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Sara Christiano
Let's Do It: Individual
Perspectives on First Sexual
Experiences

ABSTRACT

Although sex surrounds us in many ways learning about it in an honest, open and factual way seems more uncommon than common. This study was designed to examine how individuals gathered information about sex prior to their first sexual experience, how they made decisions to have sex for the first time and what sort of impact their decisions have had on their perspectives on sex. It was hypothesized that individuals who had access to and utilized a broad range of factual information including speaking to trusted, experienced individuals, such as parents and adults with whom they were close, were more likely to have pleasurable first and continued sexual experiences.

This qualitative exploratory study compiled individual perspectives from ten participants between the ages of 18-25, who described their paths toward sexual knowledge and what they found most beneficial in helping them learn about having a positive sexual experience. Participants were from around the US, identified with various sexual orientations, and had either completed or were pursuing higher education. They were asked their thoughts around themes such as: whether information gathered was useful or misleading; discussions of sex in their family; and their expectations of their first sexual experience. Major findings included participants utilizing sexual education in school as a major source of information and participants feeling unprepared regarding the emotional involvement of sex. This study provides useful information about how young

adults have gathered information about sex and the impact it has on their understanding of the experience prior to engaging in it.

LET'S DO IT: INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES ON FIRST SEXUAL
EXPERIENCES

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sex is present everywhere in our culture. It is used to sell shoes, movies and magazines. Freud believed that sexual drives are what propel us through life, the very thing that keeps us going. Sex has the power to excite us in some contexts and scare us in others. This is a qualitative study about what prevents us from talking to our young people about sex in honest and real terms.

Sex and adolescence, unlike sex and marriage, are not perceived as compatible terms in our society. We often connect adolescence with older children, young individuals who are developing their identity, learning how to advocate for themselves and their opinions. Socially sex is perceived as a process that takes place between two adult bodies who have the ability to make logical and consensual decisions to engage in the experience. Adolescents are not legally adults and socially are perceived as not being able to make logical decisions, especially when it comes to a decision such as engaging in sex (Jackson, 2006). They are still children and culturally we connect sex and children with dangerous and illegal behavior. Although this is a protective factor for young children who cannot logically consent to having a sexual experience, the same is not true for adolescents, and unfortunately our connection to this concept is proving to be damaging to the emotional well being of our youth. We continue teach adolescents about the physical risks involved with heterosexual sex, but do not consistently teach them

about non-heterosexual safe sex, the emotional involvement that comes along with sexual activity , or provide information for individuals who may be questioning their sexual identity or how one can have a positive and pleasurable sexual experience. Sexual education in the United States is an anatomical exploration of heterosexual safe sex practices. This research study explored 18-25 year olds' sexual education, sexual decision making process and overall understanding of sex and sexually intimate relationships.

Through individual interviews, participants were asked to share their opinions and views of their first sexual experiences, how they gathered information about sex and whether or not that information prepared them for their first and continuous sexual experiences. The sample for this study was ten individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who had experienced a mutually consensual first sexual experience. Questions focused on areas such as: how information regarding sex and sexually intimate relationships was gathered and how the information was useful or misleading; decision making around the first sexual experience; the pleasurableability of the first sexual experience; and the overall effect of their first sexual experience including their preparedness for the experience and the effect that it had on their life.

There were three primary audiences for this paper. First, the results of this study will be useful for clinicians as it gives insight into the world of adolescents and sexual information gathering and sexual decision making. Although sex is a normal and regular practice, socially we have difficulty discussing and exploring sex openly and honestly. This may create barriers as we try to educate adolescents about sex and sexual intimacy. It is important that clinicians are aware of adolescent sexual culture and how this culture affects their lives, especially when working with this population individually or in family work.

This work is also especially important for policy makers as it demonstrates important avenues that need to be explored to provide true comprehensive sexual education to our young people.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues surrounding adolescent sexual health are often met with feelings of discomfort and avoidance. The mental maturity of adolescents is often questioned when educating them about sex. What are they ready to know? If we tell them too much will that push them to explore further? Are they mature enough to have sex? Because of concerns like these, sexual education has become a venue for adolescents to learn only a fraction of the information that may be needed for them to make positive, well directed decisions. Our schools educate adolescents about the negative consequences of Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) associated with heterosexual intercourse but proportionately little to no education is provided about healthy choices surrounding oral sex, same sex couples or normal and pleasurable sexual exploration. The sexual health knowledge that adolescents are receiving appears to be coming from a multitude of sources, in a variety of different contexts, leaving them to navigate through the often conflicting information themselves.

Theoretical Approaches to Adolescent Development

The building blocks of psychodynamic theory provide insight into the psychosexual behavior and drives of adolescents. Freud's drive theory is built on the belief that normal childhood development is shaped by the drives of sexuality (or libido) and aggression. Freud theorized that these were biologically based phenomena that arise in the body and seek expression. Both drives are unconscious at first and only become conscious as they begin to be manifested. Freud's theory of psychosexual development is linear, each new stage of development dependant on the preceding stage. Within these stages there can be regressions (returning to an earlier stage) and fixations (not moving past a particular stage), which Freud theorized created the foundation for pathological relationships or character traits later in life. According to drive theory, each phase of childhood development is shaped by an erogenous zone (a physical zone of sexual pleasure), a drive, an object (often a person) toward which the drive is aimed, the psychosexual issue that the individual faces at each particular stage, character traits that emerge during that particular stage of childhood development, as well as the kinds of symptoms that may also occur at that point. The five stages of childhood development in Freud's drive theory are: infancy, toddlerhood, the phallic or oedipal stage, latency, and adolescence or the genital stage (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2008).

Freud theorized that adolescence is a tumultuous stage of biological changes, most notably being that of an increase in aggressive and sexual drives. Adolescents begin to change physically, which in turn affects cognition, emotion and fantasy.

The flooding of emotion may begin to impact their learning while it may also enrich their curiosity and creativity. Adolescents' tendency to be highly emotional often pulls them to regress to earlier oedipal themes of grief, unrequited love, rage, longing, desire and revenge. Berzoff (2008) conceptualizes Freud's genital stage through a modern lens:

"Given sudden hormonal changes, their mood swings are often intense, confusing, and overwhelming. Given sexual transformations in their bodies, adolescents gravitate toward peers who can help them develop norms around sexuality. They voraciously seek out literature, movies, music, and other forms of popular culture that are sexually and aggressively explicit. For the adolescent, the world now becomes filled with sexuality charged feelings about siblings, teachers, coaches, and peers. Whereas oedipal feelings and fantasies were repressed in latency, they are revived in adolescence. Since one of the goals of adolescence is to separate from the family of origin, sexual attraction to peers promotes disengagement from the adolescent's family. Adolescents also experience grandiosity and invulnerability in their thinking and judgment, believing that they have all the answers in contrast to their "over the hill" parents and teacher. (p.41)

Freud's understanding of development was one that was biologically and psychologically determined and not culturally or socially determined.

W.R.D Fairbairn questioned Freud's concept that fundamental motivation in life is pleasure and instead theorized that libido is not pleasure seeking, but in fact object seeking. He believed that our motivation in life was to connect to others, starting from the bond that was built between child and parent. If this bond was a pleasurable, positive connection, the child then becomes pleasure seeking, interpreted as a learned form of connection and interaction with others (Mitchell & Black, p115). If the child was faced with the opposite relationship, one of abuse and neglect, that the child began to seek pain as a form of connection and preferred

connection with others according the Fairbairn. This pattern continued into adulthood when the grown child seeks the same type of contact that they experienced early on in development.

D.W. Winnicott, a British object relations theorist, saw development not as a linear sequence as did Freud, but instead as a systemic person-in-environment process (Grodnick 1990 as cited in Applegate p. 82). The growth of a child was dependent on what Winnicott called the *facilitating environment*, the world around the child that must adapt and respond to their individual needs in personal and unique ways (Goldstien, p.75). The child's first interactions with this phase of life begin with their *holding environment*, a physical and psychical space provided traditionally by the *good enough mother* where the infant is protected without knowing that they are protected. It is the child's innocence that provides the opportunity for the next important phase of development, when the child begins to understand that they are not the only being in the world and that their needs will not always be met immediately. This phase occurs as the mother begins to address her own needs, comforts and personhood, which until now, have been forgotten by her. Mitchell and Black (1995) describe this as the child gradually becoming aware that the world consists not of one subjectivity, but many; that to satisfy their own desires they must not only express them, but must also negotiate them with other persons who also have their own desires and agendas (p.127).

The importance of what Winnicott called *ego relatedness*, or the bond between the infant and mother where the two sustain an intimate connection but

exist as separate identities, allows the child to then develop a strong sense of self. This sense of self is first recognized through the child's ability to be with themselves while in the company of others, what Winnicott termed *capacity to be alone* (Goldstien, p.76). *Capacity for concern* is an outgrowth of the child's basic sense of ego-relatedness to the mother and demonstrates their ability to hold a sense of frustration with their mother, while also maintaining the understanding that their mother is still the loving and sustaining individual that they only knew of before (Goldstien, p.76). As the child grows they develop a *transitional object*, an object that has grown out of the child's identification to the mother and continues to act as an extension of her when their needs are not met exactly when they want them to be.

What may be most important to this paper's study of child development through the lens of object relations theory, is what Winnicott termed the *true and false selves*. According to Winnicott the *true self* represents an individual's core potentialities and develops through an environment that has provided good enough mothering. He thought that maternal failure created by "impingements on the child, as might be reflected in overly strict expectations," leads the child to create a *false self* that adapts to the mother and the environment around them at the expense of the true self (Goldstien, p.77). The false self is a shell that has been created to please others and as the child or individual relies more on the façade as a form of self-protection, their true self becomes further and further removed. The false self is

thus a defensive organization that is designed to hide and protect the true self at the expense of its full expression (Goldstien, p.77).

Culture and Adolescence

Adolescence, a term promoted through psychological study only recently in historical context, continues to carry its past connections to childhood and innocence. In her writing on the cultural context in which adolescence and sex are explored, Jackson notes that these connections maintain an underpinning of susceptibility to sexual danger, as the definition of childhood in current Western culture holds both legal and moral ground denying sexual agency to be possible for adolescents as a protective measure (2006, p.250). Jackson continues to state that the ‘normal’ modern sexual subject has been positioned as an adult who can consent to sexual contact with knowledge and the young child respectively as one who cannot, therefore labeling adolescents’ sexual experiences in terms of “deviancy, precocity, and mental deficiency (2006, p.251).” Such connections certainly impact the angles and degree to which sexuality is discussed directly with this age group, consequently leaving adolescents to navigate on their own, oftentimes as a way to “fill in the gaps.”

The subjectivities of individuals, their sense of themselves and the social realities around them, have been argued to be inseparable from the cultural context in which they live. This is to say that one’s experiences and perceptions are formed by a dynamic interplay between subjectivity and culture (Phillips, 2000). The individualistic focus of Western culture does not encourage us to acknowledge these

facts, nor reflect on the ways that our identities are formed in relation to our cultural context. Marecek and Hare-Mustin advocate to replace the idea of the true self with:

...the idea of a human actor with a subjectivity constituted by social relations. Such an actor is not fixed in a unified identity, but rather her subjective experience is constituted by multiple positions available in the different social relations she is involved in (as cited in Phillips, 2000, p.227).

So, although adolescents may not be given the credit to be mature enough to have discussions around the many different aspects of sexual experience, they are directly impacted by the experiences and information around them.

Unfortunately the information adolescents receive regarding sex and love is often contradictory. Although sexual education classes are not taught equally in terms of content across the United States, the message some critics say is simply to discuss the acceptable adolescent sexual behavior of the specific period in history. Currently such critics have concluded that this discussion, as in most past eras, is to teach that no sexual behavior is appropriate (Levine, 2002). This type of logic is evident when examining recent laws that have been enacted in this country regarding the direct funding of sexual education in school. The passing of the Adolescent Family Life Act in 1981, a federal law that funded sex education that promoted “self-discipline and other prudent approaches,” as well as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, specifically Title V of the Social Security Act, which allocated \$50 million annually for abstinence only until marriage education (AOUM) (Fine and McClelland, 2006). Title V in particular

required programs to adhere to a series of principals, called *A to H*. These criteria were designed to discourage teenage sexual behavior and ultimately reduce teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Consistent criticism has been made against the *A to H* points as they adhere to a particular ideology which scholars have noted lead young people to believe that their sexual practices must fit into a particular relationship, that often exclude non-heterosexual sexual orientations and teach that non-marital sex is an immoral practice that leads to increased disease and social problems (Fine and McClelland, 2006). Separate discourses about sex are being taught to young Americans, those that they hear about in popular culture that acknowledge and often over emphasize sexual desire and pleasure, those that bring them a comprehensive sexual education that teaches them to pursue healthy sexual development and lastly sexual education programs such as AOUM curriculums that have been criticized to lodge sexuality into a particular morality that associates sex with fear and shame (Fine and McClelland, 2006).

Sex and Adolescent Social Culture

Understanding adolescents' attitudes regarding sexual behavior is key to understanding why they choose to engage or not engage in sex, which sexual behaviors they initiate and continue and the emotional and physical outcomes that they experience following sexual behavior (Halpern-Felsher & Reznik, 2009.) In her discussion of women and heterosexual sex, Phillips notes the "contradictory discourse of heterosexual love, sex and male aggression" within the current culture of the United States (Phillips, 2000, p. 18). Although Phillip's qualitative exploration

is highly focused on the domination, power and aggression that males often have during sexual exchanges, she notes the importance of understanding the influences of the often-contradictory discourse connected to modern sexuality (2000). Whether we are able to consciously note this discourse, see these interactions and experiences or are unconsciously impacted by them, social messages, practices and power relations impact who we are and how we navigate throughout our lives (Phillips, 2000). Although discussed narrowly through the experience of heterosexual women, I see the importance and value of the current cultural messages around sex to be infiltrating similarly across race, class, and sexual orientation. This is an important aspect to remember when examining adolescent sexual choice, for it represents the choice within a much larger context, one that extends far beyond the individual.

Sex and Gender

The influences of heterosexual, gender biased stereotypes have also been written about as important influences in the construction of adolescent dating relationships and their sexual decision making process. Heteronormative social definitions of sexual norms continue to place both men and women in a pressure situation where they feel that they may have to act more "feminine" or "masculine." In such stereotypical, gendered roles, women are constrained to feel that they have little room for expressing sexual desire and agency, which may often lead to a reproduction of male dominance and coercion in sexual relationships (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2004). Similar biases also exist for males, as they may feel that their

heterosexual drive must be active, consistent and powerful to fit into the heterosexual norm. Conversely in this situation, women may feel that it is their role to control this constant, powerful drive. Morgan and Zurbriggen reference other studies that have found males feeling pressure from peers to engage in sexually active behaviors, including aggressive sexual actions, to increase their popularity among peers. Such actions were also found to be ways through which males could simultaneously prove their heterosexuality, deny or repress homosexual feelings and establish their masculinity (Morgan and Zubriggen, 2004).

When analyzing the conveyed messages regarding sexual encounters by first sexual partners, Morgan and Zurbriggen found that over 92 percent of females reported receiving messages from their male partners that they were interested in having sex (2004). Survey participants noted that such messages were received through various methods, including an expression of physical desire to have sex as well as using it as a relationship building tool (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2004, p.523). Morgan and Zurbriggen also found that such reactions by males were explained as normal and a result of being male by females; for these women, it was expected that males would react in this way (2004, p.524). Choices to engage in sex by participants who reported high sexual interest on the part of their male partner "indicated that their choice to engage in sexual activity was based on their partner's interest, on continuing the relationship, or on pleasing the partner rather than on their own sexual desires or interest" (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2004, p.524). In some of these cases, participants also indicated that their partner verbally or physically

pressured them into sexual intercourse, 56 percent of the female participants in fact noted pressure to advance sexual activity as a reason why they chose to engage in sexual intercourse (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2004, p.524). Regarding boundaries, the study does point to men respecting the limits regarding sexual contact and progression set by female participants on most occasions, but also notes that some male participants said such instances also increased their desire to have sex (2004). Overall, the majority of participants noted that they learned a lot about sexual activity and dating from their first significant dating partners, possibly pointing to the importance of relationship experience in adolescents understanding of sex and sexually intimate relationships.

Adolescent Sexual Decision Making

Attitudinal factors as to why an adolescent chooses to engage in sex are an important component to comprehensive sexual education. A study by Ott and colleagues (2006) examined the goals associated with sexual behavior, whether adolescents believed that they would meet these goals through sex and whether there were differences in the set goals when comparing gender and sexual experience. In this particular study, adolescents first valued the goal of intimacy, followed by social status and sexual pleasure. Significant differences were found between genders, as females valued the goal of intimacy more than males, and males valued the goal of pleasure more than females. Encouraging adolescents to share their motives for engaging in sex with their partner may be a protective factor. Helping adolescents learn to look at the risks and benefits of sexual engagement

prior to engagement may shield them from the possibility of unnecessary emotional harm. A recent study by Millstein & Halpern- Felsher (2002) showed that adolescents are more likely to pursue sexual engagement if they believe that the benefits outweigh the risks.

Understanding Sexual Health

Another issue surrounding adolescent sexual health is that comprehensive information regarding sexual health, even with the current sexual education programs, is not getting to our young, evolving citizens. The Kaiser Foundation conducted a national survey of adolescents and young adults regarding sexual health knowledge, attitudes and experiences in 2003. This study revealed that most adolescents (15-17) found that sexual health issues, mainly STD's, HIV/AIDS and unintended pregnancy are "big concerns" for their age group. Four out of five adolescents and young adults (18-24) also stated that they are personally concerned with how sexual health issues may affect them. Among young adolescents (13-14) surveyed, the same issues resonate, as four out of five report that they are personally concerned about sexual health issues. Interestingly the survey also found that more than three quarters of adolescents and young adults express a need for more information related to sexual health topics. Other statistics reported from the survey note that the information that these young individuals are receiving is not understood correctly. Results of the study indicate that one out of five adolescents do not know that STD transmission can occur during oral sex and two in five consider engaging in oral sex to be "safer sex." While information regarding sex

often misperceived, adolescents and young adults are aware and vocalize a need to get more information related to sexual health topics. Getting them this comprehensive information is vital as more adolescents are typically engaging in un-safe oral sex, a topic that sexual education focuses little on. In a sample study of 212 tenth grade students from a predominately white, middle-class suburban New England high school, a reported 86, or 40.4% had preformed oral sex in the past year. Out of those 86 individuals 70% never used protection when performing oral sex (Prinstien, Meade, & Cohen, 2003).

Prinstien et al. (2003) also evaluated the correlation of the individuals' best friend's sexual practices and their own. Of the 86 adolescents who engaged in oral sex, 56.5% reported that their best friends had also engaged in oral sex. Of the 126 adolescents who did not engage in oral sex, 82.5% of their best friends had also not preformed oral sex in the past year. These figures suggest that adolescents' oral sex exploration is likely to be similar of those of their close peers.

Social Media

The use of magazines to explore sex is not a newly invented concept. There have been stories for decades of individuals finding sexual literature of their parents, older sibling or relatives and reading or examining the content out of curiosity, to learn more about something that they know little about. For many exploring sexual content is a normal part of development, for others it is not. Liebau (2007) expresses her concern with adolescents' discussion of sexual behavior within their peer groups or gathered through media sources such as magazines. She

expresses her concern about and dislike of the ways that teen magazines discuss sex carelessly, without moral attachment or judgment, and notes that such facts should concern parents and schools alike (2007, p.75). What the author does not note is the importance of such information getting to adolescents in a concrete and accessible way. Although it may be difficult for many to think of a fourteen year old female engaging in various types of sexual contact, at least a good number would hope that she has a safe way of accessing knowledge regarding safe sexual practices. The importance of such information being imbedded in the context of a sort of "pop culture" journal is less important than the protective information that it offers. This type of access could possibly curtail current unsafe practices or prevent unsafe exploration and the connected negative emotional and health consequences.

Another form of media that is regularly utilized by adolescents today is the Internet. The Internet offers individuals easy ways of communication and access to a wealth of information. A study in 2001 evaluating how adolescents use the Internet found that 10th grade students most frequently researched information related to sex, followed by information about nutrition and diet (Borzekowski and Rickert, as cited in Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009). The Internet offers individuals, including adolescents, the opportunity to explore pornography with limited regulation. Dutch researchers Peter and Valkenburg found an association between greater exposure to sexually explicit Internet material and more positive attitudes towards uncommitted sexual exploration among adolescents (2008 p.595). The study also found that exposure to sexually explicit Internet material,

after sensation seeking, as the second strongest correlate of positive attitudes towards sexual exploration (2008, p.595). As sexual curiosity is a normal part of development, visiting a sexual web site may be a safe and appropriate method of sexual exploration and not necessarily an indication of reckless or deviant sexual behavior (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009). What becomes concerning with sexual information seeking on the Internet is the effect of exposure to unsafe sexual behavior that may be learned through the exploration of sexually explicit web sites. In a study that examined a survey sample of 433, predominately female individuals ages 12-22 who attended a NYC adolescent specific primary care clinic, exposure to sexual explicit web sites and its impact on their sexual behaviors and attitudes, Braun-Courville and Rojas (2009) found that adolescents who visited these websites were found to have more permissive attitudes about sex and to have engaged in more high-risk sexual behaviors including multiple lifetime partners, more than one sexual partner in the last three months, used alcohol or other substances at last sexual encounter, and ever engaged in anal sex. Although conclusions of cause and effect cannot be made by this study, whether those individuals who engage in high risk sexual behaviors have more of a tendency to seek out sexually explicit websites or exposure to sexually explicit websites leads to more high-risk sexual behavior, it does offer us some insight into the impact of pornography on adolescents developing opinions of sex and the place that it holds in their curiosities around sexual exploration.

Discussions of Sex Between Adolescents and Parents

Beyond teenage magazines, school and other forms of “pop culture,” studies have also attempted to look at the influence of parents on adolescents’ sexual choices. Parental monitoring has also been noted to lead to lower levels of sexual risk taking (Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001.) Huebner and Howell (2003) specifically examined the relationship between adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior and perceptions of monitoring, communication and parenting styles. The authors found that adolescents who were closely monitored by their parents were more likely than their peers who were not closely monitored by their parents, to demonstrate low sexual risk-taking behavior (defined as a single sexual partner with whom you always used condoms.) Similarly Guilamo-Ramos & Bouris (2009) have found that when discussions about sex between parents and children start between 10-12 years old, and continuously reflect a health consequence social influence model, parent’s are more likely to have a significant effect on their adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behavior. A health consequence, social influence discussion model is based on the Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, & Dittus (2003) “Think Health, Talk Social” parent- child, sexual education discussion format. The format is based on two sets of findings, the first being that parents are often motivated to talk to their children about the health related consequences of sex, such as pregnancy, STI’s and HIV/AIDS, and the second being that adolescent’s decisions to become sexually active are often motivated by social positive expectancies such has the pleasure, wanting to feel loved by their partner or the desire to become more

popular. If caregivers can talk to their children not only about the health consequences of risky sexual activity but also address the social cultural influence of adolescent sexual motivation and activity, children will receive well rounded, honest and factual information about sex. There may also be racial differences regarding parental influence over sexual decision making; Brown et al. (2006) note that Black children compared to White children may be more influenced by perceptions of their parents' opinions regarding sex than particular media sources.

Letting go of the power struggle that adults engage in to prevent adolescents from engaging in sexual activity may prove to be a benefit. In a study that examined the social and emotional consequences of refraining from sexual activity in sexually experienced and inexperienced youth, results may have proved such a benefit. The study found that adolescents who began with sexual experience were much more likely to report positive consequences from refraining from sexual activity at the end of the study than those who initiated sexual activity later. The study hypothesizes that one possible explanation for this difference may be that adolescents may become more reflective of their past experience, which may result in an increased value of selectivity for their sexual partners and their decisions to engage in sexual activity (Brady & Halpern-Flesher, 2008, p.166).

Sex and Adolescents; Where Do We Need to Go?

This literature review leaves a number of questions for clinicians to wrestle with. What sexual education teaching methods help adolescents gain insight into their own sexual exploration? Are our current sexual education programs

comprehensive and supportive of non-heterosexual safe sex practices? How much do adolescents really know about sex and where does the knowledge come from? How do culture, family values and religion affect sexual education teaching methods and opinions regarding adolescent sexual experiences? Through this literature review we have learned that adolescents gather a variety of information regarding sex from a plethora of sources. We understand that peer culture, school culture, media culture and family culture impact their sexual decision making. We have learned that in a great deal of studies honest and open parental involvement regarding sex, as well as within other life areas, impacts a child's decision to engage in sexual activity. What we have not read are first hand accounts of late adolescents looking back on their decision to first engage in sex, why they made the decision they did, and what specifically influenced their learning about engaging in safe and pleasurable sexual experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore individual decision making around first experiences with sex, how information, if any, was gathered by the individual, whether this information was useful or misleading, and how such knowledge benefited or hindered their first sexual experience. It is hypothesized that individuals who are able to explore factual information of their choice from a variety of sources including literature and close family and friends about what makes a sexual encounter pleasurable, are more likely to have a safe and positive first sexual experience.

A non-probability sample of 10 individuals who were recruited through both accidental and snowball sampling techniques from the Upper Valley community of Vermont and New Hampshire, were offered an opportunity to participate in a standardized, structured interview that allowed respondents the opportunity to provide subjective qualitative data about their experiences with sexual education in the context of their first sexual encounter and resulting sexual experience thereafter. Interviews were comprised of exploratory, open-ended questions that encouraged individuals to reflect on their sexual education and the impact that it had on their sexual encounters. A qualitative study design was appropriate because of the small sample size and the importance of gathering subjective data to explore

the research topic. Study participants' responses regarding their sexual education history and its impact on their sexual decision making were analyzed for similar themes through content analysis.

Sample

Because this study used flexible methods, a non-probability sample of convenience was used as the data collection method. Recruitment procedures included both snowball sampling methods and word of mouth. Colleagues, acquaintances and potentially interested participants from mental health agencies, hospitals and schools around the Upper Valley region of Vermont and New Hampshire, were given the inclusion criteria and research topic via formal email and word of mouth. Those indicating an interest in the study either verbally directly to me or through e-mail were then emailed or personally given the specifics of the study including the informed consent, to reiterate information about the study and interview process and gather their signature to confirm consent. Most of the participants gathered through word of mouth were within the Upper Valley community of New Hampshire, as it has a large population of diverse college students. Initially poster ads were placed around the community but no participants responded to this form of advertisement. Word of mouth participants were screened by phone or in person to make sure that they met the inclusion criteria.

The criteria for participation in the study required that participants be between the ages of 18 and 25 and that they had experienced a first sexual

experience that was consensual for both partners. There were no other limitations. Because there was a limited amount of time to collect interview data, all participants were accepted if they met inclusion criteria and no interviews were accepted after the desired sample size had been met. This sample design provided ample opportunity for people to contemplate their willingness to participate in a study. They were presented with the description of the study material, and given the opportunity to read the informed consent. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw their responses up to two weeks after completing the interview

Participants

Study participants were between the ages of 18-25, identified as both male and female and identified ethnically as Black, White, Caucasian, Asian, African American and Hispanic. Study participants came from various socio-economic backgrounds, which they described as being lower class, middle class and upper middle class. Most study participants, with the exception of three, currently lived in the Upper Valley communities of Vermont and New Hampshire. All participants identified their home growing up as in the United States including New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Boca Raton, Miami, Houston, San Antonio and the state of New Hampshire. Individuals in this age group were chosen as a younger demographic would have needed approval to participate in the study by their guardians and with an emotionally charged topic such as sex this was seen as a possible barrier to participation. This age range was also used as it presumed increased insight and ability to reflect on ones past experience. There were ten study participants in total.

Data Collection

The design for this study was approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. All participants were given the informed consent form prior to the beginning of the interview. The informed consent form outlined the purpose of the study, the inclusion criteria, the risks and benefits of participation, as well as the procedure for removing answers from the study's data bank.

Data collection covered the course of six weeks and was accomplished by giving recruited study participants a standardized structured interview in person or over the phone that lasted approximately 25 to 70 minutes. This study design provided participants the opportunity to explore the relationship between their individual sexual education history and their first sexual experience. It was important that all interviews were conducted in a consistent and thorough manner with the minimum interview effects and bias, while also allowing for rich, narrative data to be collected regarding this relatively unstudied phenomenon. All participants signed the informed consent prior to starting the interview and 10 participants were recruited in total.

Participants were asked to provide as much subjective qualitative data as possible regarding the following themes: 1) the participant's most influential sources of information that they used to gather and/or make decisions about sex and how this benefitted or hindered their understanding of and experience with sex; 2) their sexual education in school; 3) the topic of sex within their home including

their parent's opinions regarding sex and sexual activity; 4) their knowledge of sex prior to engaging in their first sexual experience; 5) their expectations of their first sexual experience; 6) their motivation and decision-making around engaging in their first sexual experience 7) the pleasurableability of their first sexual experience; 8) their emotional responses regarding their first sexual experience; and 9) the overall effect that their first sexual experience had on their lives, if any.

Specific questions covering this material included: if you had a question about sex growing up who did you approach in your household?; what sort of impact did your early sexual education have on your understanding of sex and sexually intimate relationships?; please describe your sexual education in school; what sort of information was taught or discussed?; what motivated you to have [your first] sexual experience?; what sort of effect did your first sexual experience have on your life? All participants were asked the same interview questions with minimal probing. The narrative data gathered from each interview was unique to each participant and was recorded and transcribed by myself to ensure the authenticity of responses and facilitate the correct use of quotation in the findings chapter. All signed informed consents remained in a non-descript envelope. All participants were asked to identify a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality whether interviewed in person or via telephone. No participants contacted me after their interview to revoke their answers.

Data Analysis

All interviews were analyzed for their content and themed according to the structured questions and correlating responses. The structured questions in each interview were reviewed independently from the responses of other interviewees. Once the response from one question was reviewed it would then be compared to a different interview response to the same question. Themes within these responses were then grouped together as they fit. For example, when participants were asked who they would speak to in their household about sex, various responses and similarities emerged. One participant reported: " My mom. I wouldn't get very specific but general." Her response would then be categorized as an individual who spoke to their parent about sex and sexual relationships. Another participant who stated: " I still felt embarrassed about talking to people in the household about it, so I think I depended more on outside sources...I guess the internet." This response would then be categorized as speaking to no one in their household about sex because although the Internet is a way to access knowledge about specific sexual questions while in the household, it is not in fact approaching a person in the household about questions around sex and sexual relationships.

Each personal narrative was also analyzed for the participant's comfort providing answers to the structured questions. If they indicated discomfort in talking about their sexual experiences or found it difficult to find words to describe their thoughts and/or feelings, this was noted as lacking a sexual vocabulary.

The interview narratives and transcribed documents are in a locked file where they will remain for three years, as directed by Federal guidelines, and will be

destroyed if no longer needed. If they continue to be of use they will remain in a locked, secure setting. In publications or presentations the data is presented in aggregate or by participant's identified pseudonyms.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore individual decision making around first experiences with sex, how information, if any, was gathered by the individual, whether this information was useful or misleading, and how such knowledge benefited or hindered their first sexual experience and sexual experiences thereafter. This chapter will present data collected from 10 individuals who provided narrative responses regarding their sexual education and sexual decision making regarding their first time having sex. The interview contained 27 questions organized around the following major themes: how information regarding sex and sexually intimate relationships was presented and gathered and how the information was useful or misleading; decision making around the first sexual experience; the pleasurableability of the first sexual experience; and the overall effect of their first sexual experience including their preparedness for the experience and the effect that it had on their life. Basic demographic information was also collected from individuals including their age at the time of their first sexual experience, the partner in that experience, the participant's ethnicity, where they lived while growing up, what type of family they grew up in, their highest level of education, their social class, gender and sexual orientation.

Five major findings emerged upon review of the interview data. The findings will be presented as follows: 1) demographic data; 2) influences; 3) sex in the family environment; 4) sexual decision making; 5) expectations; and finally 6) the overall effect of the first sexual experience. Findings will be divided into various subsections to help organize the data more clearly.

Demographic Data

Participant Demographics

The sample size for this study was 10, five identified as female and five identified as male. Four participants identified their ethnicity as Caucasian or White, two identified as Black, one identified as Chinese, one identified as Hispanic and White, one as Mexican and Navajo and one as Hispanic, Dominican and Irish. Two participants identified their homes of origin in New England, two identified as being from Florida, two from Texas, two from areas around New York City, one from Maryland and one other from a suburb of Philadelphia. Seven participants identified as coming from two parent households, two from divorced households and one from a remarried household. All participants had graduated from high school, two were freshman in college, two were juniors, and three were seniors. One participant identified as being in graduate school and two others reported that they were pursuing higher education. One participant identified as being lower class, six participants identified as being middle class, two as upper middle class and one as upper class. The participants had their first sexual experiences between the ages of 16 and 20, with the median age of 17.7 years. Seven had their first sexual

experience with a partner categorized as a boyfriend or girlfriend, two with a friend, and one who identified their partner as more than a friend. Eight participants identified as being heterosexual or straight and two identified as being homosexual or lesbian.

Influences

How Information Regarding Sex and Sexually Intimate Relationships Was Gathered

Information regarding sex and sexually intimate relationships was gathered in a variety of contexts. No participant relied on a single source to gather information about sex and sexually intimate relationships, rather all participants listed several sources of information that they used to make decisions or gather information about sex. This section will also identify how participants found the information they gathered to be helpful and misleading.

The Most Influential Sources of Information

The most popular sources of information for the surveyed population were speaking to friends and peers, including siblings and cousins, gathering information on the internet, and the information that they were presented with in sex education classes in school. Six out of 10 participants identified friends and peers, as well as siblings and cousins, as some of the most influential sources of information that they used. One male participant stated:

Friends, being around other sexually active people and mostly learning from their experiences, so sort of knowing more about the context of the situation, was more I guess influential as opposed to other sources of information like books or internet or parents. Those tend to be more matter of a fact so to speak, where as with friends it

was more like this is what you could expect in this sort of situation, so giving more context to that, you know the sexual experience.

Another states:

...mostly just talking with people, friends, friends that had sex before me, cousins, stuff like that. That would definitely be the most influential, or what sticks out most in my mind...You know school is biased to don't have sex, you know until you are completely ready and all of that, and movies are biased towards the glamour and everything like that. [So I thought that friends and cousins had the most real information.]

Another participant reflects on how the experience of their siblings was a source of information that influenced their decisions regarding sex. He states:

...maybe it was my own sisters, I mean because one of my sisters had a kid when she was in high school. That kept me away from that and also because I didn't want to drop out, not that I could have had a kid in high school, but I'd seen how sex effected their lives...I think seeing those kind of made me not want to have sex for a while or felt fine about not having sex the way a lot of guys my age did. They were like already having sex and I didn't feel bad about not doing it.

For some participants speaking with their peers about sex and intimacy was an important resource for their learning, but it took them a while to feel comfortable to gather information in this way. One female participant states:

When I was 19 I [worked in a program] and there were a lot of different sexualities together and everyone was very open about it so I think that before that I didn't know anything. When I got there I was inundated with information from peers...I honestly don't know when it happened, but there was a time when I didn't ever talk about sex, I didn't know anything about sex and then sometime during that year talking about sex was totally normal and totally fine and it didn't make me uncomfortable at all...I had no concept of my sexuality before I was 18, the year after I graduated from high school was the year I started to figure things out, not that I had figured things out, but before that I had no sexual language.

Gathering information via the Internet was another way that 5 participants reported that they gathered information about sex. Most individuals who reported this type of information seeking used the Internet as a way that they could find answers to specific questions that they were seeking information on. One male stated:

I guess the biggest concern was being protected against pregnancy. Both my partner and I were both virgins so STI's weren't as big of an issue as pregnancy was, so the most influential sources of information were probably the effectiveness of contraception and at first we depended on condoms only. Having an understanding of how effective they were was pretty important...like Planned Parenthood dot com has information on the different rates of effectiveness.

For another participant who had not disclosed his sexual orientation in high school, reports that the Internet provided him with a sort of confidential peer resource that he hadn't found otherwise. He states:

I actually listened to a podcast, a radio show and it follows this band in New York City and they are gay and sometimes they would talk about sex and it was mostly humorous. Like, it was just following their lives and it was really, really funny and I think I learned some stuff there. I mean it was like my outlet or sometimes I would listen to it in class, and of course I would never show anyone my iPod...I think that is where I got some peer information even though I don't know them, they are still around my age relatively.

Four participants also found that they utilized the information they had been taught in their sexual education classes in school. For some this was an easy way to gather factual information about the risks involved with sex. One female participant states:

I would have to say the factual stuff, like STD's and what ever, was very well covered by my school district in Maryland, Montgomery County. So in terms of STD's I was very well informed and that helped me make decisions obviously not to have sex with random people, and

in terms of you know what to do if you're pregnant, I did know about the laws and stuff regarding EC and whatever from health education programs.

Less utilized sources that were used to gather information about sex and sexually intimate relationships were parents, books and pop culture. One participant describes his contentment with being able to speak with his parents about sex: "I guess I was lucky to be in an atmosphere where I could talk to my parents about it pretty comfortably, I didn't go into details, I totally didn't." Another describes pop culture, movies and TV shows, as being useful because it gave them information on the intimacy involved in a sexual encounter. He states: "[in] movies you do see more of the intimacy that is involved with the sexual encounter. In movies that is all it is about is intimacy really and then the sexual encounter is a very small part of the movie."

Understanding the Information- "It Kind of Feels Like an Abstract Concept."

Putting the information that participants gathered in to a context that was helpful for them and their understanding of sex was similar throughout the variety of sources that were utilized. Most individuals found that the information they gathered gave them a better understanding of what sex was and what they could expect. One participant reported that her conversations with peers and cousins helped her to conceptualize sex. She states:

It feels like an abstract concept if you haven't done it before so like them talking about their experience made it seem like realistic and like you could actually understand what would be going on. I guess it kind of helped me conceptualize the thing and because I saw them and they were still alive and kicking and I kind of figured that it would be ok.

Another male participant reports:

I mean to be honest with you, so I didn't seem so much like an idiot. You know the girl I did it with had done it before me and you know it was just nerves of did I do it right or anything like that. So it helped in that regard, knowledge, what to expect.

Information gathered from the Internet was helpful for some participants because they were able to seek out answers to specific questions that they had. One female participant states: "it made it less personal when I wasn't sure of things. I could look it up on my own time and be able to sort of compare the information from one website to another." Another female participant reports: "Internet searches, like Web MD, were also backups to fill in information that I wasn't aware of."

Sexual education programs in participants' schools were identified as being helpful when it provided information regarding protection against pregnancy and STD's. One female participant expressed:

the information was helpful because I knew what to do if I had sexual relations and it led to bad consequences. I knew that I could get the EC pill, but that I would have to tell my parents in my state.

Another participant states:

in health class I realized that it was pretty easy to get birth control and I wasn't comfortable telling my parents at the time so I did go to Planned Parenthood and it was pretty easy so that was helpful.

A participant who felt that he was lucky that he was able to use his parents as a resource for gathering information about sex reported that this was helpful as it helped him to "think twice before having sex. Like making sure that it was safe to the extent that we were at least using a condom."

Misleading Information- "It's Easy to Say Anything."

While some participants used their friends and close family members to gather information, some found the information that they were given to be based on that individuals experience or the individuals interpretation of the experience, which could be confusing at times. One female participant reflects:

You know everyone is different and their stories seemed like everyone was very similar and then in the moment you realize that they probably made their stories sound more similar than they actually were. So things that I thought of assumed would happen or wouldn't happen, did or didn't. It was just miscommunication and too much assuming on all ends of the stories that they were telling and the things that I was thinking that I would expect.

A male participant explains that information from friends needs to be analyzed independently from the source, meaning everyone's first sexual experience is their own. It may not be similar to any of the friends that you have had discussions about sex with. One male explains: "the thing with friends is that you have to kind of take [their stories] with a bit of salt because everyone is different and everyone tells their experiences differently, so those are things that I keep in the back of my head." A female freshman in college reflects on how her trust in her partner's explanations of sex misled her. She states:

I was pretty comfortable with the partner I was with so that was like a big factor I guess. Like whatever the partner said I pretty much believed it and they were lying to me. Well they weren't lying per se because they didn't know, it was like their first time.

Other participants found the information that they gathered on the Internet to be misleading at times. One male participant shared that he found that he had to be careful about the information that he trusted on the Internet. He states:

It's easy for anyone to say anything on the Internet so when you have students going and a little too afraid to talk to an adult about it, it is a definite problem. I mean I know for sure that I saw a tip that was like use two condoms. And you go through the sex-ed program and they are like don't use two condoms it is the stupidest thing that you can do. Certainly it helps to have an adult that knows what they are talking about hopefully.

Another female participant states: "Once I realized that the stories that my friends told me weren't exactly how my first time would be or anything, then I realized the same thing from the internet, that everyone has their own sides to all stories."

One participant described his sex education in school not as misleading, but as not providing him with all of the information that he would have liked to have known. He states: "you always get information in health class like if you are having unprotected sex what happens. They don't really talk about the complications in terms of relationships and the emotional value of sex."

Media and popular culture, including pornography were described as having similar misleading traits by 2 of the participants. One states:

I mean the media portrays the whole process as much easier, especially the first time, if sort of didn't work actually so. I feel like people have very high expectations for the first time they have sex and actually it probably usually doesn't live up to that. Of course from there it gradually improves, but the learning process is definitely portrayed in the media or actually discussed at all. That was one thing that wasn't that apparent.

Another recalls the information that he received about sex through pornography as being misleading in that it left out the sensuality that can be a result of sex. He states:

It is not like I studied pornography, like this is what I am going to do, but I had watched a good amount of it, you know while I was in high school. It's like totally different from what real sex it, at least in my own experience. It is definitely not good study material I'd say. Like it

sort of cuts out all like the sensuality from the experience and it is very aggressive and that is not how, in my opinion, that's not how sex should be and that's not what makes it enjoyable for people.

Sex Education in School

Although sex education in school was identified as being one of the most influential sources used to gather information about sex and sexually intimate relationships for only 4 individuals, all participants reported that they received some sort of sexual education in school. Participants' sex education in school was described in a variety of ways including; 1) abstinence only models (N=2); 2) programs described as "not satisfactory" or lacking the involvement that the participant felt as sex education class required (N=2); 3) Objective, biological models (N=1); 4) good or satisfactory programs that included information about STD's, safe sex, the reproductive cycle, influence of alcohol and drugs, and in one case the emotional aspects of sex (N=4); and finally 5) well rounded sexual education classes that discussed the previously mentioned points, but also included information regarding same sex and questioning individuals (N=1). Out of the 10 participants 4 described their sexual education in school as being less than needed, not satisfactory or expressed that they couldn't remember it. One male states:

Sex education was kind of tied into health at my school. There was no sex-ed class or anything like that and when you did it, it was all by the books. You know you really didn't have the interaction, you know the back and forth, that you kind of require, or not require but need. It was always don't have sex until you are ready and the complications of sex. They didn't go so much further into it than that, what STD's there were, rape the legalities.

Another female participant reflects that her sex education class also did not provide her with the sort of information that she felt was needed or could have been helpful:

I don't even remember that much. All I really remember them talking about was STD's and AIDS. I don't consider it satisfactory...it seems like they say wear protection and that is about it, like minimal type of thing. We talk about AIDS and things like that but they don't really get into the sex itself in any great detail.

Another female who did not find her sexual education class in school to be satisfactory became motivated to research information on her own. She states:

[Sex education in school] was completely abstinence only, very little on birth control and more on you know it is really important that you wait and you should really wait until you are older and you can make informed decisions and it's going to be with one person. That if you're going to, you should still use condoms, but that was the only form of birth control that they ever brought up. Within my group of friends we realized that was not realistic, so I think that was when we sort of decided that we were going to look on the Internet and find out what we could find out on our own.

Five participants reported that they found their sex education classes in school to be good or well rounded sources of information that gave them good and useful knowledge about sex. One participant states:

they did a formal sex-ed class that basically went through the process of what sex is, what is pregnancy, what is an STD or an STI...They definitely said if you're gonna' do it use protection, that sort of thing.

Same Sex Couples in School Sex Education Programs

Out of all of the participants, only 1 mentioned that their sexual education class in school spoke directly about safe sex methods between same sex couples. Five participants reported that there was no mention of same sex relationships in their class, 4 reported that same sex couples were mentioned or briefly discussed through language or discussion of increased risk of HIV/AIDS in homosexual males.

Seven participants reported that there was no discussion of individuals who may be questioning their sexual orientation, 2 reported that it was briefly mentioned or poster campaigns were used in their school to address the topic and 1 participant stated that their sexual education class did discuss individuals who may be questioning their sexual orientation.

Sex in the Family Environment

Who Can You Talk To?

For nearly all participants, the topic of sex was avoided within the context of the immediate family. Only one participant reported that they sought out a parent for specific questions regarding sex. He states:

Actually my mom I tended to approach the most. She was a little easier to talk to about those things...It was always a little awkward to bring up with your parents but I felt like I could if I needed to.

Another participant stated that she would ask a parent about relationship questions and another reported that she would only ask her parent's a question after she consulted with friends but couldn't remember a time when she had asked her parents a question about sex. Some participants imagined that they could have asked a sibling. One participant reflects on the subject of sex within his family. He states:

My parent's were not really around, working mostly and even so we didn't really have the birds and the bees talk, we never talked about anything like that, we still don't. It's become like an unspoken rule...I remember my mom finding a box of condoms in my room and being pleased that I was doing it safely even though I was 16 or 17 at the time. She didn't seem upset, but then again she didn't talk about it...If I did [have a question about sex] I would go to [my sister], but she's older than me so when she moved out, keep it to yourself, talk to your friends maybe, but not in the household, no.

Half of the participants reported that they would not speak to anyone in their home about sex, including siblings, because they did not feel comfortable approaching the subject of sex with them.

Attitudes About Sex in the Home

Although most participants reported that they avoided speaking to their parents, or anyone in their home about sex, all participants commented that there was an underlying opinion about sex in their homes growing up. Three patterns emerged from participants' responses including; 1) that sex was not to be spoken about in the home; 2) that sex was something to be spoken about and not discourage; and 3) that sex was something that was spoken about in some context but that it should be something that one does not have until they are in a committed relationship leading to marriage or married. The majority of participants (N=4) expressed that their parents never said anything about sex, followed by home environments where participants felt that their parent's were open to discussing and providing information about sex (N=3). Of the other 3 participants each expressed a different attitude about sex in the home including one female who came from a religious household who shared that her parents believed that sex should be something that is not experienced before marriage. Another female participant who reported no religious affiliation within the household stated that her parent's believed that sex should be something that is only experienced when you are older and in a committed relationship that includes a possibility of marriage. She shares:

...they sort of discouraged premarital sex. They wanted me to have premarital sex if I was in a serious relationship you know so you didn't end up marrying someone who you were sexually incompatible with. But in general they would assume that I was getting married or getting into a serious relationship after the age of 21/22, so sex before then would not be accepted.

One other participant expressed that his parents, both of whom lived in the same home, gave him different opinions about having sex. He states: " sort of a unique dichotomy, dad's saying go son, do what men do and mom is saying save yourself, don't be a man whore."

Sexual Decision Making

Previous Experience- "All of the Bases Except for the Homerun"

All of the participants surveyed had engaged in some sort of sexual activity prior to engaging in their first sexual experience. Two patterns emerged regarding sexual experimentation; 1) participants had experimented with various kinds of sexual activity including kissing, heavy petting and oral sex or 2) participants had experimented sexually but did not engage in any sort of oral sex prior to their first sexual experience. One participant reported that he had phone sex with his partner prior to their first sexual experience. The majority of participants (N=6) had engaged in oral sex prior to their first sexual experience. Seven participants reported that the person that they first had sex with was a partner, such as a boyfriend or girlfriend, 2 reported that their first sexual experience was with a good friend and 1 reported that their first experience was with someone who was more than a friend but not officially their partner.

Motivation

Seven participants reported that having sex for the first time was a type of milestone event, which included the participant feeling ready to have sex, or feeling as though it was a natural progression in their relationship. One female recalls her decision to have sex in this way: "it was time, we had been dating for about a year. He was the one who was moving things forward the whole time, but I was finally ready for it at that point." A male participant, who did not have sex until he was in college, reflects on his motivation to have sex in a similar way. He states:

I think it was progressive. I'd been dating my girlfriend since high school you know and we continued things for a while in college so it was sort of a getting up to event. There was like I said, other sexual acts that occurred and I guess that was the climax of it all.

Another participant recalls her motivation to have sex as:

It had been pre-meditated for like a year, because I was with the person for like four years. It was kind of like here is the opportunity to finally do it because we had never had the opportunity to do it based on our parent's because they were pretty conservative and stuff. I guess that is what motivated me. I just knew that I would have an opportunity at that time and I had feelings for the person and everything so it was pretty comfortable then.

Two participants reported that the event was not only a milestone, but also was influenced by their desire to fit in with their peers. One participant shared that he saw the experience as an achievement. He states: "You know it sort of sounds silly now, but sort of the medallion around your neck." Another male participant remarks on similar feelings:

I wanted to, I mean I guess it is a bunch of things. Certainly at that age, maybe on a hormone level I wanted to have sex, but definitely your friends are starting to do it and maybe there is some competition, but

you don't want to be the odd one out and that sort of feeling. I felt like I was ready at that time. Certainly when I was a freshman in high school I definitely didn't think I was ready and I didn't want anything to do with it. At that age I definitely thought that it was time, that sort of thing.

Participants who did not report their decisions to have sex as a milestone stated that the decision to have sex with their partner of one year was to celebrate getting into college, where as another reported that it was a decision made out of lust.

Thought Process- "And So One Day We Did"

Three themes evolved regarding participant's decisions to speak with others prior to engaging in their first sexual experience; 1) the participant spoke to their partner; 2) the participant spoke to a friend; or 3) the participant didn't speak to anyone. Out of these three themes of decision-making, no participant expressed feeling comfortable talking to their partner about the actual act of sex and why they felt that they were ready, nor did anyone consult a parent or an older adult or family member that they trusted. One participant recalls his discussions prior to having sex for the first time: "I think we decided as we had the experience. It wasn't spontaneous as I had protection and we had talk about it, it was just a matter of when and so one day we did." Another participant who reported speaking to their partner about the decision to have sex reflects on their communication as happening just before they actually had sex for the first time. She shares:

I talked about what I had completed thus far, like getting it in or whatever and that was basically as far as I had gotten to talking to him about it because he kinda' like knew it was going to happen before I talked to him.

No participants reported pleasure seeking as their main motivation to have sex for the first time.

Expectations

Pleasure

Individual's expectations regarding pleasure for the first sexual experience most commonly were that they expected the experience to be pleasurable (N=7). Two individuals reported that they did not expect it to be pleasurable and one reported having no expectations regarding the pleasure of their first sexual experience. Of the 7 participants who expected the experience to be pleasurable 5 found that their first experience having sex was not pleasurable because of emotional reasons. One participant shares:

I mean the kissing and that stuff was all incredibly enjoyable and just good. Everything up to what I would consider actually you know sex in somewhat was all very good, but the actual event was not...I remember talking to a friend afterwards and feeling really gross about it, not physically gross, but it didn't come from a good place from the other person. She didn't do it as a loving act at all. That is where the regret came in, it clearly wasn't a loving act and it was followed by a terrible downhill breaking up.

Another participant reflects that seeing their partner experience sex for the first time as painful, affected his first sexual experience. He shares: " I guess you know the first experience, my girlfriend and I were both virgins and you know for her it was certainly painful the first time so that was sort of like, oh this isn't fun."

Another participant shares that her first experience was not pleasurable because she became anxious and frightened of the consequences involved with having sex. She shares: "because of the circumstance. We were both Virgins at the time and

inexperienced, so when things were inserted the condom immediately broke, so we both panicked." One participant who originally stated that he had found the experience to be pleasurable shares after further reflection: " It made me feel kind of guilty that they [my parents] didn't know. I felt bad having to sneak off...yeah I felt guilty I guess." The remaining 2 participants who expected their first sexual experience to be pleasurable reported finding it to be pleasurable.

Understanding of the First Sexual Experience

Nine out of 10 participants identified feeling some confusion regarding the emotional and physical aspects of sex after having engaged in the experience. Of these 9 participants 4 stated that they did not understand components of both the physical and emotional involvement of sex. Only one participant out of 10 identified feeling as though they understood what it would be like to have sex after engaging in the experience for the first time and felt no confusion regarding the emotional or physical aspects of the act.

Physical Involvement

Two study participants identified only having misunderstood the physical involvement of sex. One participant shares that even though he did not understand what the experience would be like because he had never been intimate with a partner, he didn't know that the physical act of sex would not happen immediately.

He shares:

I had no idea what it was. I didn't really know because I had never been with someone, so I guess it was not what I expected. I guess it took more time to start than I had thought it would to get things going.

Another participant remarks similarly on the importance of lubrication for enjoyable sex. She states: "I wish I had known that lube, either from being aroused or artificial is very important when you are nervous."

Emotional Connection

Three participants reported having not understood the emotional involvement of sex prior to engaging in their first sexual experience. Both report aspects of confusion regarding their identity. One participant reflects on her surprise that she was able to comfortably identify with her position of power during her first sexual experience. She shares:

...It was less awkward than I expected, being naked in front of someone. I was pretty comfortable with the guy and I expected it to be pretty comfortable, but it was more comfortable than I had heard friends explain it. So that was nice.

Another participant shared his thoughts regarding his understanding of the emotional connection that he found to be a part of having sex by simply stating: "[understanding the experience] on a psychological level, how could you know?"

Another participant reported being more emotionally confused with his religious identity as well as being unprepared of the emotional intimacy that would be involved with his first sexual experience. He states:

I guess I was somewhat overwhelmed. I was excited that it happened but as far as was I conscious free, no because there are questions of religion you know. How do you declare or how do you claim you are a good Christian if you are out having premarital sex? So that's one thing. Then there's the idea of companionship. If you're having sex with someone should they necessarily be your companion you know. Us being together and dating you know I just felt like this going to be my one and only sort of thing...Coming out of it I had more

questions about my identity and how it is shaped by that experience. I mean I still have questions like that.

Four participants reported that they did not understand both physical aspects including mechanics such as positions, penetration, lubrication and foreplay and emotional aspects, which included the emotional connection that they experienced individually during sex or the effect that sex had on the relationship with their partner. One participant, who also noted not understanding the longstanding emotional connection that she would have with her partner after having a continuous sexual relationship with him, reflects on her confusion regarding the physical aspects of sex including erections and penetration. She shares:

It was like pretty late in the night, so he was kind of tired or something, I don't know. I don't totally understand but that was really the only time that happened so I don't know because up to that point I was like no we are not going to do this and then I suddenly changed my mind and I just think that it wasn't the right timing.

Another participant reflects on his lack of knowledge regarding the mechanics of sex as well as the intimate and emotional connection that he experienced during his sexual interactions with his partner. He shares:

I guess the reality is I thought that I was very well informed, that I knew the risks and that I knew about protection, but in terms of knowing what to do really, I guess my only material was actually watching pornography...Real sex isn't like pornography. It's so twisted away from so much of the emotions that go in to really having sex, especially with someone that you care about and you know, caring about how their feeling during the act as well as yourself. Those differences I don't think I was really aware of going into the act. It just seemed like something that would be like, emotions are flying and you just start pounding a girl and have a great time and then you are done. And no, it is not really like that. It can be slow and sensual and so on. It definitely took a lot of finding that out on my own.

Another participant reflects on his similar experience having limited knowledge with the physical aspects of sex as well as the emotional involvement that sex would bring to his relationship with his partner. He states:

I had originally thought that I was going to be the one in control as the man and I wasn't by any means. The positions were different, kind of more than I knew actually. I didn't know a lot of things, you know lubrication, how it all worked, what was going to feel the best...[I wish I had known] how it was going to complicate things, how she was going to react, how easily you can get attached to the physical pleasure of sex.

All participants expressed feeling as though they did not understand what their first sexual experience would entail on either one or a combination of physical and emotional elements.

Overall Effect of the First Sexual Experience

All participants reported that there was some sort of emotional effect connected to their understanding of sex and sexually intimate relationships in general. Two themes emerged regarding this finding: 1) that sex had an emotional effect on their relationship with their partner; or 2) that it affected their understanding of sex and their own identity as a sexually active person.

Relationship with Partner

Seven participants reported that their first sexual experience had an effect on their relationship with their partner. Five reported that they were not prepared for the emotional after effects that sex would have on their relationship with their partner, with whom they had a longstanding intimate relationship. One participant remarks:

I guess that it is a pretty big jump for a relationship, that's for sure. I think that with that girlfriend, that once we started having sex we became a lot closer, but in retrospect it might have been too soon for us. I think things got very passionate very quickly. In retrospect maybe we weren't ready to make that jump as quickly as I would have liked. I mean we did, we broke up a couple months later and I think while it was great having sex, it definitely put like an emotional, I don't want to say strain, it was great, but on the other hand I think expectations because a lot more serious. It's a very big jump for people in a relationship to make.

Another participant simply talked about wishing she had been educated more on the emotional effects that having sex can have on a relationship. She shares:

The emotional consequences of having sex, whether it be with someone who you have been with for a long time or a semi-stranger, it is still very weird...I would say in reflection that sex education was lacking in emphasis on how emotionally weird things can get.

Two participants expressed that they did not understand the extent of the emotional connection that can be created during intimate sex and remarked how they found this to be specifically connected to the female gender. One participant reflects on his understanding in this way:

There is a huge difference between the ways women and men use sex and how they get attached through that manner and it seems, even from the first time through now, it always seems to complicate things emotionally and classes didn't give you that knowledge, they just give you the facts. They didn't talk about any of the psychology involved. In my opinion there is and obviously every case is different, but women seem to be more emotionally attached to somebody that they allow themselves to have sex with...women become really emotionally attached and feel as though they are giving themselves to the guy. Basically to put it on the line, women read into it more than men, in my opinion.

A female participant shares her understanding of the differences between men and women and their connection to the emotional aspects of sex from a neurological standpoint. She states:

I wish I had known more of how much of an emotionally connection is formed especially for females. I am a neuroscience major so I have learned a little more about I think the oxytocin and other hormones that are released especially in women. I think that they make it harder once you stop suddenly. You know the summer before, all the time, but then we went to college and we agreed to break up then and it was hard to just kind of stop. Logically it made sense, but emotionally it was hard and it would have made sense to have more preparation about that.

Of the other two participants who felt as though they were unprepared for the emotional aspects that having a sex can have on a relationship one stated simply that he: "was not prepared for the psychological effects." The other shared that although they were prepared for the emotional attachment and increased commitment that would come from becoming sexually intimate with his long term partner, he was not prepared for the emotional connection that he would feel during sex. He shares:

It's like you have sex with your body but you also have sex with your emotions because that is how you feel it...Whenever you hear about sex or talk about sex it is very crude, it is very detached. It is not like love, it is just sex. So you really experience the vulgarity of sex through people but when you are in that moment with the person it is more than just sex, it is everything.

Understanding of One's Self as a Sexual Being

Two participants shared that their first sexual experiences had an effect on their emotional understanding of how sex would affect them. Both of these

participants also identified having some sort of abstinence education whether in school or through extra curricular activities. One participant shares:

I thought it was bad, like it was a bad thing. That something good is not going to be good unless you are married. You're gonna' feel bad, you're gonna' feel worthless and like it's just not a good thing to do...You don't die! I thought I was going to roll over and explode, [that] I would feel terrible and die. For like five years I thought that he would not talk to me anymore. I really feel like the stigma is just kinda' absurd because I was able to move on with my life.

Another participant reflects on her understanding of sex and emotional conclusions.

She shares:

It is a big deal but not as big of a deal as the school had made it out to be and that sometimes TV shows and movies make it out to be. It is a very personal choice but it depends on the situation...[Sex education] made it seem more difficult than it actually was, that is was going to be awkward during and after and that things were just going to be very weird and that there was going to be a lot of complications after the fact and that's not the case.

After the First Time: "The Actual Thinking Had to be Done by Me"

Six participants reflected on the knowledge that they gained from their sexual education and concluded that although sex education can help individuals gain knowledge around certain aspects of sex and sexually intimate relationships, learning about and becoming ready for a sexually intimate relationship or experience has to be done on your own. One college student shares:

I don't think that a sex education class can make the student examine their self in the way that I think needs to be done before you can jump into a sexual relationship. I think that it brought me to a certain point, talking about risks and methods and things to think about but the actual thinking had to be done by me. So while it certainly helped, I don't think its' necessarily prepared me.

Two students found that finding out how to make sex intimate and enjoyable was a process that they had to figure out in their own ways. One participant shares:

It [sex] can be slow and sensual and so on. It definitely took a lot of find that out on my own...It was hard to talk about sex with the girl I first had sex with which is strange. After reaching the point where we had both agreed to do it, it was hard to talk about while we weren't doing it, which is strange but I don't think I am the only one. Some people have trouble bringing it up, sitting down and talking about what feel good for you, what feel good for me and so on, which is strange that you can be so intimate with someone but have a hard time talking about it. I think that difficulty was resolved with my current girlfriend. We were very open talking about it and it has been great.

Another participant shares his experience with learning about intimacy and sex. He states:

I would say my knowledge of intimacy came from having a relationship and learning about my partner's feelings and how she digested what happened between us. Where I learned about the relationship was from being in one because the education about sex wasn't about Sally meets Joe and they have a kiss underneath the tree and they hold hands and they become intimate. No, it was this is the male body this is the female body. You know when I hear people talk about it, it is this is what I did, you know I banged her and stuff like that. It is not about I really love her and I touched her this way and I held her hand this way, I caressed her, no it's not like that. My knowledge of intimacy mostly came from being in a relationship.

Similarly one student comments on how her decision to have sex helped her to feel more independent. She shares:

I feel like I grew up. Like it was something that I wanted to do and it wasn't exactly what my parents wanted me to and I just felt like a grown women and this was my body and I made the decision that I wanted to, you know regardless of what other people were saying. So I guess you could say it [having sex] was a step towards independence.

One participant reflects on her opinion regarding sexual education and the integration of pleasure education into the curriculum. She shares:

I mean for me, I feel like what I would need to know about sex is the kind of stuff that only comes from experience, so I don't know if anything could have been taught to me before that moment about the actual physical aspect of sex and making it enjoyable, I think that it was just what it was going to be. So I don't know if I would want to know more about it. It probably would have been nice, but I think that it is what it is.

One college junior reflects on her sexual education and the change of sexual culture that she encountered when she came to college. She shares:

When I got to [college] I was actually really unprepared even though I had prior experience, just for the whole culture here I think. It is very different from what I had experience before in that it is a lot more expected on very short-term, much more casually and all of that. I mean there are definitely exceptions, like I know people who have regular relationships, but what I have found here if you go out at night and go into a frat you are not going to find any sort of relationship like I had previously. It is more, may not sex the first time but something sexual the first time and progressing very rapidly past that.

Summary

The findings in this chapter were organized into six categories and presented above. The qualitative interview responses presented enlightening information regarding how these individuals gathered information about sex, made decisions to have sex for the first time, how they digested their first sexual experience and how it has effected their understanding of sex and intimacy currently. The next chapter will discuss the organized findings in connection with the reviewed literature. In addition, the chapter will also discuss the relevance of these finding to social work practice.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore individual decision making around first experiences with sex, how information, if any, was gathered by the individual, whether this information was useful or misleading, and how such knowledge benefited or hindered their first sexual experience and sexual experiences thereafter. The topic of sex education and sexual decision making is an important topic for adolescents, teachers, parents and clinicians alike. Understanding how young people are gathering information about sex and how they are making decisions to have sex, is important knowledge to have so that we as mentors, leaders and trusted sources of information can learn how to teach children and adolescents about sex and healthy physical and emotional sexual decision making. The more our young people know about sex, the more likely they are to make informed decisions about having it. The findings will be discussed in the following subsections: 1) information gathering; 2) sex in the family environment; 3) sexual decision making; 4) emotional reactions; 5) the impact of the first sexual experience and 6) the sexual language.

This chapter will relate this study's qualitative findings to the previously explored literature, including the reviewed studies as well as theoretical frameworks. Some of the gathered data will support previous research and some

will not. This study was of particular interest for me because of the everyday presence that sex has in our lives, but is rarely discussed openly. I feel that this dichotomy has a particularly large impact on young, coming of age, adolescents who are trying to navigate their way into adulthood. I can see how sex could be interpreted as this phenomenal act that brings so much pleasure and connection to the two people who engage in it that it can only be described as orgasmic. I see this because I often note these connections myself when participating in adolescent media and social culture and also remember feeling this way myself. The truth is and I found out, that this is not what most people will find from their first sexual experience, or even the many that they may have after unless they understand the processes that are involved in creating a pleasurable sexual experience. Sexual attraction and the act of sex are at the very core of human nature, but we still feel uncertain about how we should integrate its discussion into our own and our children's lives. We wonder when, if even at all, we should teach them about these processes. If we educate our young people too early will the end result be our young people choosing to have promiscuous sexual encounters in school bathrooms and cafeterias? We teach adolescents about the physical nature of heterosexual sex and the physical risks associated with this act in most schools across the country, but this is only the view of one sexual orientation and one part of the sexual experience. Do we want our young people to have emotionally satisfying and physically safe sexual experiences, or do we just want them to have safe, heterosexual sex?

When I began this study I was certain that our young people were exposed to a lot of material about heterosexual sex, but believed that they continued to have a misperception of this experience and possibly no understanding of non-heterosexual sexual experiences. I hypothesized that because various forms of media and society in general had led most to see the experience as a sensual, erotic and highly pleasurable act over the course of their lives, that young people were drawn to having the experience because of these expectations. I hypothesized that for individual's first experiences to actually be pleasurable, that they would need to have gathered a well rounded arsenal of information from a variety of sources including literature, fact based media forms, and honest fact and opinion from experienced adults that they trusted. After participating in several qualitative interviews I found that most individuals did expect the experience to be pleasurable, but did not state that this expectation was the motivation for them to engage in the experience. The majority of participants shared that they did not have adequate information regarding the emotional aspects of sexual experiences, which actually supported my original hypothesis. As a component of the operational definition of a pleasurable sexual experience included emotional satisfaction, these young people did not find this within their first sexual experiences, and even for some their continued sexual experiences. These young people were not receiving well rounded, honest information from the sources that they used to gather information about sex and possibly their sexual experiences were not emotionally satisfying overall because of this.

The remainder of this chapter will provide an overview of the findings and offer additional discussion on the connections between the reviewed literature and data, as well as the data itself.

Information Gathering

Sexual education for this study incorporated not only what participants learned in their school sexual education programs, but also the information that they personally gathered about sex and sexual decision making. The literature review presented data from the Kaiser Foundation that reported that more than three quarters of adolescents and young adults expressed a need for more information related to sexual health topics (Hoff et al, 2003). Interview participants from this study reported that they found the information that they were presented in their school sex education program to be less than needed, unsatisfactory or that they couldn't remember it. No participant explicitly stated that they felt that they needed more information about sexual health topics, but all participants reported that there were aspects of sex and sexually intimate relationships that they did not understand prior to experiencing them. In most cases their misunderstanding fell into the category of the emotional involvement of sex. It is my belief that whether you are having sex with a trusted, long term partner, or a person you recently met, there is always emotional involvement in sex and it can be complicated. Complicated because sexual emotional involvement cannot be described in one way and is experienced differently. The emotional involvement in sex doesn't always mean attachment and it doesn't always mean connection. Emotional involvement can be

confusion about the experience or one's identity after the experience. It can be regret or euphoria, questioning your own actions or your partners thoughts after the experience. The emotional body that is present during sex is not an X equals Y equation. It cannot be explained as easily as the risks of unprotected sex can be, and quite possibly cannot be taught or explained fully at all. One participant reflects on his thoughts as to why the emotionally intimate involvement of sex was not divulged throughout his sexual education. He states:

...like the emotionally intimate part, like that is sort of uniquely extricated from the discussion of sex, it is not there. So I don't know why the intimate part is not divulged in its entirety. Maybe it is because it is not so matter of fact. You can't just put intimacy in black and white terms. It's something that is unique to every situation, where as with sex you can say if you do this, this will happen. If you don't do this, this will happen. So I think it is more a crutch for adults because they can't explain intimacy. They can explain STD's and babies and social, you know being ostracized, stuff like that. But when it gets to the sort of relationship stuff I think that is just a little more complicated and something that we don't talk about for reasons of maybe ignorance. Maybe we just don't know enough about intimacy individually to talk about it, where as we have proven results about sex that we can use to justify why you should or should not, mostly why you shouldn't have it.

Gathering well rounded information about sex and sexually intimate relationships that led to a pleasurable first sexual experience proved to be a difficult task for these interviewed participants. Participants did not rely solely on the materials that they were presented with in their sexual education classes, although the majority did utilize this information in addition to information from the Internet, their friends and close peer group members. Even with the addition of

trusted adult figures such as parents, emotional confusion after the experience remained present.

School sex education programs were often reported to be classes that were mandated by the school and taught participants the physical dangers of sex and how to protect themselves against sexually transmitted diseases and infections that can be contracted during unprotected heterosexual intercourse. What these programs did not do was teach about non-heterosexual sex and protection, beyond the occasional mention of increased risk of HIV/AIDS among homosexual males. These programs also rarely provided information regarding individuals who may be questioning their sexual identity. The majority of participant's descriptions of their high school sexual education programs left them with little more than they could research themselves through the Internet. Generally, abstinence based education or not, these programs provided no emotional support regarding sexual decision making, a topic that through this research has proven to be of vital necessity. Our youth are aware of the physical dangers of sex and continue to need information about how to keep themselves physically healthy. What they also need that our sex education classes are not providing is information related to the emotional components of sex and how they can protect their emotional health and well being.

Participant responses revealed that they needed to know how they can make informed decisions about sex that led to less emotionally confusing or damaging consequences. These are insightful opinions that should be listened to and used to

challenge our current systems of educating and discussing healthy, pleasurable sexual experiences in school and throughout society in general.

Interviewed participants reported that using more than one resource to gather information about sex is not only healthy but also provides beneficial information for parents, teachers and clinicians alike. As responses revealed that most often individuals are communicating with people in their peer group about sex, sexual education classes, teachers and clinicians may find it useful to begin peer discussion groups around the topic of sex and physical and emotional health. As information gathering in this interviewed population was not limited to a single source and instead was a compilation of a variety of sources, it may be beneficial to approach sexual education in this way.

The Internet as an information source could be coordinated into this approach. Braun-Courville and Rojas (2004) identified the Internet as a form of positive and age appropriate sexual exploration or information gathering for adolescents who were curious about sex. A large sample of surveyed participants also identified this as a medium through which they seek information about sex. The concerning factor that the Internet presents is the easy accessibility of misinformation about sex and sexually intimate relationships presented through general, unscientific postings and other materials like Internet pornography. Topics such as these could be presented through group discussion. Such discussion would not only allow for misleading information to be corrected, but would also

provide group participants with the opportunity to critically examine the sources and hear from trusted adults and peers about their opinions and experiences.

Sex in the Family Environment

One place where it may be easy to change our difficulties in openly and honestly discussing sex with our children and adolescents may be in the home environment. In the presented literature several authors identified parental monitoring and teaching their children about sex and sexual decision making as an effective way to lower sexual risk taking. Findings from this study did not point to any significant use of this sort of mediation between children and parents. The majority of participants in fact found it to be uncomfortable to talk to their parents about sex and in most cases only noted one or two discussions where their parents were open with them about any aspect of having sex. Consistent with Huebner and Howells (2009) findings, those few individuals who did report having open relationships with their parents in which they could talk about sex and sexually intimate relationships, also reported using condoms with their first sexual partner. It should be mentioned that out of the other eight interviewees, four used condoms, three did not use any sort of protection, and one did not state if they did or did not use protection.

The "Think Health, Talk Social" parent-child sex education discussion format presented by Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, & Dittus (2009) outlined that parents should not only discuss the health related consequences of sex, but that they should also open a discussion about the social cultural influences of adolescent sexual

motivation and activity to provide the most well rounded, honest and factual information about sex to their children. From the interviewed sample only three identified that their parents created an open environment to discuss sex, including conversations regarding the social cultural aspects of adolescent sexual motivation and activity. One participant identified that her parents provided education regarding the physical aspects of having sex and felt that sex was something to be experienced as one is in a long term committed relationship leading to marriage. Another's parents expressed only that sex is a part of marriage and marriage only. Another respondent reported hearing different opinions from his mother and father- save yourself and do what men do. Four participants, representing the majority, stated that their parents did not speak to them about sex or sexually intimate relationships in any context.

The basis for the "Think Health, Talk Social" model, captures what this surveyed population was missing in their sex education – that is, education about the social and emotional impact of having sex. As mentioned previously, interview participants clearly identified that they would have liked more information about the emotional complexity that can often accompany a first sexual experience, as well as continued sexual experiences. Parent's need to not only be encouraged to offer their children support around this information, but also have education around how to provide this sort of open environment for their children to bring their questions about sex and sexually intimate relationships. This is not to say that all families need to believe or be accepting of their children's decisions to have sex, instead it is

to say that parent's should be informed as to how to approach the physical, emotional and social aspects of sex in an environment that may also provide a space for their children to bring questions about sex.

Jackson (2006), who wrote of the modern sexual subject as being an adult who can consent to sexual contact with knowledge, may have predicted this type of response from the interviewed participants. Responses seem to confirm that the views of parents generally are that adolescents do not have agency to make insightful decisions around sex and therefore their sexual encounters, as Jackson noted, are seen as deviant, precocious and mentally deficient. Unfortunately, seeing their decisions in this way does not prevent them from continuing to make decisions to have sex. Instead, using parental guidance to provide children and adolescents with a well rounded sexual education that helps them to make informed decisions around sexual decision making may prevent the disturbing emotional and physical consequences that it seems our parent population is afraid of, from occurring.

Sexual Decision Making

Phillips (2006) writes of the importance of understanding the influences around the often-contradictory discourse connected to modern sexuality, including perhaps the unconscious impact of social messages, practices and power relations that impact who we are and how we live our lives. Out of the ten participants, seven reported their first sexual experience as a sort of milestone event. Of these seven participants, two also expressed that fitting in with or being recognized by their peers motivated their decision to have sex for the first time. These findings support

Phillips' theory regarding the influence of the social messages, practice and power relations that exist not only in American culture, but American adolescent culture as well. Similarly, Morgan and Zurbriggen's 2004 research on conveyed messages from partners in the first sexual experience as a relationship building tool was supported by the participants interviewed for this study. The categorization of participants first sexual experiences being that of a milestone event were described as such because their description of their decision indicated variables such as feeling as though they were ready to take that step in their relationship, or felt that it was naturally the next thing to explore sexually with their partner. These seven participants' explanations could also be described as a relationship building tool and for this reason were seen as compatible.

The research of Morgan and Zurbriggen (2006) on males and peer pressure to have sex also corresponds with the responses of the two surveyed participants who noted that their desire to have sex was to fit in or to be recognized by their peer groups. Although only two male participants out of five stated that there was a direct peer influence connected to their decision to have sex, the other three noted their decisions to have sex as a milestone event for which they just thought they were ready. Although these participants did not directly state that they were influenced by their peers, their responses certainly reflect a correlation.

Ott and Colleagues (2006) found that males valued the goal of pleasure more than intimacy or social status, where as females valued the goal of intimacy more. Pleasure was only reflected by one participant as the primary motivation to have

sex and she was female. Freud's theory that the fundamental motivation to engage in sex is one of pleasure seeking was also not supported by these findings.

The data reflected from these interviews along with a review of recent literature demonstrates that motivation to engage in sex for the first time comes from a variety of different sources including adolescent social culture, peer relationships and partner relationships. Upon reflection, the majority of these participants expressed that their decisions to first engage in sex were motivated by their "feeling ready," which logically could have been influenced by a variety of sources. Having sex for those who have not yet engaged in the experience, may be perceived as a step that mature individuals take. As one participant stated: "I was in a committed and monogamous relationship and we thought of ourselves as in love and enjoyed our other sexual activities so it was sort of a natural thing to do." It can be a decision that sets you apart from the social culture of adolescents and springs you into young adulthood. Taking into account what we have found through these interviews regarding sexual information gathering, sexual education at school and at home, it seems that opening up discussions to explore the range of emotional involvement that goes into sexual decision making and sexual activity may be an important avenue for social workers to continue to explore. Having a physically and emotionally pleasurable sexual experience is a process. Emotionally, there are a lot of different components that go into the decision making around having sex and often participants reflected that this insight did not come until after they had engaged in the experience. Helping individuals get in touch with their thoughts and

feelings through open and explorative questioning and discussion appears to be a necessary avenue to explore. Taking this sort of approach is not what is normally explored in our culture's sexual discussions or teachings about sex. Asking questions about where their motivation is coming from, what they believe will be the benefits or risks to their decisions, and helping them to explore the possible validity of their thinking is the beginning of teaching about the emotional process that is involved in sex.

Emotional Reactions

Responses from interviewed participants identified that the emotional involvement that is often found through sexual experience starts as mentioned above, with sexual decision making and continues during and after the experience. The presence of emotional processes within first sexual experiences and continued sexual experiences was a significant finding of this qualitative study's research. All ten participants identified some sort of emotional reaction, often expressed as confusion or being ill prepared, in the context of their first sexual experience. The "emotional body" of sex is conceptualized as a sense of emotional involvement, connection or feeling, that is experienced at any point during the decision making process, while having sex, or after the sexual experience.

The emotional reactions during the sexual decision making process that were described by participants continue to demonstrate the importance that open, honest discussions have on one's ability to learn about sex. One participant, who identified

as growing up in a religious household, expressed intense fear associated with her process of sexual decision making. She shared:

There was fear around the stigma associated with it...Like I was in the abstinence club...they don't say you die, but they make it seem like it is so dramatic, such a big deal and you are going to feel terrible afterwards.

She continued to state that it was very helpful for her to talk with her cousins around this subject because they were sexually active and "still alive and kicking." These are difficult emotional processes to sift through alone and open environments to explore one's thoughts and feelings about sex and sexual decision making, as demonstrated throughout this research, are not easily accessible. This participant's advice: "I just feel that sex should be seen as something that is part of normal life, not deviant and that's it."

Individuals who expressed emotional reactions during their first sexual experiences shared feelings of confusion, fear, anxiety, empowerment, connection, discomfort and disgust. This is a broad range of emotion and was experienced by each individual independently from the others. The emotional body of sex, if not discussed open and honestly, is difficult to learn prior to one's first sexual experience simply because what is experienced by some is not necessarily experienced by others. When we discourage open conversations about sex, we also discourage conversations about how individuals can have safe, pleasurable experiences. If these conversations are not taking place in sex education classrooms, family living rooms, peer groups or with trusted, adult figures, then our young people are not learning about the important process of communication

within sexual relationships. If participants cannot express what they need in a sexual relationship, then they may not be prepared to have the relationship at all. This becomes difficult because if adolescents do not have a place discuss this in, then they may interpret this as a concept that is only being utilized to prevent them from doing something that their parent's and educators do not feel that they are ready for.

How to explore the connection between sex and emotions with adolescents is an area that needs continued exploration and demonstrates an important area of concentration for the role of clinical social work. Adolescent clients may need to process their feelings around their first sexual experiences and possible emotional confusions or complications that it adds to their personal, social and family life. It is important that clinicians are prepared to create an open environment for these individuals to explore their feelings. The exploration of an adolescent's emotions in the context of sexual encounters may present an ethical dilemma for some, as socially sexual exploration among teenagers has been noted as being culturally deviant, precocious and mentally deficient. It is important to remember the effect that emotional experiences have on our mental functioning and overall wellbeing. Sex can rarely be experienced without any emotional involvement, and if our clients feel comfortable exploring this during their sessions, then we must examine our countertransference around the subject.

The emotional involvement of sex, whether through an adolescent's decision to have sex, or their questioning about having sex, may also be a topic that produces

family conflict and that needs attention during family therapy, couples therapy and individual therapy. Feeling comfortable helping families to explore and question their thought processes around the well being of their children in the context of sexual experiences and/or relationships, is an important skill to have when working with this age group. Individuals in these qualitative interviews demonstrated that the emotional processes involved in sexual relationships were not adequately reviewed in any part of their sexual education process. Although each emotional experience was unique to each participant, all demonstrated that this process deserves additional explanation. Exploring these conversations may also offer an avenue for change, as adolescents and parent's may begin to conceptualize sex and sexual exploration in a different way that may lead them to more open discussions.

The Effect of the First Sexual Experience

Participant's responses regarding the effect of their first sexual experience demonstrated that emotionally their choices have an effect on either their intimate relationship or their understanding of themselves as sexual beings. The lack of preparation and information that young people experience around these aspects of self experience again demonstrates the necessity for more comprehensive sex education. Sex is not purely physical and we need to create ways to explore the processes involved in sex and sexual choices beyond this sort of narrowed view. No literature reviewed supported these findings, which demonstrates the continued need to explore the relationship between emotions and sexual activity further.

Being emotionally unprepared can be a confusing, uncomfortable and challenging process to get through, especially when you have not found a trusted place where you can gather information or openly discuss this sort of reaction to having sex. Participants expressed a wide variety of emotional reactions including feeling unprepared for the effect it would have on their relationship with their partner and their family, an increased desire to want to continue to have sex, an increase in connection to their partner, regret and disgust. Ignoring these signs of emotional distress seems preposterous. Is sex so taboo that we are willing to continue to perpetuate this unnecessary emotional suffering?

The second finding correlated with the reviewed literature of Morgan and Zurbriggen (2004) that identified that participants overall learned a lot about sexual activity and dating from their first significant dating partners. Similarly this study found that over half of the participants (N=6) identified that learning about sex and sexually intimate relationships is something that has to be done on your own through your own experience. Both of these observations demonstrate the individual learning process that is involved in one's ability to have pleasurable sexual experiences. This is not something that any participant noted being aware of prior to having sex for the first time and therefore reflects participants' limited knowledge around sex and intimacy. It is hard to understand what makes sex enjoyable when you have never had any formal education around sex and pleasure and have not been taught through school, parents, peers or media that having a pleasurable sexual experience is not necessarily inevitable and in fact is a process

that may take a while to learn. Sex is indeed a process of individual learning and exploration, but this does not mean that we leave adolescents to do this exploration without any sort of support. If sexual education is something that we see as a necessary component of mainstream education, then we should be providing spaces to explore and educate our children around the emotional body that is involved in the experience as well.

A Sexual Language

What was also interesting throughout these interviews was the limited language that we as a culture have to talk about sex. People often stumbled to find words to describe what they meant when reflecting on their first sexual experiences. Participants never used the words penis or vagina, and only occasionally mentioned lubrication. Here we were, two people, one who was interested in hearing the other's thoughts and opinions of their first and continued sexual experiences, and the other who had willingly agreed to divulge these thoughts and feelings to me, the other. But there was no common language to express one's sexual feelings or their thoughts about their sexual decision making. There was often a looming feeling of uncertainty, the interviewee questioning their responses, wondering if they said what they meant in a way that did not seem crude or twisted. It was enjoyable to participate in these interviews and in a way felt like discussions of sex and sexually intimate relationships could start to become natural, open discussions. Bringing discussions about sex and sexual decision making from underneath their black

cloak, may release some of the forbidden flavors that it holds and allow more pleasurable and well informed emotional experiences to take place.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study was limited by the small number of interview participants. The participants were also either pursuing or had already attained a higher education and this factor may have created a bias in participant responses. The study also did not have adequate representation from non-heterosexual participants and therefore these voices were not adequately represented. In spite of these limitations, the findings have clear implications for social work practice. The emotional components involved in nearly all sexual experiences are not being taught to our young people. Participants expressed a variety of emotional responses and confusion related to the limited knowledge that they had around these processes and expressed having limited or no knowledge around the possibilities of these effects occurring. For most individuals this caused some sort of emotional discomfort or suffering. Our adolescent populations emotions are being taken for granted. Social workers can provide opportunities to openly discuss sex the emotional body that is involved in sex as clearly this population is being underserved in this area.

For clinicians who work with adolescents, being informed about the culture of sex, sexual education and sexual decision making is also important knowledge to bring to your work, whether it becomes a topic of conversation or not. As social workers we must be prepared to create an open, inviting, environment in which our

clients can explore sex and sexually intimate relationships in whatever context is needed. These interviews have given insight into the emotional impact that sex is having on our young population. If we have issues exploring sex with adolescents we must examine our own issues behind this. We can not continue to perpetuate this injustice. If our clients came to us scared from sexual abuse or rape and wanted to discuss their experience, we would help them to articulate and explore their emotions to overcome the trauma that they had endured. The same sort of dedication should be brought to our treatment of adolescents who are experiencing the emotional involvement of sexual decision making and sexual experiences. If they have not brought up these sort of challenges we should be able to communicate that our space is a safe place to explore, question or gather information around such reactions. Teaching about the emotional involvement of sex should be interpreted as psychoeducation. It is an emotional reaction to a decision or event and our clients need an appropriate context to place their experience in.

These findings are also extremely relevant for social workers who are involved with family work, as the data presented demonstrated that sex for these ten individuals was not something that was discussed in their home. If any aspect of sex has influenced the balance of a family, creating a comfortable environment for adolescents and parents to explore this topic is also of the utmost importance. Again, providing psychoeducation around the emotional effects that are often involved in sex can provide both the adolescent and their family with necessary information to understanding the experiences that they are having. Social workers

need to be able to incorporate the normal influences of adolescent sex and sexually intimate relationships into their work across disciplines. These interviews have given us a perspective that highlights the emotional confusion that is associated with sex and sexual experiences beyond the context of the first sexual experience. The emotional aspects of sex are not being taught effectively. Social workers may be the best individuals to develop groups that explore sex and pleasurable sexual experiences, as we are able to conceptualize social dilemmas from a lens that encompasses many differing perspectives. Giving room for honest information to be openly questioned and explored may create a culture where unsafe and emotionally damaging sexual experiences become a less common occurrence.

Continued research on the emotional underpinnings of sex and sexually intimate relationships for adolescents is important. It would be useful to get this perspective from individuals who are just experiencing sex for the first time, as well as those who have maintained sexually intimate relationships. As we have found that the emotional body may not be adequately explored through current sexual education venues, pilot groups around this topic may be a particularly interesting avenue to explore in future research. Conducting studies that look at how families approach discussions around sex and sexually intimate relationships within their own environments would also be a valuable area to continue to explore. If creating a pleasurable sexual experience is a process, then learning how to educate our young people successfully is also going to be one.

Summary

The overall hypothesis of this thesis was that individuals who had access to a wide variety of sources of information that were trustworthy and factual would have more pleasurable first and continued sexual experiences. This study also hypothesized that most individuals were motivated by the impressions that they gathered from the media as well as peer and social culture that sex was a sensual and pleasurable experience. What was found through the various interviews was both confirmed and disconfirmed these hypotheses. Most individuals, although they assumed that their first sexual experience would be pleasurable, did not find it to be pleasurable and did not report that this is what motivated them to have sex. The interviews also revealed that even for the few individuals who gathered information from a variety of trusted sources, including their parents, nearly all reported that they did not receive ample education about the emotional effects that having sex and/or continued sexually intimate relationships would have on them and the relationship they had with their partner. As most individuals did not receive well rounded sexual education, which included discussion of the emotional as well as physical components of sex, it could be stated that most did not have pleasurable first and continued sexual experiences because of this. The majority of interviewed participants also commented that they were unsure if they could have been prepared for these sexual realities and found that they were the best teachers that they had. Learning about sex and making sex pleasurable physically and emotionally is indeed a process. As previously discussed throughout this chapter, sexual education needs to be more comprehensive and accessible to children and

adolescents and it needs to discuss these aspects. It is not adequate for us to rely solely on school programs or the media to educate our young people. We need to continue to provide them with avenues to not only discuss the physical components and realities of sex, but we also must provide them with information on how the emotional body is also involved in sex. Helping adolescents understand what makes a sexual experience pleasurable may not prevent them from having sex, but it may lead them to make more emotionally healthy decisions.

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Appendix A

Approval from the Human Subjects Review Committee



SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

March 4, 2010

Sara Christiano

Dear Sara,

I am delighted to say that your materials are now complete. You have made all of the suggested revisions and we are able to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ann Hartman Ph.D."

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Human Subjects Consent Form

Dear Participant,

First I would like to thank you for your interest in this topic. My name is Sara Christiano. I am a graduate student in clinical social work at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am writing to invite you to partake in an interview about your perceptions of sexual education. My thesis topic is whether young people had accessible, reliable and complete information to use when making the decision to have sex for the first time, how this has benefited or hindered their sexual experiences and how they continue to make decisions about sex. The information will be used in my master's thesis and for possible presentation and publication.

You will be able to stop the interview or skip questions at any time and will have up to two weeks to withdraw your responses. Should you withdraw, all materials related to you will be immediately destroyed. To withdraw your responses after the interview please email me [author's email] with your request. To participate, you must be between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five and must have engaged in a first sexual experience that was consensual for both partners and must not have experienced sexual abuse. The interview should not take longer than one hour to complete.

Your participation in this interview may help to reveal gaps in sexual education that will be useful to educators, clinicians and parents as it may open doors to the lack of positive and accurate information sharing that currently exists around safe and pleasurable sex. Finding such gaps could potentially lead to more meaningful and less emotionally damaging experiences for individuals becoming sexually active for the first time. This will bring us closer to finding what factors lead to a positive first experience with sex. There may be some discomfort for some individuals when recalling their sexual experiences; for this reason you will have

access to a list of referral resources if discomfort in fact arises and you would like to seek counseling. Monetary compensation will not be provided for participation in this survey, although your participation may offer information to individuals who are making these decisions themselves for the first time, or those who are counselors or teachers working with them.

Information that is shared during the interview process will remain confidential, and as stated previously, all identifying material will be kept confidential. Data stored electronically will be protected, as it will be stored in a locked file only accessible by myself. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by myself. The interview narratives and transcribed documents will remain in a locked file and kept secure for three years, as directed by Federal guidelines, and destroyed if no longer needed. If they continue to be of use they will remain in a locked, secure setting. In publications or presentations the data will be presented in aggregate and no actual names will be used. When illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, they will be carefully disguised to again protect your identity. To further protect your confidentiality, you are welcome to use a pseudonym or to not give me your full name. The confidentiality of your responses is my primary concern and nothing that would reveal your identity in the process of discussing the outcomes of this work will be done.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop the interview at any time during this process and may also refuse to answer any question that you do not want to answer. If you withdraw from the survey after completing some of the interview you may choose to withdraw your responses up to that point. Your responses cannot be withdrawn after you have completed the interview. My contact information is provided at the end of this document. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding the interview. Should you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of this study, please contact me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant's signature

Researcher's signature

For question about the survey or inquiries to share more information regarding your first experience, please contact me at [author's email]. Thank you, your participation is greatly appreciated.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Data Collection Instruments

Please answer the following questions regarding your first time having sex. Sex in this survey is not limited to a heterosexual sexual activity.

1. What kind of sexual knowledge did you have prior to your first sexual experience?
2. What were the most influential sources of information that you used to make decisions or gather information about sex?
3. How was this information helpful?
4. How was this information misleading?
5. What were your parent's attitudes about sex while you were growing up?
6. What were their thoughts about masturbation?
7. If you had a question about sex while you were growing up, who did you approach in your household?
8. Please describe your sexual education in school? What sort of information was discussed or taught?
9. Did your sexual education class promote an abstinence only model?
10. Did your sexual education class provide information regarding same sex relationships? If yes, what sort?
11. Did your sexual education class provide any information related to individuals who may have been questioning their sexual orientation? If yes, what sort?

12. What types of sexual activity had you engaged in prior to your first sexual experience?

13. At what age did you have your first sexual experience with a partner?

14. What motivated you to have this experience?

15. After making the decision to engage in this experience, how much time did you take before you actually having the experience?

16. How would you describe the person that you first had sex with?

17. Who did you speak to prior to engaging in your first sexual experience?

A pleasurable sexual experience for the purpose of this study is defined as a sexual encounter that leaves the individual feeling relaxed and without guilt. It is comfortable, respectful and emotionally satisfying. It is an experience that is gratifying and induces joy for both partners but does not necessarily result in orgasm.

18. Did you expect this first experience to be pleasurable?

19. Was this experience pleasurable for you?

20. Did you feel you understood fully what the experience would be like?

21. How was the experience similar to what you thought it would be like?

22. How was the experience different?

23. Was there anything that you wish you had known about sex looking back on the experience now?

24. Did you use birth control, if yes what type?
25. Where do you go to get information about sex now?
26. What sort of impact did your early sexual education have on your understanding of sex and sexually intimate relationships?
27. What sort of effect did your first sexual experience have on your life?
28. Do you feel like your sexual education prepared you for your first sexual experience?
29. Has your first sexual experience impacted your current sex life in any way?

Demographic Information

What is your ethnicity?

Where did live while growing up?

What type of family did you grow up in?

What is your highest level of education?

Please identify your social class.

Please identify your gender.

Please identify your sexual orientation.

