



There Is More to the Story: The Place of Qualitative Research on Female Adolescent Sexuality in Policy Making

Deborah L. Tolman, Celeste Hirschman, Emily A. Impett

Abstract: Individual testimonials have an unprecedented currency in policy making about adolescent sexuality. While highly problematic as grounds for making policy, the current deployment of testimonials as evidence may in fact provide an unexpected opportunity for qualitative researchers to capitalize on the power of stories to influence policy makers' decisions. Qualitative research combines the power of stories with methodological rigor, providing policy makers with important information about the complexity of problems and suggesting possible solutions. In this article, we use the case of sexuality education policy making, which, in 1996, shifted to fund abstinence-only programs exclusively. By introducing key findings from qualitative research on female adolescent sexuality about gender inequality, we demonstrate the ways in which the sexuality education debate has left out central developmental and interpersonal aspects of girls' sexuality. We then discuss the ways in which the findings from these qualitative studies can be used to inform sexuality education policies and practices.

Key words: abstinence-only education; comprehensive sexuality education; adolescent sexuality; female adolescence

At a special hearing of the U.S. Senate on abstinence-only education in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (Committee on Appropriations United States Senate, 2004), Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania) questioned a panel of young people who had received or had taught abstinence-only education in their public school classrooms. Jennifer Bruno, a youth board member and student at Lehigh Valley High School in Pennsylvania, described the following experience:

I was at a party and I was with my friends, and all of us had a boyfriend. So most of the girls that were my friends were like going to rooms and kissing and everything. And two of my best friends decided that they were going to go with their boyfriends downstairs and they asked me if I wanted to go, and I said no because I knew what was going to happen. So after the party was over, I went to the performing arts school and they went to Liberty. And I didn't see them for like 3 months. I recently

found out that both of them had babies. And I was proud of the decision that I had made that I chose to stay abstinent. (p. 32)

In response to this testimonial, Senator Specter, a strong supporter of abstinence-only education, declared, "That's pretty persuasive proof I'd say" (Committee on Appropriations United States Senate, 2004, p. 34). With this statement, Senator Specter ensured that the intended purpose of Bruno's statement was clear: This isolated, decontextualized, and unanalyzed testimonial by a single individual was meant to count as "proof" that abstinence-only education works. Throughout the hearings, supporters of abstinence-only education punctuated their presentation of statistical data with adolescents and authoritative advocates telling their stories. Such stories included excerpts from student letters and personal observations about changes in young people's behavior, including Reverend Kenneth Page's assertion that "students have become more open to talking about

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Deborah L. Tolman, Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality, San Francisco State University, 2017 Mission Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, CA 94110. E-mail: dtolman@sfsu.edu; Celeste Hirschman, E-mail: celeste_amor@hotmail.com; Emily A. Impett, E-mail: eimpett@sfsu.edu

abstinence in front of their peers” (Committee on Appropriations United States Senate, p. 34). In contrast, evidence presented by supporters of comprehensive sexuality education did not include such testimonials, instead focusing exclusively on the extensive quantitative research that has shown that comprehensive sexuality education reduces teen pregnancy and does not encourage earlier ages of sexual initiation. Yet, since the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, also known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, federal funding for sexuality education has gone exclusively to abstinence-only programs. President Bush even proposed that funding be increased to \$270 million in fiscal year 2005 (Office of Management and Budget, 2004). As a result of the Senate hearings, abstinence-only education remains the only form of federally funded sexuality education, and funding levels continue to rise.

While there are myriad factors contributing to this funding trend, the use of testimonials by the supporters of abstinence-only in these hearings is worth examining. As others have noted, there are multiple stories about adolescent sexuality that are deployed, silenced, emphasized, or obscured for political purposes (Fields, in press; Irvine, 2000; Plummer, 1995). Individual testimonials have an unprecedented currency in policy making about adolescent sexuality, and not only at the federal level. For example, Fields described the processes, stories, actors, and meanings that were activated and suppressed as a racially diverse and divided Southern community debated the matter of sex education in their public schools. In testimony before the local school board, abstinence-only supporters made their point through the stories of virgin (White) girls who declared that they did not want to be forced to learn about condoms (Fields, in press).

The Senate hearing exemplifies what some political pundits have called a trend, in which scientific evidence is increasingly being ignored in favor of such testimonials (Brennan, 2001; McDonough, 2001). Tim Brennan, an economist who spent a year on the White House staff on the Council of Economic Advisers, wrote that “when it comes to influencing policy, testimonials trump data” (Brennan, p. B11). Former Minnesota legislator Lee Greenfield has remarked that one compelling testimonial at a crucial moment in a floor debate “can vaporize a mountain of data and careful policy analysis” (McDonough, p. 209). Following the traditional conventions of rigor—that persuading policy makers requires scientific evidence and that statistics are the only form of real data—supporters of comprehensive sexuality education have not ushered in the compelling voices of adolescents that could provide countervailing persuasive stories

to the debate or, quite possibly, change the terms of the debate altogether.

It is likely that testimonials have become a powerful part of our political process because stories *are* persuasive. They elicit emotions and organize the way we understand the world (McDonough, 2001). They move us, and they likely move politicians to make policies that reflect the experiences about which they have heard. Yet carefully selected testimonials do not represent the variety or complexity of any human experience. Where, for example, are the stories about students of abstinence-only education who got pregnant because they lacked information about the proper use of condoms and contraceptives? It is even plausible that the very same young people who spoke at the Senate hearing had other experiences in which they did not choose to be abstinent—but they had not been invited to tell those stories.

Such powerful stories can be central to a different task, that is, the task of inquiring about people’s varied experiences with a given phenomenon using a qualitative methodology. Instead of choosing and then deploying handpicked testimonials to serve a particular ideology or position, researchers who use qualitative methods investigate a phenomenon to see how it works. Qualitative methods provide a way to study the depth of human thought, experience, and decision making. Through qualitative research, narratives about experience—always complex and often contradictory—are produced. These narratives are different from the kind of testimonials that Senator Specter showcased. Because qualitative researchers use methodologically rigorous techniques to gather data, to analyze data, and to listen to stories from a variety of people, the findings generated by this type of research can identify and illuminate social patterns as well as the individual experiences that exemplify or provide an exception to such patterns.

While highly problematic as grounds for making policy, the current deployment or use of testimonials as evidence may in fact provide an unexpected opportunity for qualitative researchers to capitalize on the power of stories to influence policy makers’ decisions. In this article, we use the case of qualitative research on female adolescent sexuality as one such arena of research that should be, but is currently not, informing public policy about sexuality education. By reviewing key qualitative studies on female adolescent sexuality, we demonstrate how such qualitative research can reveal unexpected yet crucial information that should be a part of policy making. Across the studies that we review, in which many girls told stories about their experiences with sexuality and heterosexual romantic relationships, gender inequality emerged as

centrally shaping girls' sexual development, interactions, and feelings. The stories that they told show in what ways gender inequality intervenes and undermines girls, and thus offer possibilities for specific policies. Prior to reviewing these key qualitative studies, we offer descriptions of the qualitative research methods used in these studies, as well as ways to evaluate the rigor of these frequently used methods. Then, after reviewing the studies and describing common findings, we discuss the ways in which the findings from these qualitative studies can be used to inform sexuality education policies.

Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research

Accurate information about how to understand and evaluate qualitative research findings is an important first step in incorporating this body of research into policy making. The best way to understand and evaluate qualitative research is to make sure that the research methods—the ways in which data are collected and analyzed—are clearly articulated. In this article we explicate the qualitative research methods that are most commonly used to study female adolescent sexuality. Even among social scientists, there is a common error of utilizing the criteria for rigorous quantitative research to assess qualitative research (Rabinowitz & Weseen, 2001). Because the purpose and goals of these approaches to research are not the same, neither are the methods nor the benchmarks for evaluating the credibility of research that uses these methods. Our purpose in describing these methods is not to present an exhaustive list of qualitative research methods but to articulate how to evaluate the forms of data collection and analysis that are specific to the studies we have included in this article.

Most qualitative researchers gather information directly from people. In order to gather people's stories, researchers begin by identifying salient groups of people who can shed light on the phenomenon under study (sampling) and then ask them questions about their experiences, as well as observe their public behaviors (collecting data). When these data are interviews, they are usually audiotaped and transcribed to create a text that retains the veracity and particulars of participants' statements. When they are observations recorded as field notes, they are written down in narrative form by the researcher(s). To analyze these data, researchers use a range of tools to organize participants' responses to questions into patterns, usually based on both theoretically driven and organic (i.e., those that are raised by participants themselves) assessments and reductions of these responses. Finally, they interpret—make sense of—these patterns to

produce findings. Qualitative researchers use a number of methods to gather data, including individual interviews (e.g., Fontana & Frey, 2000), focus groups (e.g., Madriz, 2000), observation (e.g., Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000), and participation (e.g., Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). Some types of research, such as ethnography (e.g., Fetterman, 1998), combine data-gathering methods, such as interviews and observation, to study and describe cultures and subcultures (e.g., Chambers, 2000). Such research should always state the rationales, justifications, and descriptions of what methods of data collection were employed and significant detail about how they were employed (i.e., who conducted the interviews, how the interviewees were trained, what questions were asked) and why these choices were made.

Another way to assess the credibility of qualitative research is to evaluate it based on the range and applicability of findings. Credible qualitative research usually addresses the inclusiveness and limits of the sample in terms of age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other demographic characteristics, in addition to providing a clear justification for why participants have been included and how they have been chosen. By evaluating these sampling decisions, readers can judge how pertinent the research is to a given issue. Credible qualitative research also ensures some form of consistency in the findings across methods, samples, and observers and offers convincing explanations for contradictory findings. For example, researchers who code their data for themes develop codebooks, use multiple coders, and evaluate the consistency of applying such codes across coders (i.e., interrater reliability). Other researchers utilize method triangulation (three distinct approaches to evaluating the same data or three sources of data that inform the inquiry) to demonstrate that findings are not idiosyncratic to a particular analytic tool (Morse, 1994). Interpretive communities are a standard practice for narrative research, where several analysts of the same stories develop an agreed-upon understanding of what the participant conveyed (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001); research groups, in which members provide feedback and challenges to a researcher's field notes, serve a similar function (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). Finally, another standard technique in qualitative analysis is saturation, in which researchers continue to recruit and interview participants until the same sets of themes appear consistently and relatively few new themes emerge in analysis (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Lather, 1995), indicating that the scope of the inquiry has been covered.

After ensuring that researchers have clarified their methods and implemented appropriate measures of

credibility, policy makers can confirm that the research has been published by a trustworthy source such as a peer-reviewed journal or a university press (also peer-reviewed). Many peer-reviewed journals publish qualitative research. For instance, in the discipline of psychology, many journals published by the American Psychological Association include qualitative research, such as *American Psychologist*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, and *Psychological Methods* (Wark, 1992). Additionally, some journals have been developed specifically for qualitative research including *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Health Research*, *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, and *Qualitative Research*.

Qualitative Research on Female Adolescent Sexuality

There is a growing body of qualitative research on girls' and young women's sexuality, covering topics that range from experiences with puberty to the negotiation of safer sexual interactions (see review by Tolman & Brown, 2001). From this body of work, we chose four exemplary studies that provided insight into girls' and young women's sexual decision making as well as into the contexts in which they made sexual decisions (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002). We chose the four studies because they each (a) presented a clearly justified, articulated, and rigorously implemented qualitative methodology, including information about data collection and data analysis procedures; (b) incorporated girls' stories and voices extensively in reporting the findings; and (c) had been published in peer-reviewed books and/or journals. After briefly describing these studies, we will present the findings that emerged in all four of them. The consistency found across unrelated studies lends strength and veracity to the particular findings of each.

Taken together, these four studies (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002) included samples of girls and young women ranging in age from 14 to 22 years and represented a multiethnic, cross-class perspective on girls' and young women's sexuality development, that is, their development into sexual beings, which includes but is not limited to their experiences of puberty, romantic relationships, sexual feelings and desires (embodied and emotional), and sexual behaviors. We use the more comprehensive and inclusive term *sexuality development* in lieu of *sexual development*, which refers to the development of secondary sex characteristics.

All four studies used interviews and/or focus groups to collect data on young women's sexuality. All of these researchers interviewed girls and young women in order to identify different, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory dimensions of female adolescent sexuality. These methods provided participants with an opportunity to talk about their experiences in their own words. The interviews and focus groups were open-ended, with researchers asking broad questions about specific topics or experiences (e.g., "How would you describe the way you look?" and "How do you feel about asking your boyfriend to use a condom?"). The researchers also asked girls (and, in two of the four studies, boys) about their experiences of puberty, dating, relationships, their bodies, and sexuality.

Although in two (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996) out of the four studies the researchers included samples of boys, this article does not include a discussion of boys' sexuality development for two major reasons. First, there is far less research on boys' than on girls' sexuality development.¹ Second, because we used girls' sexuality development as one example of the numerous ways in which policy makers can use qualitative research to inform their decisions, we limited the scope of this article to female sexuality for the sake of space and continuity. It is important to note, however, that it is essential to consider findings about both boys and girls in policy-making decisions on adolescent sexuality.

Martin (1996) interviewed 32 girls ranging in age from 14 to 19 years about their experiences with puberty and their changing bodies. The sample was primarily

¹ In the mid-1980s feminist psychologists critiqued and attempted to remedy the facts that there had been far more research on boys' than girls' general development, that boys' development had been seen as normative, and that girls' development had been held up to a standard that was not based on research on girls or that even included girls (Gilligan, 1982; Unger & Denmark, 1975). Research emerging from this critique focused on closing the gender gap in developmental research. Some of these researchers focused on sexuality development in particular. Unlike other areas of study, there is a long-standing and enormous literature on girls' *sexual behavior* (Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 2002) and little on boys' until the late 1990s. However, there was very little research on girls' *sexuality*. Feminist researchers have focused on female adolescent sexuality development, yielding an unorthodox gender gap. While there is now a substantial literature on young women's sexuality, comparable research on (heterosexual) young men's sexuality is just now emerging, resulting in a broader set of studies on female adolescent sexuality development than on male adolescent sexuality development, with the exception of homosexual boys' identity development and coming-out processes.

White (with six Latino and four Asian American participants) and was almost evenly split between middle- and working-class participants. Martin analyzed the interviews for themes that emerged from the data (e.g., “ideal love” and “feeling like an object”). She then grouped the interviews by demographic categories (i.e., social class) and by experiential categories (e.g., those who had engaged in sexual intercourse and those who had not) to identify potential thematic patterns within the categories.

Tolman (1996, 2002) interviewed two groups of 15- to 18-year-old girls: (a) a racially and ethnically diverse sample of 15 girls from primarily poor and working-class backgrounds from an urban public school and (b) a sample of 16 primarily White, middle to upper middle class girls from a suburban public school. The interview questions were designed to elicit girls’ narratives about their sexual experiences, feelings, and desires. Tolman analyzed the narratives to identify the different and often complex ways that girls talked about their sexual experiences and choices.

In the Women Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP), Holland and colleagues (1998) sought to learn ways to reduce HIV transmission to heterosexual girls and young women by understanding how risk and protection played into their sexual decisions. They interviewed 148 young women in London and Manchester ranging in age from 16 to 21 years about their everyday sexual practices. The sample consisted primarily of English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, and Northern and Southern European young women and included smaller numbers of Asian, African, and African Caribbean women. They then coded the transcripts for various discourses about sexuality (e.g., “disembodied femininity” and “embodied masculinity”).

Phillips (2000) focused on the tensions or contradictions between the early messages that young women learn about femininity and sexuality and their current thoughts and experiences. She interviewed 30 primarily White and mixed-race/ethnicity 18- to 22-year-old heterosexual and bisexual young women, as well as conducted four group interviews with a subset of 6 of the 30 women. Phillips identified a set of competing discourses—defined as ways of conceptualizing, having awareness and knowledge, and talking (Irvine, 2000)—about sexuality with which women struggle, such as the desire to be a “good woman” (i.e., sexually pure) and the desire to be a “together woman” (i.e., sexually sophisticated).

Girls’ Sexuality Development: The Centrality of Gender Inequality

The four studies (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002) explored a diverse set of

topics relating to girls’ and young women’s sexuality development. By talking to girls and young women about their sexual experiences and feelings, despite differences in their particular lines of inquiry and methods, all four qualitative studies found the same thing: that gender inequality and the sexual double standard were potent forces that continued to shape and influence young women’s sexual behaviors, feelings, and experiences. While the researchers did not ask specific questions designed to elicit narratives about gender inequality, this theme nevertheless pervaded girls’ and young women’s stories about their sexual experiences. The consistency of this finding across multiple analytic methods and samples demonstrates the salience of gender inequality in the sexual lives of young women. Gender inequalities figured centrally in the findings from girls’ and young women’s stories about their sexual and relationship experiences in three main ways: (a) walking on the slut/prude tightrope; (b) experiencing male pressure and coercion; and (c) developing, or failing to develop, sexual subjectivity.

Walking on the Slut/Prude Tightrope

In each of the four studies (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002), the researchers found that girls and young women were under tremendous, confusing, and frequently contradictory pressure to manage their sexual reputations. While boys were encouraged to pursue sex, girls continued to be sanctioned for being overtly sexual or sexually assertive; they were also taught that they are responsible for controlling boys’ sexuality as well as their own. Thus, younger girls were mainly concerned with figuring out how to avoid sexual activity or rumors of sexual activity so they would not be labeled as “sluts.”

As they got older, their status as mature women rested more heavily on their ability to find and keep a boyfriend, during which time they struggled with questions of how to explore sexuality without being considered too sexual. According to Phillips (2000), on the one hand, women were required to adhere to the strictures of what it meant to be a “good woman.” Among other things, the good woman was perceived to be pleasing, feminine, and subordinate to men. Through her virginity, modesty, and lack of desire, she demonstrated moral and sexual purity. Women of color and working-class or poor women were often excluded from this category due to sexual stereotypes and lack of access to the funds required to maintain their desirability. On the other hand, a newer set of social expectations required that women present themselves as what Phillips labeled the “together woman.” The together woman is free, sexually sophisticated, autonomous,

self-directed, and powerful; however, her legitimacy still rested on her ability to attract and keep a man. In Phillips' study, Sara, a 20-year-old White woman who identified as "mostly heterosexual with a healthy bisexual curiosity, but with no experience," said:

It's a constant balancing act. It seems guys don't really have to worry so much about this sort of thing, but for women it's really different. It's just always like, you have to be sure of yourself and not hung up and like you know what you want and what you're doing. But on the other hand, you can't look too willing or experienced, like you can't be more experienced than the guy is, and you can't come off looking like a slut, because then you look really bad. (p. 87)

In Tolman's (2002) study, 15-year-old White, middle-class, questioning/bisexual Megan described the perilous tightrope that she was aware she was supposed to walk in response to the requirements to be both "good" and "together":

I mean so many of my friends have done it and in a way it's kinda good if you, like my friends who haven't ever kissed a guy or they've just kissed or something, that's not cool either, you have to be kinda in the middle you know, you have to like know what you're doing but not go that far . . . There's so [much] like, you know, stuff that you have to deal with and I don't know . . . (p. 110)

In describing this ambiguous territory, Megan articulated how having to be the gatekeeper of boys' sexuality and maintaining her reputation made it hard for her to experience or pursue her own desires:

It's so confusing, 'cause you have to like say no, you have to be the one to say no, but why should you be the one to, 'cause I mean maybe you're enjoying it and you shouldn't have to say no or anything. But if you don't, maybe the guy'll just keep going and going, and you can't do that, because then you would be a slut. (p. 110)

The girls and young women in these studies (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002) walked a difficult line between the social expectation that they protect their reputations and the social approval that comes from having a boyfriend. They made decisions about whether or not to be sexual in the midst of the pressure to keep a boyfriend. At the same time they feared that they would lose others' respect if they were too sexual or too "easy." For instance, a middle-class, 17-year-old White girl from the Holland and colleagues' (1998) study said:

If a girl sleeps with him and if she consents quickly to the boy saying, "Yeah, I'll have sex with you," then

he'll think she's slack whereas if a girl says, "No," sometimes he'll say to her, "Oh, you're frigid," but in his mind he'll be thinking, "She's a bit sensible. She knows what she's thinking." But he'll try and make her feel bad. Whereas a girl, if she goes to bed with him, he'll say, "Oh yeah, you're lovely" then the next day he'll be calling her a slag behind her back. (p. 169)

Girls were punished for their sexual expression when their peers labeled them with such monikers as "slag" or "slut" (p. 168). A 16-year-old, African Caribbean, working-class girl noted that there were no equivalently damaging terms for boys or men:

With girls you're brought up to be ladylike, because if you start being rampant you're called a slag or a slut or whatever, but with boys they can get away with anything, like they won't get called no major names, they just get called Casanova and things like that, but that's not really going to hurt them, like if a girl gets called a slag. (Holland et al., pp. 173–174)

A girl's actual sexual activity often had no bearing on whether or not she was called a slut. Girls told stories about going to extreme efforts to rescue themselves from an undeserved bad reputation. In Tolman's (2002) study, Trisha, an 18-year-old, White, working-class woman, described a time when an innocent canoe ride with a male friend and a female friend transformed into a rumor that she had been alone with a boy, presumably having sex. She was afraid that others would think:

Oh, she's easy, I can get off her anytime I want, you know, they're gonna think you're easy, so everyone else is gonna try it. And then your friends are gonna think of you lower, so it's like, you wanna try to keep your reputation good. (p. 137)

Trisha worked hard to fight back against this false story because she was sure that the consequences that awaited her were so dire.

In order for sexuality education to address the slut/prude tightrope, curricula would first have to reveal its existence and show the way that categorizing some girls as sluts and others as prudes creates a hierarchy of women in which girls diminish each other and compete with one another for boys' attention. Teachers could talk about the ways that derogatory categories such as these also constrain girls' ability to comfortably express and experience their sexuality for fear that they might then be labeled as a slut or prude. Teachers could engage students in discussions and activities to articulate the multifaceted motivations that girls have for engaging in sexual behaviors, which can be complex and even contradictory.

For example, girls might choose to engage in sexual behaviors to experience pleasure, to gain popularity, to maintain a boyfriend, or to “get it over with.” Each of these motivations might have different implications for the decisions girls make about disease protection and contraception, pleasure, and power (Impett & Peplau, 2003).

Experiencing Male Pressure and Coercion

The researchers (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002) found that girls' experiences with sexuality occurred along a continuum of male pressure and coercion, ranging from overt consent on a girl's part to forced sexual interactions. Oftentimes, girls took responsibility for the pressure or physical force that they experienced. One girl in Tolman's study who struggled to develop an understanding of her own sexual feelings described the constant threat of male violence that women and girls feel in their daily activities. Kim, a 16-year-old, suburban, White girl, explained:

I had just been out to dinner with a friend, and I was walking back and so when I was walking it was like 8:30, so it was dark, and this man started following me, and so I crossed to the other side of the street and he crossed over too, and I crossed back, and he crossed on that side, too. And that was really scary. (p. 76)

Kim said that her father believed that “women have to take some kind of responsibility” for being raped, since “it could be kind of their fault too” (pp. 75–76).

Approximately one-third of the girls in Tolman's (2002) study reported abuse or molestation from men or boys, most of whom they knew. Most of the girls described boys behaving in sexually aggressive and assertive ways, although they did not name these behaviors as inappropriate or problematic. Talking about a boy she liked, Sophie described his

Chasing me with some like bat or something like that? And I like went to get away, and he like pinned me down. It sounds like cruel and like ferocious, but he was like holding me down . . . And he was just right above me and had both of my arms down. (p. 132)

This example demonstrates how qualitative research can reveal complexities in the ways that different people feel about the same experience. Whereas many people might have been afraid, Sophie experienced the interaction as playful and exciting. Her story illuminated how girls learn that male predatory behavior is not only expected but also exciting (Phillips, 2000).

Holland and colleagues (1998) found that in addition to experiencing male coercion as normal, girls and women assumed responsibility for the satisfaction of men's and boys' sexual desires, and this sense of responsibility was particularly strong if they felt that they had behaved in an arousing way. One 20-year-old, working-class, White woman described her guilt when she felt she had aroused a man:

I was also a little bit worried, but I just tried to brush it off a little bit. But it was obvious that he wasn't going to take no for an answer. I suppose in a way I was scared of what he would do if I said “no” any more. Because he was really like pushing me. Not pushing me physically, but pushing me in the sense of, “Oh, come on”—you know. I thought, “Oh God I feel guilty,” because I thought, “You've led him on—led him on.” (p. 157)

The threat of male coercion was coupled with the fear of male abandonment; over time, girls learned to anticipate and fear negative consequences from not satisfying male sexual desire, whether or not any particular threat was made. When Martin (1996) asked girls, “Why do you think it is hard for some girls to say no if they really don't want to have sex?” they gave responses such as (a) “‘Cause you're afraid that they're gonna leave you,” (b) “Because some guys say, ‘If you love me you would do it,’” and (c) “‘Cause they're afraid of them” (pp. 73–74). This last statement about girls having sex because they are afraid points to another aspect of gender inequality. Namely, if girls do not acquiesce to sex in response to men's verbal pressure, they run the risk of being raped. For instance, one 21-year-old, White, heterosexual woman in the Phillips (2000) study said:

I thought it was really cool and I expected we would kind of work up to things and then see what happened. I definitely didn't expect to have sex with him, not then and there. It didn't occur to me that he would try to force anything. It was so exciting, and we were kind of drunk and away from home and the whole thing was just so exciting. I didn't mean to lead him on, but I see it now from his perspective, and I was all over him, and in the beginning I was into it just as much as he was. But I was thinking like, making out, not sex. But I guess I must have been sending out totally mixed signals. I can see how he would have assumed that since I brought him back to my room, and my roommate wasn't there, and we had been fooling around, I mean it's understandable that he would have thought we were going all the way. It went too far for me and I was getting scared. I totally tried to stop it, but he was like,

“Come on, who are you kidding? You know you want it just as much as me. You know you wanted it all along.” He just didn’t take no for an answer, and we, or maybe I should say he had sex with me, because I was just laying there wishing this wasn’t happening. I look at it as a failure of communication, really. He was young and I sent him mixed signals, so of course he was going to see that as an invitation to have sex. I just should have chilled out and been much more careful about the kinds of signals I was sending out. I should have realized I might be leading him on. (p. 177)

Because boys are generally not held responsible for their sexual actions, girls and young women often take on responsibility for being raped, especially if they are raped by an acquaintance.

Experiences with child sexual abuse may contribute to later confusion about one’s own sexual feelings. Laura, a 17-year-old, urban, African American girl in Tolman’s (2002) study, reported many years of sexual abuse, beginning at age 7, perpetrated by a male adolescent babysitter who “did unspeakable things to me” (p. 71). She remained angry that no one intervened when she told adults. Laura considered the possibility that her current lack of clarity about her own sexual feelings might have been related to her early negative experiences of abuse: “Like if I wanna do something, like with that guy, you know, [the abuse] might stop me” (p. 71). Further, she said that she sometimes felt “jumpy,” “hyper,” or “strange” (Tolman, p. 69) around a boy whom she liked. She had trouble knowing what her own feelings were and whether her body’s responses had something to do with being attracted to the boy.

To address the male coercion and pressure that many if not most girls deal with as a normalized part of heterosexual courtship, sexuality education would have to do more than teach girls to “just say no.” An alternative that is responsive to how girls describe their actual experiences would be to create safe spaces for discussions among girls and also boys about the ways that negotiations between sexual partners actually do occur. For instance, a discussion about what it is like for girls to say no and what it is like for boys to hear it could be enlightening and could also serve as a springboard for developing more effective means of communicating around differences in desire and power. Teachers could invite girls and boys to analyze nonverbal cues, the impact of alcohol and drug use, the differences in power and control between boys and girls, and the societal normalization of control and violence in heterosexual relationships through, for example, the media.

(Not) Developing Sexual Subjectivity

Confronting male pressure and coercion and attempting to find a balance between being a slut and being a prude hampered girls’ abilities to develop a positive sense of themselves as sexual beings. The ability to know and express oneself as a sexual person with desires, rights, and boundaries has been referred to as *sexual subjectivity* (Bartky, 1990; Fine, 1988; Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002). As girls avoided acknowledging the coercion they experienced during sexual relations and could not genuinely experience their own sexual pleasure and desire for fear of being labeled a slut, they described sexual intercourse as something that “just happened” (Martin). Tolman identified the “it just happened” story as a cover story—the only legitimate one that girls can tell while retaining their “good girl” reputation. What is distinctive about saying that sex “just happened” is that there is no active subject, no person making choices or taking responsibility, that is, no evidence of sexual subjectivity.

Across all four studies (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002), the girls’ stories lacked a sense of agency and clarity that would have enabled them to make active and unambiguous choices about their sexual behavior. Tolman found that some girls either failed to develop or eventually lost the ability to be aware of and act upon their own desires. Instead, they were only responsive to boys’ sexual needs, desires, or demands. That is, at the same time that they lacked awareness and agency regarding their own desire, they felt responsible for responding to or controlling their partners’ desire. This lack of sexual subjectivity made it difficult at best for them to discern when they did and did not want to engage in particular sexual experiences. A dangerous implication of this lack of awareness and agency is that some girls were unable to tell the difference between consenting and being coerced. For example, one girl was unable to determine if in fact she had been raped during a recent sexual experience (Tolman). Jenny described saying no repeatedly, that she “wanted to wait,” that she didn’t “like” him, and that she “said no but I never, I mean I never stopped him from doing anything” (p. 62). Although she did eventually stop saying no to her partner, this experience, like all of her other sexual experiences that she talked about, did not include a sense of her own desire. Because she never had a sense of her own feelings, and proof of rape is predicated on the absence of desire, how could she distinguish this experience from others? How could she know if she had been raped? It was Jenny herself who introduced the idea of rape into her own story: “He’s not the type of person who would rape me, or whatever, I mean, well, I don’t think he’s

that way at all" (p. 65). The normalization of coercive male behavior led girls to question whether their experiences could really be called rape.

Another aspect of girls' lack of sexual subjectivity is that they think that they do not deserve to have desire or to have their desires fulfilled. In order to feel all right about being sexual and to maintain their "good girl" status, girls had to pretend that their interactions were part of a caring or loving relationship, that the interaction "just happened," or that they were to some degree coerced into the interaction. Sondra, a 19-year-old, heterosexual, African American/Native American woman in Phillips' (2000) study, narrated how she can only "look good" if she is coerced into having sex:

It doesn't look good if I say I want it. I'd feel so self-conscious that I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself anyway, and I'd lose the mood. The only way I can really feel okay about enjoying myself is if he really coerces me into it. Which is kind of funny, because if I act on what I want, I can't let myself want it. But if I'm forced to act, not violently forced but kind of coerced into it, then I can feel like I was seduced, so then it's ok because it kind of just happens. (p. 116)

Emily, a 16-year-old, White, suburban girl, talked about her discomfort with having sexual feelings of her own, even in responding to her boyfriend's interest in meeting her needs. Emily's intellectual understanding of the importance of incorporating her sexuality into her growing sense of self stood in counterpoint to her shrewd observation of the danger that such a self-concept may generate and how she came to be in this bind:

Maybe it's that all through growing up, [adults tell you] he's gonna try to get this off you, and he's gonna try to do, you know, when you're little, and he's gonna try to kiss you and you have to say no, you know, stuff like that . . . I don't like to think of myself as feeling really sexual . . . I don't like to think of myself as being like someone who needs to have their desires fulfilled. (Tolman, 2002, p. 104)

This same girl described faking sexual pleasure and ending a sexual experience by providing her partner with sexual pleasure as a way to end a physically painful experience. The idea of just stopping did not occur to her as an acceptable decision:

He was almost like hurting me [with his fingers in my vagina], I just faked like loud and I just like made him come so the whole thing would stop . . . I was just getting almost bored, nothing was happening, I would just rather have been watching TV, I wasn't really attracted to him, I just didn't have the energy to put off his come-ons, so I just gave him

a hand job and so he came and then it like ended. (Tolman, 2002, p. 105)

When asked why it was important for her to appear like she was enjoying herself, Emily responded:

I don't know, I think it's kind of almost mean, personally, I would feel mean and uncaring if I didn't, it was just one, I mean, it was no skin off my back to do it, so why not make him happy by just pretending, it was no big deal, I mean, I wasn't getting hurt by it. (Tolman, 2002, pp. 105–106)

Once girls are distanced from their own desire and are more concerned about their partners' pleasure, they may not insist that their partners use condoms. Some girls and young women in the Holland and colleagues (1998) study talked about how their male partners disliked condoms, privileging male pleasure over their own safety:

I mean, they're terrible. I mean, the thing is as well, people just won't use them because they hate them. It spoils the whole effect of it. It's like—I mean, as most people say, you know, it's like chewing toffee with the wrapper on. (pp. 40–41)

When discussing whether or not they want to use condoms, some girls and young women in the Holland and colleagues (1998) study were afraid of spoiling the mood, and even those who felt that they deserved pleasure and safety indicated that it was difficult to ask their partners to use protection. One girl said, "Yeah, I think that's what it is, you don't want to hurt his feelings" (p. 41). In longer-term relationships, girls said that asking a partner to use a condom was difficult because it brought up questions of trust. Privileging the continuity of relationships and boys' and men's pleasure or feelings over their own safety were other examples of how girls lost their sexual subjectivity in relationships. One 21-year-old White woman self-consciously critiqued her own experience of getting enjoyment not from the physical experience of sex but from her male partner's satisfaction. She said:

Well I think I don't enjoy sex for what it is right, when a fella is like going away, I'm not enjoying that, the actual intercourse. I like enjoyment from, I know it sounds like a typical woman statement, but them actually doing it and them enjoying themselves. (p. 122)

In contrast to the many stories in which girls appeared to have lost or never developed a sense of sexual subjectivity, there were moments when girls conveyed clarity, comfort, confidence, and entitlement regarding their sexuality. Holland and colleagues (1998) discussed sexual subjectivity in terms of the concept of empowerment. In their findings, they distinguished between "intellectual" and "experiential" empowerment (p. 131).

They noted that while some girls could articulate the idea of being empowered to know and act on their own subjective sexuality, putting these words into action was more difficult. Several girls in their study did exemplify such “integration” (p. 140). Working-class, White, and 21 years old at the time of her interview, Tina was able to import her understanding of gender inequities in relationships into how she made active choices to support her own safety and pleasure:

Most women didn’t know what they should feel. It was very much on the receiving side, doing something to please someone else. Not pleasure for themselves. So when it came down to contraception, “Oh, I went on the pill to please my boyfriend,” because they didn’t like sheaths for whatever reason. They didn’t feel in control, as an equal, with the same rights as their boyfriend . . . Safe sex is as pleasurable an experience as actual penetration. Oral sex, just things like touching somebody else’s body in a very gentle way. Kissing. Appreciating one another’s bodies. I think it’s just as [much] fun, if not more. You concentrate on each other’s needs a lot more, you’re a lot more aware of them . . . I’ve said, “I don’t want to do that,” or “why don’t you try this?” Before they know it, they’re converted and they suddenly realize—“Well we haven’t actually done it,” “Well, I’m tired now, haven’t you had a good time?” (pp. 142–144)

These researchers argued that Tina had educated her partners in the “transformation” of masculinity and also femininity.

This young woman echoed Sophie, who at 16 years chose not to have sexual intercourse, because she believed that “being in love” and having “an ongoing thing” were requisite for making that choice. She also believed that “it’s ok to like fool around with somebody that you’re just attracted to . . . having fun is a good enough reason . . . but having sex is more of like a commitment” (Tolman, 2002, p. 128). Sophie also described providing partners with information about her body so that her safer sex choices were pleasurable and asking them to tell her what they liked. She liked feeling attractive, which made her feel like “you have power,” and she noted that “feel[ing] sexy. . . . It’s just almost feeling like good about yourself, in a certain way” (p. 131). Unlike most of the other girls in this study who attributed their feeling “sexy” to how others responded to them, for Sophie, sexual subjectivity was expressed in how she felt as well as how she acted.

One 19-year-old, heterosexual, biracial woman in the Phillips (2000) study took the contradictory step of “decid[ing] to become a slut” (p. 124). Understanding

how this label was meant to control her sexual subjectivity, she concluded that the way to transcend the controlling label was to embrace it:

I wasn’t going to be like the passive, demure little lady about [having sex] and try to pretend I was a nice girl, because I knew once you decided to have sex you were never going to be a nice girl anymore in anyone’s eyes anyway, so why not just accept the fact and be a slut. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I basically felt really empowered by it. (p. 124)

While this strategy freed this young woman in some ways, she acknowledged certain losses as well, in particular, her sense that she had to opt out of the category “girl”:

If you go to do things other girls do, like makeup or doing your hair pretty or clothes and that, it’s like you’re never seen as doing it because you’re a girl. It’s only seen as you’re doing it because you’re a slut. (p. 124)

Preferably, girls could express their sexuality without having to opt out or experience power only by embracing a marginalized social category.

To support girls’ development of sexual agency, classroom curriculum could include discussions about sexual decision making that acknowledge that most girls and some boys do not ever make an overt decision to have sex but often experience or even “go for” sex as something that just happens in the heat of the moment. Sexuality education could include information about the realities and vicissitudes of girls’ and boys’ desire and the ways that being aware of one’s own desires and also one’s partner’s desires can be helpful and also difficult. Based on the qualitative research on girls’ sexuality, girls who are in touch with their desires appear more likely to know when they do or do not want to engage in sexual behaviors and are more likely to make conscious decisions and communicate these desires safely. Curriculum could also include a discussion of the way that conscious decision making is a key factor in young people’s decisions to use condoms and contraception.

Gender Inequality: Policy Implications for Abstinence-Only Education

In an attempt to bring attention to the continued oppression of girls and women, some of the more recent international human rights declarations condemn ongoing gender inequality and mention its relationship to sexuality-related practices and policies (see, for example, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2004; United Nations, 1995). The *Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual*

Behavior (Satcher, 2001) includes in its community responsibilities the responsibility to ensure that people are free from gender-based stigmatization and violence.

Policy aimed at the eradication of gender inequality in U.S. public schools began with the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972. Title IX states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Title IX, ¶ 2). Since Title IX passed, it has been utilized to address inequalities in school programs, ranging from gender discrimination in athletics to differential participation and inclusion in math and science classes. Title IX has also provided an opportunity to address sexuality-related issues, including sexual harassment and discriminatory practices aimed at girls who are pregnant and parenting. To date, Title IX has not addressed the gender inequality that has recently been identified in sexuality education curriculum.

Rogow and Haberland (in press) found that globally and in the United States sexuality education curricula persistently leave out or only superficially deal with gender inequality. In fact, abstinence-only education has been shown to reinforce traditional, stereotypical gender roles, thus actively supporting, as well as failing to acknowledge or challenge, inequality between boys and girls (Decarie, 2005; Waxman, 2004). Only recently have evaluators of abstinence-only education and some sexuality education policies in the United States begun to acknowledge the importance of addressing gender inequality in sexuality education. In his content analysis of abstinence-only education programs, Waxman (2004) found that "abstinence-only curricula treat stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific fact" (p. 16). Abstinence-only curricula teach that girls are more focused on relationships than on future goals and achievement, that girls are weaker than boys and in need of protection, and that boys are naturally aggressive and unemotional. In a qualitative thematic analysis of workbooks used in popular abstinence-only curricula, Decarie (2005) found reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles and encouragement of mutual mistrust between boys and girls. For example, the workbooks teach that girls focus solely on romantic relationships, thus posing a threat to boys' future goals and achievement. At the same time, they encourage girls not to trust boys, who are presented as being sexually dangerous because of their inability to control their own sexual desires.

Rejecting the countrywide trend toward abstinence-only education, California policy makers have passed new comprehensive sexuality education legislation. The

California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act (2003) says that sexuality education lessons must "provide a pupil with the knowledge and skills necessary to protect his or her sexual and reproductive health from unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases" and "encourage a pupil to develop healthy attitudes concerning adolescent growth and development, body image, gender roles, sexual orientation, dating, marriage, and family" (p. 7). While acknowledging the place of gender roles, the bill does not specify the ways in which gender is part of such a "healthy attitude." Qualitative research illuminating how gender inequality interferes with adolescents' efforts to make safe and healthy choices could have been part of such legislation, for instance, in writing specific regulations into the education code for the state to operationalize this new law.

As the movement toward abstinence-only education becomes stronger in the United States (and also globally), the policy debate over sexuality education continues to become more polarized between abstinence-only education supporters who believe the goal of sexuality education is to stop young or unmarried people from engaging in sex and comprehensive sexuality education supporters who believe that young people need and deserve information about the proper use and effectiveness of condoms and contraceptives if they chose to have sex. The findings of qualitative research on adolescent female sexuality suggest that the current abstinence-only versus comprehensive sexuality education debate is impoverished, since neither approach acknowledges the centrality of gender inequality to girls' sexuality development. Holland, Ramazanoglu, and Scott (1990) discussed the importance of accounting for gendered power differentials when educating about HIV/AIDS. They pointed out the way that public advertising campaigns and school-based sexuality education in London failed to incorporate research findings that consistently showed that young women faced the continued sexual double standard and subtle to violent coercion in their day-to-day sexual experiences. They found that this coercion often thwarted young women's attempts to protect themselves against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. They noted that sexuality education's focus on heterosexual intercourse and reproduction and its lack of any information about the social context in which these interactions take place left girls and young women with little practical information about how to negotiate safer sex in the midst of real-life power imbalances with their male partners.

The findings of qualitative research on female adolescent sexuality offer specific directions for any sex education curriculum to include lessons that confront the

slut/prude dichotomy, critique and challenge the normalization of male pressure and coercion, and support girls and young women in developing sexual subjectivity. Based on the findings of qualitative research on girls' (and also boys') sexuality, a healthy approach to gender roles requires critical thinking that resists the naturalization of gender-stereotyped behavior. Much like the teaching of media literacy where young people are taught to think critically about the messages and images they see in popular culture (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), sexuality education anchored in critical thinking about gender would train teachers to ask young people to identify and question cultural assumptions that uphold and reproduce gender inequality, such as the belief in the naturalness of female purity and male sexual aggressiveness. Fields and Hirschman (2005) suggested a classroom in which teachers and students discuss the ways that sexuality and sexual differences are deployed either to promote or deny inclusion of some community members. They imagined teachers encouraging dissident voices as well as classroom conversations that recognize the public aspects of sexuality as opposed to its privatization. Kevin Kumashiro (2002) recommended that teachers and students move beyond the desire for comforting repetition of familiar tropes toward dialogues that critique existing social structures—such as gender inequality. He pointed out that these kinds of conversations can be uncomfortable and controversial but that this is where actual learning occurs. For such an approach to be effective, a *safe space*, in which girls and boys could explore the vicissitudes of real life without fear of repercussions, would be essential. Even analysis of what would make such frank discussions so difficult could initiate the development of a critical perspective and skills that would constitute an important educational tool.

As the Senate hearings (Committee on Appropriations United States Senate, 2004) underscored, the power of young people's voices can be instrumental in moving adults to develop responsive policy. By reemphasizing the importance of scientific rigor, qualitative research can both destabilize the power of testimonials by exposing their lack of method, depth, and complexity and infuse compelling and complicated stories that could fuel responsible policy development. It is also possible that qualitative research may be able to leverage space for various kinds of science and data that are currently being denied and denigrated. Qualitative research trumps testimonials even as it exposes their unfair deployment by emphasizing how all stories—which are productions of lived experience—are suffused with complexity in the telling and in the living. There is always more to the story.

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