

Parents' Constructions of Teen Sexuality: Sex Panics, Contradictory Discourses, and Social Inequality

Sinikka Elliott

North Carolina State University

Teen sexuality occupies a highly ambivalent and contradictory place in U.S. society. Teenagers are deemed too young to know about sex, but too sexually driven to be trusted with information. Teen sexual activity is portrayed as fraught with danger, yet sexuality is a pervasive aspect of the American cultural landscape and considered key to identity and fulfillment. Drawing on in-depth interviews with forty-seven parents of teenagers, this article explores how parents navigate these contradictory discourses in making sense of teen sexuality. The findings show that parents do not think of their own teenagers as sexually desiring subjects, even as they construct adolescents in general as highly sexual and sexually predatory, with gender, racial, and class signifiers woven through their descriptions. I argue that parents' binary thinking—constructing their teen children as asexual but other teens as hypersexual—represents more than simply an effort to maintain a notion of their teens as sexually innocent: it reveals deep anxieties about their teenagers' future life chances and underscores the prominent role sexuality plays in reproducing social inequality.

Keywords: Adolescent sexuality, social inequality, parenting, moral panic, sexual citizenship

Most research on family sexual communication seeks to learn what parents tell their children about sex and sexuality. These studies find, for example, that parents tend to avoid topics such as the mechanics of sex (Angera, Brookins-Fisher, and Inungu 2008; Regnerus 2007). Parents instead center their lessons on sexual morality (Fisher 1986; Martin 1996; Regnerus 2007; Sanders and Mullis 1988) and, to a lesser extent, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy prevention (Epstein and Ward 2008; Dittus and Jaccard 1998; Hutchinson 2002). Yet the bulk of this research is prescriptive in nature; it focuses on the content of these conversations,

Direct all correspondence to Sinikka Elliott, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Carolina State University, Campus Box 8107, Raleigh, NC 27695-8107; e-mail: Sinikka_Elliott@ncsu.edu.

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not on the factors that may shape that content. This has the unfortunate effect of either blaming or applauding parents for their sexuality lessons without examining the larger context in which these lessons take place. This context includes moral panic over and highly contradictory messages about sexuality. Teen sexuality in the United States is routinely depicted as a dangerous enterprise, full of perils and pitfalls (Fields 2008; Luker 1996, 2006; Nathanson 1991; Schalet 2004), yet sexuality is a pervasive aspect of the American cultural landscape and is considered key to individual identity and personal fulfillment (Irvine 1994). Social policy, sex educators, teachers, and other adults construct teenagers as both too young to know about sex and too sexually driven to be trusted with sexual information (Fields 2008; Pascoe 2007; Schalet 2004). How do parents negotiate these sex panics and contradictory discourses in making sense of teen sexuality? Drawing on in-depth interviews with forty-seven parents of teenagers, this article examines parents' subjective understandings of the sexuality of their own teenagers as well as teenagers in general. As I discuss below, I adopt Simon and Gagnon's (1986) sexual scripting framework to attend to the psychological and sociocultural dynamics that inform parents' constructions of teen sexuality.

A further goal of this article is to examine how social inequality shapes, and may be reproduced through, parents' understandings of teen sexuality. A consistent finding in the research on parent-teen sexual communication is that parents often reproduce and reinforce gender inequality in their lessons to their children about sexuality (De Gaston, Weed, and Jensen 1996; Martin 1996; Moore and Rosenthal 1991; Phillips 2000). For example, in their sexual lessons, parents try to protect their daughters by stressing their sexual vulnerability and emphasizing the dangers of sex, whereas sons are more likely to be given parental leeway to explore their sexuality (Epstein and Ward 2008; Martin 1996). Studies linking parents' sexuality lessons to processes of inequality, however, have focused primarily on gender inequality. Yet a large body of literature highlights that sexuality is tied to other demographic variables including race, ethnicity, class, and citizenship (Bettie 2003; Collins 2000, 2004; Fields and Hirschman 2007; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Nagel 2001; Plummer 2003a). Here I use an intersectional lens, which considers race, class, gender, and sexuality as mutually imbricated (Collins 2000, 2004; Nagel 2001), along with work on the reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu 1984; Collins 2000; Schwalbe 2008; Schwalbe et al. 2000), to analyze how parents' interpretations of teen sexuality may be linked to larger social inequalities.

PARENTS AND TEEN SEXUALITY: SEXUAL SCRIPTS AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

I follow an interactionist perspective that views sexuality not as biological or immutable but as intimately tied to sociocultural and psychological processes. In particular, I use Simon and Gagnon's (1986) sexual scripting theory, infused with post-structuralist queer theory insights into power and inequality (Foucault [1978] 1990;

Gamson and Moon 2004; Plummer 2003b). Simon and Gagnon posit three levels on which sexual scripting occurs: the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. On the cultural level, discourses are a culture's "instructional guides" (Simon and Gagnon 1986:98).¹ They are the taken-for-granted ways to understand the social world and social practices that "shape our imaginings of the world and of ourselves" (McCormack 2005:663). For example, the discourse of teen sexuality as risky and hormonally fueled shapes how adults respond to teen sexual activity. Discourses are not accidental or neutral; rather, they reflect dominant interests. "Experts" and moral entrepreneurs in the scientific, medical, political, and religious communities, among others, play a prominent role in crafting and promulgating discourses of sexuality (Collins 2004; Foucault [1978] 1990; Irvine 2002). Yet discourses are not monolithic or omnipotent: competing discourses may vie for prominence and may contest and contradict one another (Foucault [1978] 1990).

Discourses are often too broad or abstract to fit the nuances and complexities of everyday life. Thus individuals craft their own interpersonal scripts to fit the context of their particular situation and interactions. These interpersonal scripts play out on the interactional arena. On the level of the psyche, individuals engage in intrapsychic scripting. This concept captures internal motivations, desires, and anxieties in the construction of sexual subjectivities, what Simon and Gagnon (1986:99) refer to as an individual's "many-layered and sometimes multi-voiced wishes." Intrapsychic scripting is linked to cultural discourses insofar as discourses may be internalized and become powerful motivators directing action (Foucault [1978] 1990; Martin 1996). As Foucault observed, discourses operate through individuals, not on them. But individuals may also resist and challenge dominant discourses on both the interpersonal and the intrapsychic level (Collins 2000; Foucault [1978] 1990; McCormack 2005).

Sexual scripting theory has primarily been used to explain how individuals develop a sense of themselves as sexual beings (e.g., Martin 1996). In the research presented here, I use this framework to attend to the multilayered process by which parents make sense of teenagers as sexual subjects. My focus is on what Nagel (2001:124) termed "sexual ascription . . . the assignment of sexual meanings, evaluations, and categories to others." Parents may be deeply invested in and concerned about their children's sexual behaviors and attitudes. Not only are parents charged with being their children's sex educators (and hence implicated in any negative outcomes of teen sexual activity), the dominant discourse of teen sexual activity emphasizes that it is fraught with devastating consequences. As such, parents may feel responsible for their children's sexual behavior and, when it comes to sex, consider the outcomes to be largely negative. Whereas the notion of scripts may imply a static or even formulaic orientation, I suggest this theory offers a model of parents' understandings of teen sexuality in the making, one that is dynamic, processual, and linked to, but not determined by, broader sociocultural conditions and discourses. In what follows, I trace the larger sociohistorical context in which parents construct their understandings of teen sexuality. This context includes intense conflicts over sex education and contradictory discourses of teen sexuality.

Sex Education and Sex Panics

The first calls for sex education in the United States emerged in the early 1900s in conjunction with the notion that sex is dangerous for the young and the unmarried and a newfound developmental stage in the life course—adolescence. The discovery of adolescence was accompanied by a flurry of scientific research to bolster the notion that adolescents are neither physically nor developmentally suited for many adult responsibilities, including working, marrying, and bearing children (Luker 1996), and eventually to institute mandatory high school attendance (Palladino 1996). School-based sex education, however, was not widely implemented until the late 1970s when it almost immediately emerged as central to the culture wars between conservative and liberal interests (Irvine 2002; Luker 2006). The implementation of sex education in schools also coincided with a concerted effort on behalf of an uneasy alliance of feminists, health professionals, and social conservatives to expose and eliminate child sexual abuse (Angelides 2004; Irvine 2002; Wyness 2006). From inflated figures on the prevalence of child sexual abuse to expanded definitions of child victimization to include such things as talking to a child about sexuality, the campaign against child abuse contributed to a cultural climate in which sexual abuse seemed omnipresent (Irvine 2002).

Local and national debates over sex education have unfolded in this “broader context of high anxiety about potential dangers to children” (Irvine 2002:135). Indeed, although national polls show that most Americans support sex education (National Public Radio 2004; Rose and Gallup 1998), and despite greater openness about sexuality in popular culture since the 1960s, battles over sex education have increased in intensity over the past four decades (Irvine 2002)—a period marked by “sex panics,” explosive political and local clashes over sexuality, including gay rights, censorship, and sex education (Vance 1984:434). The debates over sex education have centered on whether youth should be instructed in the uses of contraception or whether sex education lessons should exclusively teach young people to abstain from sex until marriage. These debates, however, are about far more than the sex education curriculum—they are fueled by and reproduce deep anxieties about childhood, sexuality, gender, marriage, and the institution of the family (Fields 2008; Irvine 2002; Luker 2006; Rubin 1984). As Rubin (1984:297) observed, in times of moral panic, when “diffuse attitudes are channeled into political action and from there into social change,” sexuality often functions as a scapegoat, tapping into and deflecting social and personal malaise.

This process can be seen in the wording of federal legislation adopted in the mid-nineties. In 1996, under the aegis of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (i.e., welfare reform), President Bill Clinton signed into law a new entitlement program for abstinence-only education. The new law, which was renewed and expanded under the Bush administration, defined abstinence education as any sex education program that teaches, among other things, “that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity, . . . that sexual activity outside the context of

marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects, and . . . the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity” (Personal Responsibility 1996:2354). This legislation, hence, discursively bound sexual activity to marriage, personal responsibility, and financial self-sufficiency, and overwhelmingly stressed the negative consequences of nonmarital (e.g., teen) sexuality, serving to solidify and broadcast what I term the danger discourse of teen sexuality. Consequentially, this law was part of the sweeping welfare reform legislation that initiated stringent work requirements and time limits for welfare recipients (Hays 2003). It also coincided with a time of increasing economic deindustrialization, a rapid rise in (low-paying) service sector jobs, and an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. Thus, in the context of labor restructuring and a rise in income inequality, this legislation bolstered the notion that Americans are responsible for their own well-being and that sexual behavior is a key way for people to secure promising futures (e.g., through abstinence) or to hinder their future prospects (e.g., through nonmarital and teen sexual activity). Abstinence-only sex education has grown in popularity (National Public Radio 2004) and has begun “to assert a kind of natural cultural authority, in schools and out” (Fine and McClelland 2006:299). How do parents navigate the discourses of danger and sexual and personal responsibility in making sense of teen sexuality?

Binary Thinking and the Reproduction of Inequality

The debates over sex education have profoundly shaped not only sex education curricula but also the discourses of child and teen sexuality (Irvine 2002). In their rhetorical battles over sex education, conservative and liberal groups have engaged in “making up children” (Irvine 2002:108). Through this discursive work, children became socially defined as “innocent, vulnerable, and in need of protection from adult sexual knowledge and practice” (Thorne and Luria 1986:177; see also Rubin 1984). The seemingly generic notions of childhood innocence and asexuality promulgated in these debates, however, belie the racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist foundations of sex education and the construction of the innocent child (Fields 2005, 2008; Irvine 2002). In particular, the lens of child innocence is used mostly to construct white, middle-class children (Ferguson 2000; Fields 2008). Children without this race and class privilege are construed as hypersexual, “unsalvageable,” and a corrupting influence (Fields 2008). Debates about teen sexuality “reflect the twin assumptions that American teens are too innocent to know about sexuality and too sexual to be trusted with information” (Pascoe 2007:29). Teenagers are both discursively “made up” as innocent and endangered by sexual information *and* “made up” as hormonally fueled and sexually driven (Schalet 2000, 2004), with race, class, and gender meanings etched through these constructions.

This categorizing of difference—splintering “innocent” teens from “unsalvageable” teens—is not unique to the battles over sex education. It is a key mechanism in the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu 1984; Collins 2000; Schwalbe 2008; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Within the major axes of inequality in the United States—race,

class, gender, and sexuality—there are numerous categories that define difference. Collins (2000) refers to this categorizing of difference as binary thinking and points out that, in binary thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms: for example, the “opposite sex.” Moreover, binaries do not simply define what is different but imply relationships of superiority and inferiority. One side is culturally devalued and “objectified as the Other . . . an object to be manipulated and controlled” (Collins 2000:70). For example, men and women are not simply seen as different; historically, masculinity has been constructed as superior to femininity (Collins 2000; Connell 1995). Thus binaries provide ideological justification for social inequality. If one group is better than the Other, it deserves social rewards (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

In the research presented here, I explore how parents’ understandings of teen sexuality reflect binary thinking. Recognizing that parents’ constructions do not take place in a discursive void, I contextualize their narratives within broader societal discourses of normal, acceptable sexual expression (e.g., Personal Responsibility 1996). My focus is on how these norms build on and contribute to gender and sexual, as well as race and class, inequalities. The data show an overarching binary in parents’ constructions of teen sexuality—their asexual children versus hypersexual teen Others—and that this binary is often imbued with race, class, and gender hierarchies and inequalities. Indeed, although sexuality as a category of difference is frequently elided in research on the reproduction of inequality, the findings presented here underscore how sexuality is central to organizing and sustaining boundaries and status hierarchies (Collins 2004; Nagel 2001). As I discuss in the conclusion, through their binary thinking, parents do not simply imply that their teens are sexually innocent but also that, as such, they are worthy of social resources and recognition, suggesting linkages between sexuality and citizenship (Fields and Hirschman 2007; Plummer 2003a).

METHOD AND DATA

To investigate how parents of teenagers make sense of teen sexuality, I conducted forty-seven in-depth interviews with a diverse group of parents of teenagers, comprising six fathers, one grandmother, and forty mothers. Most interviews were conducted with individual parents ($n = 41$). However, three heterosexual couples were interviewed together ($n = 6$). Hence, of the six fathers who participated, three were interviewed as part of a couple. Interviews lasted from one to two and a half hours and were generally conducted in study participants’ homes, but occasionally parents were interviewed at their workplace or a café. The interviews focused on the parents’ beliefs and experiences and “processes of interpretation that give meaning to everyday lives” (DeVault 1991:11). I began each interview by asking parents to describe their teenager(s) and a typical day in their lives. I then focused on specific issues related to puberty, dating, and sex. I asked parents, for example, whether they had noticed any physical or emotional changes in their child during puberty and probed to learn how they felt about those changes. I posed questions such as whether their

teen has dated, if they have talked with their teen about dating, and their feelings around teenagers dating. Questions about sexuality focused on what parents teach their children about sex as well as the dynamics of these discussions: why parents say what they say, how they feel about talking to their children about sex (or not, as the case may be), and what they think about teen sexuality. Throughout I tried to ask open-ended questions that elicited stories (Plummer 2003a) to capture meanings, interactions, nuances, and contradictions. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

Recruitment

Most of the parents in this study were recruited through their children's health classes in three high schools and one middle school ($n = 40$). The schools from which the parents were recruited are located in a large southwest city, which, in the previous year, had been the site of three heated public school board debates over the adoption of sex education textbooks. I mention this here because, although none of the parents I interviewed were involved in the debates, they had likely heard and read about them in the local news. In other words, these debates or, more accurately, the reports of these debates comprised part of the discursive terrain in which parents made sense of teen sexuality. A health teacher at each of these four schools allowed me to send letters home to the parents of their students asking them to participate in my study. Of the almost four hundred letters sent home, I received fifty-three responses and eventually interviewed forty of these parents. The remaining seven parents were recruited through advertisements placed in community newspapers in the schools' neighborhoods ($n = 3$) and through referrals ($n = 4$).

Sample

Just over half of the parents identified as white ($n = 24$), about one-third identified as Latino/a ($n = 16$), one-eighth identified as black ($n = 6$), and one parent identified as multiracial. About one-fifth fall in an upper-income bracket, classified as upper middle class ($n = 10$), half are categorized as lower middle class ($n = 23$), and almost one-third fall in a working-class or poor income bracket ($n = 14$). To capture the social and cultural aspects of class, parents' social class location was based not simply on income but also on the types of jobs they held and their education levels. In line with recent work stressing the social construction of class and race/ethnicity (Bettie 2003; Bonnett 1996; Winant 2000), these categories should not be considered monolithic or representative of all people who identify as a particular class or race/ethnicity. Rather, I was interested in race/ethnicity and class to the extent that these statuses mattered to the study participants. Two-thirds of the parents identified their relationship status as married or living with a partner ($n = 31$). Eight are divorced, four are separated, two are widowed, and two identified as single. All study participants identified as heterosexual.

Analysis

My analytic strategy draws on a grounded theory approach that involves a two-stage coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). First, I carefully read and reread the interview transcripts, employing *open coding* to identify themes and categories. Second, I used *focused coding* to hone in on key themes I identified in the open-coding process. For example, my open coding revealed that parents spoke about teenage sexuality differently depending on whether they were talking about their own teenager or about teenagers in general. In the focused coding, I looked for processes to help explain how and why parents engage in this binary thinking. Through this method, the danger discourse of teen sexuality, a sense of their own teens as young and economically dependent, and gendered, racial, and class sexual meanings emerged as particularly salient factors.

CONSTRUCTING THE ASEXUAL TEEN: NAÏVETÉ, DANGER, AND DEPENDENCE

In this section, I examine how and why parents think of their own children as asexual while constructing their children's peers as hypersexual. By asexual, I mean that parents did not describe their teenage children as sexually agentic, desiring subjects. In the first part, I suggest that parents depend on their understanding of their children as young, naive, and economically dependent in making this judgment. This part also reveals the extent to which parents think of teen sexual activity in largely negative ways. The second part shows that parents think of other people's children as highly sexual and sexualized, and underscores the extent to which they rely on gendered, but also raced and classed, sexual meanings to construct this asexual-sexual binary.

The parents in this study consistently characterized their children as young, immature, and naive. In doing so, they often compared their children with other teenagers. Beatrice (fifty-two, white, lower middle class) typifies this viewpoint in her comment about her sixteen-year-old daughter: "One thing I've noticed is that she's probably a little bit more immature than some of her friends, and that's okay, I think it will come." Echoing Beatrice, Ellena (forty-one, Latina, working class) said her sixteen-year-old daughter "seems very young or immature at times." Although I interviewed far more mothers than fathers, the few fathers also view their children as less mature than their peers. Ron (fifty, white, working class) sees both his fifteen-year-old son and his seventeen-year-old daughter as immature:

They're a little immature for their ages. Well, my daughter especially. She still acts a little younger than most seventeen-year-olds. She looks younger than [seventeen] to me too. Which, we really don't mind though. We don't mind that. Because, we can sort of regulate it a little bit easier when she gets little questions and things like that.

Ron constructs his daughter, in particular, as younger than her peers, both in terms of how she acts and how she looks. Importantly, he observed that this has made

parenting easier because his daughter has not asked difficult questions about sex and has seemingly acquiesced to her parents' answers in that department. He expressed relief that, in his assessment, her immaturity relative to her peers has delayed her interest in sex.

Indeed, many parents rely on their understanding of their children as young and immature in constructing their children as asexual and not yet capable of handling the responsibilities that accompany sexual activity.² For example, Beth (thirty-nine, white, upper middle class) believes that her sixteen-year-old son is a virgin because he has told her as much and because he has not dated, but she also added:

When you look at your child, they're just so little and young. You just don't think of them ever even thinking about [sex]. It's hard to even think about what you should be saying to kids. You don't think they are old enough when you think about those things.

Beth's view is shared with most of the parents in this study. Despite the fact that her son "surprises her a lot" (in the past few years, he has been caught smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, and watching pornography), she cannot imagine him as a sexual being. She said she should probably talk to her son about sex, but has no idea of what to say or how to go about it; in her words, "It's hard to even think about what you should be saying."

Similarly, Kate (forty-three, white, lower middle class) said that her fourteen-year-old son is too young to have sex: "I don't think it's safe for his age. Maybe it's just him, I don't know. But he's a little naive." As she spoke of her fears for her son, it became clear that peer pressure is an important component of Kate's concerns for her son's sexual innocence and well-being:

SE: What is it about his age or his naiveté that you don't feel he'd be safe?

Kate: I don't know. I . . . [sighs].

SE: Is it that he wouldn't use protection?

Kate: Yeah? Or maybe, I guess, [that] he'd do something he didn't want to do. Get pushed into something or let himself be pushed into something. I think he would definitely do that. "I'm not going to be cool if I don't do this."

Here we see that Kate has a difficult time imagining her son might experience sexual desire of his own accord, at least not at his age. Like Ron, she views her teenager as asexual. However, she is concerned that he might succumb to sexual activity to appear cool in the eyes of his peers. Her fears center less on whether he will use contraception and more on her son finding himself in a sexual situation that he may not be ready to handle. In the same vein, Rosalia (forty-three, Latina, poor), who has five daughters ages nine to twenty-two, does not allow them to date or go out on their own until they are eighteen because, before that, "They're gullible. They'll just believe anything. They're naive, I guess."

Hence age and maturity are crucial to parents' understandings of their children's (a)sexuality: they posit their own teen children, at least until the age of eighteen, as young, immature, and naive, and, by association, sexually innocent.³ Their narratives also underscore the extent to which a danger discourse of teen sexuality underlies

this understanding. Based on this hegemonic paradigm, teen sex equals (hetero) sexual intercourse and also equals danger, risk, and negative consequences (Fields 2008; Luker 2006; Personal Responsibility 1996). Kim (forty-five, black, lower middle class) said she emphasizes consequences when she talks to her seventeen-year-old son, twelve-year-old niece, and ten-year-old daughter: “[I tell them] ‘Procreation is real. I don’t care what anybody says, when you have sex, there’s only the potential for a baby to pop up, no matter what precautions you take.’” As Melissa (forty-three, white, upper middle class) put it, “You’re dealing with *life and death* issues” (emphasis as stated). Consistent with the danger discourse, which is constitutive of the larger panic over teen sexuality, parents regularly described teen sexual activity in terms of catastrophic consequences that no amount of information or safety measures can prevent.

Some of the narratives also reveal that parents equate teen sexual activity with deviance. For example, when Portia’s (forty-six, Latina, upper middle class) then fifteen-year-old son came to her with the news that his girlfriend might be pregnant, Portia was in shock: “Because he was such a young teenager and I really didn’t think. And again, this is a really good solid kid.” The way Portia described her son suggests that he does not fit her stereotype of a sexually active teen. Indeed, Portia has not yet talked to her now sixteen-year-old son about contraception and does not plan to until he leaves for college, because “he’s just a good kid who got in over his head.” Portia’s reluctance to view her son as a sexual subject because he is a “good kid” implies that she connotes teen sexual activity with badness.

Finally, in line with the legislative discourse that poses financial self-sufficiency as a precedent for sexual activity (Personal Responsibility 1996), parents link their understandings of their teens’ sexuality to economic wherewithal. Beth, who earlier described her sixteen-year-old son as “little and young,” for example, has told her son that he can watch pornography when he is eighteen *and* economically independent: “[I said] ‘When you’re eighteen and on your own computer, you pay for your own computer and your own TV and your own service, you can do whatever you want. But whenever you’re in our house you live by our rules.’” Like Beth, many parents said their children can be sexually desiring subjects when they no longer live at home and are paying their own bills (most prefer that this also coincides with a time when they are married). Thus, while age clearly plays an important role in how parents think about their children’s sexuality—parents often indicated precise ages when their children may date; some, like Beth, pinpointed when they may watch pornography; and many identified an age range during which they think of their children as particularly naive and immature, for example—age is not simply about developmental trajectories; it is intertwined with economic dependence and a deep sense of parental responsibility to usher their children safely to adulthood.⁴ As I discuss in more detail in the following, parents’ understandings of teen sexuality are also shaped by complex notions of difference and destruction.

Constructing the Hypersexual Teen: Promiscuity, Hormones, and Predation

Although parents have a difficult time envisioning their own teens as sexual subjects, they described their children's peers as highly sexual. Sylvia (forty-four, Latina, lower middle class), for example, characterized her fifteen- and fourteen-year-old daughters' peers in the following manner: "The way the teens are now, I know they're out they're doing it [having sex]. But I wouldn't want it for my girls." Other parents described their children's peers as "real sexual" (Gina, fifty-one, white, upper middle class) and "promiscuous" (Rosalia). Corina (thirty-nine, black, working class) put it this way: "[Teenagers] got their cute little bodies and their raging hormones. They're like raring to go." This understanding reflects a dominant discourse of sex as an uncontrollable drive to which teenagers, *in particular*, because of their raging hormones and lack of impulse control, are susceptible (Schalet 2000, 2004). This discourse often runs alongside a risk-based discourse of teen sexuality.

Some parents construct their own children's goodness and asexuality in part by contrasting it with other hedonistic teens. Kelly (thirty-seven, white, working class) described her sixteen-year-old niece, who lived with Kelly and her sixteen- and fourteen-year-old sons for six months, as follows: "I realized that my boys are pretty good, and I have no major complaints about how they act. Because this girl, she was very openly sexual and all she could think about was the next time she got to go see this guy." In general, Kelly said, "Kids are moving too fast these days." By contrast, her sons are not "even interested in acting like that. They have higher goals for themselves." In this way, Kelly separates her goal-oriented sons, who she believes are not sexual, from other "openly sexual" teenagers like her niece, who are, presumably, easily sidetracked by sexual activity.

Thus parents differentiate between their asexual teen children and their teens' sexual peers. However, this binary thinking does more than simply establish their teens as asexual and, therefore, good; it also creates a scenario in which their teenagers are imperiled by their peers. Indeed, parents described their children's peers as not simply sexual but as *sexually predatory*, with gender, race, and class meanings often woven through their descriptions. In what follows, I first analyze the fears parents expressed in relation to their sons' sexual well-being and then examine their fears for their daughters. In contrast to previous research suggesting that parents stress sexual vulnerability to their daughters while giving their sons more leeway to explore their sexuality (e.g., Martin 1996), underscoring the panic around teen sexuality, the parents in this study consider sex to be dangerous for both their sons and their daughters.

"You need to watch out for girls": Girls as Sexual Aggressors

Parents of sons consistently described their sons' female peers as hypersexual, sexually aggressive, and more sexually advanced than their sons. Rose (forty-three, white, upper middle class), who has three sons ages eight to fourteen, regularly talks

to her oldest son about puberty, dating, and sex. “[I tell him], ‘You need to watch out for girls.’ And, of course he’s not allowed to date yet, at his age. And he won’t be able to date till he’s sixteen, but I want to start telling him now ’cause I think a lot of times girls are more [sexually] aggressive than boys are.” Despite being a woman herself, Rose warns her son away from girls. Like other parents I interviewed who have sons in their early teens, she said girls mature faster than boys and often pressure boys to have sex to solidify a relationship. As Kate cautions her fourteen-year-old son, “‘Girls can manipulate you or be controlling.’ Because he is one that would let a woman walk right over him.” One father, Scott (thirty-four, white, lower middle class), also expressed concern about sexually assertive girls. Scott said that his fourteen-year-old adopted son is “not the type to initiate sex, [but] there are girls out there that would. And he’s not a oh no, I can’t do that [type of person].”

This understanding is interesting because a great deal of research indicates otherwise. Studies find, for example, that girls often feel pressured to have sex before they are “ready” (Martin 1996; Thompson 1995). However, past studies also suggest a compelling explanation for why and how parents can cast girls’ sexuality in such a negative light. Research shows that young women face a limited range of acceptable behaviors when it comes to sexuality (Tolman 1994). If they violate the cultural construction of girls as naturally less interested in sex than boys, they risk being labeled sluts (Martin 1996; Thompson 1995; Tanenbaum 1999). Young women constantly skirt the Madonna-whore dichotomy: either they are sexually innocent Madonnas or they are sexually lascivious whores. As more young women have sought sexual pleasure and agency, many adults have responded with alarm, underscoring the tremendous anxiety about female sexuality that persists in the United States (Wilkins 2004). Parents, hence, may rely on the Madonna-whore dichotomy in maintaining their own children’s sexual innocence. By casting “other” girls as sexual temptresses, they maintain their understanding of their sons, and also their daughters, as asexual and innocent.

Parents’ depictions of girls as sexual temptresses often had class overtones, though rarely directly articulated in terms of class (Bettie 2003). For example, Rose said she initiated a conversation with her son about the dangers of oral sex around the time he transitioned from a private to a public school: “I wanted to tell him, so he’ll know, when a girl puts her mouth on a boy’s pee-pee—somehow, by saying pee-pee that kind of makes it more gentle to me, but he gets the idea . . . [I said], ‘Boys really lose respect for girls who act like that.’” When asked why she felt it was important to have this conversation, Rose explained that when her son attended private school, “There was talk among the moms that some of the kids at the public school, not our school, of course, were meeting at the movies and having oral sex in the back row.” Now that Rose’s son is at a public school, she worries that he may confront this situation, suggesting that the girls whom Rose deems sexual (and sexually threatening to her son) are those who attend public, not private, school.

Like Rose, Renae (forty-three, black, working class) said she instructs her nineteen- and thirteen-year-old sons to watch out for girls. Her warning evokes the

cultural archetype of the female gold digger: “[I say], ‘You better stay away, stay away. Sometimes girls trap you.’” Indeed, last year Renae’s older son, Cameron, who was a senior in high school at the time, claimed that his girlfriend, who, like Cameron, was black, feigned a pregnancy. Had this been true, Renae feared it might have prevented Cameron from going to college. Renae insisted that Cameron accompany his girlfriend to Planned Parenthood where she took a pregnancy test that came back negative. Upon learning this, with his mother’s insistence, Cameron broke up with the young woman. Cameron is now in his first year of college and has told Renae that his ex-girlfriend’s pregnancy scare “really kind of woke me up to women. I’m scared of women.” Although pleased that her son is focusing on his education, Renae hopes that he will remain open to women in the future:

[I tell him], “Get your education. You going to meet a whole lot [of women] out there in different careers and different, well, attitudes and all that. Educated and everything. And on your level.” Because I didn’t feel [his ex-girlfriend] was on his level to be honest. She was more streetwise.

Renae’s narrative reveals that it is not all women Cameron should stay away from, just a certain kind of woman. Like other parents, Renae did not overtly talk about class, but instead used code words like “streetwise” that have strong class overtones, imbued with gender and race meanings. The gold digger narrative, prevalent in mainstream hip-hop, meshes with contemporary and long-standing stereotypes of working-class and poor African American women, making them targets for parental (and social) anxieties (Collins 2004; Luker 1996). Anticipating that her son will become a member of the professional class, Renae’s advice is also likely shaped by the precarious status of the black middle class (Pattillo-McCoy 2003) and notions of few “marriageable” black men compared with a surfeit of single black women (Collins 2004). In encouraging her son to find girlfriends who share his career aspirations and intellectual abilities, Renae implicitly urges him to seek out women, and suggests there are many, who will share his future social class location.

“I was a teen boy and I want to protect my girls from that”:
Boys as Sexual Aggressors

Whereas the parents cast girls as the aggressors in talking to their sons about sexuality, in discussing sexuality with their daughters, parents consistently position their daughters as victimized and vulnerable rather than as desiring subjects—essentially as Madonnas. In this discourse, boys are the sexual aggressors. Many parents spoke extensively about their fears for their daughters’ safety in relation to their male peers and dating relationships. Greg’s (forty-three, white, lower middle class) advice to his eighteen-year-old stepdaughter exemplifies this concern. He frequently tells his stepdaughter that she is better off in a group than paired up with a boy:

If the news has something about date rape on it or these girls turn up missing or dead and, not that it only happens on dates, we’re not telling her that, but it’s like, there’s safety in numbers. [I tell her], “If you’re with a group of friends and you

stay with a group of friends, there's less chance something's going to happen to you. . . . If you're in a group you are better protected."

In addition to relying on the news and other sources of information, Greg, who has a biological teenage daughter as well as two teenage stepdaughters, bases his belief about predatory boys on his own experience as a male: "I feel like I have to protect my girls. I was a guy and I want to protect my girls from that." Greg carefully monitors his daughters' friendships with boys, has a rule that they cannot date until they are eighteen, and has made it clear that boys are not to be trusted.

The parents' discussions with their daughters about dating and relationships paint a fairly grim picture. Many parents view relationships, in general, as a hindrance to their daughter's well-being. Gabriela (forty-four, Latina, upper middle class) said she tells her three daughters (ages seven to sixteen): "Take care of yourself first, then seek out a relationship with someone else. Make sure that you're taking care of yourself first. Be self-sufficient, have your own job, your own career, travel, have your own interests." Some fear that even a responsible, trustworthy daughter might be lured in over her head by a boyfriend (most parents assume that their children are heterosexual) who is less focused, less responsible, and more sexually driven. Corina, who has a fourteen-year-old daughter as well as two daughters in their early twenties, said she regularly warns her daughters not to trust boys: "[I tell them], 'He just wants you for your body. And then after he get it, he's going to be done with you.'" She also asked her single brother to talk to her daughters about the "male point of view": "And he told them the truth: [He said], 'I just want them for their body. I'm using them and if any other man tells you that's not what they're doing then they're lying to you. Basically they're users.'" Corina instructs her daughters instead to have "something left to save for your husband on your wedding night."

Parents' depictions of their daughters' potential dating relationships were often not only gendered but also raced and classed. Race was especially salient for some of these parents—white parents in particular—suggesting the continued linkages between race, gender, and sexuality. Historically, depictions of hypersexual black men corrupting white women's purity and innocence ignited and galvanized racist fears (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Palladino 1996). Some of the white parents' narratives suggest the persistence of this trope. Pamela (forty-seven, white, lower middle class) was blunt about the prospect of her fifteen-year-old daughter dating interracial: "[My husband and I] do *not* want her to go out with a black person. I would be okay with the Hispanics. I just, the issue with a white person and a black person, I just think there's a lot of issues with that and so we won't let that happen." Pamela explained why she feels this way: "Where I grew up, people were shunned and bad names were called to the girls that were going out with the black guys. And it was mostly white girls with black guys, not the other way around." Pamela's explanation reflects a legacy of racial and sexual politics in which white women who dated men of color were deemed race traitors and fallen women, essentially whores (Collins 2004; Nagel 2001).

Most parents, however, were not as direct as Pamela in voicing concerns about interracial dating. Sheila (forty-eight, white, lower middle class) expressed ambivalence

about the black boys her sixteen-year-old daughter dates. She said she does not mind that her daughter currently dates only black boys, but indicated that she thinks it is just a phase and frequently emphasized that her daughter “does *not* embrace their cultural values as a whole,” implying that blacks have different (possibly inferior) cultural values compared with whites. Sheila also shared a story with me about one black boy who apparently exposed himself to her daughter two years ago, suggesting she wanted me to see that her worries about black boys were not unfounded. The story exposes the particular dilemmas parents face and how their interpretations are shaped by race, gender, and current understandings of teen sexuality. The boy and her daughter were standing in the yard talking when Sheila’s husband, who was watching them from a window, saw the boy “acting suspicious.” Her husband bolted out of the house and ran the “kid off our property.” Their daughter admitted that he had exposed himself to her and that it was “gross.” In response, Sheila’s husband “sat out in our driveway in the back of our van for two nights with a rifle in his hand (laughs).” In addition to being vigilant at home, Sheila and her husband also tried to get their daughter transferred to another school.

Although it is difficult to say whether Sheila and her husband would have responded in a similar manner if the gender of the teenagers in this story had been reversed—that is, if a girl had exposed herself to their son—or if the boy in the story had been white, it seems as though racial and gendered sexual politics and discourse shaped their reaction. Female sexuality, especially white girls’ sexuality, is often associated with (and may be experienced as) vulnerability and victimization (Martin 1996; Thompson 1995), while the sexuality of African American boys and men has historically been framed as excessive, dangerous, and out of control (Collins 2004; Ross 1998). Under Jim Crow segregation, these framings worked in tandem to justify racial inequality and antimiscegenation laws (Collins 2004; Palladino 1996). Indeed, Sheila’s husband’s effort to protect his daughter with a shotgun is reminiscent of a lynching, an institutionalized mechanism of segregation (Collins 2004). Sheila and her husband’s attempt to transfer their daughter to another school further underscores their sense that she could not be safe near this boy. Their daughter, however, was unwilling to divulge the boy’s name, suggesting some resistance on her part to her parents’ efforts to characterize her as a victim.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Existing studies of parent-teen sexual communication inform us about what parents teach their children in relation to sex and contraception. Yet these studies tend to be prescriptive; the meanings parents attach to teen sexuality and their reasons for talking (or not talking) to their teens about sex are left largely unexplored. My analysis of interviews with forty-seven parents of teenagers reveals that parents do not think of their own teenagers as sexual subjects. A number of cultural, structural, and psychological forces shape this understanding, with the danger discourse of teen sexuality being perhaps paramount. This discourse is shaped by the debates over sex education,

which are themselves part of a broad moral panic around child and teen sexuality characteristic of the last several decades (Angelides 2004; Irvine 2002; Rubin 1984; Vance 1984). In line with this discourse, parents cannot envision any good coming from teen sexual activity; rather, they articulated innumerable negative consequences, including death. As one parent put it, "There are diseases that will kill you. They will kill you" (Sandra, forty-five, white, upper middle class). This produces a tremendous social and psychological incentive for parents to asexualize their teens (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Parents also indicated that economic independence is an important criterion for sexual activity; their ability to think of their teenagers as sexual subjects is hindered by their teens' economic dependence. Finally, parents' descriptions of teen sexual activity reveal that they equate it with deviance, something they do not associate with their "good" teenagers. These understandings are remarkably similar to abstinence-only sex education mandates (Personal Responsibility 1996).

Yet, even as parents construct their own teens as asexual, they posit other teens as highly sexual and sexualized. That is, parents do not think of their children as sexually desiring subjects, but they construct their children's peers as sexually agentic and even predatory. Parents exhibited this binary thinking across gender, race, and class, and regardless of their children's actual behavior. Even the three parents in this study who have children who became teen parents subscribe to this understanding. This discourse appears to be so hegemonic that it transcends racial or class differences and is an everyday commonsense understanding (Bourdieu 1984; Collins 2000). In this article, I have argued that parents' binary thinking is shaped by the contradictory discourses of teen sexuality that discursively construct teens as not only sexually innocent and vulnerable but also sexually driven and rapacious (Pascoe 2007; Schalet 2000, 2004). Parents' binary thinking may also be part of a larger social psychological phenomenon whereby people tend to view themselves and in-group members more favorably than they view those outside their social circle (Brown 1986; Peiser and Peter 2000; Taylor and Brown 1988). This perceptual tendency helps individuals feel more positive and better about themselves and those in their groups (Taylor and Brown 1988). In a context in which teen sexual activity connotes deviance and ruin, and parents are held accountable for their children's behavior, on the intrapsychic level (Simon and Gagnon 1986) parents may desexualize their children based on, and to shore up, a positive view of themselves and their children.⁵

The data also show that the parents in this study often use gender, racial, and class signifiers in casting their children's peers as hypersexual. A long history of binary thinking around sexuality has shaped understandings of sexuality in U.S. society. As social historians have documented, the poor, new immigrants, blacks, Latinos, Asians, gays and lesbians, and those deemed mentally "unfit" to reproduce have long borne the mantle of "bad" (i.e., promiscuous) sexuality (Collins 2000, 2004; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Luker 1996). Today, many of these sexual stereotypes endure and have become so entrenched that they are taken for granted. Collins (2004), for instance, argues that the persistent hypersexualization of black men and women can be seen in policymakers' and academics' intense concern over and scrutiny of black

teenage motherhood (see also Luker 1996). I argue these stereotypes enable parents to project their anxieties about teen sexuality onto gendered, and also raced and classed, Others. This othering of their children's peers preserves their notions of their own children as asexual and innocent. But this also means that parents see their children as potential victims in their intimate relationships. Based on this equation, their children's peers are not fellow innocents on a path of mutual self-discovery and pleasure. Instead, peers are potential predators, abusers, and entrappers, with gender, race, and class meanings woven through these depictions. Following well-worn gendered tropes, parents of sons expressed concerns about sexually voracious girls seducing and trapping their gullible sons. Parents of daughters worry about sexually predatory boys using, and sully the reputations of, their heretofore innocent daughters. Although parents' assumptions about their children's sexuality reproduce heteronormative notions of heterosexuality as natural, by drawing on these discourses, parents cast (teen) heterosexual relationships in an extremely unfavorable light. Ultimately, this elides teenagers' sexual subjectivity (Fields 2008; Martin 1996): parents have a difficult time envisioning their teenagers becoming sexually active other than through coercion and/or naïveté. Insofar as parents' lessons are based on adversarial gender relations, rather than mutuality and trust, they may also undermine another goal of abstinence-only sex education (and welfare reform): marriage promotion (Personal Responsibility 1996).

Through their binary thinking, parents also contribute to the notion that teen sexuality is bad; hence, teenagers who have sex are bad, and any negative consequences that befall them are their own fault. For example, one mother, in talking to her sixteen-year-old daughter about a pregnant girl at her daughter's school, said, "She made a choice and her life's going to be harder because of that" (Beatrice). Thus, in line with the discourse of personal responsibility, parents assign agency to other teens' sexual behavior, but they conceive of their own teens as sexually vulnerable and potential victims. This suggests that one unintended consequence of legislation designed to promote personal responsibility in a society riven through with inequalities may be the scapegoating of Others. By constructing their teenagers as asexual but other teenagers as hypersexual, parents may effectively create an "out" for their children if they behave "irresponsibly": their peers are to blame. In this model of responsibility, everyone but one's own child(ren) is held accountable. This ultimately justifies social hierarchies and inequalities (Collins 2000; Schwalbe 2008; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Yet whose interests are served by the binaries? Why do the binaries exist in the first place? According to Collins (2000:70) "the 'Others' of society . . . threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries." Societies divide the world into good and bad, pure and polluted as a way to establish moral order (Douglas 1966; Durkheim [1912] 2001). Ultimately, the asexual-sexual binary buttresses the social order (and hence social inequality) by blaming Others for the problems of teen sexual activity. This absolves society of responsibility for the consequences of teen sexual behavior and directs attention away from the cultural

ideologies and institutional arrangements that structure parents' and children's lives, such as the conceptual and practical obstacles to reproductive information and services (Schalet 2004).

The United States is a nation that valorizes families and child rearing while denying families access to affordable child care, health care, quality education for all, safe neighborhoods, flexible and well-paid work, and hopeful futures for young people and, indeed, their parents. The parents in this study are pessimistic. They worry that their children's lives will be hard. They see the options arrayed before their children as limited. Many parents spoke dispiritedly of the extreme competition to get into college. Others described the limited options facing their children, even with a high school diploma. Through their constructions of teen sexuality, parents are not simply trying to preserve their children's innocence; they are expressing anxiety about the ability of their children to secure a piece of the pie (Ehrenreich 1989). They present their children as deserving, worthy citizens by desexualizing them, underscoring the role sexuality plays in notions of good citizenship (Fields and Hirschman 2007; Plummer 2003a). Thus while parents' understandings of teen sexuality may bolster social inequalities, they must be understood in the context of a larger society that is highly stratified and presents a limited range of acceptable life trajectories. That is, the panic over teen sexuality may have particular resonance in part because it taps into parents' fears for their teenagers' futures in what they perceive as an increasingly competitive environment. Moral panics "mine rich seams of anxiety" (Weeks 1981:92). The promise of abstinence, as outlined in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, is essentially that if youth make it to adulthood and, ideally, marriage sexually unscathed, they will have access to the good life.

Moreover, in the hyperindividualistic environment of the United States, children's outcomes and well-being are considered largely the responsibility of their parents (Wyness 2006). Indeed, the parents in this study asserted that it is ultimately up to parents to successfully guide their children through adolescence and into adulthood. In a context in which teen sexuality is framed in terms of deviance and danger, a sexually active teenager may signal that a parent has failed this moral imperative. Parents are caught between contradictory discourses not just of teen sexuality but also of parenting: they are charged with teaching their children responsibility, but also with taking responsibility for their children's safety and well-being and protecting them from a whole host of social and sexual ills.⁶

By focusing on parents' constructions of teen sexuality, I do not mean to imply that children passively internalize and reproduce these understandings. Socialization is not a unidirectional and totalizing process, wherein adults transmit knowledge to children who absorb these lessons uncritically; youth play an active role in this process (Connell and Elliott 2009; Fields 2008; Thorne and Luria 1986; Wyness 2006). A limitation of the research presented here, then, is the absence of the voices of teenagers themselves. Future research should investigate how youth interpret their parents' lessons about sexuality and the meanings young people give to sexuality.

This study contributes to the growing call to examine gender, race, class, and sexuality as mutually reinforcing, yet independent, forms of inequality (Collins 2000; Nagel 2001). We cannot collapse these forms of inequality into one another; rather, the focus should be on how they are mutually constituted and may be conditioned by other axes of inequality. My research demonstrates, for example, that, as we increasingly divide the adult world from the realm of childhood and adolescence, age is an ever more important axis of inequality to be taken into consideration. The findings presented here also have implications for how sex education is currently taught. School-based sex education tends to frame teen sexuality as hormonally driven, hard to control, inherently dangerous, and deviant (Fields 2008; Fine 1992). Parents agree with this framing when thinking about teenagers in general, but not their own teenagers. This provides insight into the confusing and contradictory messages young people may be getting about sexuality. Lastly, this research supports the need to shift the focus away from whether or not parents are talking to their children about sexuality to how and why they are doing so—to begin to interrogate the taken-for-granted discourses, ideologies, and inequalities that shape parents' understandings. As long as teenage sexual activity is equated with deviance and imperilment, it may be very difficult for parents to acknowledge their teens as sexual subjects. This suggests a need to radically alter current discourses of teen sexuality and the conditions of social inequality that inform, and are reproduced by, them.

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NOTES

1. Simon and Gagnon (1986) refer to these as “cultural scenarios” rather than discourses. For continuity and clarity, as well as to emphasize power relations, I use the term *discourse* throughout. As Plummer (2003b) notes, sexual scripting theory attends well to agency, context, interaction, and meaning making, but lacks a direct analysis of power and inequality, something that is front and center in post-structuralist queer theory accounts of sexuality. Plummer also takes queer theory to task for a lack of attention to “the ordinary everyday lived experiences of sexuality” (p. 521), a strength of scripting theory. Combining these approaches can therefore balance their strengths and weaknesses (see also Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009).
2. All but one parent, who was a health educator, associated teen sexuality with (hetero)sexual intercourse. In other words, the parents view teens as becoming sexual through (hetero)sexual activity.
3. As I discuss elsewhere (Connell and Elliott 2009), parents in this study experienced their teens as complicit in their own asexualization: parents described teens who acted mortified by the topic of sex and actively reassured their parents that they were not interested in sex.
4. For many parents, eighteen represents a milestone insofar as it is the age of majority and signals the end of high school, the ability to vote, and, for some, home leaving. However, most parents said the real measure of adulthood was economic independence. Many parents, particularly the middle-class parents, envisioned their children remaining dependent on them well into their twenties, informing their sense of their teen children as young and immature.

5. Studies find that this perceptual tendency is stronger when judging others who are more socially distant from oneself (Peiser and Peter 2000), an intriguing claim that may help explain the salience of race, class, gender, and sexuality in binary thinking. Research that deconstructs these categories, revealing their sociocultural, historical, and political underpinnings, hence may undermine the processes that contribute to binary thinking and help dismantle the scaffolding of social inequality.
6. As scientific studies continue to refine the definition of adolescence and, in doing so, reify it, the expectations placed on parents of teenagers have become increasingly dissonant. Parents are expected to give teen children a degree of freedom and independence, but are also inundated with expert advice stating that teenagers are developmentally incapable of, for example, thinking through the consequences of their actions.

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