal sexuality: 'To be queer—to be different, outside the norm—is to be suspect; heterosexual hegemony serves not only to contain gay sexuality but also to pathologize almost any nonconformity' (Raymond, 1994, p. 125). Redman refers to the promulgation of a particular brand of heterosexuality as the 'hidden curriculum' of SBSE programs. Haywood uses attitudes towards masturbation to exemplify this argument: if there were no such implicit agenda, and SBSE was truly and solely committed to the prevention of disease and pregnancy, then masturbation (either independent or partnered) would be a featured topic given the low associated health risks. However, instead of this scenario, masturbation is one of the most contested topics of SBSE, and at least partially precipitated the dismissal of US Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders in 1994. Indeed, to be heterosexual is not sufficient for teens to avoid stigma or labels as 'other'; in fact, heterosexuality is packed with additional sets of expectancies that shape adolescent sexual behaviors and relationships.

In a content analysis of sexuality education web sites, Bay-Cheng (2001) found that only 9 of 52 sites utilized an expanded definition of 'sex,' i.e. one that extended beyond heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse. The remainder of the sites adhered to coitus as the equivalent of sex, with the remainder of the spectrum of sexual behaviors classified as 'foreplay' or left unacknowledged. These findings are consistent with criticisms of SBSE, as well (Whatley, 1992; Trudell, 1993; Irvine, 1994; Welsh *et al.*, 2000). A primary problem with such a limited definition is that it simply is not a realistic reflection of the kinds of sex that teens are engaging in. The sexual lives of adolescents include a wide range of behaviors, including complete abstinence, masturbation, mutual masturbation, and oral, anal, and vaginal sex. What is more, these behaviors might involve a variety of sexual partners and occur in a number of relational contexts. Failure by sex educators and programs to acknowledge this reality of sexual diversity in the lives of teens results in at least three shortcomings: (1) teens will not be informed of the need for safer sex precautions in different forms of sex, such as anal intercourse; (2) SBSE will miss out on the opportunity to present safer and more gratifying [3] forms of sex, such as mutual masturbation (Whatley, 1992); and (3) if coitus is treated as 'real' sex, teens who are seeking an elevated, adult-like status may be inadvertently encouraged to engage in penile-vaginal intercourse (Netting, 1992). These three possibilities are clearly not to the real-life advantage of adolescents.

This second factor of the challenge being posed to conventional constructions of adolescent sexuality highlights the narrow and well-policed bounds of normal adolescent sexuality. Many, if not most of the criteria used in assessing normality are commonly taken for granted, assumed to be natural and inherent. Raymond (1994) warns against buying into such essentialist notions of sexuality. To accept one single way of being as natural is to privilege it and imbue it with a sort of correctness. The flip side to this is

deviance, an individual transgression. Once individual deviance is identified, regulation and rehabilitation emerge as necessary (and to some, they may seem humanitarian). From the standpoint of SBSE, adolescent sexuality has resided almost exclusively in this domain of individual behavior, either normal or deviant. As will be explored next, this decontextualized perspective, however, is clearly insufficient.

Teen Sex: gendered, raced and classed

The isolation of sexuality at the individual level of analysis not only invites determinations of deviance and normality, but also reduces it to a decontextualized, disembodied state. The medical model that dominates the field of adolescent sexuality and SBSE has resulted in the proliferation of atomistic, disjointed studies of individual behaviors, rather than the cultivation of a coherent and penetrative narrative of the meanings of adolescent sexuality (Morris, 1994; Simon, 1996). As an embodied product of the personal, social, and historical moment (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon, 1996), sexuality is not amenable to the reductionist, decontextualized approach commonly adopted by SBSE. As an example of the dynamic meanings associated with various sexual behaviors, Landrine (1998) highlights anal intercourse among two different cultural communities: heterosexual Latino couples and gay men.

When contextually defined, when understood as an act-in-context, the behavior here is not unprotected anal intercourse except in the most superficial way of thinking about complex human beings. For these particular Latinas, the behavior was “trying to maintain virginity for, but still have intercourse with, men who are demanding both,” and that surely is not the behavior gay men engage in when they exhibit similar, superficial, mechanical movements. Comparisons across groups on superficially similar movements cannot be made because the acts-in-context are different behaviors and have different meanings. (Landrine, 1998, p. 86)

Indeed, sexuality is, and has historically been, intricately intertwined with gender, class, and race (e.g. Alexander, 1995; Irvine, 1995; Odem, 1995; Wyatt, 1997). The salience of these dimensions is evident in the proliferation of stereotypes and fetishized notions of sexuality throughout our cultural history and present: lustful and loose lower class women; sexually aggressive and animalistic black men and women; emasculated and impotent Asian men (for a review, see Irvine, 1995; see also Nettles & Scott-Jones, 1992; Wyatt, 1997; Reid & Bing, 2000; Zia, 2000). According to Gagnon and Simon, it is on the basis of the complex interactions between sociostructural dimensions that the pool of sexual scripts available to particular individuals is determined.

A great deal of research has been conducted on the intersection of gender and sexuality among adolescents, focusing specifically on the impact of gendered sexual scripts on the conversion of sexual knowledge into sexual practice (Wight, 1992; Hynie *et al.*, 1998; Laub *et al.*, 1999). In these scripts, adolescent men are cast in the role of sexual initiator, adolescent women as sexual gatekeepers. Whereas boys are active and desiring sexual subjects, girls are passive and desired sexual objects (Raymond, 1994; Durham, 1998; Fromme & Emihovich, 1998; Holland *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, in SBSE curricula, puberty and the adolescent development of girls is inevitably coupled with the discourse of menstruation, firmly locating female sexual development in the context of reproduction; emerging male sexuality, on the other hand, is framed in terms of

erections, ejaculation, wet dreams—individualized and seemingly automatic and unstoppable experiences of desire and pleasure (Whatley, 1992; Walker, 1997). Male desire is naturalized in this discourse of the male sexual drive as an individual, free-standing sexual entity. Female sexuality, couched in terms of reproduction and reactivity, is constructed as inherently dependent on a male presence (Morokoff, 2000). Adolescent men have at their disposal scripts of agency, initiation, and subjectivity. Adolescent women, on the other hand, are offered scripts of passivity, responsiveness, and objectification (Holland *et al.*, 1999).

These roles leave little room for the expression of sexual agency on the part of girls without risk of being labeled as deviant (which can be encoded in the language of promiscuity, prudery, or homosexuality). Adolescent women are in the precarious position of needing to present themselves as desirable to men, though not desiring (which can be interpreted as aggressive and morally loose); sexually responsive to male desire (thus proving that they are ‘normal,’ neither homosexual nor prudish) as well as sexually responsible (Holland *et al.*, 1999). Harding (1998) has pointed out that discussions including boys have centered on modifying boys’ responses to getting someone pregnant or sick. The typical approach employed with girls, however, aims at eliminating their sexual behavior in the first place, not just the modification of how they handle the aftermath. An excellent illustration of the complicated ‘Catch 22’ position of adolescent women in relation to safe sex is presented by female teen participants in a study by Hillier *et al.* (1998): if they carry condoms and/or initiate safe sex, they are perceived as sluts; if they do not carry condoms or initiate safe sex, and their male partners do not as well, they risk possible infection and/or pregnancy.

Social location not only influences how people construe their sexuality, but also assigns varying levels of power and status to individuals. Power discrepancies in the domain of gender, for instance, play an important role in sexual behavior (Whatley, 1992; Walker, 1997). The subordinated status of girls and women significantly hinders their ability to negotiate issues of sexuality with male partners and to have their expressed interests respected (Holland *et al.*, 1999). The issue of social power and the feasibility of negotiation around sexuality given gender discrepancies in status become only more complicated when one considers that the sexual partners of adolescent women frequently are adult men (Males, 1998). One can assume that the ability of an adolescent woman to advocate for safer sex or no sex with an adult male partner would be severely compromised, given the status differential between them on multiple levels.

As in the case of gender, social location based on class and race has been shown to have a strong influence on the way in which sexuality is conceptualized and enacted by young people. For instance, research indicates that class affects the way in which sexuality is subjectively experienced by teens. Tolman (1994a) and Tolman & Szalacha (1999) found that both suburban (primarily middle-class) and urban (primarily working-class) girls shared a similar sense of embodied sexual desire, but that they differed in their management and response to these feelings. The urban participants voiced a greater wariness of the dangers associated with partnered sexual behaviors and the need to resist and suppress their own desire in the interest of self-preservation. Suburban participants, on the other hand, spoke less about threat and vulnerability involved with desire, and more about pleasure and curiosity. Social context most definitely shapes the ways in which these girls conceptualize and make choices around their sexuality. With regard to race, as illustrated by the Landrine (1998) reference cited previously, sexual meaning making and conventions can vary significantly across racial and ethnic groups. Although generalizations and stereotypes must be eschewed, there is nevertheless evidence of

important cultural diversity in the realm of sexuality. Asian/Pacific Islander American (APIA) teens, for instance, may negotiate public and private sexual expressions more carefully than non-APIA youth (Chan, 1994). Reid and Bing (2000) survey the sexual roles and values of various racial and ethnic communities of women, remarking on the apparent trends and dominant conceptions that characterize each cultural group. The reliance of SBSE upon a presumption of homogeneity and universal norms severely handicaps its ability to address the nuanced perceptions and experiences located at these diverse social positions.

Though research strongly indicates the salience of gender, class, and race in shaping sexuality, most SBSE pays little explicit, curricular attention to these factors and their unique contributions to sexuality. Nevertheless, SBSE has also been criticized for implicitly accentuating and reifying constructed gender differences, as well as for relying on racist and classist stereotypes. Rather than countering or neutralizing discrepant gender expectations and values, SBSE propagates these as natural and normal. According to Fine, 'This discourse of sexuality [one in which victimization, violence, and morality are presented to the exclusion of desire] mis-educates adolescent women. What results is a discourse of sexuality based on the male in search of desire and the female in search of protection' (p. 40). The effect of this is evident in research conducted on the sexual agency and desire of adolescent girls. Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996) discovered that, in accordance with the emphasis placed on girls' gatekeeping responsibilities, a significant disparity exists between girls' confidence in their ability to say 'no' to male sexual advances and their insecurity in regard to their ability to advocate for their own desires or to assert the need for safe sex precautions. As described earlier, the acknowledgment of embodied female sexual desire is a necessary step in improving the effectiveness of SBSE at both preventing negative sexual outcomes and promoting positive sexuality (Raymond, 1994; Tolman, 1994b, 1999b).

However, even if the current conservative tide of sex-negative, abstinence-only SBSE were to be turned, and discussions of female desire and sexual subjectivity included in SBSE curricula, this would not be sufficient to redress the gendered imbalances that exist in our constructions of adolescent sexuality. Such discussions must also be accompanied by a critique of existing discourses of male sexuality and entitlement. As asserted by Whatley (1987), reinforcing girls' ability and right to say 'no' is not enough if boys are not also taught to 'hear and understand the word "no".' A failure to do so implicitly exempts boys from such discussions [4], reinforces the tacit belief that male sexuality is biologically programmed and therefore unchangeable, and maintains the onus already placed on girls for sexual behavior.

With regard to socioeconomic status, recall from the overview of SBSE's history that SBSE was originally championed as a way to supplement the presumably deficient moral education provided to lower class youth by their parents (Trudell, 1993). Although class is presently discussed in far more coded and discreet terms, it most certainly plays a significant role in SBSE. In debates surrounding types of SBSE programs, for instance, it has been proposed that comprehensive curricula are most appropriate for lower income districts in which teens are expected to be at greater risk of engaging in partnered sexual activity, and that abstinence-only curricula are best suited for middle- and upper-class districts (Kirby, 1994). The underlying twin assumptions here are evident: lower-class teens are expected to be moral failures; middle- and upper-class teens are expected to adhere to a more stringent standard of social (and sexual) behavior; or perhaps it is that middle-class teens have something *worth* 'saving.' Of course, this objection is complicated if one believes that in practice, comprehensive SBSE programs are in fact more

useful and supportive of teen sexuality. In this case, more privileged adolescents are perhaps being deprived of a higher quality sexuality education.

SBSE's attention to racial and ethnic diversity tends to be superficial and tokenistic, if present at all. For instance, pictures of teens of color might be included in a textbook, but these are not accompanied by any discussion of the unique experiences or concerns of different communities (Ward & Taylor, 1994). While this visual inclusion acknowledges the existence of superficial diversity, the omission of any substantive consideration of the intersection of culture and sexuality maintains the pretense of sexual homogeneity, even in the face of physical difference. In her content analysis of college-level SBSE texts, Whatley (1994) discovered a more disturbing trend than the omission of substantive considerations of race and ethnicity: the photos included in sections focusing on normative adolescent sexual development most frequently featured white teens, whereas more pictures of teens of color were included in sections on risk and danger, such as pregnancy and disease. SBSE also must attend not only to the ways in which race and ethnicity impact sexuality, but the ways in which race and ethnicity play a role in the SBSE classroom itself. Ward and Taylor (1994) conducted focus groups with teens regarding SBSE in which participants of color were both aware of and concerned by the possibility that white SBSE teachers might have stereotyped notions of them and their sexuality. For instance, the unfounded belief that teens of color are both more sexual and less responsible than their white peers is quite prevalent in public opinion (Nettles & Scott-Jones, 1992). As a result, they felt inhibited and unable to ask questions and engage freely in discussions, constantly on guard against racist presumptions.

Conclusion

The neglect of social context, the narrow definition of adolescent sexuality, and the overwhelming preoccupation with the dangers and deficits associated with teen sex are themes that have endured in the public conception of adolescent sexuality as well as in formulated responses to it. As intimated by Lesko (1996), our very construction of adolescent sexuality justifies our attempts to control it.

Of course, there are those who do not dispute that SBSE plays a role in the production of a particular brand of 'normal' sexuality, and further argue that this *should* be a central objective of SBSE. However, as argued by Elia (2000), the prescriptive and proscriptive character of SBSE, particularly that of abstinence-only programs, is neither democratic nor truly educational. In its current form, SBSE trains adolescents away from thoughtful sexual decision-making, stigmatizing those outside the 'charmed circle' [in Rubin's (1993) words] of traditionally-gendered, monogamous, and coitus-centered relationships, and neglecting the diverse ways in which sexuality can be construed and enacted at different social locations. Furthermore, despite this seeming oversight of sociostructural dimensions such as gender, class, and race, SBSE's tacit reliance on sexist, classist, and racist notions of sexuality results in the distillation of a prejudicial and limited conception of sexuality. Until these shortcomings and biases are redressed through the successful rejection of a conservative sexuality education agenda, SBSE will continue to propagate a narrow and unrealistic version of 'normal' adolescent sexuality, failing to truly inform and empower teens to make healthy and responsible sexual choices.

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NOTES

- [1] It is important to note that several theorists and researchers challenge this essentialized characterization of adolescence (e.g. Enright *et al.*, 1987; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992; Lesko, 1996).
- [2] In addition, the very definition of what constitutes a 'negative sexual outcome' warrants consideration. Research in this domain has revealed the exaggeration of the incidence of teen pregnancy (Irvine, 1994; Luker, 1996) and the flawed perception that teen pregnancy leads to poverty and welfare-dependence when in fact poverty most often precedes teen pregnancy (Males, 1996; Moran, 2000). Other researchers have concentrated on redressing the social stigma attached to teen pregnancy and parenting. Oz *et al.* (1992a) found that teen mothers exhibited higher levels of ego development than their non-mother peers, and have argued for the need for more strengths-based research on teen mothers Oz *et al.* (1992b). Kelly (1996) provides a compelling interrogation of the stigmatization and scapegoating of teen mothers by the media, policies, and agencies.
- [3] Research indicates that first coital experiences are frequently not very pleasurable for women (Martin, 1996; Guggino & Ponzetti, 1997).
- [4] There is evidence that boys already consider SBSE lessons and messages regarding safe sex and responsibility to really be girls' concerns, not theirs (Szirom, 1988).

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