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Adolescent Sexuality

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Introduction

The field of adolescent sexuality has often been marked by debates about how much, at what age, and with what restrictions young people should learn about and engage in sexual activity. Research in the area of adolescent sexuality has aimed, in large part, to explain the prevalence, outcomes, contexts, and predictors of sexual activity in teens. Focus has often been on sexual risk and heterosexual intercourse, specifically the age of first intercourse, rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancy, as well as other associated behaviors such as alcohol and drug use (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Over the last 30 years, however, there has been a increasing interest in examining sexuality as a normative developmental experience which includes not only questions regarding sexual activity but further elaboration of girls' and boys' sexuality – including gender and sexual identity development, body image, how sexuality is experienced, how it is negotiated with peers and partners, and the development of expectations that a sexual life can be a balance of both pleasure and risk (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Definition

"Adolescent sexuality" is a term that includes several interrelated dimensions, including adolescents' physical body and aspects such as puberty, hormonal development, and body image (Vasilenko, Ram, & Lefkowitz, 2011); gender and gender identity development (Martin, 1996); sexual behaviors; sexual and romantic relationships experienced during adolescence (Jones & Furman, 2011); sexual identities and orientations (Diamond, 2005); sexual self-concept and sexual subjectivity (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Martin, 1996); sexual agency and the ability to enact wishes regarding sexuality (Gavey, 2012; Tolman, 2002, 2012); sexualization and sexual violence, including how young people are mistreated as sexual beings (Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2012); young people's conceptualizations of sex and the qualities they imagine for themselves in their current and future sexual lives (McClelland, 2010); and, lastly, aspects of their sexual socialization as influenced by the various groups, communities, and social environments in which they develop, including school, families, religious institutions, and the media (Ward, 2003).

Keywords

Adolescence; normative; sexual behavior; sexual development; sexual identity; sexual desire; sexual risk; sexual experience; sexualization; sexual empowerment; sexual pleasure

History

Adolescent sexuality has long been equated with danger (Moran, 2000), and researchers have often reflected this sentiment with their choice of research questions by pursuing studies of pregnancy, STI risk, condom use, and, increasingly, sexual violence in the lives of adolescents. Research in the field of adolescent sexuality has frequently been in the service of identifying predictors of and controls on these and other negative sexual outcomes. Over the past 30 years, researchers have advocated for unlinking adolescent sexuality from assumed dangerous outcomes and pathology (Bauman & Udry, 1981; Fine, 1988). Since 2000, investigators have regularly produced empirical research which highlights dimensions of adolescent sexuality, such as sexual subjectivity, gender development, and motivations for engaging in sexual activity (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Traditional Debates

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been political and academic anxieties concerning the most beneficial way to define adolescent sexuality, especially given the context of abstinence-only sex education policies and controversies about the efficacy of teaching young people exclusively about abstinence until marriage (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Two areas that have been consistently examined are sexual risk (particularly risk associated with heterosexual intercourse) and pubertal development.

Sexual Risk
The focus of research on adolescent sexuality has been anchored in identifying and evaluating risks associated with penile-vaginal intercourse, with particular focus on age of first intercourse, pregnancy, and increasingly STIs, including HIV/AIDS. The underlying purpose for this research is to diminish the dangers and unintended consequences of adolescent sexual behaviors. This body of research has often been concerned with which groups of adolescents are most "at risk" for outcomes such as teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Often as a result of gender-based and racial stereotypes about adolescent sexuality (Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2012), race and ethnicity have been dominant factors in the definition of "sexual risk," with African-American and Latina adolescents often categorized as especially "at risk" or "risky." This focus on specific demographic groups as especially "at risk," while framed as protectionist, has meant that youth of color have often been individually associated with sexual risk, obscuring structural factors such as poverty, lack of educational supports, or social stigma (Fine & McClelland, 2006). However, research on diverse patterns within racial/ethnic groups has extended understandings of early romantic relationships (Geronimus, 2003; Milbrath, Ohlso, & Eyre, 2009). In addition to race/ethnicity, to the extent that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) sexuality has been studied, it has almost exclusively been in terms of identifying who is at heightened HIV risk (Goodenow, Netherland, & Szalacha, 2002).

Pubertal Development
A substantial body of research has focused on puberty and the physical development of secondary sexual characteristics in adolescents. Pubertal development and its timing have been examined by researchers for the implications for adolescents' attitudes towards sex and sexual behaviors, as well as implications for their psychological adjustment. Two general approaches have been taken in this research: first, a focus on pubertal timing and maturation trajectories and, second, a focus on issues of weight, body image, and their effect on sexual decision making, especially for girls and young women. Both have examined the development of the sexual and sexualized body:

there has been attention to groups of adolescents based on the timing of their puberty, with negative consequences for early puberty for girls (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2004) and delayed puberty for boys (Lindfors et al., 2007).

Critical Debates

An important critical turn in adolescent sexuality research has been a shift away from an exclusive focus on risks associated with sexuality to broader considerations of adolescent sexuality in terms of the potential for positive and developmentally appropriate sexual outcomes, including adolescent sexual desire (Fine, 1988). For example, in 2000, researchers noted that adolescent sexuality was slowly becoming understood as integral to adolescent identity formation and that "[s]igns of a shift toward a more normative perspective ha[d] begun to appear" (Welsh, Rostosky, and Kawaguchi, 2000, p. 119). While "normative" is both a social and problematic term that can imply departure as deviance or pathology, it has been mindfully deployed to interrupt the exclusion of sexuality as an expected dimension of adolescence (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

While risks associated with adolescent sexuality are essential to understand, Tolman and McClelland (2011), as well as other researchers (e.g., Russell, 2005), have noted the emergence of a critical mass of empirical studies reflecting an assumption that adolescent sexuality is a normal and expected aspect of adolescent development. These researchers have begun to argue that the constant linking of danger and sex may have negative consequences for adult sexual development.

In particular, Tolman (2002) has argued for the importance of conceptually expanding what has been called "sexual development" to the broader, more comprehensive construct of "sexuality development." Seen through this lens, adolescent sexuality has been increasingly defined as a large umbrella term that encompasses a number of subfields, including pubertal development,

body image, gender development, sexual identity development, and sexual subjectivity. Seen together, these subfields all work towards understanding how young people physiologically and psychologically mature into adulthood – with a healthy sexual self – meaning that individuals have positive associations and experiences with their physical body, feelings of attraction to potential partners, and their own experiences of desire and pleasure.

Others have argued that the focus on individual behavior in research on adolescent sexuality has resulted in limited attention to structural dangers in young people's lives, including the impact of racism, poverty, and immigration, and how these structures shape the development of young people (Fine & McClelland, 2006). In 2006, Fine and McClelland introduced the term "thick desire" as a way to capture the political, social, and embodied aspects of adolescent sexuality development.

In addition to these critical turns which highlighted a shifting focus towards normative adolescent sexuality, "sexuality development," and "thick desire," several themes have emerged as central to this expanding conceptualization of adolescent sexuality. These include adolescents' motivations for sexual relationships, the development of early understandings of oneself as sexual and having sexual subjectivity, the development of gender/sexual identity or identities, and body image. Each of these areas is explored below.

Adolescents' Motivations for Sex

One of the most important shifts has been conceptualizing motivations for sexual activity and relationships among adolescents. This shift signals a significant break from assuming adolescent sexuality is inherently pathological (or evidence of pathology) to considering it an aspect of a normal developmental process – and one which is accompanied by psychological and physical motives. Beginning in the late 1980s, research concerning young female sexual motivation, agency, and desire has been on the rise and expanding quickly (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). This interest in adolescent female sexuality has

roots in the larger feminist project of reclaiming female sexuality and roots in the developmental project of describing adolescent sexuality as a normative process that is affected by both sociopolitical and biological changes (Tolman & Diamond, 2001). This body of research on adolescent motives towards sexual encounters and behaviors has developed a new image of the young woman and, increasingly, young man (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006), who is making dynamic decisions regarding his or her sexuality and for whom sexual satisfaction is a salient consideration (Impett & Tolman, 2006).

Sexual Self-Concept

An innovative direction in the field of adolescent sexuality has been the development of research on adolescents' sexual self-concept (Hensel, Fortenberry, O'Sullivan, & Orr, 2011) and sexual subjectivity (Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002). Sexual subjectivity, for example, includes an individual's sexual body-esteem, entitlement to self-pleasure and pleasure from a partner, sexual self-efficacy, and reflection about sexual behavior (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). Researchers working with concepts related to sexual self-concept and sexual subjectivity have often investigated their relationship to sexual identity formation, sexual decision making, and sexual behaviors. For example, the development of the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI) enabled Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) to find that among adolescent girls, sexual subjectivity was associated with self-esteem and resistance to sexual double standards. Others have investigated relationships between sexual subjectivity and psychological well-being (e.g., Impett & Tolman, 2006).

Gender Identity Development

Adolescents' definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman, both in and out of sexual relationships, have been of interest to researchers for decades (Martin, 1996). This body of work has often examined the mechanisms by which adolescents learn about gender ideologies, including media, family, and schooling. For

example, Chu, Porche, and Tolman (2005) developed the Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale (AMIRS) as a means to measure the nature and degree to which adolescent boys internalized masculine norms and how masculine ideology impacted their intimate relationships. In related research, Tolman and Porche (2000) developed the Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale (AFIS) as a means to assess the role of gender norms in the lives of girls and young women. Researchers have usefully explored how gender ideologies powerfully shape sexual lives. For example, Kerrigan and colleagues' (2007) study of African-American adolescents found that "[s]tronger adherence to female gender ideologies related to emotional strength and caretaking may be linked to a heightened desire for male intimacy and tolerance of male sexual risk behavior" (p. 172).

Sexual Identity

There has been increasing interest in the nature and range of developmental trajectories that both LGBT and heterosexual adolescents experience as they develop into sexual adults. This attention has often been in terms of how young people develop sexual knowledge, how they come to identify themselves as and for potential sexual partners, and how they engage in sexual behaviors. Sexual identity development has largely been examined in two ways: sexual orientation and identity development as a sexual person. Savin-Williams (2001) and Diamond (2005, 2009) are credited with articulating the shifting nature of sexual identification in adolescents. Both have studied self-identification processes in young people, how these identities relate to same- and other-sex sexual behaviors, and how they change over time. As a result, there has been a paradigmatic shift from conceptualizing a "gay teen" to a more nuanced discussion of "sexual minority youth" – described as an extremely diverse group who may at times adopt a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity; may be actively questioning their desires or identity, including not adopting a specific sexual identity; may engage in same-sex sexual activities; and/or who may report same-sex attractions.

Body Image

Concerns with body image at this transitional point in the life course have often resulted in research which examines how the pubertal transition negatively affects girls and young women and how sexual decision making is affected. For example, Grabe and colleagues (2007) examined the role of sexual objectification during sexual development and found that pubertal development and peer harassment lead to greater body shame for girls. In terms of sexual decision making, Gillen and colleagues (2006) found that young women who evaluated their appearance more positively were less likely to report engaging in risky sexual activity. For both males and females, those who rated their appearance more positively also perceived fewer barriers to using condoms. These findings and related research are essential to better understand the relationships between how a young person experiences and judges their own body, the bodies of their peers, and the bodies of their real and potential sexual partners – both in adolescence and throughout adulthood.

International Relevance

Two areas of research have developed in terms of international trends related to adolescent sexuality. The first has concerned important comparisons between the US and other Western countries, especially in terms of the US's high rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and lack of knowledge concerning birth control (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). For example, Schalet's (2011) detailed comparison of the US and the Netherlands' approaches to adolescent sexuality, sex education, and parental guidance highlighted how cultural assumptions and public policies are extremely influential in shaping how young people learn about themselves and their bodies, as well as experience intimate relationships.

The second area of research in terms of international trends related to adolescent sexuality has concerned how US media circulates through new technologies into both developing and developed countries and how this affects the sexualization of girls worldwide (APA, 2007). Researchers have become increasingly concerned about the effects of easily available pornography, the widespread infiltration of sexualized media, and its impact on the prevalence of sexual violence as well as other vulnerabilities for girls and women (Coy & Garner, 2012).

Practice Relevance

Attention to how terms like "adolescent sexuality" are defined is essential because definitions have broad and often immediate impacts on a range of interpersonal and institutional practices – ranging from clinical and therapeutic interventions to parenting decisions, sex education practices, and other school-based policies. For example, beginning with the introduction of the 1981 Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) in the US, controversies have erupted over federal funding of sexuality education that has increasingly restricted what young people can learn about sex and sexuality in school settings. In the US, definitions of adolescent sexuality as pathological have largely resulted in "abstinence-only-until-marriage" sex education policies which define any sexual expression in adolescence as dangerous to the welfare of the individual, the school, as well as the nation (Fine & McClelland, 2006). More recently, definitions that conceptualize adolescent sexuality as a normative aspect of development have resulted in emergent school-based education programs that teach a range of issues related to relationships, communication, and sexual decision making, as well as pregnancy and STI prevention (SIECUS, 2004).

In addition to school policies, clinical settings are heavily influenced by how the concept of adolescent sexuality is defined. This can result in varying theories of intervention (i.e., when, how, and why to treat), for example, when adolescents are patients in therapeutic settings or when they are seeking medical advice/attention in health-care settings. For example, definitions of adolescent sexuality that encourage clinicians to frame sexuality only in terms of risky sexual behaviors might overlook

patients who need information about issues not related to behaviors, including gender identity development, aspects of desire and pleasure, anxieties about sexual fantasy, as well as many other areas that remain silenced within risk-focused clinical paradigms (Tolman, 2002). In addition, frameworks that focus on adolescent sexuality as primarily pathological may shape the kinds of information, diagnoses, and interventions provided to young people who engage in sexual activity, as a result of their own deciding or as a result of coercion. Lastly, these definitions shape the ways that parents engage with children, from infancy to adulthood, around issues of sex. Definitions of sexuality have been found to profoundly affect how parents teach children to name their genitals and about sexuality (Martin & Luke, 2010), how parents relate to teens' dating partners (Schalet, 2011), and the kinds of information parents share with children as they grow (Elliott, 2012).

Future Directions

There are several important directions for emerging research in the field of adolescent sexuality. These include, for example, attention to developing social technologies and the role of social media in adolescent sexuality development. This might include the development of theories and methods to research emerging technologies and social media as contexts and communities central to adolescents' social worlds, both in the US and globally. Building from the existing research on media exposure and sexual behavior (Lamb & Brown, 2007), researchers are encouraged to develop new models for how social media may affect adolescents' sexuality development in ways that overlap and differ from other forms of media.

Other suggestions include ensuring that research questions and designs not reinforce racist and gendered stereotypes. For example, the consistent portrayal of ethnic minority and LGBT youth as psychologically vulnerable and/or consistently "at risk" may serve to obscure other research questions pertaining to those

factors that might encourage positive sexuality development for this group beyond evaluating the object(s) of their desires, their social negotiation of sexual identity, and whether or not they act on their attractions. Diamond and Lucas (2004), for example, examined the links between sexual identity, psychological well-being, and sexual and relational expectations among sexual minority youth. While the investigators found comparable self-esteem and perceived stress ratings when compared with heterosexual peers, they also found higher rates of negative affect, greater worries about friendship networks, less control in romantic relationships, and greater fears of finding a romantic partner in the LGBT sample. This study illustrates the effect of theorizing LGBT sexuality as not merely a risk factor or a category but research that investigates the nuanced psychological implications for young people seeking romantic relationships with same-sex peers.

Lastly, researchers are encouraged to expand research questions to include adolescents' understanding of their sexual experiences and decision making, including and beyond questions of safer sex, to investigate what the embodied experiences of sexual expressions are for young people across adolescence. This might include studies with adolescents across genders, across family, religious and community backgrounds, across geographical locations, as well as across relational contexts (i.e., "hook ups," "friends with benefits," committed romantic relationships). Lastly, future researchers are encouraged to increasingly attend to sexual outcomes that are examined not solely in terms of the person (usually the young woman) but in terms of the economic, political, familial, and community resources she has available to ensure that she is well supported during her sexuality development.

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Online Resources

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SIECUS. http://www.siecus.org/
Scarleteen. http://www.scarleteen.com/
My Sistahs. http://www.mysistahs.org/
Youth Resource. http://www.amplifyyourvoice.org/youth resource
Sex Etc. http://www.sexetc.org/
Advocates for Youth. http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/

Adultism

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Introduction

The current use of the term adultism was first defined in 1978 by psychologist Jack Flasher (Flasher, 1978). In was later taken up and established as a meaningful concept by academics, researchers and advocates within the children's right movement and the sociology of childhood. Critical psychologists, critical developmental psychologists, and liberation psychologists working at the interface with childhood studies use this term to describe and explain not only children's disadvantaged position within social life but also their positioning within adult-centric research and paternalistic practice generated by the field of mainstream psychology (Burman, 2008; LeFrançois, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Not a new term, adultism has been taken up most significantly within Northern Europe.

Definition

Adultism is understood as the oppression experienced by children and young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult-tailored systems. It relates to the sociopolitical status differentials and power relations endemic to adult-child relations. Adultism may include experiences of individual prejudice, discrimination, violence, and abuse as well as social control and systemic oppression. At an individual level, it is characterized by adult authoritarianism toward children and adult-centric perspectives in interacting with children and in understanding children's experiences. Systemic adultism is characterized by adult-centric legislation, policies, rules, and practices that are embedded within social structures and institutions which impact negatively on children's daily lives and result in disadvantage and oppressive social relations.