From Object to Subject: Young women's experience of sexuality education within sex-negative taboos

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From Object to Subject:
Young women’s experience of sexuality education within sex-negative taboos

by

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ABSTRACT

Young female sexuality continues to be portrayed as problematic within cultural expectations of acceptable sexual conduct among young people (Moran, 2000; Russell, 2005; Welles, 2005). Contributing to this negativity is the marginalization of positive conceptualizations of female sexuality and the silencing of female sexual desire and pleasure within sexual education practices (Fields & Tolman, 2006; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002; Tolman, Hirschman, & Impett, 2005). This feminist critical ethnography utilizes the narratives of four young women participants in the From Object to Subject (O2S) curriculum—a curriculum emphasizing a sex-positive approach to sexuality education—to explore: (a) how adolescent females have been educated about sex and sexuality in the past; (b) how young women have experienced their own sexuality; and (c) the societal circumstances and messages that young women experience and have contributed to their sexual socialization. Findings revealed two major societal taboos that contribute to the marginalization of young female sexuality. The taboo of sexual awareness and the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure are described in detail. These taboos inform understanding of the realities young women experience within our nation’s contemporary climate of sex-negative sexual education practices and the nature of sexual socialization of young people. Implications for future research regarding young female sexuality and sexuality education policy reform are addressed.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Rae’s Story: An Ideal Scenario

Imagine a young woman in her late adolescence; perhaps to some she would be considered a young adult. Her name is Rae. She is a mature young person with a healthy mind, body, and soul. For the most part, Rae has good relationships with her family members and peers. She has the understanding and relationship skills to weather some of the rough patches that inevitably all relationships will encounter. Rae considers herself a loyal and trustworthy ally to her close friends, and they would agree. In recent years—as teenagers tend to do—Rae has become interested in the pursuit of love and romance. She has been involved in a few romantic, intimate relationships. As with many lived experiences in adolescence, these relationships were learning experiences for her, full of life lessons. Although she might roll her eyes and smirk a bit when asked about her “ex’s,” Rae does respect and appreciate each of the unique individuals with whom she has been involved, for each helped her begin the transition from naïve adolescence to knowledgeable adulthood.

Rae has had sexual experiences, both alone and with a partner. These encounters were not forced, coerced, random, or otherwise adverse. These experiences were wanted—desired, in fact; Rae thought about her actions prior to engaging in the actual behaviors. She knew that a time would arise when her mind and body would tell her she was “ready,” and not wanting to be taken off guard, therefore, she had anticipated and prepared, as best she could, for such a time. She and her partner never went any further than or exceeded each other’s individual boundaries; their intimate exchanges were thrilling, pleasurable, and satisfying for both. Although tempting, they had not relied on alcohol or drugs to ease any awkwardness. Instead, they had engaged in open communication—albeit with some giggling and
blushing—about the set boundaries they each wanted to maintain. These discussions included talk of their desires—their likes and dislikes, whether known or anticipated—and the use of protection from the possible negative consequences of sexual activity, and they even discussed how being physically intimate with one another might affect their romantic relationship and friendship. When asked to describe how she feels during her intimate experiences, Rae’s eyes twinkle a bit, she smiles coyly; blushing while she wistfully twists a strand of her hair around one finger, and you can see her thoughts taking her to a good place:

I definitely enjoy myself. I mean, it’s exciting and I feel like all my senses are all amped up, my mind, my body feel super in sync, like I’m at a really great concert, seeing my favorite band and they are playing my favorite song and I’m so, we’re so there, in the moment, ya know?

In this imagined scenario, Rae appears to have had seemingly healthy intimate and sexual experiences. She is the subject of her own life, including her sexual life; that is, she exhibits a sense of sexual subjectivity, “the perceptions of pleasure from the body and the experiences of being sexual” (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005, p. 28), and she demonstrates sexual agency, “an individual’s feelings of empowerment within the sexual domain” (p. 29). When asked why she thinks this is so, Rae responds that she believes it has something to do with the open communication she had with her parents and other adults in her life regarding relationships, love, sex, and sexuality. She also credits her knowledge and understanding gained from school-based sexuality education programs that offered accurate and relevant information to her and her peers regarding many aspects of sexuality—some of which were, to her, expected topics that would be covered such as sexual anatomy and physiology; reproduction; and pregnancy and STD prevention, including abstinence.
However, several topics, Rae explains, were unexpected, although in the end, she emphasizes, these discussions were most helpful. Significant to Rae were the conversations about the naturalness of female sexual curiosity and sexual desire—her own sense of sexual subjectivity was reinforced. These discussions allowed Rae to critically reflect on other important, yet overlooked issues that are intrinsically entwined in the development of sexual agency: gender roles and stereotypes; sexual orientation, sexual coercion and exploitation, societal messages about sex and the physical body including imposed standards of beauty, and the importance of communication within intimate relationships. When asked why the desire and pleasure discussions were significant to her in the sexuality education program that she completed, Rae simply stated,

Because no one ever really talks about our—girls’—desires. It was nice to hear that it is natural and human for me to feel the feelings that I do and that having these feelings doesn’t mean I am a pervert or a slut or something. It was nice to hear that I can want and should expect intimacy and sex—however you want to define “sex”—to be pleasurable for me, not just for my partner. Sex should, first, be wanted by both people and be pleasurable physically and emotionally for each. Talking about that with an adult, hearing them discuss all of this with me and my friends, it made it okay for me to have those feelings and made it easier to talk to my partner about what I want and don’t want, what I like and don’t like—the boundaries that I’ve set for myself as a sexual being.

Finally, Rae indicated that she appreciated the nonjudgmental approach that the sexuality education program took with students. Of course, not all of her peers have been sexually active and Rae has not always been sexually active either. She thought that her
sexuality education teacher did a nice job of including all student perspectives, regardless of orientation, gender identity, or level of sexual experience. She is thankful that the educators, her parents, and other adults were realistic in their approach to talking with her and her friends. Her parents definitely stated their wish for her to remain abstinent until she was older and in a committed relationship but also expressed their understanding that abstaining from all forms of sexual behavior is an overbearing, if not unrealistic, expectation. They hoped Rae would feel comfortable talking with them, seeking guidance, asking any questions, voicing concerns she might have about her romantic relationships. Rae did take her parents’ counsel to heart and she waited until she met her current partner—whom she says, with a big smile, she is “super attracted to, maybe in love with.” She and her partner have similar values and a mutual understanding regarding their sexual behaviors—they definitely like being sexually active with each other, but neither of them wants their relationship to be based on sex. The couple seems realistic about being young, in love, and sexually active; they acknowledge that changing life circumstances could alter their relationship circumstances but each is respectful of what they have shared.

Overall, Rae seems to be describing a positive experience with sexuality education—an education derived from open and honest conversations with her parents and accurate and appropriate lessons from qualified educators within a supportive school environment. In many ways, Rae has experienced sex-positive sexuality education in that, rather than hearing only cautionary tales of the perils of sexual behavior, she was informed of both the positive and negative aspects of sex and sexuality—the potential pleasurable aspects of sexual behavior and the potential risks involved in considering sexual encounters and intimate relationships.
How does Rae’s story make you feel? Proud? Alarmed? Empowered? Uneasy? Are you shocked by her frank discussion and understanding of sexual desire and sexual pleasure? Does she sound like a mature young woman or does she come across as unladylike?

Rae’s imagined scenario was created as a fusion of stories of young women whom I have encountered throughout my life: as a researcher conducting the study that is presented in this dissertation; as the instructor of a large college-level human sexuality class where the students taught me just as much about the current societal conditions surrounding sexuality education, sexual behavior, and sexual socialization as I taught them; as a volunteer at an after-school program for “troubled” pre-teen and teenage girls; as an aunt to both a teenage niece and three teenage nephews; and as a once-young woman, myself, who endured and thrived within my own adolescent and young adult experiences with intimacy and relationships, love and sex. I have also witnessed many of my female friends transform into confident young women while others have had to battle back from potentially scarring experiences within intimate relationships only to question and struggle with their personal conceptions of intimacy, sex, love, worthiness, desire, and pleasure.

Although many young women have shared with me pieces of their stories, I have never heard an exact account such as Rae’s. What remains for me to wonder is how does a young woman achieve a sense of sexual agency and subjectivity such a Rae’s; or, perhaps more pressing, how do we as a society fail to foster and affirm these qualities as vital to identity formation in young females? I understand and appreciate that I can never get the “whole story” from any one young woman—and if I could, how could I ever fully understand their unique experiences that have become their story? Nevertheless, what I can take from the stories, however whole or partial they may be, are lessons that I can pass on to others that can
make Rae’s account a true story for future young women. You might not agree that young people should be sexually active and I am not suggesting that they should. The reality is, however, a considerable proportion of young people (45.9% of females, 49.8% of males) in this country become sexually active during their high school years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2007). It is my hope that what everyone can agree upon is that young people, regardless of gender, class, race, or orientation deserve the chance to grow into healthy and happy adults; sexual wellness, subjectivity, agency, and the potential for healthy, respectful relationships must be included in the equation.

**Rationale for this Study**

*From Object to Subject: Building the Female Sexual Self* (O2S) is a gender-specific multi-session curriculum designed to address a particular expression of human sexuality—that is, young female (adolescent) sexuality—“with an affirming and empowering intent not captured by previous sexuality education curricula” (Chittenden, 2005, p. i). This curriculum was delivered on two college campuses in the fall and spring of the 2007–2008 academic year. Through observations of the curriculum group sessions and individual participant interviews, I came to know the experiences of sexual education with several young women involved in the O2S groups. In this study, I present the narratives of four of those young women.

My purpose as researcher was a passionate pursuit to raise the voices of young women to the forefront of the larger discussions regarding contemporary sex education and the nature of sexual socialization of young people in this country. I was provided this opportunity through collaboration with the author of the O2S curriculum, sexuality educator Rhonda Chittenden, and Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa. Rhonda created the sexuality
education program in an attempt to fill a large void in current sexuality education programming. Her intentions were to develop a progressive and realistic approach to talking with young women about sex, desire, their own bodies, and the friendships and intimate relationships they currently have and will experience into adulthood. Rhonda’s passion for the honest, respectful, and realistic education of young women has inspired me throughout this research journey. I am passionate about revolutionizing the way members of our society think about and acknowledge sexuality education and the sexual socialization process (often sexualization) that young women experience and endure in this country.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The overall purpose of this study is to understand how young women experience and make sense of their sexual self-development (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005) in the context of current sex education practices and sexual socialization factors prevalent in our culture, particularly those influences that thwart sexual well-being, subjectivity, and agency by diminishing and marginalizing female sexuality. Through this understanding, I hope to use their voices to understand their experiences of sexuality education and to inform the development of the O2S sexuality education curriculum. Therefore, this study will be interpretive and critical, and my goal will be to inform readers, policymakers, sexuality educators, parents, and young people, particularly young women, regarding the nature of contemporary sexuality education and sexual socialization of young women.

This study is a feminist critical ethnography. The idea of the O2S curriculum is steeped heavily in feminist thinking, and my research methodology and interviewing techniques are reflective of not only my own feminist views, but the feminist underpinnings of the O2S curriculum. As with most qualitative research, my intention in conducting this
study is based on my interest in (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2002).

As a critical feminist ethnographer, I explored the experiences, both past and current, of four young women as sexual beings and as they experienced a sex-positive sexuality education program, O2S. I wanted to understand how these young women have experienced their own sexuality, in childhood and adolescence, and how those experiences were and/or are informed by societal messages, parents, peers, and schools. I was particularly concerned with having their voices be heard regarding their past sexual education experiences. By bringing these young, female voices to the forefront, it is my intention to use their words and their experiences to address the issues surrounding sexuality education and sexual socialization of young people.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What have been these young women’s past experiences of sexuality education?
2. How have these young women experienced their own sexuality?
3. What are the societal circumstances and messages that these young women have experienced that have contributed to their sexual socialization?

The results of this research can inform our current conversations regarding sex education policy and sexual socialization of children and adolescents. This research is unique in that young women’s voices are heard—their knowledge and perspectives provide deeper insight into what young women need and want from sexuality education; deeper insight into how adults might foster and affirm young women’s sexual well-being, subjectivity, and agency
even as our society continues to perpetuate sexual double-standards and to communicate mixed-messages about sex and sexuality.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Early on, I contemplated where to position this study within the larger body of research. Not unlike the over-scheduled young women I interviewed, this study was being pulled in a dozen directions. I asked myself, do I position this study within the great debate over sexuality education? Do I position it within the rich history of feminist critique, as a call to continue to revolutionize how we, as a society, think about female sexuality? Do I position it within the current surge in literature regarding adolescent female sexuality, desire, and pleasure and how those topics have been silenced in much of contemporary sex education? Or, do I position this study as one in which the voices of young women are heard; a study in which I listen to their experiences of sexuality development amidst various—often conflicting—sources of sexual information and pass on their insight so others (i.e., researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and educators) might consider the richness of their experience and how it can inform our efforts in the areas of adolescent and female sexuality, sexuality education, and feminist critiques of our socially constructed circumstances? Due to my own research and teaching interests and the nature of the O2S curriculum, it was obvious that my study would concern sexuality education practice and policy in this country and to current conceptualizations of young peoples’ sexuality, specifically female adolescent sexuality. In addition, O2S is based within a feminist framework, drawing heavily upon work from feminist writers and researchers such as bell hooks (2002), Michelle Fine (1988), and Debra Tolman (2002). Also, my theoretical and methodological foundations reflect a feminist stance. Finally, I think about sexuality development as an essential component of healthy, natural human development (as I tell my students, we are sexual beings from cradle to grave). Ultimately, this study is not one that can be easily categorized; rather, it falls under
“all of the above.” In the following literature review, I have tried to provide a map, albeit a layered one, of how I have conceptualized this study as it has and continues to move within the areas of scholarship mentioned above.

**Sex Education or Sexuality Education?**

*If, as the feminist catchphrase has it, “the personal is political,” then sex education—surely a thoroughly personal matter—is thoroughly political as well.*

Claudia Nelson & Michelle H. Martin, 2004

Sex education, in one form or another, is as old as our species. Humans have had to “figure out” sex since the beginning of our existence in this world and, considering the most recent estimate of our world population (6,787,570,618 people as of October 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), we have been quite successful in doing so. Jeffrey P. Moran’s (2000) book highlights that sex education is not a fixed entity; rather it is in constant flux, swiftly responding to the latest national crisis (e.g., the AIDS crisis and the more recent perceived crisis of teenage pregnancy), pop-culture trend, or to changes in the social ethos. “It reflects evolving ideas about gender, race, social class, and childhood as well as about sexuality” (Nelson & Martin, 2004, p. 2).

Perhaps our contemporary idea of sex education is much different than past sexual information-gathering and disseminating techniques, but undoubtedly the discussion surrounding the education of young people in terms of this touchy subject is not a new one. Well before the advent of the contraceptive pill and the “free love” era of the 1960s, the *Roe v. Wade* turmoil of the 1970s, the AIDS upheaval that began in the 1980s and continued into the next decade, which resulted in a spike of moral rhetoric and practical arguments of increasing sex education (delivered as HIV/AIDS education) in the 1990s, our country was
arguing over the extent and type of sexual information to which citizens had the right (for other works on the history of sexual education see Freeman, 2008, and Irvine, 2002). The above arguments were particularly fierce when girls and women were the intended beneficiaries of such information (see Rowand, 2004). In their book Sexual Pedagogies, Claudia Nelson and Michelle H. Martin (2004) provided a revealing glimpse of the functions of sex education over the past 120 years, and particularly how some of these functions have been at odds. Examining “points at which certain competing visions of sexuality intersect” (p. 9), they chronicle the following dueling purposes of past and present sex education:

- to instill moral and physical self-control but also to remove inhibitions;
- to help contain the sexual energies of the young, poor, or the racial Other but also to profit from them;
- to advance but also retard the cause of feminism;
- to preach both tolerance and intolerance of sexual minorities;
- to disguise the marketing of commercial products and gender-role stereotypes alike. (p. 2)

To say that the sex education debate in America is complex is an understatement. Individuals on each “side” of the argument have sound reasons for promoting their convictions regarding young people and sex. However, as Kristin Luker (2006) reminded us, our society tends to ignore the deeper, underlying issues of sexuality education:

- Fights about sex are also fights about gender, about power and trust and hierarchy, about human nature, and . . . about what sex really is and what it means in human life.
- Even more deeply, fights about sex [education] are fights about how we are to weigh our obligations to ourselves and others, issues that themselves are tied to our notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. (p. 7)
Some Clarification, Please: Is It Sex or Sexuality Education?

Before continuing this review of literature, it is important to clarify the use of the terms sexual development and sexuality development, and sex education and sexuality education as they are distinguished within the current study and other relevant research. In this section, literature to support these designations is provided. I also explain my position in making these distinctions throughout this paper.

Within the past decade, debates over sex education have focused primarily on policy making, particularly federal, state, and local efforts to adopt and fund either abstinence-only education or more comprehensive approaches to sex education (Constantine, 2008; Fields, 2008). Unfortunately, our nation’s youth are often cast as voiceless pawns in this debate as the adults’ attentions stray from questions of the content and delivery of sex education and, instead, allow their discussions of policy and practice to spill over into principled, religious, and political battles of “who should serve as children’s ultimate moral authority—are social mores, and particularly sexual mores, to be inculcated by schools or by families?” (Nelson & Martin, 2004, p. 1; see also Ehrhardt, 1996).

The current study is situated within a position beyond this debate in that I accept and wholly support genuine sexuality education—not simply sex ed—for young people, delivered by well-informed and well-intentioned adults who care about the well-being and healthy, enriched development of future generations. I believe abstinence-only education falls short, in numerous ways, of providing a genuine educational experience for young people, and, if asked to choose a side in this binary debate, I would support the comprehensive sexuality education advocates. However, weaknesses exist even within the comprehensive sexuality education spectrum. One example of a downfall of this approach is the focus on dogmatic
lessons on avoiding the dangers and risks of sexual behavior at the expense of “instruction that insists on the value of young people gathering with their peers to ask questions, to share information, and to learn about and claim their capacities as agentic sexual beings” (Fields, 2008, p. 169). This is “fully articulated sexuality education” according to feminist sex education researcher Jessica Fields (2008, p. 169). Based on her extensive ethnographic research conducted within middle school sex education classrooms in North Carolina in the late 1990s (see Fields 1999, 2005; Fields & Tolman, 2006), Fields (2008) makes the following point regarding this debate and I fully agree:

Beginning—and often ending—the conversation about sex education with this question [of abstinence-only vs. comprehensive sex education] constrains the possibilities that educators, policy makers, students, families, and researchers imagine; a focus on the question of abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education also obscures the ways that sex education rejects and reinforces social inequalities. An exclusive concern with school system policies obscures several more complicated issues: the silence regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexuality; the affirmation of conventional gender roles and hierarchies in teachers’ and students’ sexual lives; the assertion of bodily norms that marginalize people of color and people with disabilities; the frequent harassment of women and girls; and the absence of a consistent discourse of agentic sexual subjectivity in young people’s lives. (pp. 166-167)

According to the above definition and description, few sex education curricula would qualify as “fully articulated sexuality education” (Fields, 2008, p. 169). Therefore, throughout this literature review and in subsequent chapters, the term sex education is used to distinguish
programs that adhere to a “stunted vision of both sexuality and education” (Fields, 2008, p. 170).

In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between sexual development and sexuality development. Well-known researchers within the field of adolescent sexuality, Tolman, Hirshman, and Impett (2005), explain *sexuality development* as a person’s development into sexual being. This includes but is not limited to one’s “experiences of puberty, romantic relationships, sexual feelings and desires (embodied and emotional), and sexual behaviors. We [I] use the more comprehensive and inclusive term sexuality development in lieu of *sexual development*, which refers to the development of secondary sex characteristics” (Tolman et al., 2005, p. 7). Within this review of literature, I have attempted to distinguish between sexual development and sexuality development whenever possible; however, I chose to remain true to the terminology used within the original texts as many authors continue to refer to *sexual* and *sexuality* (and often *sex*) interchangeably.

*Let’s (Briefly) Talk Sex Ed*

Although a meticulous review of past research regarding sex education policy in this country is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems necessary to briefly discuss where the nation stands in terms of efforts to provide school-based sex education and sexual health information for young people. To better contextualize the current study, a brief explanation of abstinence-only education (also abstinence-only-until-marriage education) is warranted, particularly with respect to the reality of government funding allocated to this specific type of sex education within the past decade.

“Abstinence-only programs teach abstinence as the only morally correct option of sexual expression for teenagers. They usually censor information about the health benefits of
contraception and condoms for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy” (Marr & Hitchcock, 2009, p. 2; for a review of abstinence-only policies and programs see Kantor, Santelli, Teitler, & Balmer, 2008). In 1996, in an attempt to promote sexual abstinence and healthy teen behavior, the federal government enacted Title V, Section 510 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (also known as welfare reform), putting forth an eight-point definition of abstinence-based education which restricted the types of sexuality education programming eligible for federal funding. The definition came to be known as the A-H guidelines and clarified abstinence education as: (a) has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity, (b) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children, (c) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems, (d) teaches that a mutually faithful, monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity, (e) teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects, (f) teaches that bearing children out of wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society, (g) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances, and (h) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (Trenholm et al., 2007). The federal government allocated $50 million annually for educational programming that adhered to the A-H guidelines and, in order to receive their share of those federal funds, states were required to match this U.S. Department of Health and Human Services block grants program
funding at 75%. Between fiscal years 1998 and 2007 a total of $87.5 million annually was allocated for abstinence-only education (Trenholm et al.). In addition to Section 510, two other federal programs have been dedicated to funding restrictive abstinence-only education, the Adolescent Family Life Act’s (AFLA) teenage pregnancy prevention component and Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE; Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006). Since 1996, these programs have resulted in over $1 billion in federal and mandatory state matching funds being spent to promote abstinence-until-marriage among our nation’s youth (Boonstra, 2009).

Abstinence-only may sound good in theory—abstinence from all sexual activity with a partner is the only 100% effective means to avoid unintended pregnancy or contracting an STD. However, abstinence-only education does not address the realities and variation in adolescents’ and young adults’ sexual lives. In the A-H guidelines of the funding-eligible abstinence education programming requirements five statements include language that censure sexuality activity outside of marriage—not simply sexual intercourse outside of marriage but all behavior between two people that is sexually stimulating; going by strict definition, this could be interpreted to include kissing and handholding (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006). Such education would undoubtedly alienate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young people in that their dreams of marriage are not recognized as legitimate in most states in this country (see Fisher, 2009). In addition, many young people consider marriage as a step in life that will happen only after years of college, technical training, or military service—in many young adults’ minds, this is a daunting amount of time to abstain from all sexual activity. In fact, according to the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted every 2 years, providing data representative of 9th through 12th grade
students in public and private schools in this country, the reality is approximately half of high school students (45.9% of females, 49.8% of males) report having ever had sexual intercourse (CDC, 2007). Other studies from the CDC suggest higher rates of sexual activity among older adolescents. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) reported that among 18 to 19-year-olds, 68.8% of females and 64.3% of males reported having had engaged in sexual intercourse. Further, according to the most recent NSFG data available, 84.9% of women ages 15–44 and 91.3% of men ages 20–44 report having had engaged in premarital intercourse (CDC, 2002). It should be noted that these percentages refer only to reported vaginal intercourse and do not include reports of other forms of sexual behavior such as oral and anal sex and mutual masturbation (manual stimulation of partner’s genitals) which is a heterocentric-focus commonly present in surveys on sexual behavior, particularly when target research respondents are young people.

Today, the nation’s young people exist in the aftermath of abstinence-only policies and practices. Teenage pregnancy rates provide an example of how we as a society have continued to fail in providing adequate and appropriate sexual health information and education, allowing, rather, the youth of our nation to experience sex education that is “fragmented, incomplete, and frequently based on ineffective approaches and curricula” (Constantine, 2008, p. 324; see also The Content of Federally Funded, 2004). According to information compiled by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (2006), although the U.S. experienced a decline in teenage pregnancy between 1990 and 2002, the reduced incidence of unintended pregnancy was not due to increased abstinence-only education, rather it resulted from teenagers delaying sex, having sex less often, and increasing their use of contraception. Nonetheless, the U.S. continues to outpace all other developed nations with respect to
adolescent pregnancy rates—almost twice as high as those in Canada, Wales, and England and eight times as high as those experienced in Japan and the Netherlands (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006; for a recent review of sexuality education content in the Netherlands compared to that in the United States see Ferguson, Vanwesenbeeck, & Knijn, 2009).

There is nominal scientific support for the efficacy of abstinence-only education in delaying initiation of sexual activity, reducing number of partners, or increasing condom or contraceptive use among adolescents (Kirby, 2008). On the other hand, strong evidence continues to mount indicating the effectiveness of and support for comprehensive sexuality education (Constantine, 2008). Empirical study results report that comprehensive sexuality education can effectively delay initiation of sexual activity among young people (Mueller, Gavin, & Kulkarni, 2008) and, for those who have become active, help to increase protective measures when engaging in sexual behavior (i.e., condom and contraceptive use; Kirby; see also Boonstra, 2007). In addition, a recent epidemiological analysis by Kohler, Manhart, and Lafferty (2008) suggests that young people who received comprehensive sexuality education were significantly less likely to report adolescent pregnancy than those who received abstinence-only education or no sexuality education. Finally, research indicates that parents report being supportive of comprehensive sexuality education and this espousal appears to be ubiquitous across demographic subgroups based on age, race, ethnicity, religion, education, political ideology, and income (Eisenberg, Bernat, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2008; Ito et al., 2006).

According to a recent brief published by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (2009) regarding state-by-state requirements for public school sex education, most states do require STI/HIV education or more general forms of sex education (see also Kendall, 2008).
Regardless of mandate status, most states also place requirements on how discussions of contraception and abstinence should be presented within school curriculums. More often than not, “this guidance is heavily weighted toward stressing abstinence; in contrast, while many states allow or require that contraception be covered, none requires that it be stressed” (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2009, p. 1). As of March 2009, however, 23 U.S. state legislatures had voted to reject Title V (A-H guidelines) for their respective states, including the state in which this study took place. In addition, seven states have refused all abstinence-only funding from the three federal programs, Title V, AFLA, and CBAE (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS], 2009; see also Raymond et al., 2008).

Although there is currently no federal program dedicated to supporting comprehensive sexuality education, legislators have been working to counter the previous 2000–2008 federal administration’s support of only abstinence-only education. Advocates are calling on Congress to support the Responsible Education About Life (REAL) Act (Senate Bill 611, 2009; House Bill 1551, 2009), sponsored by Reps. Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Christopher Shays (R-CT) in the U.S. House of Representatives and Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) in the U.S. Senate (Boonstra, 2007; see also Advocates for Youth, 2009b). “The REAL Act would support state programs that operate under a . . . definition of ‘family life education’ that stands in sharp contrast to the eight-point definition of abstinence-only education” (Boonstra, 2007, p. 7). President Obama, a co-sponsor of the REAL Act when he served in the U.S. Senate, signed into law the first-ever cut to abstinence-only funding within the federal budget shortly after he took office in early 2009 (SIECUS, 2009; Advocates for Youth, 2009a); however, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) recently attached an amendment in the Senate Finance Committee authorizing $50 million in federal dollars for abstinence-only
programs as part of the current Health Care Reform legislation (United States Senate Committee on Finance, 2009). Although the current administration has clearly stated support for age-appropriate and medically accurate sexuality education for all school-aged children, proponents for abstinence-only education are not likely to quiet their ideological rhetoric anytime soon (SIECUS, 2009); the well-established abstinence-only lobby continues to be well-financed and politically persuasive (Constantine, 2008).

Support for Sex Education Policy Reform

A call to action regarding sexuality education policy reform has been loudly voiced by numerous researchers, educators, policymakers, practitioners, parents, and young people (Boonstra, 2007, Constantine, 2008). For example, Ingham’s (2005) examination of sex and relationships education (SRE) suggested that the public health outcomes usually associated with sex education (e.g., STD prevention, unintended pregnancy prevention) could be better served if curricula embraced a greater acceptance of positive sexual experiences, namely “more prominence to pleasure” (p. 385). In stark contrast to the U.S. Government’s A-H definitions of abstinence-only sex education, the National Guidelines Task Force (NGTF), originally formed in 1990 by SIECUS and comprising experts in the fields of adolescent development, health care, sexuality, and education, put forth guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education rooted within a philosophy that is more consistent with the realities of our pluralistic society and with the realities of human development. The task force states their core values as:

Sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living. All persons are sexual. Sexuality includes physical, ethical, social, spiritual, psychological, and emotional dimensions. Individuals can express their sexuality in varied ways. Young people develop their
values about sexuality as part of becoming adults. Young people explore their sexuality as a natural process in achieving sexual maturity. Young people who are involved in sexual relationships need access to information about healthcare services. (see source for the entire list of NGTF values; NGTF, 2004, p. 20)

The task force’s overall goal for sexuality education is not focused solely on prevention of negative outcomes of sexual behavior or proscriptive expectations regarding sexual expression. The education guidelines set forth are to promote adult sexual health. [Sexuality education] should assist young people in developing a positive view of sexuality, provide them with information they need to take care of their sexual health, and help them acquire skills to make decisions now and in the future. (NGTF, 2004, p. 19)

Feminists’ Call for Sex Education and Policy Reform

In her 2008 book, Fields reported on her extensive ethnographic qualitative research conducted in the late 1990s in which she explored sex education and the discourse surrounding such education within three North Carolina school districts. Fields strongly advocates for social and sexual justice in sex education (Elliott, 2009) and proposed her ideal of sex education as a transformative experience for students in which they develop “a sense of sexual entitlement and rights, an appreciation of sexual pleasure, and a critical understanding of sexual danger” (Fields, 2008, p. 17). Broadly speaking, Fields concluded current conceptions of sex education in this country are disempowering to young people because of a strong emphasis on an “adultist framework” (p. 19). This framework is one in which adults stereotype all adolescents into one of two misrepresentations, “innocents” (asexual) or “vulnerables” (promiscuous and/or at risk of victimization), ignoring the realities
of what young people might be experiencing; and this omission of the actual sexual behaviors and experiences of young people can strip them of a sense of agency and subjectivity. In addition, Fields (2008) explained that current sex education programming is based upon and perpetuates hierarchies and inequalities of gender, sexuality, race, and class. She makes the case for a re-envisioning of sexuality education by broadening our definition and conception of adolescent and young adult sexual expression and behaviors, rather than focusing solely on heterosexual sexual intercourse, as is often the case in contemporary sexuality education programming. In doing so, sexuality education would be more accessible and inclusive of all young people—encompassing the experiences of those who are sexually active in a “traditional” sense (consensual vaginal-penile sex) and those who are active in ways that tend to be ignored, evaded, and shamed including oral sex, anal sex, fantasy, masturbation, same-sex sexual behaviors, coerced sexual activity, sexual harassment, hypersexual behavior, and asexual behavior. By becoming more aware of the realities of—and subsequently changing the definition of—adolescent sexuality, Fields (2008) contended that this would not only revolutionize the discourse of teen sexuality but also transform young people’s sense of agency and subjectivity across multiple aspects of their lives. She explained, “sexual subjectivity”—an awareness of oneself as an agentic, embodied sexual subject—“is fundamental to young people’s”—particularly that of girls and young women—“sense of agency in all aspects of their lives” (p. 110).

Fields (2008) then offered her ideal for liberatory sexuality education, a shift from the interventionist model currently prevalent. This new model would not be one in which adults simply intervene in the lives of young people, attempting to shape and oppress sexual behavior; rather, this new model would engage students as active partners in the sexuality
education classroom and “would address the realities of sexuality and social inequalities, pleasure and danger, cognitive and subjective knowledge about selves and bodies” (Elliott, 2009, p. 135). Essentially, Fields (2008) provided a reminder of the power of education and knowledge, in this case, the powerful potential sexuality education can provide young people on the intrinsically-human journey all individuals have or will take, navigating the joys and heartaches, pleasures and risks that are intricately woven within our sexual being.

Louisa Allen (2001, 2005) utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the sexual subjectivities of young people. She was particularly interested in “understanding young people’s own conceptualisation of their (hetero)sexual selves, knowledge and practices and what these imply for how we conceptualise sexuality educations’ effectiveness” (2005, p. 1). The “knowledge/practice” gap is described in terms of the type of information sanctioned within official sexuality education programs, how young people actually conceptualize being “sexually knowledgeable,” and the types of information young people are interested in knowing, yet are missing, from sexuality education (Allen, 2001). Her findings suggest that young people conceptualize sexual knowledge in two ways: as that which is bestowed upon them from secondary sources such as sex education, community health organizations, television, books, magazines, and friends, and that which they garner from personal sexual experiences (Allen, 2001).

For the most part, knowledge from secondary sources such as sex education, books, and community health organizations is presented as prescriptive lessons regarding how to protect oneself from unwanted negative consequences of sexual activity; rote memorization of facts about contraception use, STIs, sexual abuse, pregnancy prevention; and biological processes such as puberty—particularly menstruation—and conception. The young people
usually spoke of this information—a discourse of sexual dangers—with a sense of
“officialdom, . . . as a type of sexual knowledge that was clinical, scientific, and morally
sanctioned” (Allen, 2001, p. 114).

Information taken from friends, television, and magazines was linked to “lived”
experiences of sexual interaction, a more personal discourse concerned with emotions and
bodily feelings related to details of sexual attraction, desire, and expression and how these
were acted upon, negotiated, and played out within their lives. Allen (2001) referred to this
sexual knowledge as a “discourse of erotics” where erotics is defined as “of, concerning, or
arousing sexual desire or giving sexual pleasure” (p. 114).

For the young adults included in Allen’s (2001) sample, practical sexual
knowledge—that is gained via personal sexual experiences—trumped knowledge imparted
by secondary sources. The author explained, “Inherent in this constitution of two types of
sexual knowledge is a hierarchy in which these young people perceived knowledge acquired
through practice as having greater status and being more useful” (Allen, 2001, p. 113). The
“discourse of erotics” was central to the lives of the young people as well. The author noted
that this discourse dominated the conversations within the 17 focus groups she conducted
with young women and men. Although they spent most of their time conversing within the
discourse of erotics, the young people identified topics within this discourse as areas about
which they were least knowledgeable and in which they reported problems arising within
their romantic and sexual relationships (i.e., how to ask out a potential romantic interest, how
to decipher if another is mutually attracted, how to initiate and coordinate sexual interactions,
how to engage specific sexual positions and techniques). Not surprisingly, the adolescents
also cited these as areas missing from their “official” sex education. Consequently, they
Many of them also expressed their wish for greater access to this type of information within sexuality education programs. In addition, in lieu of so much emphasis on the dangers and negative consequences, the adolescents explained that they would prefer more attention on the pleasurable aspects of safer sexual activity. Overall, “without a discourse of erotics, it is not surprising that knowledge derived from . . . secondary source[s] held less appeal and status for young people in the study” (Allen, 2001, p. 120). Regarding the application of these findings to sexuality education policy and practice, Allen (2001) offered the following:

Including a discourse of erotics in sex education programmes should not be at the expense of official messages about, for example, safer sex. Rather, these messages might be reformulated within a discourse of erotics to capture the interest and attention of more young people, and integrate this important information into a reality that more readily matches their sexual practice. (p. 120)

(Re)Conceptualizing Healthy Sexuality

It has been almost 15 years since the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health released a consensus statement asserting that becoming a sexually healthy adult is a principle developmental task for adolescents (Haffner, 1998; see also Haffner, 1995). The commission’s statement, supported by over 75 national and professional organizations including the American Medical Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, extended the concept of sexual health for young people beyond the avoidance of STD transmission and prevention of unintended pregnancy to include the abilities: (a) to develop and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships; (b) to appreciate one’s own body; (c) to interact with both genders in respectful and appropriate ways; and (d) to express affection,
love, and intimacy in ways consistent with one’s own values (Haffner, 1998). In 2001, working within this same vein of reasoning, the then-U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher released the consensus of an interdisciplinary effort stating:

Sexuality is an integral part of human life. . . . Sexual health is inextricably bound to both physical and mental health. . . . Sexual health is not limited to the absence of disease or dysfunction, nor is its importance confined to just the reproductive years. It includes the ability to understand and weigh the risks, responsibilities, outcomes and impacts of sexual actions and to practice abstinence when appropriate. It includes freedom from sexual abuse and discrimination and the ability of individuals to integrate their sexuality into their lives, derive pleasure from it, and to reproduce if they so choose. (p. 1)

Within their 2004 guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education, the NGTF put forth “life behaviors of a sexually health adult,” behaviors for which young people should receive guidance and encouragement from, primarily, parents, but for which schools, faith-based institutions, and community-based organizations can play an important role in fostering (NGTF, 2004). According to the Task Force—and imperative in conceptualizing comprehensive sexuality education programming for young people—a sexually healthy adult will: (1) appreciate one’s own body; (2) seek further information about reproduction as needed; (3) affirm that human development includes sexual development, which may or may not include reproduction or sexual experience; (4) interact with all genders in respectful and appropriate ways; (5) affirm one’s own sexual orientation and respect the sexual orientation of others; (6) affirm one’s own gender identities and respect the gender identities of others; (7) express love and intimacy in appropriate ways; (8) develop and maintain meaningful
relationships; (9) avoid exploitative or manipulative relationships; (10) make informed choices about family options and relationships; (11) exhibit skills that enhance personal relationships; (12) identify and live according to one’s own values; (13) take responsibility for one’s own behaviors; (14) practice effective decision-making; (15) develop critical-thinking skills; (16) communicate effectively with family, peers, and romantic partners; (17) enjoy and express one’s sexuality throughout life; (18) express one’s sexuality in ways that are congruent with one’s values; (19) enjoy sexual feelings without necessarily acting on them; (20) discriminate between life-enhancing sexual behaviors and those that are harmful to self and/or others; (21) express one’s sexuality while respecting the rights of others; (22) seek new information to enhance one’s sexuality; (23) engage in sexual relationships that are consensual, nonexploitative, honest, pleasurable, and protected; (24) practice health-promoting behaviors, such as regular check-ups, breast and testicular self-exams, and early identification of potential problems; (25) use contraception effectively to avoid unintended pregnancy; (26) avoid contracting or transmitting a sexually transmitted disease, including HIV; (27) act consistently with one’s own values when dealing with an unintended pregnancy; (28) seek early prenatal care; (29) help prevent sexual abuse; (30) demonstrate respect for people with different sexual values; (31) exercise democratic responsibility to influence legislation dealing with sexual issues; (32) assess the impact of family, cultural, media, and societal messages on one’s thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors related to sexuality; (33) critically examine the world around them for biases based on gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, and race; (34) promote the rights of all people to accurate sexuality information; (35) avoid behaviors that exhibit prejudice and bigotry; (36) reject
stereotypes about the sexuality of different populations; and (37) educate others about sexuality (NGTF, 2004, p. 16-17).

Together, these documents asserted sexual health as a normative aspect of human development and recognized sexuality as multidimensional—an “integration of psychological, physical, societal, cultural, educational, economic, and spiritual” (Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003, p. 4). In the wake of years of rigidly focusing only on the negative consequences of adolescent sexual behaviors (i.e., HIV/AIDS, STDs, unintended pregnancy, and sexual coercion), these reports and guidelines have rallied our societal mind-set in taking “a crucial step toward a positive conception of sexuality for adolescents” (Tolman, 1999, p. 133).

**Sounds Great! Right? Feminist Critique of the Positive Perspective**

Within these inclusive conceptualizations of sexual health an important aspect of sexuality is missing; “the construct of gender does not appear in a substantive way” (Tolman et al., 2003, p. 5). In the minds of many sexuality education advocates, the absence of gender in these models of sexual health is particularly detrimental to young women. As many feminist researchers and writers will attest, sexuality as a system does not exist without gendered meaning (Tolman et al., 2003; see also Rubin, 1984). Because sexuality is not gender neutral, because our culture is based on male, heterosexual privilege, different meanings have been constructed for female sexuality than for male sexuality; therefore, strikingly different realities exist for women and girls than for men and boys in terms of expectations and acceptance of sexual expression (Tolman, 1999). Tolman’s (1999, see also Tolman, 2001) research provides several examples of these differing realities. In the
following excerpt, Tolman (1999) illustrated the constraints of femininity, a barrier to sexual health for young women, when she described the “good girl” conundrum:

Despite the sexual revolution of the 1960s, society’s conception of sexuality for adolescent girls who want to be considered good, normal, and acceptable remains constrained. Good girls are still supposed to “just say no,” are not supposed to feel intense sexual desire, and remain responsible for the sexual desire of boys and for protecting themselves from harm. (p. 133)

In a more recent article, Tolman (2006) reminded us that gender may not be the sole dimension of significance in the development of young women’s sexuality, but it is foundational. Citing recent works by psychologist Michelle Fine (2005), who over two decades ago powerfully critiqued how our society frames adolescent female sexuality in terms of danger, victimization, and individual morality (see Fine, 1988), and a young contemporary feminist writer Ariel Levy (2005), who addressed the current rise of (pseudo) empowered young, female, “postfeminism” sexuality and its unsettling resemblance to raunchy exploitation (Skenazy, 2006), Tolman (2006) offered this caution in ignoring the very real gendered experiences of young women’s sexual being:

To laminate female sexuality, to pigeonhole it as either pure pleasure or relentless risk, especially in adolescence, threatens to obscure the ongoing reality that societies (including much of our own) continue to be organized by and to maintain systematic male power in ever mutating guises. (p. 74)

*Healthy and Happy Young People: Toward Positive Perspectives of Adolescent Sexuality*

In the years since Surgeon General Satcher’s call to action, many researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and educators have attempted to answer the charge of
reconceptualizing sexuality and sexual health in a more positive light—that is, positioning sexuality as a natural and positive component within human development. This is particularly true of those working with and advocating for adolescents and young people, rebelling against the dominant “problem perspective” thinking about adolescent sexuality in which teenage and young adult sexual behavior is “viewed as a personal and social problem, as behavior to be proscribed and regulated” (Russell, 2005a, p. 1).

Highlighting the tensions that exist between “typical experiences” of teenage sexuality and societal “expectations and proscriptions,” Russell (2005b) has provided a vivid analysis revealing how the underlying values of many recent programs and policies geared toward controlling adolescent sexuality are “fundamentally at odds” with the realities of young people’s sexual lives and sexuality development. For example, Russell discussed the extensive culturally sanctioned time gap that exists between a young person’s sexual maturity (i.e., puberty) and social maturity (i.e., considered an adult, ready for a career, marriage, and child-rearing) and how this time period has been lengthened in the last half-century or more. “Recent generations are among the first in history to negotiate a significant proportion of young adulthood as sexually mature and with concurrent cultural proscriptions against most sexual behavior” (Russell, 2005b, p. 5). Accordingly, negotiating this time period between sexual maturity and social maturity has become a primary developmental challenge for present-day young people, yet they are faced with doing so in a relatively hostile environment with little affirmative discourse on their sexuality (Russell, 2005b). Though most adolescents in this country will generally be exposed to sex education about puberty changes and the negative outcomes of (hetero)sexual intercourse (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000), they are “provided with almost no tools with which to understand sexuality in social
and cultural context” (Russell, 2005b, p. 6). To illustrate this point, since 1995, the proportion of adolescents having had any education on contraception has decreased while the percentage receiving information only about abstinence has increased (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006). Ultimately, Russell’s (2005b) article is a call to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to rethink adolescent sexuality and break away from the “narrow, heterosexist, and negative frame” (p. 8) that has stifled the development of models of positive adolescent sexuality.

Researchers have begun to answer this call. Examples of research conducted within this more “sex-positive” mindset include Smiler, Ward, Caruthers, and Merriwethers’ (2005) exploration of positive first coitus among young people—positive referring to “sexual experience that is mutual, respectful, and empowering, and not simply risk-free” (p. 51). These researchers were interested in understanding factors that contributed to both male and female adolescents’ and young adults’ experiences of first coitus as characterized by positive emotions, a sense of love, and/or a sense of empowerment. Overall, they concluded that, indeed, young people can have positive initial sexual experiences and that first coitus was reported to be more positive when it was intentional, when parents had shared messages of sexual freedom with their son or daughter, when the young person maintained a less traditional gender role orientation, and when the adolescent reported higher levels of satisfaction with his or her body (Smiler et al.).

Healthy Subjects: Toward Positive Young Female Sexuality

“Sex-positive” research regarding young female sexuality has become burgeoning and mainstream (Tolman, 2006), most likely in an effort to shift away from “blame-the-victim” and “fix-the-problem” approaches to young women’s sexuality (Tolman, 1999). For
example, Lisa Diamond introduced the summer 2006 volume of the publication *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*—a volume dedicated entirely to “creatively reimagining what healthy, self-affirming sexuality might look like for girls and how we might identify and promote it” (p. 1)—by explaining:

In the ensuing years, an increasing number of thoughtful and constructive critiques have challenged negatively oriented perspectives on sexual risk. These critiques have argued for more sensitive, in-depth, multimethod investigations into positive meanings and experiences of adolescent females sexuality that will allow us to conceptualize (and, ideally, advocate for) healthy sexual-development trajectories. (pp. 1-2)

Graber and Sontag (2006) examined issues of puberty and how such changes can have psychological and social impacts on girls’ lives, influencing girls’ relationships with peers, sense of self as a sexual being, sexual feelings, sexual behaviors, and other forms of sexual expression—all topics that are not often discussed in an affirmative tone when the bodily and hormonal changes of puberty are the focus of discussion. Although research findings have supported speculation that mass media, particularly television, convey limited, unrealistic, and stereotypical messages about sexuality, sex roles, and romantic (heterosexual) relationships, Ward, Day and Epstein (2006) discussed the potential positive effects that media can have on female sexual health and development. According to their analysis, media can benefit young women by providing sexual information, by offering diverse sexual models, and by offering vicarious practice of dating norms and ideals (Ward et al.).
Averett, Benson, and Vaillancourt (2008) utilized a critical feminist orientation to examine young women’s views of their sense of sexual agency within the context of the parenting they experienced, particularly parent–daughter communication about sex. Their findings supported other research (e.g., Jaccard & Dittus, 1993) indicating that parent–child communication about sex is usually limited. The messages that were conveyed, however, tended to reinforce sex as “scary” or “something to be feared,” which resulted in many of the young women adopting a passive approach to sexual interactions and an acceptance of sexual aggression and control from men (Averett et al.). Overall, the messages, communicated both verbally and nonverbally, were ones of “very traditional and very feminine gender roles that prescribed asexuality” (p. 336). Ultimately these messages resulted in a sense of sexual disempowerment among the girls. However, the young women expressed that parental messages regarding other (nonsexual) aspects of their lives were empowering and encouraged agency. The young women recognized these mixed messages regarding sexuality and gender roles in contrast to other aspects of their being and were eventually able to transfer a sense of agency from the nonsexual aspects of their being to their sexual lives (Averett et al.).

Specific to late adolescent girls’ sexual experiences and sexual satisfaction, Impett and Tolman’s (2006) findings suggest that young women with positive sexual self-concept—a girl’s sense of herself as a sexual being—are more likely to derive satisfaction from sexual experiences compared to female peers with negative sexual self-concept. In addition, young women who are approach-motivated in engaging in sex—that is, their behaviors are motivated by the pursuit of positive or pleasurable experiences—are more likely to derive satisfaction from sexual experiences compared to individuals who were avoidance-
motivated—that is, their behaviors are motivated by the avoidance of painful or negative experiences. The authors also noted that for the young women who were more likely to report satisfying sexual experiences, the data suggest approach motivations were not associated with total sexual experience (i.e., number of partners) but were associated with the number of times that a girl reported engaging in sexual intercourse. Therefore, regarding the approach motivated young women, “it is likely [their] sexual interactions occurred in the context of important and valued dating relationships rather than with casual partners” (p. 640).

Impett, Schooler, and Tolman (2006) examined the influence of femininity ideology on female adolescent sexual health (see also Tolman, 1999). They concluded that aspects of femininity ideology, namely, inauthenticity in relationships and body objectification do play a role in late adolescent girls’ (in)ability to make healthy sexual choices. These two aspects of femininity ideology were associated with poorer sexual self-efficacy—defined within the study as a young woman’s beliefs that she can act upon her own sexual needs and desires within a relationship including the insistence to use protection, the ability to refuse unwanted sex, and the belief that she can enjoy sexual encounters. Lower sexual self-efficacy, in turn, predicted less sexual experience and less protection behavior.

The authors explained that “inauthenticity in relationships” refers to silencing one’s own needs and desires to maintain a relationship or as a strategy to reduce conflict; these behaviors are often enacted when girls and women attempt to hide their true feelings and thoughts, particularly those considered unfeminine, such as aggression and anger (Impett et al., 2006). Other researchers have referred to this phenomenon as “loss of voice” (e.g., Brown & Gillian, 1992), “false-self behavior” (e.g., Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997) or
“silencing the self” (e.g., Jack & Dill, 1992). Body objectification is discussed in terms of two aspects: the disassociation from one’s own body and bodily desires (i.e., for food, for sex), and the constant surveillance of one’s own body and actions from another’s perspective—what de Beauvoir (1961) referred to as the internalization of the “male gaze” that is then turned upon oneself, resulting in a constant state of self-evaluation and self-assessment rather than an embodied feeling and experience. Overall, this research suggested that adherence to traditional gender roles—not necessarily sexual behaviors—may have detrimental consequences for young women:

Girls who internalize norms of traditional femininity may find it difficult to voice their sexual desire and engage in wanted sexual behavior. . . . Being able to assert one’s sexual desires and needs may be a critical prerequisite for enacting safer sex practices. Consequently, the extent to which conventional femininity ideology inhibits this ability may present a threat to the sexual health of adolescent girls. (Impett et al., p. 140)

Overall, these and other feminist contributions to the study of adolescent sexuality and sexuality development are valuable in that this type of scholarship “offers direction for the development of a model of positive sexual health for adolescent girls that recognizes how our society denies and diminishes female sexuality” (Tolman, 1999, p. 134). The following section explains how, in general, qualitative research can continue to contribute to this ambition and to the call for sexuality education reform based on a more comprehensive and positive concept of adolescent (particularly female) sexuality.
Exploring the Intersections of Young Female Sexuality and Sexuality Education

The Power of Narratives: Advocating for Adolescent Sexuality and Sex Education Policy Reform

In an attempt to demonstrate how qualitative analyses, specifically the narratives elicited through such analyses, could be beneficial in the campaign to rethink female adolescent sexuality and sexuality education policy, Tolman et al. (2005) reviewed four exemplary qualitative research studies in which researchers “interviewed girls and young women in order to identify different, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory dimensions of female adolescent sexuality. These methods provided participants with an opportunity to talk about their experiences in their own words” (p. 7; see Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thompson, 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002). The four studies differed in methods of qualitative inquiry (although all used interviewing as a means to collect narratives) and in topics addressed, spanning girls’ experiences with puberty and changing bodies (Martin); sexual experiences, feelings, and desire (Tolman, 2002); influence of risk and protection factors on young women’s sexual decisions (Holland et al.); and the impact of early femininity ideological messages on young adult female thoughts and experiences (Phillips).

Tolman et al. (2005) found a common theme among the four studies, “that gender inequality and the sexual double standard were potent forces that continued to shape and influence young women’s sexual behaviors, feelings, and experiences” (p. 8). In particular, gender inequality seems to sway girls’ and young women’s lives in three key ways, causing them to (a) walk the slut/prude tightrope (i.e., the virgin/whore dichotomy), (b) face and deal with male pressure and coercion; and (c) attempt to acquire, often with difficulty, sexual
subjectivity (Tolman et al., 2005). Noting that, globally and in the United States, sex education usually deals with gender inequality in a superficial manner, if at all (Rogow & Haberland, 2005), Tolman et al. (2005) offered suggestions for how contemporary sexuality programming can better address issues of stereotypical gender roles and inequalities between boys and girls (see The Content of Federally Funded, 2004); particularly the inequalities affecting young women’s sexual existence, evident, for example, within the four studies reviewed by the author. Not surprisingly, they suggested that sexuality curriculum incorporate:

- lessons that confront the “slut/prude dichotomy, critique and challenge the normalization of male pressure and coercion, and support girls and young women in developing sexual subjectivity. Based on the findings of qualitative research on girls’ (and boys’) sexuality, a healthy approach to gender roles requires critical thinking that resists the naturalization of gender-stereotyped behavior. . . . For such an approach to be effective, a safe space, in which girls and boys could explore the vicissitudes of real life without fear of repercussions, would be essential. (p. 15)

Collectively, these four studies reviewed by Tolman et al. (2005) help researchers and practitioners recognize the value of narratives in understanding issues of female sexual subjectivity. They also point to the significance of using narratives in continuing this research in the future.

Feminist, Qualitative Perspectives

Female [adolescent] sexual desire. Just as the discussion of sex education has a long history within research literature and policy debates, so too does discussion of the place and acceptance of female sexuality. Historically, our culture has placed more severe restrictions
on female sexual expression—especially if that expression is one of enjoyment—compared
to male sexuality (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Today, these socializing forces remain at
work in the lives of women of all ages, rippling through various aspects of girls’ and
women’s lived-experiences (Hyde, 2004). A specific dilemma confronting many young
women is that of sexual desire (see Welles, 2005 for a review). Psychologist Michelle Fine
(1988) labeled this the “missing discourse of desire.”

Around the turn of the 21st century, Tolman (1994; 2001; 2002) conducted extensive
interviews with adolescent girls and was more surprised by what she did not hear from the
girls about their sexual behavior than what she did hear. They discussed their sexual
experiences, but they did not have a voice of their own desires or even their own bodies
within those accounts. Tolman (2002) heard the story of sex “just happening” numerous
times during her interviews with teen women and concluded:

“It just happened” is a story about desire . . . [and] can also be understood as a cover
story. It is a story about the necessity for girls to cover their desire. . . . Girls are under
systematic pressure not to feel, know, or act on their own sexual desire. It covers up
our consistent refusal to offer girls any guidance for acknowledging, negotiating, and
integrating their own sexual desire and the consequences of our refusal: sexual
intercourse—most often unprotected, that “just happen” to girls. (pp. 2-3)

When young women did discuss desire, they often coupled it with self-protection and
self-control, focusing on their vulnerability to the risks and dangers of sex—AIDS and STDs,
pregnancy, and getting a bad reputation (Tolman & Szalacha, 1999). This was especially true
of urban girls; suburban girls, in contrast, were more likely to discuss sexual pleasure with
less mention of restraint due to potential vulnerabilities. Negative cultural messages did,
however, dictate the suburban girls’ feelings of guilt about having “their desires fulfilled,” under-
standing such need and pleasure as “wrong” (p. 16). This research suggested, regardless of their social location, young women have complicated experiences and feelings of sexual desire and pleasure.

Sharon Thompson (1990, 1995, 1996) made similar conclusions. Her research revealed that although teenage girls often cited love and commitment as reasons for their sexual behaviors, most had sexual intercourse with little forethought. Thompson (1996) wrote,

They had never been introduced to the notion of desire—their own or their partner’s—and so could not anticipate it. When they found themselves in situations where those elements were introduced, they froze; it was like they were in a trance. Certainly, they weren’t making an active decision to have sex. (p. 6)

Thompson’s (1990, 1995, 1996) and Tolman’s (1994; 2001; 2002) conclusions echoed those stated in the late 1980s by Fine (1988) who suggested that adults tend to educate girls and young women away from positions of sexual self-interest by leaving out information about the positive aspects of sexuality, namely the pleasure-giving parts of the female sexual anatomy. The messages that girls and women hear repeatedly is that their bodies are designed for reproduction (which they spend most of their lives trying to control) and ignore the other purposes that can extend across their lifetimes—experiencing pleasure with self or a partner. In fact, there are aspects of a girl’s coming of age in American culture that are remarkably consistent across time and space, including: (a) shame, prudery, and embarrassment about sex and the body; (b) confusion about the lack of familiarity with the female body, especially the genitals; (c) little or no experience with masturbation; (d) relying
on a boyfriend to make the first move and to guide sex; (e) little, inadequate, or incorrect sexual information; (f) insecurity about her body and her own attractiveness; and (g) emphasis on intercourse over manual sex, reproduction over pleasure, and his pleasure over her own (Douglass & Douglass, 1997). Young women are often told to “just say NO” to sex; however, “feeling desire is an essential component of self-knowledge and a prerequisite for establishing boundaries. If a girl doesn’t know what her ‘yes’ means, how could her ‘no’ come from the heart?” (Schoefer, 2001, p. 9).

Fine’s (1988) research stemmed from earlier work by Jean Baker Miller who, in her 1976 book, Toward a New Psychology of Women, explained that the ability to bring one’s own real feelings of sexual desire and sexual pleasure meaningfully into intimate relationships is a key feature of women’s psychological health (see also Tolman, 2002). Miller referred to this ability as sexual authenticity, and it has also been referred to as sexual agency or sexual subjectivity. The author of the O2S curriculum chose to use the latter term—sexual subjectivity—in the curriculum because she was inspired by the following words of Tolman (2002): “Sexual subjectivity can and should therefore be at the heart of responsibility in sexual decision making. . . . From this perspective, it is not only unfair to deny female adolescent sexual desire but ultimately unsafe and unhealthy” (p. 6).

Emancipatory sexuality education for young women. Following her 2002 study, Shelly Balanko advocated for the widespread implementation of emancipatory sexuality education due to the positive influences such education can have on young women’s sense of subjectivity. Balanko found that this type of sexuality education “helped women shift the focus of their sexuality from others’ wants, needs, expectations, and definitions of women’s sexuality to their own wants, needs, and self-definitions” (p. 94). The results of the
quantitative survey data corresponded with the qualitative pre- and post-program interview data collected. Her research findings suggested that young adult women (ages 19–24) can benefit from short-term (6-week) sexuality education emphasizing consciousness-raising, assertiveness, openness, self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-acceptance.

The majority of participants in the Our Whole Lives (OWL) curriculum implemented in Balanko’s (2002) study experienced consciousness-raising and became more open to certain aspects of sexuality including masturbation, sexual diversity, and sexuality and spirituality—aspects reflective of self-focus, self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. In general, the participants found that the sharing of experiences within a diverse group of young women in a safe, open—yet confidential—and nonjudgmental atmosphere facilitated emancipatory change (i.e., increased self-focus via self-reflection, self-disclosure, re-evaluations of beliefs, practices and relationships, and redefinition of self). Although hypothesized to be an outcome of completing the curriculum, participants’ attitudes toward the sexual double standard did not change nor did their concerns with body image and reputation (Balanko), suggesting that certain restrictive cultural expectations for girls’ and women’s sexuality remain powerful forces in the lives of young women.

Situating the From Object to Subject Curriculum

The From Object to Subject (O2S) curriculum was developed as a response to the lack of sex-positive sexuality curriculums available to educators, parents, and, particularly, adolescents. Most sexuality education curriculums fall within one of eight models: (a) instrumental education, (b) abstinence-only-until-marriage education, (c) abstinence-based education, (d) comprehensive sexuality education, (e) harm reduction, (f) anti-oppression education, (g) empowerment education, and (h) peer sexuality education (National Sexuality
Resource Center, 2004). These models can and do overlap, but an overarching characteristic of much of the sexuality education curriculums that are developed out of these models is a focus on the potential negative consequences of sexual behavior, especially for girls and women—unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual harassment, and date rape. Existing curriculums often fail to share with adolescents the positive aspects of sexuality including sexual pleasure and the acknowledgment of sexual desire (Fay, 2002). This is especially true for young women who are usually taught to be the “gate keepers” rather than the “embracers” of their own sexual selves. “Our society’s sexism reflects what is censored” in sexuality education and “information about female sexual pleasure is withheld more often than male sexual pleasure” (Fay, p. 13). In movies and magazines, in music and advice columns, girls are portrayed as the object or the victim of someone else’s desire, but virtually never as someone with acceptable sexual feelings of her own (Tolman, 2002).

Ultimately, the O2S curriculum has an empowering and affirming intent and aspires to help young women realize that female sexuality is an inherently positive force in their lives and that they can and should be the sexual subjects of their own lives, not the vulnerable objects of other people’s desire and behavior (Chittenden, 2005). Returning to Fields’ (2008) definition of a fully articulated sexuality education program, the O2S curriculum does, indeed, meet the key standards of that definition in that O2S incorporates and asks facilitators and participants to engage in critical thinking and reflect upon both cognitive and subjective knowledge, all in an effort to contribute to developing and maintaining young women’s sexual subjectivity (Fields, 2008 p. 172).
This literature review provides a context for the current study. Many researchers have expressed a need for continued research in the areas of sexuality education and female adolescent sexuality. Regarding a general appeal for continued inquiry into sexuality education practice and policy, Kendall (2008) expressed a need for continued research in sex education practices within schools and other public institutions. Recognizing that many public institutions can be difficult to gain access to due to the vulnerable populations present, Kendall encouraged researchers to take up the cause, explaining, “Such research can be an important mechanism in examining and effecting positive change in public policies and practices, particularly those that raise important social justice and democratic participation issues for people and institutions throughout the United States” (p. 9).

Russell (2005b) specifically advocated for continued research regarding positively oriented programs and policies for adolescent sexuality development, particularly further examination of the social and political inhibitions against emerging ideas of sexual agency among young people: “With very few exceptions, contemporary young people in the United States do not have access to spaces where the critical discussion of sexuality among other young people and with caring adults is encouraged” (p. 10). Recognizing the need for resources and policies to do so, Russell (2005b) encouraged the development of such spaces in which young people can safely and thoughtfully examine issues of sexuality.

Impett and Tolman (2006) urged persistence of researchers within the field of adolescent female sexuality with the reminder that “girls’ feelings about their sexuality do not develop in a social or cultural vacuum. . . . Future research should focus on understanding
how... social and cultural forces shape, limit, or enhance girls’ ability to have sexually satisfying relationships” (pp. 642-643).

Tolman et al. (2005) encouraged qualitative researchers to continue to contribute to the body of literature in support of comprehensive sexuality education and sex education reform. To offer greater perspective on arenas of research “that should be, but [are] currently not, informing public policy about sexuality education” (p. 5), the authors further defended the need for qualitative methodologies to continue to inquire about young people’s varied, lived experiences as sexual beings—rigorous processes that are quite different than simply hand-picking “testimonials” to serve a particular ideology or position. Although some within the political and scientific community continue to rebut and belittle various kinds of science and data that do not fit with “traditional” conceptions of positivistic inquiry, Tolman et al. (2005) provided a resounding reminder that “qualitative methods provide a way to study the depth of human thought, experience, and decision making. Through qualitative research, narratives about experience—always complex and often contradictory—are produced” (p. 15). They encouraged researchers to utilize scientifically rigorous qualitative approaches in order to “capitalize on the power of stories to influence policymakers’ decisions” (p. 15). Ultimately, qualitative researchers can incite the ability and “power of young people’s voices... in moving adults to develop responsive policy” (p. 15).

The current study contributes to the larger body of research, answering the calls for continued qualitative and feminist exploration into the intersections of young female sexuality and sexuality education. This feminist critical perspective gives voice to young women as sexual beings. Like other feminist researchers before me, I completed this study out of a desire to add to “those voices that attempt to promote empowerment and agency” in
the lives of young women (Averett et al., 2008, p. 333). The current research entailed a collaboration with and for young women. Researchers need to continue to explore the circumstances and societal taboos girls and young women face in developing (or not developing) healthy and positive sexuality, sexual subjectivity and agency. Young women’s experiences and perspectives will offer valuable insight to educators, practitioners, and policymakers in their efforts to refine the design and implementation of educational sexuality curriculum and programming that speak to the realities of young peoples’ lives.

To address this need to further understand adolescent and young adult female sexuality, sexuality education, and the influence of society on healthy, female sexuality development this research addressed three questions:

1. What have been these young women’s past experiences of sexuality education?
2. How have these young women experienced their own sexuality?
3. What are the societal circumstances and messages that these young women have experienced that have contributed to their sexual socialization?
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it... Researchers construct their respective products from the fabric of the interactions, both witnessed and lived.

K. Charmez, 2006

Transparency of the researcher’s position is fundamental in qualitative research, particularly feminist and critical research (Madison, 2005). In my attempt to explore and understand the experiences of young women as they engage in a sex-positive sexuality education program, it is imperative that I inform the audience of my personal position, biases and experiences that have not only enthused my interest in the topic of this study but have undoubtedly shaped the manner in which I have conducted this research. To begin with, I am a White, heterosexual woman from a middle class upbringing in the Midwest of the United States. The fields in which I have chosen to study, human development and family studies and women’s studies, color the lens through which I see the world. I am a feminist who is passionate about revolutionizing the way we, as a society, think about and acknowledge sexuality education and the sexual socialization that young people, particularly girls and young women, endure and experience in this country. My experience in several semesters of teaching a large undergraduate human sexuality course at a university in the Midwest has reinforced my belief that our society is committing a disservice to our nation’s adolescents by providing them inadequate and often inaccurate sexuality education. More often than not, teenagers have engaged in sexual activity by the time they have graduated from high school; however, regardless of their level of sexual experience, all young people are exposed to cultural (mixed) messages that shape their expectations regarding “appropriate” conduct
within intimate relationships and sexual interactions. The students with whom I have worked have opened my eyes to the anxiety, fear, confusion, and misconceptions about sex and sexuality that exist among many young people. Many of them have expressed to me their struggles to balance personal values and physical and emotional wants and needs with perceived societal expectations regarding sex, love, and intimate relationships. In my experience, young people are usually attempting this balancing act on a shaky (inadequate or inaccurate) foundation of basic sexual knowledge and understanding. Being sexual is intrinsically human; to deny young people information about the realities of sex and sexuality is to diminish their right to safe and healthy development. Throughout this dissertation, particularly in my interpretation, analysis, and discussion of the data, the influence of my chosen fields of study, my feminist theoretical stance, and my stated biases regarding sexuality education and socialization will be apparent to the audience.

Feminist Critical Ethnography

I employed critical ethnography as my method of data collection with the added dimension of feminist theory and feminist methodology guiding my research through all processes of the study: development of research questions; planning and implementation of data collection; and coding, analysis, and interpretation of data. Some might argue that I am being redundant in categorizing this study as both a feminist and critical one as a “feminist” approach is intrinsically a “critical” approach. Feminist theory and therefore feminist methods descend from critical theory and critical methods but I included and highlighted my feminist approach in this research for two reasons. First, the O2S curriculum is based within a feminist framework and draws upon the work of feminist researchers and writers in its approach to educating young women about sex, sexuality, and subjectivity. Because this
curriculum is feminist by nature, it was important that the research design and methodology be grounded in the feminist framework as well. Second, I am a feminist. I view the world through this lens. In my mind, I would not have been genuine to the curriculum, the participants, the audience of this research, and myself if I had not emphasized and made completely transparent my feminist approach to this research.

In the following sections, I describe in more detail my feminist, critical, and ethnographic approach to the current research study.

_A Feminist Approach to Research_

Feminist methodology promises a more interpersonal and reciprocal relationship between researcher and those whose lives are the focus of the research. Feminist methodology seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched.

Leslie R. Bloom, 1998

Gender is a basic organizing principle that greatly influences the conditions in which one lives and one’s consciousness (Lather, 1991). Feminist research is research for women, by women; it not only seeks to empower women, whose voices are neglected or marginalized within our patriarchal society, but also strives to answer the questions that women have about their own lives and experiences, particularly those that have been inadequately addressed or completely ignored in social science writing (Stewart, 1994). Feminist research works to create social change in our institutions and throughout society (Bloom, 1998). It is positioned within the postpositivist moment and rejects the notions of the dominate positivist paradigm which touts “objective” research. “In feminist research approaches, the goals are to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative” (Creswell, 1998, p. 83).
The ideas of feminist research can be applied to methods of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings (i.e., methodology). Feminist qualitative researchers do not attempt to separate themselves from the participants of their study, those they research, nor do they believe that one can truly be objective in any aspect of the research process. To this end, feminist methods require the researcher to engage with the participants in an attempt to better understand and construct knowledge about that which is being studied. The expert is the participant, and by listening to and being aware of the non-unitary subjectivity of individuals, the researcher attempts to bring out the multiple voices of the participants. In the process of doing so, the researcher also maintains her sense of positionality, particularly in relation to the research participants’ social position. Respondents and researchers each bring their own unique positionality to the research process; age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and social background will frame each person’s perspective of the research process (Bloom, 1998).

A Critical Approach to Research

According to Madison (2005) “the critical ethnographer resists domestication and moves from ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’ (p. 5, see also Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). Resisting “domestication” refers to the use of “resources, skills, and privileges” available to the researcher in order to “contribute to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice” (Madison, p. 5). Critical researchers “penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach” (Madison, p. 5). As a critical researcher, I have kept at the forefront the voices and experiences of the young women who participated in the O2S curriculum groups and in the current study because many times the very people intended to
be the recipients of educational programming are not likely to be asked for their input on the subject. This is often painfully true regarding sex; sex education; and the needs, wants, questions, and concerns of young women. I have not only examined and questioned “what is” the status of young women’s experiences as sexual beings as they intersect with the societal taboos surrounding sexual awareness and, in general, female sexuality, I have also suggested “what could be” the reality of a greater cultural shift in how our society approaches the sexuality education and sexual socialization of young women. I have accomplished this by tapping into the experiences and amplifying the voices of the young women who are targeted by a bombardment of messages, positive and negative, from countless sources within our society regarding the complex nature of and ambiguous beliefs surrounding sex and sexuality, including desire and pleasure.

In keeping with the idea that a researcher should make every attempt to contribute to emancipatory knowledge and social justice, critical researchers also acknowledge their own positionality in that they must “acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (Madison, 2005, p. 7). By considering one’s positionality in relation to the Other, a critical researcher “turns back” on one’s self (Davis, 1999) and acknowledges accountability and accepts responsibility for one’s own position of authority, one’s representation of the Other (the participants) and one’s interpretation of the phenomenon being studied (Madison). A critical researcher will ask oneself, “What am I going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives me the authority to make claims about where I have been? How will my work make a difference in people’s lives?” (Madison, p. 7). My research is critical and feminist in that I have been and will continue to “be accountable for the consequences” of how I have
represented the young women who participated in my study and “of the implication of [my] message” (Madison, p. 5)

An Ethnographic Approach to Research

Creswell (1998) identified five research traditions in qualitative research including ethnography, case study, and phenomenology. My study falls under the tradition of ethnography as it has resulted in a “holistic view of a social–cultural group or system” rather than “an in-depth study of a bounded system or case” (a case study) or “a description of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon” (a phenomenology; Creswell, pp. 65-66). As Creswell pointed out,

in an ethnography, an entire cultural or social system is the focus of attention. . . . In a case study, on the other hand, a system of people is typically not the case. In case study research, one works with a smaller unit such as a program, an event, an activity, or individuals and explores a range of topics, only one of which might be cultural behavior, language, or artifacts. Furthermore, in an ethnography, the researcher studies a culture-sharing group using anthropological concepts (e.g., myths, stories, rituals, social structure). These concepts may or may not be present in a case study. (p. 66)

Similarly, phenomenology and ethnography often share some of the same characteristics, however, my study was not a phenomenology because I did not emphasize only one phenomenon. I was not only concerned with the past experiences of the young women in the study, I was also interested in their experience within the curriculum. In addition, I was concerned with what their experiences tell us about our larger society’s reaction to young women’s sexuality and their education (or lack thereof) on the topic. In this sense, my
attention was focused on the culture-sharing curriculum groups but also the larger system in which the young women exist—the larger culture and the societal implications of both our contemporary sex-negative models of sexuality education and what could potentially contribute to a cultural shift in those models to more progressive, sex-positive approaches. Observing, describing, analyzing, and interpreting the behaviors and language of the participants and the cultural-themes that were documented as existing within the culture-sharing group (Creswell) of the young women was my focus and, therefore, this was an ethnographic study.

There is a strong history between the tradition of ethnography and critical theory. Because feminist theory—with roots within critical theory—has guided my thought process for my research endeavors, ethnography made the most sense in terms of the tradition this current research followed. As explained by Creswell (1998, p. 85, Figure 5.1), theory comes “before” asking questions and gathering data in an ethnography—which occurred in my current research undertaking. In addition, my study included many of the elements central to ethnography: (a) the use of description with a high level of detail; (b) the telling of the story informally as a “storyteller”; (c) the exploration of cultural themes of roles and behaviors of young women as sexual beings and targets of sexuality education; (d) the format of my narrative as a descriptive analysis and interpretation of the data; and (f) a conclusion with questions regarding our society’s contemporary system of sexuality education and how we socialize young people, particularly young women, regarding sex, sexuality, and objectivity/subjectivity (see Creswell, p. 35, Ethnographic Aspects). As Creswell explained, “a portrait is drawn of a cultural group or people in an ethnography” (p. 37). The portrait I hope I have drawn is one of our contemporary culture of sexual socialization and sexuality
education of young women and how that portrait might change for the betterment of safety, health, and well-being in future generations of girls and women, and, ultimately, humankind.

Ethnography has been greatly influenced by two particular traditions: “the British anthropologist from the 19th century and the Chicago School from the 1960s” (Madison, 2005, p. 10). “Ethnography comes from the anthropological tradition of illuminating patterns of culture through long-term immersion in the field, collecting data primarily by participant-observation and interviewing. Analysis of this data focuses on description and interpretation of what people say and do” (Glesne, 1999, p. 9). Employing Creswell’s (1998) dimensions of qualitative research (see Table 4.1, p. 65 and Table 4.2, p. 67), I briefly summarize below how my study adhered to the traditions of ethnographic research in terms of focus, data collection, data analysis, and narrative form. A more detailed discussion of participants, procedure, and analysis will follow.

*Focus: Describing and interpreting a cultural and social group.* The specific focus of the current study was college-aged young women who participated in a sex-positive sexuality education curriculum, O2S. Through their voices—the telling and meaning making of their experiences—I describe and interpret their interaction with the curriculum. In addition, I interpret their accounts of past sexuality education and their recollection of growing up as young, female sexual beings in a society that sends mixed messages regarding sexuality—particularly female sexuality. Finally, I describe and interpret the young women’s current understanding of their continued sexual development within a culture often described as sex-negative yet overly sexualized. Although my sample is small, their experiences shed light on the larger, shared phenomenon of sexuality education as experienced by young women throughout this country.
Data collection: Primarily observations and interviews with additional artifacts
during extended time in the field. I observed two O2S curriculum groups during the fall 2007
and spring 2008 academic semesters, respectively. Each curriculum group met weekly over
an 8- or 10-week period. I was immersed within the culture of the curriculum groups and that
of the young women for approximately 4 months. During that time, I observed the 60- to 90-
minute group sessions and participated in group discussions when asked to do so by the
group members and group facilitators. I also conducted individual interviews with curriculum
group members who agreed to be participants in my study and the group facilitators.
Although the O2S curriculum often called for group members to bring in artifacts (e.g.,
photos from magazines, personal items for a specific curriculum activity and reflection) and
the facilitators had the best intentions to include some of these “portfolio” activities, more
often than not, the young women forgot to bring in such artifacts or the activities were cut
from the session due to time constraints or concerns about the age-appropriateness of the
activity. (This curriculum was originally designed for adolescent girls 14–19 years old, and
the facilitators felt that some of the portfolio activities were too “young” for the college-aged
women participating in the curriculum groups.)

Data analysis: Description, analysis, and interpretation. According to Wolcott
(1990), “description is the foundation upon which qualitative research is built. . . . Here you
become the storyteller, inviting the reader to see through your eyes what you have seen” (p.
28). I use rich description of the young women participants including their experiences and
their varying perspectives. My analysis comprised a search for “patterned regularities” in the
data (Wolcott, 1994) and “draw[ing] connections between the culture-sharing group [the
young women in the curriculum groups] and larger theoretical frameworks [feminist theory]”
Finally, in my attempt at an ethnographic interpretation of the culture-sharing group, I drew “inferences from the data [and] turned to theory [feminist theory] to provide structure for my interpretations” (Creswell, p. 153).

*Narrative form: Description of the cultural behavior of a group or an individual.*

Ultimately, the efforts of this research resulted in a narrative describing the cultural behavior of young women—the experiences of the young women as sexual beings within the larger social system, their experiences with past attempts at sexuality education, and their experience within the O2S curriculum groups. As Creswell (1998) explained, a critical ethnographic researcher might design her study to “include changes in how people think, encourage people to interact, . . . and help individuals examine the conditions of their existence” (p. 81). In maintaining a critical focus to my research, this narrative was designed to shake up our contemporary thinking and policy regarding sexuality education and sexual socialization of young women.

*Curriculum Group Sites and Participants*

**Curriculum Group Sites**

“A single site . . . where an intact culture-sharing group has developed shared values, beliefs, and assumptions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 114) is central in the design of an ethnographic study. Gaining access to such sites is also an important aspect of research design. In many ways, I was fortunate to have the collaborative efforts and support of Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa (PPGI—recently consolidated with a neighboring-state Planned Parenthood affiliate and re-named Planned Parenthood Heartland) and the regional educators of that organization. Sites for the O2S curriculum groups were determined by PPGI. Regional educators with PPGI’s Education and Resource Center expressed interested in forming and
facilitating groups in their respective service areas. Due to Institutional Review Board concerns, the decision was made that I would only observe and collect data from groups comprised of participants 18 years of age and older. Two sites fit this criteria. In the fall of 2007, I observed a curriculum group at University A, a large university with a Carnegie classification of RU/VH (Research University—very high research activity) located in a small midwestern city in the United States. In the fall of 2008, I observed a group at University B, a large land-grant RU/VH university located in a small midwestern city.

The University A curriculum group held their sessions in the university’s Women’s Resource and Action Center (WRAC), located on the north edge of the campus, a short walk from the student union building. This site was an older house that had been converted into meeting and office space for WRAC staff and provided a welcoming atmosphere for students with a kitchen area for their use; comfortable sofas and chairs; and study tables on the main level. On Thursday evenings during late fall of 2007, the O2S curriculum group met in a small room on the second floor of the facility—this former bedroom was set up as a child care room with toys occupying one corner of the room and Disney character decor. Curriculum group members sat in a loose circular pattern around the room on a small couch, on two donated upholstered chairs, or on wooden desk chairs. Dawn, the group facilitator and PPGI regional educator made a conscious decision to select a facility and room in that facility that did not appear “classroomy” or “too formal” to the young women group members.

The University B curriculum group also held their group sessions at the Women’s Center (WC) centrally located on the university’s campus in close proximity to many of the university’s main buildings, including the library and student union. The WC staff offices are
on the second floor of a restored stately brick house that was used for faculty housing in the university’s early years. The main level of the facility includes a kitchen, a meeting room with a large table and chairs, two sitting rooms with comfortable upholstered chairs, and a small library and study area for students. The WC provides a warm and inviting place for respite to any and all university students, particularly during between-classes breaks and over the lunch hour. During the late winter and early spring of 2008, on late Monday afternoons, the O2S curriculum group met in the front room of the facility—a cozy sitting room with three windows providing a nice view of central campus. This small room, having been newly re-furnished, allowed group members to relax in matching upholstered scoop-shaped chairs; the young women often lazily draped their legs off one arm of the “scoop chairs” as we discussed the evening’s topic. Brandi, the group facilitator, had previously worked as a graduate assistant at the WC and felt it was an ideal setting for O2S curriculum group, providing a casual, comfortable, and safe atmosphere for the young women participants.

Participant Recruitment

Due to the collaborative nature of my study with the O2S curriculum, purposive sampling was used. In order to better understand the experiences of young women as sexual beings, particularly their prior experience with sexuality education and cultural messages about female sexuality, and the intersection of their experiences with the current phenomenon of engaging in a progressive sexuality education curriculum targeted at late-adolescent and young adult women, the sample for this study consisted of curriculum group members recruited by the various PPGI sexuality educators. According to Patton (2002), “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth . . . those [cases] from which once can learn a great deal about issues of central
importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended sample selection to the point of redundancy or when no new information is forthcoming, that was not possible in this study, and I instead followed Patton’s suggestion of “minimal samples based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study and stakeholder interest” (p. 246).

As mentioned previously, I was not responsible for selecting sites for or establishing the O2S curriculum groups. Once the regional educators for PPGI established curriculum groups and contacted me regarding the time frame for their specific group, I determined whether it was feasible for me to travel to the site on a weekly basis in order to be able to observe group sessions and conduct individual interviews with group members agreeing to be participants in my study. Dawn and Brandi, the facilitators of the curriculum groups at University A and University B, respectively, invited me to attend the first meeting of their groups. At those initial meetings, I introduced myself to the young women group members by providing a brief summary of my background as a graduate student in Human Development & Family Studies with an emphasis in Women’s Studies, as a lecturer of a large undergraduate human sexuality course, and of my university affiliation. Through this “lay summary” (Madison, 2005), I briefly explained my research study, my motivation in conducting the research, and what I planned to do with the results of the study. As Madison explained, “The purpose of the lay summary is to explain your project to the people who are central to it; therefore, they have the right to know, and you [the researcher] have the responsibility to explain your presence in their lives” (p. 23). In accordance with Madison’s suggestions for being transparent when communicating with potential participants, I made sure to explain how their involvement as a group member of the O2S curriculum group did in
no way oblige them to take part in my separate research endeavor. In addition, I provided the young women with information regarding my role as a researcher, what the research process would entail, and what their role would be in that process, if they chose to participate.

Prior to this introduction, while recruiting group members, Dawn and Brandi—acting as gatekeepers (Creswell, 1998) for the group members becoming study participants—mentioned to potential group members that they would have the opportunity to participate in a research study in addition to their participation within the curriculum groups. Therefore, my introduction at the first session was not a surprise to group members. After explaining my research study, I asked group members to read and complete an informed consent document (see Appendix A). This document indicated the potential risks and benefits in participating in the study, explained the procedures I would be using to ensure participant confidentiality, and allowed the group members to select one of three options in regard to their level of participation as a study participant. One of the three options included a request that I, the researcher, not be present at the group sessions (i.e., the group member did not, in any way, wish to participate in my research study). No group members selected this option, and I was allowed to observe all group members within all curriculum sessions.

At University A, a total of 8 young women attended the first O2S session. Of those 8, all agreed to be observed during group sessions and 6 agreed to being observed and individually interviewed one to two times during the 8-week curriculum program schedule. Of the 6 participants who agreed to be interviewed, 2 attended the O2S sessions consistently and were interviewed, 1 on two occasions and the other, due to scheduling conflicts and time constraints, only once. The other 4 participants who had agreed to be interviewed were not
available to be interviewed because they did not attend the curriculum group sessions on a regular basis or stopped attending altogether.

At University B, a total of 3 individuals attended the first O2S session. Of those 3, all agreed to be observed during group sessions and to be individually interviewed one to two times during the 10-week curriculum program schedule (this schedule was 2 weeks longer due to how the sessions were scheduled during the semester). All 3 participants were interviewed twice during that time period; however, only 2 of the 3 participants’ interview transcripts have been included in the current analysis. This decision was made due to the third participant’s age (34 years-old) and position as a graduate student. Although she was an engaged group member and an enthusiastic interviewee, her motivation for attending the O2S curriculum group at University B was to gain a better understanding of her undergraduate students’ behaviors and perspectives regarding issues of sex and sexuality. She had been working as a graduate teaching assistant in a social science program and planned to continue her teaching endeavors after completing her master’s degree. The other 4 participants, whose interview transcripts were included in the analysis for the current study, ranged in age from 18 to 21 years. They were young women on the cusp of adulthood yet still at the tail-end of adolescence, an ideal age-range of participants for a study concerned with the intersection of young women’s personal experiences as budding sexual beings with recent attempts at their sexuality education and cultural influences on their sexual socialization. This is not to say that insight and contributions of University B’s third participant to this research could not be utilized in future analyses; however, for the current analysis, it seemed appropriate to include only the participants who had yet to reach “full adult” status.
In addition to interviewing the young women participants, I received informed consent to observe and individually interview Dawn and Brandi, the group facilitators. Our exchanges served as a form of peer debriefings within my research process and will be further discussed in a later section of this chapter in which I address the rigor and trustworthiness of the current study.

Participants

Participants for this study included four women, 18 to 21 years of age, all of whom self-selected and volunteered to be group members of the curriculum groups described previously. These four young women were undergraduate students at the universities described above. All were heterosexual and White. Below, you will find a brief description of each of the four young women who volunteered to be interviewed for this study and whose narratives were included in the current analysis. It is important to note that these “bios” were compiled from personal information the young women shared with me during our interview sessions, from my methodological logs recorded following those interview sessions in which I noted my perceptions of the young woman participants and reflected upon the interview session, and from my own observations of the participants during the curriculum group sessions.

Nettie. Nettie, a 20-year-old sophomore, was studying social work at University A. She was my first interviewee for this study and within our first conversation she mentioned that she was interested in possibly pursuing a career in helping girls and women with sexuality-related issues. My initial perception of Nettie was that she was quiet and contemplative. Compared to the other participants in her O2S curriculum group, she was relatively reserved but would speak up if she had a point to make or a question to ask. During
our interviews, Nettie was very open and willing to share her experiences and opinions. In fact, following our first interview session, I noted in my post-interview comments she “definitely had a lot to talk about and was not shy about answering my questions.” Nettie was also candid regarding her perspectives of other young women and described herself as a person who did not “get along with girls [her] age” because she does not “agree with their lifestyles.” She was referring to the “hook up culture” that seemed to be, in her opinion, prevalent on University A’s campus (see Kathleen Bogle’s 2008 publication in which she analyzes the meaning of “hooking up” among college students). I commented in my field notes that Nettie could be described as conservative but not in a political sense, rather, a personal ideological sense; her appearance is subdued and she seems content to “do her own thing,” focusing on her school work, her family, and her boyfriend. She is a self-assured young women; quite comfortable in her self-described “tomboy” skin.

Nettie’s university was located about an hour and half from where she grew up, a suburb of a medium-sized midwestern city. At the age of 17, Nettie’s mom found out she was pregnant with Nettie. Nettie did not mention her biological father. Before Nettie reached middle school, her mother married and Nettie became the oldest of three siblings, gaining a half-sister from her mother and stepfather’s marriage and a stepsister from her stepfather’s previous relationship. At the time of the interviews, her half-sister was an 8th grader and her stepsister was a junior in high school. She explained that until high school, she and her stepsister did not get along well, but they now have a good relationship and she feels that her stepsister looks up to her as a mentor. Nettie explained, “We talk to each other a lot about stuff and she asks a lot of questions about dating and drugs and alcohol and all that stuff.” Nettie’s grandparents on her mother’s side were pastors, and she explained that “whole side
of the family is pretty religious.” Although Nettie mentioned regularly attending church and church camps as a child and into her adolescence, she did not come across as particularly engrossed in her religion at this point in her life.

Within the group setting and our interview sessions, Nettie shared stories about her current and past relationships with boyfriends, admitting that she had tended to go from one relationship to the next. She explained, “I’ve pretty consistently had a guy in my life and it’s usually for a long period of time, like months or whatever.” She had been in a 13-month relationship with her current boyfriend and said she liked to talk with him about the issues she had been learning about in the O2S curriculum group. Open communication seemed to be a pattern in her current relationship as she shared with me that she and her boyfriend had had several conversations about birth control, condom usage, abortion, and their sexual histories prior to engaging in sex for the first time. He was her first and, she hopes, only sexual partner.

_Tegen_. Tegen, a 20-year-old junior at University A, was studying communications with a particular interest in radio media; at the time she was working as a DJ for the university radio station. She shared that she would like to pursue a career in radio and writing. My initial perception of Tegen was that she was quite bright and self-confident although, perhaps, a bit guarded. I noted in my field observations that she had a “cool confidence” about her. Tegen’s features were slight and her eyes were piercing. Her facial expressions were usually serious, as if she were in deep contemplation. She would, however, smile, laugh, and joke with the other group members while we were waiting for the evening’s session to begin. I noted that she “definitely had her own vibe going” in terms of her personal style, which contributed to my sense that she was comfortable in her own skin and had a
Tegen contributed in her O2S curriculum group discussions often and was consistent in attending the group even though she seemed quite busy with her course load, DJing job, a “serious” relationship with her boyfriend, and other social commitments. Her comments in group and her narrative during our one and only interview seemed very thoughtful, however, I noted that she was not usually elaborative with what she shared, indicative of being protective of her experiences. I noted in my post-interview reflection that I did not feel comfortable “digging deeper” into many of her comments because I sensed that she was only so comfortable with the amount of detail she provided, sprinkling in personal accounts with her more general narrative of “what girls her age” and she and “her friends” experience.

Tegen was raised in a small midwestern city in the same state in which she was currently attending college. She shared with me that her parents divorced when she was around the age of 10. During late childhood and early adolescence, she recalled “hating life” due to the custody battles resulting from the divorce. Both of her parents went on to remarry, and these second marriages brought stepsiblings into her life as a teenager. She had been the middle child of three, and following the remarriages she became the middle child of seven. She explained that she held a lot of animosity toward her dad following her parent’s divorce and describes her current relationship with him as “nonexistent.” However, Tegen considered her mother to be “very supportive” and she felt quite close to her siblings on her “mom’s side.”

During our interview, Tegen alluded to the fact that she had had some negative experiences in past intimate relationships. She shared with me that she was currently in a “healthy relationship” with her current boyfriend whom she had been with for about a year.
Tegen is sexually experienced in that she was sexually active in past relationships and is currently sexually active with her now-boyfriend.

Gabi. Gabi, 18 years old, was a freshman majoring in microbiology/pre-med at University B. She was interested in pursuing a career in osteopathic medicine. My initial reaction to Gabi was that she was very motivated and upbeat—I noted in my field notes that she was “sun-shiny” and, in fact, she self-described as a “flower-child hippie.” Although she was at that time in her first year at University B, she had become quite active in campus organizations and activities. She was a member of the Greek community and spoke often of her sorority sisters and the sorority-house environment in which she was living. Being a sorority sister was an experience that she had not anticipated until her mother noted that Gabi’s boyfriend had had a positive experience in making friends once he joined a fraternity at University B. Gabi said she chose to join the “most laid-back, non-girly” sorority that she could find because “girly” did not fit her personality, and she seemed quite happy in her decision. Overall, Gabi seemed comfortable with herself but did allude to struggling to reach a sense of comfort in terms of accepting her appearance, her body, her “looks” as-is. With her long blonde hair and permanent smile, her appearance, to me, seemed very natural, healthy, and easy-going.

Gabi was very willing to share her personal stories both in the group setting and in our interview sessions. In fact, our interview sessions ran longer than any of the others I conducted, which I attribute to her openness in sharing her experiences and eagerness to discuss the topics addressed in the O2S curriculum. Although she was engaged in the group sessions that she attended, Gabi did miss three sessions during the 10-week curriculum schedule, typically because of her busy schedule and sorority committee obligations. Her
absence from these sessions did affect the interview process as I was limited in what I was
could ask her regarding those specific curriculum topics, settling instead for her more
generalized opinions and reflections of those issues.

Gabi was raised in a fairly urban area in a midwestern state. She described her
surroundings growing up as a “low-income area.” Her parents divorced when she was a
toddler but she has one sibling from that relationship, a sister who was then a junior in high
school. Her mother remarried and Gabi considered her stepfather “dad.” She had become the
oldest daughter of four after two more siblings, half-sisters from her mother and stepfather’s
marriage, ages 6 and 8, joined the family. She described the circumstances of her upbringing
as a “pretty normal family dynamic” and pointed out that she and her mother were “more like
best friends” who rarely fought or “collide[d]” with each other. She and her 16-year-old
sister sometimes “butt[ed] heads” but she attributed this to her sister’s age; she pointed out
that it was fairly easy to get along with her other sisters, the 6- and 8-year-olds. Although her
full-sister still had visits with their biological father, he and Gabi had little interaction. She
shared with me that she attributed her (non)relationship with her biological father to partially
contributing to her “trust issues” with men and boys as she was growing up. She did explain,
however, that once she reached high school, she tended to befriend boys more so than girls in
an attempt to avoid “the drama” of dealing with other girls.

Regarding intimate relationships, Gabi had been in a serious relationship for the
previous 3 years. She met her boyfriend when they were students in high school. He is a year
older than Gabi and also was attending University B. She described their relationship as
“pretty dynamic” and said that they were the “perfect example of opposites attract” in that
she considered herself “liberal” yet he grew up within a “very conservative family.” They
both, however, were very academically motivated and planned to pursue advanced degrees. Gabi and her boyfriend had been together for almost 2 years before they decided to have sex for the first time; she was about to begin her senior year of high school and he was about to leave for college. They had since continued to be sexually active.

Sam. A 21-year-old junior, Sam was majoring in computer engineering at University B. Though she once had hoped to pursue a career in the armed forces, some physical health issues had prevented her from continuing this pursuit. Now, she was looking forward to pursuing a career in the field of human–computer interaction, particularly smart technology. Sam had a passion for martial arts. What began as a hobby and something to do to maintain physical fitness soon became a large part of her life because she was drawn to the discipline and confidence-building aspect of the sport. Sam could be found participating in martial arts clubs on campus several nights each week.

My initial reaction to Sam was that she was extremely mindful, reflective, and intelligent. Although small in stature, she had a big smile that beamed a very warm, inviting nature. Sam commented that she liked that she is “naturally very motherly.” This nurturing tendency had been beneficial in her role as a community advisor in her on-campus dormitory. Sam never missed a curriculum group session; she provided thoughtful comments and asked incisive, mature questions during group discussions. I perceived Sam to be a confident young woman though her physical appearance might have indicated otherwise; a factor that sometimes had caused her self-esteem to waver. Sam explained that for her height, she “would be considered quite overweight,” and when I balked in disbelief at this statement, she smiled and explained that she could “hold it well” because she “had a lot of muscle”—a testament to both her dedication to the practice of martial arts and to her strong sense of self.
Raised in a small, rural midwestern town where her parents had lived in the same house for 30 years, Sam considered her family “close-knit” and explained that she and her three siblings had “healthy sibling rivalry,” particularly when it came to grade point averages. Sam credited her parents for focusing on her and her siblings’ individual personal strengths rather than boxing them into certain stereotypes or gender roles. Honesty and openness were highly valued in Sam’s family—the “rule” of the house being: “If you are honest about it, it will never come back to bite you.”

At the time of the interviews, Sam was not in a romantic relationship. She shared with me that she did not “make out with a guy” until she got to college and she had not engaged in sexual activity with a partner beyond making out. If the “right situation” and the “right man” came along, Sam felt that she would be ready to be “sexually mature.” She had set standards for the characteristics she is looking for in an intimate partner—honest, respectful, and able to connect with her via “deep conversations”—and she believed that, at the very least, she would want the relationship to reach the 6-month mark before taking physical intimacy to the level of sexual intercourse.

_Incentives for Participation_

Although it is impossible to place a monetary value on participants’ willingness to contribute to one’s study, I believe that reciprocity—at least a small token of such—between the researcher and respondent is a necessary element of qualitative research. Therefore each participant received a five dollar gift card to a local coffee shop for their overall participation in my study, regardless of their willingness to be individually interviewed. Participants who also volunteered to be interviewed received an additional five dollar gift card at their first interview. I purchased the gift cards through my own personal funds.
Data Collection Methods and Procedure

Prior to having contact with potential study participants and engaging in data collection procedures, I obtained approval from Iowa State University’s Institutional Review Board and PPGI via the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (see Appendix B). Upon approval to conduct the current research study, I collected observational data from two curriculum groups with 11 group members total, 8 members at University A and 3 members at University B. I also collected interview data from 5 participants and 2 facilitators.

Data Collection

There are four forms of data collection that are most often included in ethnographic studies to capture descriptions of behavior and language among the culture-sharing group: observations, interviewing, documents, and artifacts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Spradley, 1980). For the current study, I relied on participant observation and interviewing. It was my intention to supplement data collected via interviews and observation with materials submitted by group members for the completion of weekly O2S portfolio activities; however, these activities were often cut from the sessions at the discretion of the facilitators citing time constraints and age-appropriateness (i.e., the activities were thought to be “too adolescent” for the college-aged young women) as reasons to do so.

Observations of curriculum group sessions. Because “understanding context is essential to holistic perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 263), I attempted to sit in on as many group sessions as possible in order to observe group interactions and dynamics as well as individual responses, reactions, and comments to the curriculum content. Due to travel constraints, I had to miss two of the eight scheduled sessions of the University A curriculum group. I was able to attend all sessions for the University B group. Elder and Fingerson
(2002) pointed out the benefit of combining interviews with other forms of data collection, namely field observations, when studying young persons. Observations help set the stage for interviews, which, in this case was the primary means of data collection. Observations of group sessions served as fruitful ground for developing interview questions. Interviews provided an opportunity to explore more intently topics that surfaced during the group sessions.

I approached the task of participant observation as one in which I did not want to distract from the curriculum or the group cohesion. At the beginning of the first few sessions, I reminded the group members that I would be taking notes throughout the session, and I invited them to ask me if they had any questions about my field notes. Although I rarely volunteered to participate in the group discussions, I always contributed when asked to do so. This was usually the case at the beginning and end of each session when we would go around the room for an ice-breaker activity and a “closing whip,” respectively. Initially, I tried to “blend in” with the group as much as possible for fear that my note-taking presence would be threatening to the group members. Fortunately it took only a few group sessions or less before I sensed the group members comfortably accepted my quiet, yet hurried note-taking and I felt at ease in my participant observer role.

During the group sessions, I listened carefully to the group discussion and took detailed notes regarding the mood of the participants individually and as a group. Ultimately, I tried to write down anything that conveyed a sense of what the participants were thinking, feeling, and questioning. Of course, this was much easier to do when the participants shared their perspectives and opinions and when they asked questions or broached an issue. However, when possible I also noted nonverbal communication, namely body language and
any awkward silences or nervous laughter. In addition, I would jot down notable questions or comments from participants to return to in our individual interviews.

Individual interviews. At the conclusion of curriculum group sessions two individual interviews were conducted with each participant with the exception of Tegen with whom I was able to schedule only one interview. The interviews were 45 to 90 minutes in length and took place in the facility where the O2S curriculum group sessions were held or in a private conference room in a nearby campus building. The one exception to this was, again, Tegen’s interview for which we had to meet in the corner of a large, yet relatively undisturbed foyer of University A’s student union because we did not have access to our intended meeting spot, the WRAC. All interviews were audio tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim through the use of a transcription machine.

For the interview process, I relied on simple open-ended questions regarding the young women’s perception of the weekly curriculum session topic including the goals and objectives of each. During these individual interviews, I also attempted to gain at least a basic understanding of the women’s personal history, including family and upbringing. In addition, I was interested in tapping into the effect of their experiences with prior sexuality education and societal messages imparted regarding gendered stereotypes of sex and sexuality. Interviews were semistructured in that I began the first interview by asking several background questions (see Appendix C) and then proceeded to ask questions based on topics covered in curriculum sessions (see Appendix D) that the participant had attended prior to our interview. For the second interview, curriculum session topics structured our conversations. Overall, I tried to maintain a conversational approach to the interviews and, thus, the direction of the interview was often dictated by the participant, particularly when
sharing personal narratives. I did, however, maintain a sense of organization by bringing
tangential dialogue back to the issues raised within the curriculum group sessions.

Following the individual interviews, I would record my reactions and reflections of
the interview session at the end of the tape used to record the participant’s interview. These
methodological logs/interview summaries were usually brief (5–10 minutes) but provided me
the opportunity for initial data analysis and interpretation of the young women’s experience
with the O2S curriculum and their personal narratives as sexual beings. These spoken journal
entries provided the chance to note issues or questions I wished to further explore in our next
interview, if applicable, in addition to any methodological issues I experienced in my first
qualitative research undertaking. For example: I might have noted to check in my observation
field notes regarding a comment I remembered being mentioned during a group session that
tied in with the narrative of the interviewee; I might have provided some description of the
circumstances of the interview and/or mood of the interviewee, such as if the interview was
conducted during final exam preparation week or the young woman seemed to have a busy
schedule to keep; or I might have noted simple, yet important, reminders such as the
necessity in keeping extra batteries with the tape recording device to avoid interview session
interruptions (see Appendix E for a sample of my methodological log/interview summary).

Analysis and Ensuring Trustworthiness

Analysis

Qualitative research realizes its potential when researchers immerse them-
selves in a setting and struggle to figure out the best way to understand it.

–Shelley J. Correll, 2002

As with all qualitative research, data collection and data analysis, for the most part,
occurred concurrently with the current study.
Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to “test” emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data. To wait until all data are collected is to lose the opportunity to gather more reliable and valid data. (Merriam, 2002, p. 14)

Unfortunately, a limitation to the current study is that I did lose the opportunity to gather additional data following the conclusion of the second round of interviews due to time constraints and life circumstances. Due to a lag in time between the conclusion of the curriculum groups and my completion of the interview transcription and coding process, the participants were on semester breaks and I did not make further contact with them. Their further reflection and feedback would have proved fruitful in the late stages of data collection.

However, the data collected was substantial. I observed 14 curriculum sessions and took field notes throughout each observation. My initial analysis of the field notes—thoughts and questions jotted down in the margins of my field notes notebook—provided ideas for questions to pursue during the individual interviews. The interview transcripts were the main data source used in the current analysis. During the transcription process, I used the “Review/New Comment” feature in the Microsoft Word® word-processing program to note initial interpretations of the respondent’s narrative and to provide notes of clarification. These “balloon comments” included: simple clarifications regarding, for example, acronyms; contextual notes regarding the interview and my interview technique; quotes that “popped out” to me; and some preliminary codes (see Appendix F for a sample of transcript coding).
Often, these “balloons” along the right margin of the page provided an initial guide to the next step in my coding process, open-coding (Esterberg, 2002).

Once I had printed copies of the transcripts, I carefully read through the passages, assessing the respondents’ narratives for common and predominant themes. At the outset of this open-coding phase, in an attempt to stay true to the language of the participant, I wrote out verbatim in the margin any key phrases I identified within the narrative (see Appendix F). This proved to be time-consuming so I streamlined this process by underlining or designating with a highlighter the key phrases. If an appropriate descriptive label or concise code came to mind for the selected passage, I wrote these in pencil or highlighter ink along the right hand margin of the transcript page (see Appendix F). Some “chunks” of data had more than one code—open codes sometimes overlapped.

After completing the open coding phase, I read through my open codes and tried to summarize the major issues emerging within the narratives. These short synthesis codes were written in blue ink along the right-hand margin of the page and, thus, I refer to such as “blue codes” (see Appendix F). I tried to be as succinct as possible with these synthesis codes, however my main objective in classifying the initial open codes into blue codes was to capture the essence of that particular passage. Keeping with the language of the participant was important to me as well and I tried to include the participants’ own word usage in my blue codes when possible.

The final steps in my analysis included further interpretation of the blue codes and eventual categorization of those codes into themes and, ultimately, into the main issues presented in the Findings chapter of this dissertation. I used several organizational tactics: (a) I fleshed out the blue codes with descriptive, interpretive statements; (b) via memo-writing, I
outlined and contextualized the blue codes, attempting to interweave multiple codes when possible; and (c) I diagrammed theme interpretations in some instances. These tactics were fluid and changing (see Appendix G for samples of these tactics). Through this process, I was able to make connections among the more specific blue codes and the broader themes in which these connections began to emerge. I consulted several sources for coding and analysis techniques including Miles and Huberman’s (1994), Bloomberg and Volpe’s (2008), and Madison’s (2005) discussion of coding, however, my principle guide for code development and data analysis stemmed from the knowledge and understanding of the process I gained through multiple feminist methodology courses, particularly the instruction I received from Dr. Leslie Bloom (2005, 2006). In describing the style of coding which she prefers to practice, she explained that it is crucial to “stick to the language of the participant” in developing initial codes and then distill those codes into “main issues” represented by “the chunk of data,” that is, the passage of narrative from the respondent. By identifying recurring patterns that “cut through the data” (Merriam, 2002, p. 38), the resulting codes were truly emergent. My blue codes were not “pre-determined” or “pre-selected”—this coding scheme was not developed a priori, but was organic in the sense that I listened carefully to the narratives and allowed the respondents’ words to speak to me. My primary goal in generating meaning and organizing their stories was to highlight their commonality as young, female sexual beings experiencing a curriculum aimed at helping them critically reflect upon the realities surrounding their own sexual existence and, more generally, the influences shaping all female sexuality. Through their words and my interpretation, as mediated by the lenses of my own personal experiences, my chosen discipline (human development and family studies)
and my choice of theoretical framework (feminist theory), two main themes emerged and are discussed in the following chapter.

Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

According to Charmez (2006), “Different disciplines adhere to different standards for the conduct of research and for acceptability of evidence (see for example, Conrad, 1990; Thorne, 2001). . . . Criteria for evaluating research depend on who forms them and what purposes he or she invokes” (p. 182). I asked several questions throughout the analysis to address the rigor of the study; these questions were based on criteria for evaluating qualitative research suggested by Charmez: (a) credibility—do strong logical links exist between the data, the analysis, and contextual argument? (b) originality—do the themes offer new insight, have social significance, or challenge and extend current ideas and practices? (c) resonance—do the themes link larger collectives or institutions and individual lives and does the analysis and argument make sense to the participants or those who share their circumstances by providing them deeper insights about their lives and worlds? (d) usefulness—does the analysis offer interpretations and contribute to knowledge that can be used by young women, their parents, educators, and policymakers in their everyday worlds? Does the study contribute to making a better world? To address these questions of rigor and trustworthiness, I used triangulation and peer debriefings with facilitators, explained below, to validate the realities experienced by the participants and the realities that I, as the researcher, have represented in my analysis and attributed to the young women participants.

Triangulation. Triangulation is encouraged in qualitative research as it can enhance the credibility or internal validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). The issue of credibility is associated with the questions: Can the data be trusted, and can one
verify that the data is loyal to the phenomena? Therefore, it is important to ensure that the
research and data stay true to the phenomena under study (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).
Unlike the positivist or quantitative paradigm, the postpositivist or qualitative paradigm holds
that “the understanding of reality is really the researcher’s interpretation of participants’
interpretations or understandings of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, p. 25).

Denzin (1978, 1989) identified four types of triangulation: (a) by data source
(persons, places, times); (b) by method (observation, interviews, artifacts); (c) by researcher
(investigators A, B, and C, etc.); and (d) by theory. For this study, I utilized data
triangulation—the use of a variety of data sources—and method triangulation—the use of
multiple data collection methods—to confirm emerging findings and to provide deeper
insight into the young women’s experiences. Both of these triangulation tactics provided
corroboration of both consistencies and conflicting findings that emerge in the data. My
triangulation included (a) interviews with multiple respondents at different points in time
throughout the curriculum, (b) conversations/peer debriefings with the curriculum group
facilitators, (c) observations of the curriculum group sessions at two group sites, and (d) my
interpretation of the individual interviews in light of group session observations and vice
versa.

Peer debriefing. Also referred to as peer examination, peer debriefing is another
technique to ensure quality data collection. In conducting a peer debriefing, I asked the two
group facilitators to share with me their perceptions of the young women’s engagement with
the curriculum material. Both Dawn and Brandi had had many years of experience in
working with, advocating for, and educating adolescent and young adult women, particularly
young women within college and university populations. In these conversations, I shared my
raw interpretations of the data and the initial development of the two main themes. In doing so, we could assess the plausibility of my findings, that is, ask whether my interpretations made sense based on the data.

**Ethical Issues**

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed within the O2S curriculum groups and individual interview sessions, ethical issues were central to the current study. I utilized various safeguards in order to ensure protection of participants’ rights, particularly their voluntary participation and confidentiality. Informed consent was thoroughly addressed with each curriculum group at their first group session. To maintain the integrity of the O2S curriculum it was particularly important to me that the group members understood they were in no way obligated to participate in my study, the priority being that they experience the curriculum. The young women had self-selected to be a part of the curriculum group; they were made aware of the nature of the curriculum content prior to and at the beginning of the group sessions. Due to their voluntary participation in the curriculum group and their written consent to participate as a research respondent, I did not anticipate serious ethical threats to the young women’s well-being. To protect their confidentiality, participants were asked to select a pseudonym or I assigned one in cases in which the respondents indicated that I could use their actual name. Tapes and transcripts were labeled with these pseudonyms. Within my field notes, I used pseudonyms or initials of participants’ names. Research-related materials, such as interview tapes and the field notebook, were kept in locked storage when not in my physical possession. Although I attempted to provide rich descriptions of the young women and their experiences, I was careful to exclude identifying information.
It is important to note and commend the O2S group facilitators, Dawn and Brandi, for their ethical sensitivity in creating a safe space in which the group members could discuss potentially delicate issues and share their personal experiences. I learned from their example and made every effort to maintain the highest level of conscientiousness with regard to the respondents’ comfort and security during the interview process. “The traditional interview has painstakingly attempted to maintain neutrality and achieve objectivity and has kept the role of the interviewer as invisible as possible” but as a feminist researcher, it was important to me to resist “the practice of exploiting respondents” and, instead, “to use interviewing for ameliorative purposes” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 720). I strove to maintain my sense of humility as the participants shared with me intimate details of their lives. The words of Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1991) guided my approach to interviewing the young women about personal opinions and intimate experiences:

The researcher must always remain attentive to the moral dimensions of interviewing and aware that she is there to follow the narrator’s lead, to honor her integrity and privacy, not to intrude into areas that the narrator has chosen to hold back. (p. 25)

Based on her own research experiences, feminist researcher Leslie R. Bloom (2002) provided the following suggestions to novice researchers, such as me, and I took these words to heart throughout this study:

Maintain humility and be ethically responsive to the research. First, maintaining humility means not taking ourselves or our research so seriously that we forget that those we research have other, more important things going on in their lives. . . . We should always be grateful to those we research. Second, research requires us to act in ethical ways. Ethics begins with the conception of the research project and ends with
how we represent and share with others what we have learned . . . it is the responsibility of each researcher to be continually aware of specific ethical problems that arise in each project and respond not simply in ethical ways but in ethically situated ways. (p. 313)

In summary, interview and observational data from 4 participants were collected and analyzed. Two major themes emerged from the data and these are presented in the following chapter. Throughout the research process, issues of trustworthiness were addressed. In addition, ethical issues and potential concerns for participants’ confidentiality and representation have been and will continue to be considered.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Emergent Overarching Themes and Subthemes

This chapter will focus on the findings from the qualitative interview and observational data collected in the fall of 2007 and spring of 2008, as described in Chapter 3. The research questions of this study are: (1) what have been these young women’s past experiences of sexuality education? (2) how have these young women experienced their own sexuality? and (3) what are the societal circumstances and messages that these young women have experienced that contributed to their sexual socialization? The findings are organized and presented as two primary themes or “taboos” which emerged from the narratives of the young women who participated in the O2S curriculum groups: (a) the taboo of sexual awareness, and (b) the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure. Within my exploration of these taboos, I began to understand the sexual education experiences of the young women including their experiences as O2S participants, how they were experiencing and understanding their own sexuality, and the societal circumstances and messages that had contributed to their experiences and understanding as sexual beings. The young women were living as sexual beings within these taboos; the influences of which are both subtle and blatant. In the following section, these taboos will be illustrated through the voices and experiences of the young women. Within their narratives, included throughout the next two sections to support the identified themes, subthemes for each taboo emerged and are also presented. See Table 1 for a visual depiction of the main themes and subthemes.

Throughout this discussion of these taboos experienced by the participants, I include my own interpretations of their narratives. This chapter concludes with a synopsis of the two taboos. Additional insight into the findings of the current study, linking such to the larger
Table 1

*Themes and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Taboo of Sexual Awareness—The tensions that exist between young women’s sexual naivety and knowledge</td>
<td>• “Sex will get you an STD” and other wisdom from health class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “I just didn’t know anything!”: Naïveté of young women</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Did you get “The Talk?”: Parents and their naïve daughters</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• With a little help from my friends . . . and the Internet, TV, and</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Cosmo</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “To get out of the dark”: Agency and education within the taboo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leaving it to “trial and error”: The consequences of the taboo</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• To summarize: “It’s pretty sad that I had to wait ‘til I got to college to hear all this stuff”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Taboo of Female Sexuality, Desire, and Pleasure—The constraints placed on young women’s ability to acknowledge, experience, and express aspects of themselves as sexual beings</td>
<td>• A safe place to tackle the taboo</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “I didn’t know what’s going on down there!”: The mysterious female body</td>
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<td>• “Guys always have to make the first move” and other “weird notions” of female sexuality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Fearing the “pencil down the hallway”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To summarize: We are dealing with a tenacious taboo</td>
</tr>
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body of current research and practice regarding sexuality education and the state of contemporary sexual socialization of young women, will be discussed in the final chapter of this paper.

*The Taboo of Sexual Awareness*

This taboo illustrates the tensions that exist between naïveté and knowledge; the dilemmas young women face in having only partial and ambiguous information regarding sex and sexuality but wanting or needing more. Some young women remain experientially naïve yet gain sexual awareness through education and conversations with caring adults who realize the value in informing adolescents—for their health and happiness—of the realities of
sex. Other young women gain awareness through their own personal actions and interactions; they are no longer experientially naïve, however, they may remain knowledgeably naïve due to a lack of accurate sexuality education and an uncertain understanding of all aspects of sex and intimacy, possibly risking health, happiness, and more.

“Sex Will Get You an STD” and Other Wisdom from Health Class

A lack of sexuality education or inadequate sexuality education is a barrier to a healthy level of sexual awareness. This lack of sufficient and consistent “formal” sexuality education was a common pattern found within the participants’ narratives. The young women discussed various forms of sexuality education programs that they had experienced in middle school, high school, and/or within church youth group classes. Often these programs were remembered as “plumbing discussions” in which the basic reproductive anatomy was discussed with, perhaps, some mention of pubertal, physical changes. Nettie (age 20) recalled, “When [my school] did it, it was basically the reproductive side and half of which, especially after this class [O2S], I was like, ‘I didn’t know any of that!’” Tegen (age 20) remembered a program that took place in late elementary school:

In fifth grade, we had a program PK and it stood for Parents & Kids Can Talk About Sex and basically it was a packet we were supposed to do with our parents and my mom thought it was just kind of a joke, so she would sign it every day and we didn’t really do the activities that we were supposed to do and in class they talked about “warm-fuzzies” and it was supposed to teach you about, I guess, what it is to be horny or something and they told you about, what to expect when you get your period, basically.
Gabi (age 18) remembered a class from her seventh-grade year. She explained, “Our middle school had a class called Decisions. And we all . . . had to take it and that was about sexuality and, talking, trying to open the gates between talking with parents and teachers and yourself.” Besides her fifth-grade experience with the PK program, Tegen recollected compulsory sexuality education that took place during high school: “Then, when I was a freshman in high school, we had a mandatory health class that we had to take and that’s where we learned about, like, pregnancy and STDs.”

Nettie and Sam’s experience with school-based sexuality education throughout elementary, middle, and high school is typical of many young people. Sam (age 21) amusingly discussed “The Videos” that were shown every year from fourth to seventh grade; however, The Videos, even the most “explicit” in the series, focused on the basics of puberty with scarce mention of sex or sexuality:

The first one was very vague, kind of like, [spoken in a higher pitch voice] “[Puberty] is something you might be experiencing.” You know, “This is why you need PE clothes. Your bodies are changing.” And then they got more and more explicit as they [went on], you know, “Be expecting your periods; they will be coming!” (Sam)

In describing her education, Nettie insinuated that it was sparse and incomplete:

The first time we got it, I think it was fourth grade, and it was just briefly and it was just like a one day thing and then . . . in sixth grade we had a unit on it in science that was like 5 weeks long or something and that’s when, like, we talked about it with, like, boys and girls in the same room because in fourth grade it was separate. And then we touched on it again in health class in seventh and eighth grade and that one was a little bit more in depth. They brought in, like, the empathy belly and stuff like
that. That was a little bit more, but still. . . . In high school I took anatomy and we didn’t really talk about it in there and then I took a health class in high school, too, and I think we did a week on STIs and stuff, but other than that, [there] wasn’t really anything there either.

A negative tone lingered within Sam’s reflection on her high school health class’s unit on sex. The main message: “Sex will get you an STD” (Sam).

Tegen was 12 years old when she participated in a confirmation class at her church. The topic of sex came up once. “The pastor who taught it basically said that he doesn’t support premarital sex and that was all that was talked about so, no, I would say that the topic of sex wasn’t covered really,” (Tegen).

“I Just Didn’t Know Anything!”: Naïveté of Young Women

Naïveté of young women regarding sexual topics seems accepted, expected, even fostered by adults. For many young women, sexual naïveté is a common and accepted aspect of one’s adolescent identity. Gabi was particularly convincing in illustrating her previous unawareness of most things sexual:

In high school, as far as like my freshman and sophomore year I just didn’t know anything about sexual acts, I mean, I knew sex, and, basically knew, like the very basics that they teach you in school. Didn’t know there were multiple positions, I didn’t know you could have anal sex, or oral sex, I didn’t know any of that.

Sam described herself as “ultra-naïve growing up” and qualified this label by explaining she “never really went to parties, never . . . ‘dated around,’” and never “did crazy stuff in high school” (Sam). For many young people, sexual activity and drinking alcohol go hand-in-hand so it was not surprising when Sam further explained her naïveté in terms of her
inexperience with drinking. Once she reached college, she avoided some of the overwhelming temptations of excessive underage drinking: “I was the kid that didn’t drink alcohol until like, second year of college, at the end of my first year of college, and yet, I’ve never really been crazy with it” (Sam).

One could argue the potential merits of this naiveté—ignorance is bliss, perhaps—but what was compelling was, despite their sense of being naïve, the young women’s eagerness for a better understanding of sex and sexuality was fully evident. Each young woman sought information from various sources to satisfy at least some of her curiosities.

*Did You Get “The Talk?”*: Parents and Their Naïve Daughters

Adults, particularly parents, can play a big role in fostering sexual naiveté among young women, yet they can also foster a sense of awareness through open dialogue about sex and relationships. Two stories shared by Gabi and Tegen provide an interesting contrast in considering parental reactions to naiveté, in the case of Gabi, and loss of naiveté, in the case of Tegen.

Although she labeled herself as naïve during high school, Gabi described the parent–child communication she has had with her mother and stepfather regarding sex as open:

My mom and . . . my stepdad, they were both very open and if I had a question about anything I’d go and ask them. Actually my friends tended to be the ones who came to me and then I went to my parents and asked [laughing].

Perhaps her naiveté allowed the open communication to exist; for many parents, their teenage daughter’s sweet naiveté is much more excusable than eager curiosity. When asked to provide an example of an open exchange with her parents, Gabi shared an experience from high school in which she was confused by the term “BJ.” In this account, Gabi illustrated the
seemingly comfortable communication she shared with her mother and again she mentioned her self-perception of naïveté:

_Gabi:_ Yeah, ‘cause my favorite one is in this: My best friend and I were very naïve [laughing] all through high school and it got to be like our sophomore year and somebody said the word “BJ” and we were like, “I have no idea what that is!” So I went home and asked my mom and she was like, “Oh, you know, it is like where you suck on someone’s penis.” And I was like, “Oh, okay.” So I went back and told my friend and she was like, “You asked your mom!?!” and got all freaked out [laughs] but, yeah, [my mom was] totally with it.

_Me:_ Have you ever talked to your mom, now, as a young woman in college, . . . have you ever asked her how she felt when you went up to her and asked those types of questions? Or, do you feel like she’s always been . . . [Gabi begins to answer]

_Gabi:_ I just feel like, she’s always been, [she pauses] ‘cause she’s always said if you ever have any questions or anything like that I’d rather have you come ask me than go into something not knowing what you are doing. So, I’ve never asked her how she felt about it, but she always seemed very verbal or she would laugh because she thought it was funny because I didn’t know yet.

This account is telling in many ways. Gabi described her mother as being quite open to discussing her questions regarding sex and this example illustrates that her mother provided frank and honest answers to those questions. It is interesting that Gabi mentioned her mother’s laughter when approached with such questions. Her interpretation of that laughter was one of her mother’s surprise that Gabi did not already know such information. This might very well have been the case, given Gabi’s sense of being “naïve” about sexual
things in high school, however, her mother’s laughter could be interpreted as embarrassment in discussing sexual topics with her teenage daughter—apparently an embarrassment that Gabi’s mother was able to set aside in order to truthfully inform her daughter. Although she did complete a formal sexuality education program during her middle school years, Gabi cited her parents, particularly her mother, as her main source of information regarding sex and sexuality while she was growing up. “[My mother’s] always said ‘If you ever have any questions or anything like that, I’d rather have you come ask me than go into something not knowing what you are doing’” (Gabi). For many parents, this might be a hard pill to swallow—your adolescent daughter has questions about sex and she wants answers—but Gabi’s mother handled the situations with honesty and Gabi was quite appreciative of her mother’s candor as it had facilitated her sense of comfort and confidence in seeking more information and knowledge regarding sex and sexuality, namely, her involvement in the O2S curriculum group. Though Gabi was naïve in her early adolescence, she was making strides toward becoming more knowledgeable—a journey that could be attributed partially to her parents’ openness in answering her questions in a sincere and nonjudgmental manner.

Tegen’s naïveté was lost to a certain level of personal discovery early in her adolescence. Tegen confided in her mother at the age of 15, after she had experienced sexual intercourse for the first time. That would be, however, their first and final mother–daughter conversation regarding sex.

When I was 15, I told my mom that I had had sex and she said, “Okay,” [laughs a bit] and she got me on the pill. And other than that, nooo. She said, at the time she got me on the pill, she just basically told me that she wanted me to respect myself but beyond that, not really. (Tegen)
Tegen was upfront with her mother in sharing that she had become sexually active, yet a sense of discomfort pervaded this narrative. Perhaps it was a mother’s uneasiness with her daughter’s new-found sexual awareness, preferring to pretend that her daughter was and would remain sexually naïve. Indeed, Tegan’s mother did express a powerful and important message by reminding Tegen to “respect” herself, and she did facilitate Tegen’s contraception use. Nonetheless, the notion that adults and parents would prefer to maintain a state of denial and resist the reality of teenage sexual behavior persists.

Nettie described her sexuality education at home as “implied.” Although she had been and still was quite close with her mom and they engaged in open communication of most issues, Nettie revealed that she never received “The Talk”—the time-honored and often infamous “birds and bees” discussion dreaded by parents and teens alike, so much so that it does not happen or is too little, too late. In Nettie’s home, certain messages regarding unacceptable behaviors were implied based on her parents’ rules when boys visited.

Me: You said you are pretty close with your Mom. Did your Mom ever talk to you about sex and sexuality as you were growing up?

Nettie: No, not really. We had that question in the other sexuality class and it was like, “When did your parents give you like The Talk?” And I thought back and I’m, like, “I never really got The Talk.” It was always like if I had boyfriends in junior high and high school and I was never allowed to be alone with him in a room with the door shut so it was obviously, like, implying something there. But they never really talked to me about it. There was never, like, a discussion and then I, like, started my period in like sixth grade and it was, like, “This is how you use a tampon,” and, like, that was about it. That was as far as my education went with my parents. It was a lot
of implied, like, “You don’t touch each other,” and “Don’t sit too close on the couch,” but there was never really a discussion or, like, a talk.

Me: It was kind of, like, it was known?

Nettie: Yeah, it was like they expected, I guess, I don’t know if they expected that schools [would] be teaching me everything I needed to know or if they just didn’t know how to talk to me about it or what.

Nettie raised a point many school-based sexuality education proponents maintain: Parents either assume that schools are handling the sexuality education of their children or they want schools to do so to alleviate the need for that potentially difficult (i.e., embarrassing, awkward) sit-down with one’s child for The Talk. Not only can a lack in parent–child communication about sex foster naïveté among young people, so, too can an absence in parent–school collaboration regarding the sexual education of young people. If parents are avoiding the discussion all together and schools limit the discussion to the bare minimum—puberty and reproduction—what is a naïve yet curious young person to do to become an informed, agentic sexual being?

For Nettie, Sam, Tegen, and Gabi, they took matters into their own hands—each turned to “other” sources for guidance and they sought further sexuality education opportunities.

With a Little Help from My Friends . . . and the Internet, TV, and Cosmo

Due to the lack of or inadequate nature of the sexuality education these young women experienced at school, at home, or at their church homes, many revealed that they—intentionally or not—relied on “other” sources for information about sex and sexuality. Sam admitted, with a hint of embarrassment in her voice, “Well, I’ve done Internet research. I
mean, we have all done our own exploration [laughing, said in a higher pitch] as you could say . . . but you never really understand the actual interworkings of anything.” After explaining that her school sexuality education covered only the basics of reproduction, Nettie stated, “I guess a lot of it I learned through friends and online and TV and whatnot.” Gabi, claiming naïveté during high school, commented “I knew nothing about anything until I was like in high school [laughs] so, but, I don’t know. I know that the guys I hung around with were the ones who first started talking about it and exposing me to it.”

Fortunately for some, their friends’ parents had sat down for The Talk with their child. Nettie, by way of her elementary friend, learned from pictures in a book:

*Me:* When you say you heard it from friends, was it mainly just from their experiences—sharing with each other?

*Nettie:* Yeah and there was also like a friend that I had in elementary school whose mom did give her the talk and she bought her like a book that had a lot of like diagrams and pictures and stuff like that in it so we would just like, it was mostly just like childish, “Ooh!” like giggles and all these pictures and stuff. But like we learned a lot that way. . . . I don’t even know what the book was or anything.

When I asked Tegen whether she had experienced any other sexuality education besides the brief lessons she remembered from fifth grade and her freshman year of high school, she shared the following:

My friends and I joke that we learned all the things we know from *Cosmo* [Cosmopolitan magazine] because nobody talked about it, um, outside of the risks, we never really learned about being sexual other than gossip from each other and things that we read.
Much of Tegen’s understanding of female anatomy, particularly the structures that are often absent in formal sexuality education programs such as the clitoris, came from “other” sources. “As far as formal education goes, we didn’t cover any female anatomy other than the vagina so everything else I’ve learned has been from pop culture and magazines, ya know” (Tegen). Gabi reported that, fortunately, her main source of information about sex and sexuality was her mother, but she relied on her friends and pop culture to fill in the gaps:

   For me growing up, I could always talk to my mom, but as far as like learning what certain things were, I read things like Cosmo and talked to other girls, . . . because seriously, I was so naïve, I didn’t know what anything was until probably my junior or senior year in high school [her narrative trails off].

“To Get Out of the Dark”: Agency and Education Within the Taboo

   During our discussions of their prior, yet lackluster sexuality education, I sensed that these young women craved mature and honest conversations about the many realities of female sexuality, including their own bodies and physical sexual response, sexual expression, and romantic relationships. Each of the young women explained that the O2S curriculum groups provided an opportunity to have those conversations. Sam explained,

   I don’t have a whole lot of, like, experience, I guess you could say. I mean, I’ve got a little bit, but not a whole lot so it’s kind of things that are really new to me and, I mean, what better way do I have than talking to females who actually want to talk about the actual reality of it, not just, you know, [pause] . . . the raunchy stuff.

   While Sam reiterated her sense of naïveté, she expressed a desire to explore her thoughts and feelings about herself, sex, and sexuality in a mature environment. “This is a
safe place to talk about it,” she said. Similarly, Gabi’s interest in participating in the O2S group was based on a quest for personal betterment, particularly a desire to be enlightened:

I just want to learn a little bit more. I feel like I think I know about my body and I think I know what, how things work and what I like and stuff like that, but I still feel rather in the dark and I feel like some girls who haven’t had more education than me still know more so I thought the best way to get out of the dark was to take a class and learn.

Gabi was acknowledging that she did know some things about sex and sexuality—even some things about her own likes, a sign of her subjectivity regarding the issue of sexual behaviors and sexual desires—yet, she also unapologetically admitted that she would like to know more. She could have relied on other sources of information (i.e., her peers, the media, pop culture) to fill in the gaps in her understanding; instead, she recognized the benefit in engaging in a class to facilitate her transition from naïveté to awareness.

Though Tegen had experienced two attempts at sexuality education during her elementary and high school years, she regarded such efforts as “male-oriented.” In spite of being sexually active since the age of 15, Tegen expressed a proactive attitude in her desire to become more informed on issues regarding the female body and women’s sexuality. She described her reasoning for taking part in the O2S curriculum group:

There has never really been any group that is focused toward female sexuality what-so-ever and when this was explained to us it was sort of explained that it was a sex ed group directed toward young women and I thought that that would be something beneficial to me just because all the sex education, formal education I’ve had, in my opinion, was sort of more male-oriented. It talked about, like, you know, “You stick
your penis in a vagina and that’s all you need to know.” With [O2S], we talked about a lot more topics that are important to females.

During this particular semester of her sophomore year in college, Nettie was enrolled in a human sexuality course as part of her pre-social work academic track. I asked her to reflect upon her learning in that course and why she decided to participate in the O2S curriculum group in addition to the human sexuality class. She replied, “It’s really opened my eyes to a lot more stuff that is out there that you don’t really think about. . . . You just don’t realize how it is integrated in our everyday lives and people just look over it.” In this narrative, Nettie alluded to the taboo of sexual awareness in which young women are enmeshed and, paradoxically, how ubiquitous sex is in our everyday existence. As Nettie reminded us, we, as a society, have become desensitized, as if the (ab)use and consumption of sex within advertising, entertainment, and headline news were the background noise of our lives.

As the young women continued to express their reasoning for wanting to participate in the O2S curriculum group, they also shared their thoughts about the benefits of such an education for themselves and as well as for younger adolescents. With regard to receiving this type of education in high school, Tegen explained,

I think the maturity level is definitely there, ya know. I felt like, I mean, at the time I felt like I was really mature, looking back I wasn’t, but I felt like I could talk about those things in a civilized manner and not, ya know, feel inclined to giggle or something, at [the age of] 14.

Sam thought high school would be the ideal time to begin educating young women, although, she conceded that it might be more appropriate for early adolescents because teenagers are
becoming sexually active at younger ages and are being “immature” in how they handle their physical intimacy:

I think middle school, it’s . . . scary for them. . . . At that age, . . . it’s kind of an uncomfortable subject because all you hear about it is STDs—“Sex is bad!” you know, or pressure from the guys—“Don’t give in! Don’t drink alcohol and have sex!” That’s really, I mean, they hear the same thing over and over. Basically, they are getting beat in the head with it. So, you know, I think it’s still a scary subject for them. . . . But, I mean, I think you have to be [pause] a little bit more [she hesitates and laughs] . . . gentle, I suppose with the younger crowd because to them it is still that transition period of, “I need to know what it is, and I need to know everything about it because I have to face this,” ya know, “I don’t want to be naïve when it comes to, my boyfriend’s pushing something and I really don’t know what it is. I don’t know what can happen,” ya know. . . . Especially, high schoolers [face] all sorts of peer pressures and it’s not a mature type of peer pressure, it’s, “Everybody’s doing it!” . . . I mean, now days, kids are giving sex to their boyfriends as their birthday present! Things like that, I mean, I think a lot of it is immature. . . . But I think [a class like this] would be teaching them maturity about it, too.

Sam’s comments bring up an interesting point regarding the negative undertones with which most sexuality education programming is delivered. Repetitiously hearing the “bad and ugly” of sex—however truthful or misleading—would make it a scary subject for anyone of any age. It is not difficult to understand how the sex-negative tone used by adults to educate young women about their bodies and sexual behaviors could scare them into silence;
adolescent girls might not feel comfortable asking questions or seeking guidance if the topic about which they are curious has been steeped in negativity and fear.

For some, education and knowledge can be transformative in unexpected ways. Nettie’s experience with the O2S group and a college-level human sexuality course sparked an interest in possibly pursuing a social work career in which she would focus on helping other girls and women with issues related to sex and sexuality. At the conclusion of the O2S group, she contacted Dawn about volunteering at the local PPGI site. Nettie also e-mailed me to inquire about my academic background, particularly the sexuality-related courses that I had taken during my undergraduate coursework and asked for suggestions of coursework that she should pursue. I asked what was inspiring to her about doing work in this area. Nettie replied,

Even to lead a group or class like this I think would be awesome. . . . I’ve learned so much from it and I’m sure there are other girls out there that have no clue and have never been given “The Talk” . . . and they could learn so much from a group like this that I think it would be really helpful and if I would be able to help other girls like that, that’d be awesome and there is like other life experiences and stuff that I’m like, “I wish I would have been able to help that person.”

Leaving it to “Trial and Error”: The Consequences of the Taboo

When one is initially asked to consider the consequences of the taboo of sexual awareness, the typical dilemmas might come to mind—sexual victimization, unintended pregnancy, and the spread of HIV and other STDs among adolescents and young adults. It is not my intention to minimize these consequences, as they are, indeed, unfortunate and potentially devastating for individuals experiencing such. Where we, as a society, misdirect
our focus is in the dramatic publicizing of these specific outcomes because they are considered larger “social ills” that affect all citizens indirectly, if not directly. Perhaps we would be well-advised to consider the precursors to the decisions that result in the negative outcomes. Most adults would likely agree that reducing and/or preventing the risks associated with adolescent sexual behavior is imperative for the well-being of our society. Yet our apprehension to scrutinize what lies beneath the surface of the risk and negative outcomes of young female sexuality is painfully obvious, to the point that our best efforts to intervene and prevent are continuously muted. With their narratives, the young women provided a deepened sense of the context of these dilemmas. Their insight illuminates the antecedents of these specific consequences for young women and how certain outcomes can lead to their further confusion and misguided actions—all of which could have been mitigated or wholly prevented had factual information been given, open communication been modeled, and sexual agency been encouraged by adults.

Tegen and I spent a lot of time discussing her perceptions of young women’s sex lives at her university, and she was quite open in sharing stories of herself and her friends. In particular, we discussed whether young women have conversations about contraception and protection against STDs with their partners prior to engaging in sexual behaviors. According to Tegen, it is not uncommon for sex to occur before the conversation, that is, if the conversation happens at all. This pattern often results due to alcohol use preceding the sexual act, as in the case of Tegen and her current boyfriend:

No, we did not have a conversation about it. It happened. We were very drunk [spoken matter-of-factly] and that’s pretty typical, I think, of the college experience, but, we did use a condom and we talked about [it] the next morning. We talked about,
ya know, whether or not we were going to continue having sex or whether or not we
were going to use condoms, you know, things like that. (Tegen)

I asked Tegen if she thought it was fairly typical of young people of her age to have
conversations with partners either before or after sex regarding condoms, contraception,
STDs. She replied,

From what I’ve gathered from my friends, most of my friends don’t use condoms and
most of them don’t talk about [it] with their partner either. That’s, like, four or five
friends] that have said the same, pretty much said the same story, [spoken in a silly
voice] “Oh, we were drunk, didn’t use a condom and naaaah, not gonna use them
now, it’s too late,” pretty much. They’re scared that if they say “Hey,” you know, “I
want you to get tested,” that the guy is going to think that they [the young woman, not
the young man] are dirty or something ‘cause maybe they’ve had more partners than
just him or something so they will be thought of as being slutty or something. [That’s]
what I’ve gathered.

Tegen’s comments caused me to wonder whether this pattern of noncommunication
between young women and their partners would exist if sexuality education occurred earlier
and with more intent—sexuality education that included discussions regarding healthy
relationships; the emotional aspects of sex and intimacy; acknowledgement of sexual desire
and pleasure regardless of gender; setting and respecting boundaries with relationships and
intimate encounters, partner communication about contraception, and HIV/STD protection;
and realistic and relevant information about the risks of alcohol and drug use when mixed
with sexual activity. In Tegen’s opinion, sexuality education, similar to the O2S curriculum,
occurring earlier in adolescents’ lives would help young women avoid the “trial and error” of
navigating the woes of romantic and sexual relationships. In response to my question, “Do you think that more sexuality education would change that or get them to think about having those conversations and getting tested?” Tegen replied,

Absolutely. I think that, there has to be a class, probably starting around [the age of] 16 or so, I would say, just from my experience, where you talk with girls about getting tested, about talking to their partner, about what defines a healthy relationship, ‘cause I feel like, those things are never covered and I don’t know where on earth people are supposed [to] learn that except by trial and error. So, I think that if you sat down with a girl, a high school aged-girl and just talked to her and said, “You know, this is what you need to do to respect your body and yourself,” I think that it would definitely help.

Me: Just thinking about this group, and all of the topics we’ve covered in the sessions, do you think that high school-aged girls would benefit from experiencing a group such as this?

Tegen: Mmmhmm, yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, all the stuff that we’ve talked about in this class, I was talking about with my friends when I was 14 [years old]. But I had no education on the matter so most of what we were saying was just like, I don’t know, like stupid [laughs] and silly things and, I think, you know, if we were able to talk about it in an educated way, we could’ve probably saved ourselves a lot questions that we didn’t have answered until later.

I asked Nettie at what age she would have liked to have been exposed to the information she learned through the O2S curriculum. She shared an account of her
boyfriend’s sister to demonstrate the importance of, she believed, beginning sexuality education before young women reach high school:

Probably when I got to junior high or middle school, like the very first year. I think they should talk about it right away so people who do have questions, they can ask and, I mean, there’s time. I mean by the time we actually start talking about it, it’s like, “Oh” [spoken blasé]—I’m gonna use my boyfriend’s sister as an example—she just had her second kid and she just turned 18. So, like by the time that she actually had her sex talk she had already been pregnant once. It’s like, “Of course she knows what sex is because she’s been having it!” but it’s stuff like that—if she would have been taught sooner by school or parents or whatever, like, that, maybe that pregnancy could have been prevented, because she ended up giving up her first kid for adoption; she kept this last one. But maybe she would have known differently if she would have been taught younger.

Throughout our discussions, Nettie returned to the idea that because female adolescents “are starting to have sex at such a young age,” the opportunity to discuss issues such as “their bodies and their desires and how to love their body” would make a “huge difference” in helping young women “respect themselves a little more” by enhancing their “understanding of what is going on inside their bodies, with their desires” (Nettie).

*To Summarize:* “It’s Pretty Sad That I Had to Wait ‘Til I Got to College to Hear All This Stuff”

The following narrative from Nettie summarizes the collective voices of the young women participating in the O2S curriculum group as she named the taboo nature of young women discussing and acknowledging a sense of awareness regarding sex and sexuality.
I think if talking about sex and anatomy wasn’t so taboo, that people wouldn’t really even think of it as a negative thing. But because everyone is like, “Oh, you shouldn’t talk about that!” I think that is what makes girls be like, “Oh, I don’t want to talk about this, I’m gonna pretend I’m not listening!” I just think that if it wasn’t so taboo in society and families and religion and whatnot then it would be so much easier to talk about stuff like that and, I don’t know, [pause] it’s pretty sad that I had to wait ‘til I got to college to hear all this stuff. (Nettie)

_The Taboo of Female Sexuality, Desire, and Pleasure_

This taboo is specific to women’s ability to acknowledge, experience, and express aspects of themselves as sexual beings. As illustrated in a variety of examples provided by the young women’s narratives, this taboo is multi-faceted, and can be, again, both obvious and discreet. Even the inconspicuous influences of this taboo can have undeniable consequences for young women’s perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding their own sexuality.

_A Safe Place to Tackle the Taboo_

Throughout our interviews and within the O2S curriculum groups, the young women’s stories provided a glimpse into the taboo of female sexuality and desire they experience on a day-to-day basis. This taboo takes many forms: the perpetuation of the female body as strange and mysterious; the centrality of male sexuality as “the norm” in our society; and the schizophrenic cultural messages that inundate young women regarding the nearly mandated balancing acts of inner strength with outer appearance, confidence with naïveté, and sexiness with wholesomeness. Fortunately, all of the young women I interviewed seemed to have a firm foot planted in their own sense of subjectivity and agency;
however, each shared stories, past and present, in which this stance has wavered under the pressures imposed by society, romantic relationships, and the occasional dip in self-esteem. Ultimately, they expressed that through their conversations with each other, they had begun to work through the taboos surrounding their thoughts, attitudes, and actions regarding sexual desire and sexual behavior, and all narrated stories of navigating their sexual lives as thoughtful and reflective sexual beings. Sam explained,

I mean, it’s always nice to get to talk to other women about reality versus society. You know, it’s how society . . . affects us, I mean, it is unending in the way that it can change us and affect us [and] affect how we feel about ourselves and it’s nice to have other women who recognize that and that you can talk to . . . And so, it’s really just nice to have, basically, a path to having the opportunity to talk about that and to explore that about yourself. . . . I think that this [O2S] is kind of a venue for, “Hey, you know we can talk about this stuff; this is a safe place to talk about it.”

Sam’s comment was echoed by the other O2S participants. The young women seemed to find solace in having “a safe place” to tackle the taboos of female sexuality and sexual desire. Talking with each other and with the group facilitators in a casual, nonjudgmental setting provided the young women the opportunity to vent their frustrations sparked by negative and confusing societal messages, to clarify the misinformation they had previously received, and to safely and openly reflect upon the realities of their own lives as sexual beings. Tegen shared the following with me regarding the O2S group sessions:

I definitely benefited from talking about sexuality with other girls in a casual environment so that, ya know, nobody was judging anyone else and we could share
stories, and I think that, had I not, I probably would’ve still believed a few things that
I probably shouldn’t, ya know?

In the following section, through the voices of these young women, I will illustrate several
facets of the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure from which they found refuge
within the O2S curriculum groups.

“I Don’t Know What’s Going On Down There!”: The Mysterious Female Body

Young women are surrounded by varying images of the female form. They gaze at
their own bodies every day while showering, dressing, and progressing through their usual
beauty rituals. They live and socialize with female friends, sisters, mothers, grandmothers,
and aunts. They see a variety of women portrayed in media, music, movies, and pop culture.
Yet, for many young women, the female body is mysterious, even “weird.” In particular,
their own basic female sexual anatomy is not completely understood. The O2S curriculum
includes a more extensive discussion of female sexual anatomy than one might be familiar
with having had gone through minimal amounts of sexuality education in the past. After
completing the O2S sessions entitled “All About Down There: Part I” and “Part II” I asked
the young women their reactions to such information. Although she remembered learning
about male sexual anatomy, Gabi reiterated the point that the knowledge she gained from
previous sex education in regard to female sexual anatomy was limited:

I guess I learned the basic anatomy of the man . . . but we never went over, like they

never even mentioned the clitoris in our health class or anything like that. I don’t
think they mentioned the labia either, I think they just spoke of the internal anatomy,
the vaginal walls, and the uterus and ovaries. . . . They focused on the reproductive
aspect; they didn’t focus on anything pleasure-wise.
In comparison to her recollection of limited information in past sexuality education experiences, Gabi shared her reaction to learning about the urethral sponge, g-spot and the clitoris within the O2S group. (The urethral sponge, also identified by various researchers and authors—indicative of the ambiguous nature of female anatomy even among professionals—as vestibular bulb, female prostate, corpus spongiosum, or the infamous G spot, is spongy tissue that surrounds the urethral opening and is located within the vestibule, internally, beneath the labia majora and labia minora. This tissue becomes engorged with blood during female sexual arousal and is principal in orgasmic response and female ejaculation. Located within this tissue are small glands that produce the alkaline fluid that is released during female ejaculation. See Chalker, 2000, and Crooks & Baur, 2008).

As far as, like I said in the session, I had no idea where the urethral sponge was as far as on my own body. I think I made like an “Oh” [spoken with surprise in her voice, in a higher pitch] sound in class ‘cause I had no idea, but, besides that, I knew where things were, I just didn’t necessarily know that we had an organ solely for pleasure, stuff like that. . . . Yeah, I didn’t know where the g-spot was but that was pretty cool because I had never really figured that out, you know, everyone talks about it, but you never really know where it is and then, just in general, like the fact that the clitoris is the only, like it is purely for pleasure, doesn’t serve a purpose other than that, that was pretty cool to learn, too. (Gabi)

Tegen also commented that learning about the clitoris and urethral sponge was “definitely helpful” and “pretty informative,” particularly because her previous sex education programming “didn’t cover any female anatomy other than the vagina.”
From my experience in teaching college students in an undergraduate human sexuality course, it was not surprising to me that much of the anatomical information was new to the young women participating in the group. However, after we had discussed female sexual health within the O2S group, including the importance of gynecological exams and pap tests, Nettie expressed frustration in her realization that she had previously lacked an understanding of not only the terms associated with the female genitals, she was also concerned that she did not have an understanding of the healthy state of one’s body and the purpose of gynecological exams. She commented that the “female body is cool but kind of weird at the same time.” I asked her why she thought female bodies are “weird.”

Because *nobody talks about it.* It’s like, I don’t know what’s going on down there because nobody’s ever told me. . . . Like, what they actually do when you are getting the pap, like, I had no idea what they were doing and like I’m always like “Here ya go,” opening my legs so that she [her health care provider] can do her thing but it’s like “OK, what are you doing?” I guess stuff like that, that’s stuff that I should probably know because it’s, like, health things that, I mean, that, what are they doing when they do that? What are they looking for? And then it’s like, “Your pap is normal,” and they send it in the mail to you and it’s like, “Ok, cool, but what does that mean?” I never really knew. (Nettie)

Nettie’s response, in concert with the reflections shared by the other O2S participants, suggest that the taboos of female sexuality and sexual awareness are more far-reaching than one might expect. Many young women lack an advanced awareness and appreciation of the intricacies of sexual desire and sexual behavior but, according to the young women I spoke
to, due to the taboo nature of female sexuality and sexual awareness, many have been deprived of a basic understanding of their own bodies.

“Guys Always Have to Make the First Move” and Other “Weird Notions” of Female Sexuality

All of the participants expressed that they identified as heterosexual, or they indicated that they had been or were currently involved in a relationship with a male partner. As part of the O2S curriculum, the young women spent a substantial amount of time discussing sexual desire. Though they all indicated that they had had feelings of romantic and sexual desire for a male partner, they explained to me that discussing such desire was a rarity. Rather, the young women shared narratives indicating that male sexuality, desire, and pleasure trumps not only sexually themed conversations, but sexual interactions as well. Reflecting on her high school experience, Sam explained that there is an obvious difference in the freedoms young women and young men enjoy in discussing matters of a sexual nature:

You know, and then the girls [that had] the boyfriend and you kind of knew it was going on, but it was never a “Guess what we do?!?” and the guys, I mean, [pause]—they’re guys, you know. They say all sorts of crazy things from one end to the other.

As Sam’s narrative highlights, within cultural attitudes held regarding the acceptability of young people’s sexual curiosities, sexual exploration, and/or sexual exploits, a stark difference based on gender exists. Tegen further illustrated this difference:

I guess a lot of what I understood as sexuality stemmed from “guys always have to make the first move” and “you kind of just let it happen.” . . . I think that a lot of women confuse their own desire with the desire of their partner. I think that it’s not
unrealistic for a girl to be pressured into something that she doesn’t necessarily plan on doing.

Nettie’s narrative reiterates Tegen’s comment and emphasizes that it is not uncommon for a young woman to confuse her own desire—if she does, in fact, allow herself to recognize such desire—with that of her partner. As Nettie pointed out, this confusion might occur due to cultural expectations, or at least that which young women perceive as being expected of them. That expectation is that young women refrain from discussing their own desire and pleasure; rather, they should focus on the sexual fulfillment of their (male) partners. When asked, in her own experience or experience with her friends, if she thought girls talk about desire, Nettie replied,

I don’t think it’s personally like their desire; it’s like what they want to do to please someone else. I don’t think it’s what they want though. At least it’s not talked about, I don’t think. I know my friends and I never talk about stuff like that. . . . I think it’s culturally, like, it’s ok for a guy to talk about their sex drive and what they want and everything but, like, for girls it’s like we’re not supposed to have that or whatever. That’s what it seems like society says.

Tales of female desire taking a backseat. In the following narratives, Gabi and Tegen provide telling accounts illustrating how a young woman’s desire and pleasure can take a back seat to that of her partner. As Gabi implied, this is a habit perpetuated by cultural messages that young women absorb regarding “expected” (hetero)sexual conduct. Gabi had begun to reflect upon what she desired and enjoyed within the sexual relationship she was sharing with her current and relatively long-term boyfriend of 3 years:
I think we tend to focus on our partner’s desires. Just in general, I mean you read any “women’s” magazine and it focuses, like, one of the top things, is “Ten Sex Moves He’ll Love” or “Ten Sex Moves that will Blow His Mind” and it doesn’t ever, I mean, occasionally you’ll see an article, ya know, “What Can You Do to Enjoy Sex Yourself” but I think generally it’s about pleasing your partner and keeping him around, when not enough attention is focused on keeping you around. I know personally, there was definitely a period where—and I’m, I’ve been in a pretty long, steady relationship—and there was definitely a period where I was like “Oh, crap! Does he want more? Is he gonna, ya know, [leave], . . . like what should I be doing!??” And I don’t think until just recently, like [pause] I’ve actually started thinking about what I want and how comfortable I am and if I’m enjoying things ‘cause if I’m not enjoying it, then it is not exactly worth it, but, I think sometimes you kind of need to be, you either need to be very, very confident to enjoy [yourself] or you need to start getting comfortable with who you are with, because I think if you are not comfortable, it just seems awkward and you’re like “Oh, well, I have to make this other person happy.”

Tegen’s experience in a past relationship was one in which she described herself as not having “control over the sexual aspect of the relationship.” Her then-boyfriend was the one in control. She explained, “He would want to have sex all the time and he didn’t really care to, it wasn’t really about the experience, it seemed like it was about quantity for him.” From this relationship, Tegen developed, what she labeled, “a kind of weird notion about what it was to be sexual.” However, in her current relationship with a new boyfriend, she found a balanced and healthy sexual existence, undoing her previous “weird notion” of being
sexual. “We both just started over and we . . . learned from each other and about . . . how to 
be sexual and how to . . . make it healthy. . . . It’s about neither person using the other 
person” (Tegen).

Tegen had found her voice; she confidently declared her sexual subjectivity and 
agency in her current relationship. Unfortunately, she had to endure a relationship in which 
her voice was minimized and her sexual subjectivity was marginalized. It would be easy to 
wag a finger at her then-boyfriend—scold him for taking advantage of their intimate 
relationship and Tegen’s willingness to accommodate his “needs,”—however, maybe one 
should consider the larger, outside forces that can permeate the thinking of a young man and 
a young woman; the illusorily implicit cultural messages about intimacy, sex, and romance 
that pushed and pulled these two young people to behave sexually in a manner that seemed 
appropriate (i.e., He should want lots of sex and she should give in to his needs). Tegen’s 
answer to buffer such ubiquitous influences would be “a class that taught [young people] 
what’s going on with women and dispelled some of the myths about female sexuality.” She 
explained, “It would really help a lot to get people to treat each other a little better.”

*The empowering advantage of “Knowing what’s going on.”* While Tegen provided a 
very personal account of how female sexuality, desire, and pleasure can be stifled and even 
lead to unhealthy intimate interactions, she credited her time in the O2S group as an 
empowering experience:

I’ve definitely have become more aware of women being objectified and I feel like 
there were certain things in my life that I would, you know, people would say to me 
and it would be a joke but now I’m like, “Don’t say that to me,” you know, “Respect 
me.” . . . This class reiterated . . . for me [to have] more respect for my femininity and
being a woman... It taught me to take a little more initiative in my life, in my sexual life.

Although their narratives are more generalized than was Tegen’s, Gabi and Sam shared similar reflections on the utility of openness and honesty within the sexuality education of young women. As Gabi and I discussed the O2S session “All About Down There: Part I” in which the topic of female sexual anatomy—including the clitoris and g-spot—was the focus, our conversation turned toward pleasure and desire. I asked Gabi to share her thoughts about educating young women about their own feelings of sexual desire and capacity for sexual pleasure. Her response is one that any naysayer of genuine sexuality education might want to consider; her comments ironically refute much of the conventional criticisms of sex education and increased sexual knowledge leading to unabashed teenage promiscuity:

I think a lot of the times if women knew that it could be more pleasurable that they might, you know, not necessarily hold off, but, if they did engage in sex, they would do it for different reasons, you know, they would do it because they wanted to enjoy it, and be closer to someone [rather] than... feeling like “to please a guy, [I] have to do it.”... It seems like an obligation a lot of the times. I know I’ve talked to plenty of people who are like, “Well, if I don’t, you know, then something will go wrong [in the relationship].” It just seems like it is too much of an obligation for women where as [for] guys [pause, laughs, voice rises] it is for pleasure. I think... if we educated [young women] a little bit ahead of time they would be more apt to think that, you know, it is worth investing a little bit of thought into, because if they can enjoy it too, they should. They should. (Gabi)
I asked Sam a similar question regarding the appropriateness of including discussions of female sexual desire and pleasure within sexuality education programming for young women. Her response highlights that access to information and obtainment of knowledge can be an empowering and maturing experience for young women:

Getting the information in a controlled environment versus a guy saying, “Hey, guess what?” and then taking advantage of the fact that [the young women] don’t know what’s going on. I think you are more likely to have informed women—at a young age—saying, “Hey, I already know this stuff! I don’t need a guy to take advantage of me ‘cause I already know what’s going on!” And so, I think you would have less-naïve young women getting taken advantage of by older guys [who] know what’s going on, or more experienced guys (Sam).

Similarly, Gabi confided in me that she believed erasing the taboos surrounding female sexuality, desire, and pleasure would allow young women healthier options for safely exploring their sexuality. Specifically, she mentioned the taboo of “self-love”—masturbation and the use of vibrators. Gabi advocated that the topic of female masturbation not be dismissed within sexuality education as the benefits of such behavior can resonate in multiple aspects of one’s life:

Pleasing yourself is all right and, like, that’s how you get to know where things are and what you like. You’ve got to kind of know that before you go into a relationship with somebody and expect the sex to be wonderful, ya know? And I think that would also, like, telling people that it is all right and nothing to be ashamed of, I think that would be good to focus on. . . . I don’t know why things like . . . vibrators and dildos, . . . they’re so taboo right now. . . . I think there is a little taboo that I think if we
started integrating into the conversations a little bit more it wouldn’t be as, ya know, a
shame, like people wouldn’t be ashamed if they were thinking about it or they would
think it would be all right. And I think it is a good outlet/alternative to having sex
when you are younger, . . . ya know. You can explain it as, “Well, at least I’m doing
this! I was trying to find another outlet for [my sexual desire] instead of . . . becoming
sexually active and risking pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, risking
acquiring one of those!”

These narratives suggest that a more sensible and authentic approach to educating
young women about their own sexuality, including the realities of female sexual desire,
would indeed provide them with an empowering advantage as they begin to experience
romantic and sexual relationships. Open and honest discussions between trusted adults and
young women regarding sex and intimacy would go a long way in buffering the dominant,
male-focused sexual messages that young women experience socially and personally.
Perhaps it would be wise to take Sam’s advice regarding tactics for approaching sexuality
education of adolescent young women:

Tell them *straight out* how it is. Not putting everything in sugar coated bubbles of,
“Here is all this information and don’t have sex,” but straight up, like, “You know
what? You are young women,” you know, “You need to make these decisions for
yourself, but guess what, we realize that it’s happening. Here’s the *real* information
that you need.”

*Fearing the “Pencil Down the Hallway”*

Contributing to the perpetuation of the taboo of female sexuality and sexual desire are
negative messages and stereotypes held within our social mindset. These myths and
misconceptions seem to be particularly prevalent within adolescent and young adult social circles. Tegen provides an illustration:

Ya know, “The pencil down a hallway.” Have you ever heard of that? Like, I hate that and I always try to explain to, like if I hear a guy say that, ya know [laughing], “Noooo!” They don’t, they don’t believe you because of what pop culture says. They are like “No, if you have sex so many times, your vagina is gonna get huge!” [spoken in a low, mocking voice]. Ya know, and I’m like [laughing] “Yeah, okay” [sarcastically].

Initially, one might hear one of these quips and excuse it as an immature yet benign comment. Upon closer reflection, a few simple words—whether it be a slang term describing a women in terms of an animal or infant (i.e., chick, bitch, baby) or a rehashed joke about a husband’s desperate attempt to convince his “frigid” wife to engage in sex—can have a powerful impact upon young women’s collective thinking, fostering and engraining convoluted, if not repressive, attitudes regarding female sexuality, desire, and pleasure. In the following narrative, Nettie provides a glimpse of how she once held a repressive and judgmental view of female masturbation and exploring self-pleasuring options: “We just thought of sex toys like, ‘Oh, that’s that shop over there,’ and ‘That’s like looked down upon’ and stuff and you make fun of girls in high school—‘I bet you have a vibrator!'”.

Whether due to adolescent naïveté or peer pressure to conform, many young people share a similar judgmental view of sexual exploration that deviates from “normal” patterns of (hetero)sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing, petting, vaginal intercourse). In the following narrative, Nettie credits the educational opportunities provided by her university and the O2S curriculum group in broadening her perspective on the realities of sexual behaviors:
It’s just that I was never exposed to that stuff in high school so learning about it like this and being more mature about it and learning about it is really interesting and it’s helpful. It’s okay to know and it almost makes it like okay because other people do it, too. And even like learning about other people’s experiences . . . to learn about [what] everyone else is doing, the same thing you are and so you don’t have to feel as bad about whatever it is.

Although Nettie shared how the normalizing of sexual knowledge can lessen anxiety among young women, she, herself, seemed to be working through some lingering feelings of guilt or anxiety regarding certain aspects of human sexuality. She commented that learning about the many aspects of human sexuality “almost makes it okay” to do certain sexual acts and her realization that other people engage in and enjoy those same acts has allowed her to not “feel as bad about” her own actions. I asked Nettie to share with me her opinion regarding why the experience of feeling sexual desire and acting upon it for the sake of pleasure were often difficult topics for young women to discuss. She responded, “It’s a taboo topic, like where you don’t want to talk about it because you’re afraid of like what other people are going to say.”

Apprehension felt regarding what other people might say or think can be powerful forces in a young woman’s life. The question is: From where do these concerns stem? The hint of anxiety I sensed in Nettie’s voice and the fear to which she referred are quite telling of the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure.

To Summarize: We Are Dealing With a Tenacious Taboo

The taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure is a stubborn one. Within the narratives of the participants, I was able to identify many instances in which the young
women recognized their position as enmeshed within a culture that perpetuates the taboo. They discussed how the effects and consequences of the taboo are imbued in hypocrisy and mixed messages. However, I also identified examples within the narratives of the intense hold the taboo has over these young women regardless of their ability to recognize its presence in their lives. These examples usually took the form of contradictory narratives. In the following section, I highlight two such narratives from Gabi and Nettie.

The following narrative from Gabi is in response to a question regarding whether she, at a younger age, could have handled knowing the information shared within the O2S curriculum, particularly the discussions regarding female anatomy, sexual desire, and pleasure. Gabi’s response, illuminating for any adult undecided about the need and appropriateness of such educational programming, was:

Mmmhmm [spoken with an upbeat, high pitched tone]. I think I could have, er, I think I might have benefited from a little bit just ‘cause, you start to question where things, how things feel, you start to—I’m trying to think of the right wording here—but you start to want to know what pleasure feels like and what orgasms are and stuff like that earlier on in high school and stuff like that and so I think if you actually knew about these things girls wouldn’t be so hasty to run out and try things that they don’t know anything about. I personally would have, I think I would benefited from knowing a little bit more about what goes on in my body and how things work.

Gabi makes a striking point regarding the empowering nature of sex-positive knowledge and understanding in delaying adolescent sexual behavior; one that contradicts that oft-touted argument that sexuality education will lead to sexual behavior. In her opinion, possessing accurate information and an understanding of one’s body and desires would help
reduce “hasty” decisions to engage in sexual behaviors. Gabi reiterated this point when she shared with me that she had a younger sister, a 16-year-old junior in high school. I asked her if she thought her sister and other young women around her sister’s age would benefit from knowing the O2S curriculum content. She responded:

I think there is so much that either she hasn’t come to me and asked about or I just know she’s in the dark about a lot of it and I really think she could benefit from it and I know she’s mature enough to handle it. . . . Especially with that age range, I think that would be the perfect time to target it and say, “Here’s what is going on with your body,” so when they do start wanting to experiment, they are going to have the knowledge to back it up instead of going into it blind.

Interestingly, Gabi was conflicted in her attitude toward providing sexual information to young people. In the above accounts, Gabi spoke with a sense of advocacy regarding informing her sister and young women around the age of her sister. However, as we continued to discuss the topics and issues of O2S that were new to her, I asked Gabi what she thought about the absence of discussion about the clitoris in most sexuality education programs for early and late adolescents, including her previous sexuality education. Her response suggests that she feels conflicted in who should know about sexual topics of pleasure:

Well, I think if you tell somebody it is fun, they are going to want to go and try it [laughs] like they try to keep that away from the younger ages purely because, I mean, at least I know in our, like even in our middle school, we were having problems with promiscuity so, like, I think if you describe it as being purely for pleasure and “Yes, it is a fun act!” and stuff like that, kids are going to want to
experience that instead of just learning that it is for reproductive purposes, so, I mean, I had heard from other people that it was fun to engage in but I had never, like that was never talked about as an enjoyment in [sexuality education] class or anything.

Gabi’s explanation reiterates the argument that sexuality education will lead to sexual behavior—the very stance she had previously refuted when discussing how the O2S content would have been helpful at an earlier age. Although Nettie echoes Gabi’s initial sentiment of advocacy when asked to share her opinion regarding educating young women about the positives of sex, her following narrative also reflects a sense of conflict, albeit to a lesser extent than Gabi’s. In response to my question, “Do you think that it’s important or necessary or beneficial that girls and young women understand or at least realize that sex can be pleasurable, . . . to know about the clitoris and their capacity for sexual pleasure when learning about sex and sexuality?” Nettie replied,

Well, [pause] because it’s a part of their body and something they have, I think they deserve to know about and, like, I wouldn’t want something on me that I didn’t know what it was for, ya know. I mean, I can see why they don’t want girls to know about it because maybe that is going to make them go out and try to, I don’t know, test it out, but I think they deserve to know, it’s part of who they are, it’s part of life.

Perhaps these narratives indicate an internal struggle within these young women caused by mixed messages regarding the appropriateness of sexuality education, particularly education regarding female desire and pleasure. The young women do, indeed, demonstrate their belief in the value of open discussion between adolescents and trusted adults regarding the realities of sex and sexuality, including sexual desire and pleasure. However, these beliefs are up against many years of the ingrained sex-negative influences of the taboo. I interpret
the subtle discrepancies illustrated within Gabi and Nettie’s narratives as evidence of the strong arm of the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure over young women’s lives.

Discussion

Evidenced by the findings of the current study, there is much to glean from the lived experiences of these young women as they make sense of what it means to be young and female within a sex-negative culture, one that has not reconciled the realities of adolescent and young adult sexuality with policy and practices surrounding sexuality education. Young women must navigate two taboos as they begin and continue to define themselves as sexual beings: (a) the taboo of sexual awareness and (b) the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure. These taboos identified within the current study are consistent with findings and analyses in previous literature on the topic of female sexuality within adolescence and young adulthood (Fields, 1999, 2005, 2008; Fields & Tolman, 2006; Fine, 1988; Impett & Tolman, 2006; Thompson, 1990, 1995; Tolman, 1994, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2006; Vance, 1984).

The taboo of sexual awareness was illustrated through several subthemes: the young women’s experiences of insufficient “formal” sex education, the expectation and acceptance of naïveté, and limited communication with parents about sex and sexuality. Even within the confines of this taboo, young women find ways to obtain the information they need and want. Some turn to friends, others rely on TV, movies, magazines, and the Internet. Although many young women have little choice but to learn through “trial and error,” Tegen, Nettie, Gabi, and Sam sought better understanding and knowledge through educational opportunities such as the O2S curriculum group. In a society that continues to uphold a taboo that diminishes female sexuality, desire, and pleasure, the curriculum group became the young women’s “safe place” to explore issues of female sexuality. They were particularly interested in
demystifying their own female bodies and exploring society’s gendered realities of sexual expression, desire, and pleasure. In the face of negative messages about female sexuality, derogatory sexual stereotypes, and pervasive misconceptions about sex and gender, knowledge and understanding seemed to be empowering to the young women as they continued to make their way as sexual beings within a tenacious taboo.

If these are the circumstances in which young women find themselves exploring their sexuality, testing their sexual and relational boundaries, and establishing intimate relationships, it seems warranted that sexuality education practice and policy also address these issues. By considering the experiences of young women, more suitable and realistic sexuality education programming will result. By implementing sex-positive education—whether it be within school settings, home, or other—young women can be offered healthy, genuine, and responsible alternatives to the dominant discourse of the current cultural taboos surrounding female sexual awareness, sexuality, desire, and pleasure. The voices of the young women who participated in the O2S curriculum groups during the fall of 2007 and spring of 2008 indicate that O2S is a step in that direction. Their positive experience within the curriculum groups suggest that O2S should be called upon as a guide to content, format, and delivery of sexuality education that is rooted in the realities of the lives of adolescent girls and young women as they are at the initiation of their sexual existence. A proactive and positive approach to sexual socialization of young women would not only facilitate the systematic deconstruction of the negative and confusing taboos that bind young people, but would also foster informed decision making in terms of sexual and relational situations. Ultimately, a new approach to sexuality education would encourage young women to be the subjects of their own lives in all aspects of their being, including the sexual.
Finally, I want to share a narrative from Sam that seems appropriate at the conclusion of this discussion in which I have provided support—via the voices of Gabi, Tegen, Nettie, and Sam—for considering the benefits of viewing the sexuality education and sexual socialization of young women through a completely different, more positive and genuine lens than the consistently negative and anxiety-producing perspective to which many are so rigidly attached. The following narrative solidifies the impact that sexual awareness and confidence in one’s self as a female sexual being can have on the lives of young women. At the end of our final interview, following the final O2S session, I asked Sam to elaborate on a comment she had made in that final session. During that session, when Brandi (the facilitator of Sam’s O2S curriculum group) had asked the group members to reflect upon their experience in the group over the 10 weeks they had met and spent time together discussing the many issues included in the curriculum regarding female sexuality, specifically sexual subjectivity, Sam had stated that the whole purpose was to become the subject of one’s own life and that takes confidence. Sam elaborated on her reflection during our final interview:

I think . . . becoming somebody’s sexual object [happens] because you don’t feel that you have the power to be the subject. You don’t have the confidence in yourself. I think the only way you can become a subject of your own life is to actually truly believe in who you are and what you are doing, and why you are doing it. . . . I mean, that’s solely [confidence in] who you are and what you are doing, you know. Being sexually aware and then being confident in what you know and being confident in the standards that you have set and not always falter and say, “Oh, this guy said that I was beautiful. He doesn’t meet any of my standards. He is a scum bag, but he said that I was beautiful.” So, I mean it takes confidence to say, “Hey, I know what I want
and that’s not what I want. He’s not going to treat me right,” you know, “Instead of being his sexual object, I’m going to stay the subject of my own life.”

Limitations of the Study

The current study provides a glimpse into the lived experience of four late adolescent/young adult women in terms of their sexual socialization and education and the consequences of such on their current sexual being. An important limitation to recognize is the sample size and demographic makeup of the participants. All participants of this study were heterosexual Caucasian young women from, relatively, the same area of the United States—a midwestern state that is known for a fairly homogenous population in terms of ethnic and religious background. Although not explicitly solicited, all four participants referenced “middle class” upbringing and all identified currently or in the past with a Christian religious affiliation. All were attending college at a large public university in the Midwest. It is important for future research to include a broader representation of young women in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, and social location.

An additional limitation of the current study is the number of interviews and observations conducted. Although several subthemes and two main themes emerged from the data, more extensive time in the field and prolonged engagement with the young women would have revealed further support for the themes. Longitudinal follow-up with the young women participants—6- to 12-months post-curriculum completion—would have provided insight into the impact of the O2S curriculum in the lives of the young women as they continued to live amidst the taboos, exploring, reflecting, and adapting their sexual agency and subjectivity. Finally, each taboo, individually, could be more intensely explored and further contextualized, offering richer insight into the ideas presented in this study.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Four young women, Gabi, Tegen, Sam, and Nettie, provided rich insight into the lived experience of contemporary young women, amidst the bittersweet phase of life, at the twilight of adolescence and the promising verge of adulthood. The initial purpose of this research endeavor was to understand the past sexual education experiences of young women and how that education would compare to the experience of a sex-positive approach to sexuality education (such as the O2S curriculum). In addition, I wanted to gain better insight into how young women experience and talk about their own sexuality, particularly considering the social messages and expectations about sex and sexuality to which young women are incessantly exposed within a culture that has adopted a rather schizophrenic approach to the sexual socialization of young people. This study provides a better understanding of the phenomenon of contemporary young female sexual socialization and the realities of sexual(ity) education in this country.

Young women exist as sexual beings and are educated about sex and sexuality within a culture that maintains two significant taboos—one more generalizable to all adolescents and young people, the other harshly directed at females—the taboo of sexual awareness and the taboo of female sexuality, desire, and pleasure. The findings of this study suggest that because of the circumstances of these taboos, young women are caught in multiple sexual double-binds. In her 1983 essay “Oppression,” Marilyn Frye (1983) describes the double-bind as “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation” (p. 2). I argue here that young women experience double-binds with regard to expressions of sexuality and in creating their own genuine sexual
biographies. The socially constructed and perpetuated circumstances that surround girls and young women, the taboos of sexual awareness and female sexuality, desire, and pleasure—whether females are aware of such or not—constrain their lives in subtle and profound ways. For example, the expectation for sexual naïveté and the want and need for sexual knowledge ensnare young women within an absurd catch-22; being naïve might be the socially acceptable option, but it can lead to fear, anxiety, and uninformed decisions that can result in risky sexual activity or the denial of the human experiences of sexual desire and pleasure. On the other hand, being sexually knowledgeable is not socially sanctioned. Although having accurate information regarding sex and an awareness of sexuality-related issues can facilitate a sense of empowerment and sexual agency among young women, possessing such knowledge can be misconstrued by adults and peers as a sign of promiscuity or vulnerability.

The double-binds experienced by adolescent girls and young women can result in a sense of ambivalence (Hyde, 2004) in which they may feel conflicted, anxious, ashamed, and even fearful regarding their natural curiosities and desires. This confusion and guilt is further exacerbated by the negative, and often paternalistically and moralistically punitive, manner with which female sexuality is addressed by parents, teachers, and other adults. Young women hear convoluted messages that disrespectfully portray them as either innocent damsels in distress or out-of-control girls gone wild (see Valenti, 2009). To illustrate this point even further, let us consider some of the implied double-standard messages, often fueled by myths and misconceptions, inundating today’s young women. We can recognize similar conflicting messages embedded within the two taboos identified through the narratives of Gabi, Nettie, Tegen, and Sam (see also Bogle, 2008; Levy, 2005; Valenti):
• Be hot, sexy, and beautiful to get that guy!—Translation: Your worth is based on your physical beauty—your personality and intelligence are not significant—and it had better be used to secure yourself a man, not a woman. (Although, ironically, young women in “girl-on-girl action” has become increasingly commercialized and, therefore, eroticized by heterosexual males and consequentially, has become a new tactic in some heterosexual young women’s repertoires for getting that guy; see Levy, 2005.)

• Embrace your youthful freedom!—Translation: Get it (sex) while you can because they say your sex life will dry up after the age of 30 when you will be out of shape and hormonal from having children and he will either need Viagra or leave you for a younger woman.

• But don’t fall victim!—Translation: You are always vulnerable and must be vigilant in protecting yourself from men who are out to take advantage of you, use you, and/or abuse you. You are your own keeper, boys cannot help themselves, and the rules are different for them than you.

• Don’t be a slut!”—Translation: Do not express your own sexual desires, initiate sex, or take any pleasure in doing so or you will get a bad reputation.

• Don’t have sex without commitment!—Translation: Don’t have sex until you are in a heterosexual marriage or you will be considered easy (see above).

• And if you do have sex before you are married, be sure that he’s enjoying it!—Translation: Your sexual desire, pleasure, and fulfillment are not important.

Blatant messages such as these may not be explicitly communicated to girls and adolescents; however, as the young women in the current study suggest, the implicit rules of
socially acceptable sexual conduct are remarkably obvious to young females. Even if not
directly stated, girls and young women perceive these messages within the sexual education
they receive (or do not receive); by the verbal and non-verbal messages conveyed by their
parents; through the information they seek from friends, media, and popular culture; and
within their own personal experiences within relationships with peers and intimate partners.
The ambiguity between what is said and not said to young women can be excruciatingly
confusing and confining for them. On the one hand, sex is ubiquitously romanticized,
eroticized, and commercialized within popular culture as the thing to do if you are a fun-
loving and thrill-seeking young person. On the other hand, if you are a responsible and
mature young person, sexual expression should be carefully monitored, sexual behaviors
should be restricted, and sexual desires should be ignored. A society that allows the
perpetuation of misleading messages such as these does not allow young women “the
possibility of having full, complicated, active sexual lives that might include desires,
pleasure, violence, agency, missteps, and respect and care from adults in their communities”
(Fields, 2008, p. 64). As in the case of the four women in this study, young women may find
themselves caught in an unfair balancing act between what it means socially to be sexy and
respectable and what it means to acknowledge personal sexual feelings and desires.
Complicating matters even more, young women are provided limited resources and tools
with which to navigate this balancing act.

These conflicting messages can stay with young women into adulthood; the
ambivalence caused by the double-binds experienced in adolescence and young adulthood
can have implications into womanhood. Debra Tolman (2001) pointed out one example of
such ramifications. She posed the following consideration, “For girls, ‘healthy’ sexuality is
often positioned as no sexuality, the avoidance of negative consequences by avoiding it altogether. What are the implications of this ‘no sexuality is good sexuality’ model for adolescent girls’ developing into sexually mature women?” (p. 206). Within our societal taboos of sexual awareness and female sexuality, while it is “still not ‘normal,’ not acceptable . . . considered immoral for girls to believe that they can or should have their own sexual desires and pleasure—and therefore can or should think of questioning its absence” (Tolman, 2001, p. 197)—an adult woman is supposed to question and be concerned that she might have a sexual problem if she does not experience sexual desire and/or pleasure. “In a patriarchal society, women’s sexuality is constructed and positioned not in terms of women’s own desires, needs, satisfaction, health or happiness, but in the service of men’s needs” (Tolman, 2001, p. 198).

The narratives from Gabi, Nettie, Sam, and Tegen, much like the narratives of countless other adolescent girls and young women whose stories reflected a silencing of the discourse of desire (Fine, 1988) or a severe compromising of the discourse of erotics (Allen, 2001, 2005; see also Holland et al., 1998; Phillips, 2000; Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 2002), suggest that the construction of women’s sexuality begins within childhood, is reinforced in adolescence and, for some, definitively cemented in young adulthood. Research has indicated overwhelmingly that young women experience and report “inequities of power in sexual relationships and sexual experiences that are organized around boys’ needs, desires, and interests in conjunction with an absence of a positive conception of female sexuality” (Tolman, 2001, p. 200). While it may sound oxymoronic to speak of female adolescent sexual dysfunction, ultimately, because our society has perpetuated a limiting and male-centered focus on models of sexual health and sexual normalcy, “every single reason for
women’s sexual problems that . . . [can be] articulated . . . can be found in the lives of adolescent girls” (Tolman, 2001, p. 197). An early and positive approach to the sexual socialization of girls and young women, one in which the discourses of desire (Fine, 1988) and erotics (Allen, 2001) are acknowledged and embraced, could have sweeping influence on their healthy and fulfilling sexuality development in womanhood. Further, longitudinal research is necessary to continue to explore the connections between early, positive female sexual socialization, and sex-positive sexuality education with the outcomes for healthy sexual and relational experiences in female adulthood.

*Implications for Sexuality Education Policy and Practice and Social Change*

Nelson and Martin (2004) explained that “people get information about sex from all kinds of places—and almost all of these sources will attract strong criticism from someone” (p. 3). Although I advocate for sex-positive programs such as O2S, one curriculum cannot fill the void caused by years of inadequate sexual education nor can it, alone, cure our society of the tenacious taboos that exist regarding female sexuality. We must get past the idea that education is harmful and embrace that it can be empowering; when it comes to sex and sexuality, we must realize that talking about the good is not bad. In order for change to begin, we must acknowledge that we live in a sex-negative culture, yet with an almost schizophrenic sense (e.g., sex is almost always taboo, quietly venerated by most, and commercialized everywhere), sex is ubiquitous within this culture, much to our own doing. We must put a stop to our binary way of thinking—sex and sexuality do not have to be relegated to moral abomination, nor do they have to be embraced to the point that they are considered trite, reckless, or unsacred. There is a middle ground. Within the security of healthy self-exploration, respectful intimate relationships, and nurturing and accepting family
lives, many young adolescents will be able to appreciate and even celebrate the positive realities of sex and sexuality while also gaining awareness of the possible—not definite—drawbacks associated with sexual behavior. However, for many, this has not been the case. Negative societal messages, unrealistic cultural expectations, and minimal or poor sexual education have resigned many individuals, particularly girls and women, to live with sexual naïveté, misinformation, guilt, fear, and shame. These negative societal messages can debilitate a young woman’s sense of sexual agency and subjectivity and result in a self-imposed shutdown of sexual desire and pleasure, a relinquishing of control and power to the desire and pleasure of others.

Therefore, our society could continue to have tired debates regarding abstinence-only and comprehensive sexuality education, but this will simply perpetuate the continued avoidance of the underlying issues, that is, the tabooed circumstances—particularly demeaning to young women—in which young people experience sexual education. Rather than continue the perpetuation of the current falsely dichotomous “official” discourse of sexual education (abstinence-only vs. comprehensive sexuality education), perhaps it would be wise to consider the “unofficial” discourses of sexuality education that “undermine the ‘authoritative’ point of view” (Nelson & Martin, 2004, pp. 3-4). Including all stakeholders in creating a new discourse on sexuality education seems like a good start. This would include young people—the target audience of sexual education—in addition to parents, educators, and policy makers (Nelson & Martin). Within the current study, I critically analyzed how we include and engage young people in their own sexuality education. Support for funding and implementation of curriculums such as O2S is only one step in a long journey toward larger
social changes regarding how we, as a culture, think about, live with, and educate about sexuality.

In her latest book, *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*, feminist writer Jessica Valenti (2009) argued the following point regarding the time and energy spent by a small (but vocal) minority of adults in promoting negative rhetoric regarding sexuality education and in politicizing young female sexuality:

If the same people who are working themselves into a purity panic over women’s sexuality spent half as much time advocating on behalf of issues that young women really need help with, we might actually be getting somewhere. But instead, we’re stuck talking about what a shame it is that young women are having sex, when the truth is, it isn’t a shame at all. (pp. 189-190)

One way to take on the naysayers and the negatives myths and taboos is to chip away at them, bit by bit (Valenti, 2009). To do so, positive-sexuality education supporters must “sharpen the collective focus on what we value . . . regarding sexuality development” (Russell, 2005b). Research must continue, communities and groups that care about these issues must organize and advocate, concerned citizens must rally politicians to legislate change, from the status-quo “sex ed” to fully articulated comprehensive sexuality education (Fields, 2008). For transformation to occur, for policy makers to wake up to the realities of adolescent sexuality, sexual education and the discrepancies between the two, “the overwhelming majority of parents and the general public who hold pragmatic public-health-oriented moral values about this issue will need to speak more assertively” (Constantine, 2008, p. 325; see also Constantine, Slater, & Carroll, 2007).
Further, research, practice, and policy discussions of the gendered, heterocentric focus of sexual education should continue. Future research should incorporate a more inclusive array of female voices; young women within middle schools and high schools, girls and adolescent females from diverse social, ethnic, racial, and religious positions, and young women identifying within various sexual orientations and gender identities also need to be included in these discussions of moving toward a more positive conceptualization and, hopefully, realization of young female sexuality and sexuality education reform. In addition, boys and young men should be brought into the conversation. Research regarding their experience with positive sexuality education is warranted, in general, and specifically in terms of breaking down stifling gender role stereotypes both within and outside the sphere of sexual activity and sexual expression. Finally, as previously mentioned, in order to measure and assess long-term outcomes associated with exposure to and socialization within sex-positive sexuality education programs as girls and young women, longitudinal research is needed to follow research participants into womanhood. This type of research would better inform understanding of the influence of such positive education on adult women’s continued healthy sexuality development and also healthy relationship-oriented outcomes within, for example, committed intimate relationships and parent–child relationships.

**Closing Reflections**

What if our culture offered a holistic paradigm in which girls and women could find empowerment and health affirmation as sexual beings? What if adults overcame our own discomfort, lack of information, and moral censorship so that we could be forthright about the dynamic and positive aspects of female sexuality? What if girls
and women became the sexual subjects of their own lives rather than the vulnerable objects of other people’s sexual behaviors? (Chittenden, 2005, p. i)

The above questions—posed by the O2S curriculum author within the introduction of curriculum manual—encapsulate the reasons why I chose to undertake this research study. I wanted to contribute to the realization of a world in which female sexuality is considered an inherently positive force within the lives of girls and women (Chittenden). I agree with the author’s conviction that “unrestrained by cultural practice, religious dogma, government restriction, or commercial exploitation, the full and free unfolding of female sexuality could positively and powerfully transform all our lives and the world” (p. i). Perhaps this is an idealistic ambition, but I believe it is an ambition that all of members of this society—regardless of social position; gender, age, sexual orientation, race, or religion—should reflect and act upon. Similar to previous research findings, the current study suggests that we are due for a change in the lens through which we consider, acknowledge, and educate about sexuality, specifically young female sexuality. The socially constructed double-binds that girls and women face can and should be deconstructed so that we all might experience improved relational, sexual, and emotional well-being. The consequences of such a transformation in our societal mind-set could be more far reaching than simply reducing teenage pregnancy rates and STD transmission; young and old, women’s sense of self, agency, and personhood are at stake.
APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMED consent

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
From Object to Subject Curriculum Participant

Title of Study: From Object To Subject: Young Women's Experience of a Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa Sexuality Education Curriculum
Investigator: Erin Chapman

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of young women as they complete the Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa (PPGI) human sexuality curriculum entitled From Object to Subject (O2S). You are being invited to participate in this study because you have volunteered to take part in the From Object to Subject curriculum group. I am conducting this study in partial fulfillment of requirements to complete my doctorate at Iowa State University.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES
If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will be requested for the duration of the From Object to Subject curriculum—approximately 10 weeks. If you are interested in participating in my study, you have the option to participate in one of two ways: (Option 1) Consent to be observed during group sessions, or (Option 2) Consent to be observed during group sessions and to being interviewed.

For the first option, you agree to allow me to sit-in and observe during the group sessions. Your interactions during each curriculum session will be observed but I will not audiotape or record during group sessions. However, I will take notes about the discussions and activities that you participate in with the other group members.

For the second option, you agree to allow me to sit-in and observe during the group sessions as in Option 1 (see above) and, in addition, you will be asked to participate in 3-4 individual interviews and one focus group interview at the end of the 10-week curriculum. You will also be asked to share your portfolio activities throughout the 10-week curriculum during the interview process. Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews will focus on your experiences with the O2S curriculum and your reflections on the topics covered and activities completed during the curriculum groups. Upon completion of the interviews, you will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion with other participants in this study. The focus group will gather information for improving the O2S curriculum as well as information for understanding young women’s experiences as sexual and gendered beings in today’s society. The interview sessions and focus group will be audio-recorded. The audio tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and will be erased immediately following the transcription.
RISKS
Although I do not anticipate that participation in this study will entail risk, you may experience discomfort due to the potentially sensitive nature of the curriculum (i.e., issues regarding sexuality and gender issues). You are free to refrain from answering any interview question at any time.

BENEFITS
If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you, although talking about your experience as a learner within a human sexuality curriculum group may help you further reflect on yourself as a sexual and gendered being in our society. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by providing a greater awareness of the experience of young women as sexual and gendered beings in our current society. Furthermore, the findings from this study will help professionals to understand the experiences of learners who have participated in the O2S curriculum, thereby helping with the further development and improvement of the curriculum.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. If you agree to participate in this study, in the spirit of reciprocity for your time and attention, you will receive a $10 gift card to a local café coffee shop. You will receive the gift card regardless of whether you complete the study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and you may stop answering questions at any time. If you decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your participation in this study is not a requirement for participation in the O2S curriculum.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. Participants will be allowed to choose a pseudonym, which will be used on all documents and data. The principal investigator and supervising major professor will have sole access to all records from this study, which will be kept in password protected computer files. All hard copies of documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The audio tapes will be erased immediately following the transcription – within one month of recording. If the results are presented or published, your identity will remain confidential. Any other
identifying details obtained in the course of interviews or observation will be altered to protect confidentiality

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Erin Chapman: chapman@iastate.edu (515)294-5950 or my major professor, Mary Jane Brotherson: mjbrothe@iastate.edu (515)294-3667

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, jcs1959@iastate.edu, or Diane Ament, Director, Office of Research Assurances (515) 294-3115, dament@iastate.edu.

**********************************************************************************************

PLEASE MARK THE OPTION YOU CHOOSE.

__________ OPTION 1: I consent to being observed during group sessions.

__________ OPTION 2: I consent to being observed during groups sessions and to participating in interviews, including individual interviews, a focus group interview, and sharing portfolio activities with the researcher during individual interviews.

__________ OPTION 3: I do not consent to participating in this study. I do not wish to be a participant in this study.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE
Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) ________________________________________________

__________________________ (Participant’s Signature) ____________________________ (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT
I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

__________________________ (Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent) (Date)
APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

DATE: 1 October 2007
TO: Erin N. Chapman
     1091 LeBaron Hall
FROM: Jan Canny, IRB Administrator
      Office of Research Assurances

IRB ID: 07-407

Approval Date: 26 September 2007
Date for Continuing Review: 18 September 2008

The Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University has reviewed and approved the protocol entitled: "Young Women's Experience of a Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa Sexuality Education Curriculum." The protocol has been assigned the following ID Number: 07-407. Please refer to this number in all correspondence regarding the protocol.

Your study has been approved from 26 September 2007 to 18 September 2008. The continuing review date for this study is no later than 18 September 2008. Federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. three to four weeks) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. All research related activities involving the participants must stop on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Please remember that any changes in the protocol or consent form may not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4566, www.compliance.iastate.edu.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
August 10, 2007

Iowa State University
Institutional Review Board
Ames, Iowa

To Whom It May Concern:

Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa has given Erin Chapman permission to conduct research and observe groups where the Object To Subject curriculum will be facilitated during fall 2007.

The Object to Subject curriculum was created by and is property of Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa. Object To Subject groups will be and have been established by Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa through recruitment of group members. The study sample will be created by these formed groups.

We are excited to be a part of this important research and look forward to working with Erin on this significant project.

Respectfully,

Penny Dickey
Vice President of Health Services & Education
Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa
515-235-0450
pdickey@ppgi.org
August 9, 2007

Iowa State University
Institutional Review Board
Ames, Iowa

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Respectfully,

Julie Hibben, LMSW, CPS
Director of Education & Outreach Services
Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa
515-235-0446
jhibben@ppgi.org

PO Box 4557, Des Moines, IA 50305 | Phone: 515.883.1869 | Fax: 515.284.0149 | www.teenwire.com | www.ppgi.org
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title of Study: *From Object to Subject: Young Women’s Experience of a Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa Sexuality Education Curriculum.*
Interviewer: Erin Chapman  
Date: _________________________  
Informant: ____________________

**Interview Protocol: O2S Participant**

**• Initial Interview: Introduction & Background**

- Tell me about yourself?
- How old are you?
- Who is in your family?
- Where are you from?
- Do you have a religious affiliation?
- What was growing up like for you?
- Share with me one of your favorite childhood memories.
- Growing up, do you think boys and girls were treated differently?
- If so, how were they treated differently?
- How long have you been at University X and what are you studying?
- Do you have any specific career goals?
- Did you have any education on sexuality in your high school, church, community, etc.?
- What excites or interests you most about signing up for this curriculum?

**• Tell me about session…**

- (Please see below for O2S session topics.)

| Session 1. Setting the Stage for Learning |
| Session 2. To Be an Ally: Building Relationships with Women and Girls |
| Session 3. Part One: All About “Down There” |
| Session 4. Part Two: All About “Down There” |
| Session 5. “Nice Girls Don’t…Or Do They?” Acknowledging Female Desire |
| Session 6. Body Love: Loving Your Body through Thick and Thin |
| Session 7. Connecting to Ourselves: Tending to the Body, Mind and Spirit |
| Session 8. Breaking the Rules: Women Who Dare to Live Their Hearts’ Desire |
| Session 9. To Be an Equal: Building Relationships with Men and Boys |
| Session 10. No More Shame: Seeking Sexual Wholeness |
| Session 11. Well, Smart & Safe: Self-care and Prevention |
| Session 12. The Road Ahead: Female Sexuality across the Lifespan |
| Session 13. Closing Celebration: You Made It! |
• During the session’s “Closing Whip”, you commented _________. Please tell me more about your response.

  o (See below for “Closing Whips”—the closing question addressed at the end of each O2S session).

Session 1. One thing I really liked about our first meeting is...
Session 2. One new thing I learned about my relationship with other females is...
Session 3. The best thing I learned today [about female sexual anatomy] is...
Session 4. One reason I will practice abstinence or, if I want to be sexually active, will practice safer sex is...
Session 5. The most important thing I learned today [about acknowledging my own desire] is...
Session 6. The thing I love most about my body is...
Session 7. The best feeling or thought I had today about doing these [yoga] movements was...
Session 8. If I could break one rule about the female gender role, it would be...
Session 9. From now on, the most important quality I will expect in my male friend and/or dating partners will be...
Session 10. The most important thing I learned today [about sexual assault and violence] is...
Session 11. One preventative action I’ll take to protect my reproductive health is...
Session 12. As I remember all I’ve experienced in this group and prepare for our last meeting, I feel...
Session 13. The most important lesson I carry away with me is...

• In this session’s portfolio activity, you wrote/said/showed _______. Please tell me more about your portfolio entry.

  o (See below for examples of Portfolio activities)

Examples of Portfolio activities include:

  o Worksheets handed out and completed during the curriculum session
  o An interview assignment to interview a male family member or friend
  o An interview assignment to interview a female family member or friend
  o A media assignment to collect images (from newspapers, magazines, etc.) of women in our society.
APPENDIX D: O2S GROUP SESSIONS AND GOALS

The following is a list of the O2S curriculum group session topics and goals, as stated within the curriculum facilitators’ manual (Chittenden, 2005). Note that this is an exhaustive list of the 13 sessions included within the original curriculum format. In order to accommodate the academic semester schedules, group facilitators worked with the author of the curriculum to determine which sessions to cut, edit, and combine for the condensed 8- or 10-week versions of the curriculum program.

Session 1. Setting the Stage for Learning:

The goal for this first session is to set the stage for the learning process by creating an initial sense of comfort, trust and familiarity with the group and with the program philosophy.

Session 2. To Be an Ally: Building Relationships with Women and Girls

The goal of this session is to foster a positive female identity in each girl through examining and honoring healthy, noncompetitive, allied relationships between and among females.

Session 3. Part One: All About “Down There”

The goal of this session is to provide factual information on the natural capacity of the female body for sexual pleasure while affirming the natural diversity in size and shape of vulvas.

Session 4. Part Two: All About “Down There”

The goal of this session is to provide factual information about the maturing sexual organs of the adolescent female body, affirming the life-enhancing aspects of safe sexual pleasure across the lifespan.
Session 5. “Nice Girls Don’t...Or Do They?” Acknowledging Female Desire

The goal of this session is to affirm sexual desire as a natural experience of teenage girls and to empower girls to differentiate between their desire for attention or love and their desire for sex.

Session 6. Body Love: Loving Your Body through Thick and Thin

The goal of this session is to affirm the unique beauty of each girl while enhancing her ability to love her body and resist the unrealistic standards that saturate our mainstream American media.

Session 7. Connecting to Ourselves: Tending to the Body, Mind and Spirit

The goal of this session is to introduce participants to a body-mind-spirit practice that can provide a lifelong opportunity for personal insight into one’s physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Session 8. Breaking the Rules: Women Who Dare to Live Their Hearts’ Desire

The goal of this session is to affirm girls’ abilities to choose which aspects of the female gender role, including expression of sexual orientation, most authentically convey their true desires while providing resistance strategies for those who choose non-traditional paths.

Session 9. To Be an Equal: Building Relationships with Men and Boys

The goal of this session is promote the values of mutuality and equality in male-female relationships and build girls’ abilities to assess the behaviors of male companions who do not have girls’ best interest at heart.
Session 10. *No More Shame: Seeking Sexual Wholeness*

The goal of this session is to increase girls’ knowledge about sexual exploitation of girls and women in families, intimate relationships, and communities while encouraging survivors of abuse to seek healing and wholeness.

Session 11. *Well, Smart & Safe: Self-care and Prevention*

The goal of this session is to instill the value for holistic self-care and prevention as essential practices of sexually responsive woman.

Session 12. *The Road Ahead: Female Sexuality across the Lifespan*

The goal of this session is encourage each girl to envision her ideal future as an adult woman and then identify the knowledge, behaviors, and choices that will create this future.

Session 13. *Closing Celebration: You Made It!*

The goal of this session is to celebrate the girls’ learning and commitment to this series and to affirm each girls’ capacity for sexual subjectivity as she launches herself into the world.
APPENDIX E: SAMPLE INTERVIEW SUMMARY AND METHODOLOGICAL LOG

The following transcript is an example of my audio taped, spoken journaling in which I reflected upon the first individual interview that I conducted. In addition, I provide comments regarding the fifth session of the University A curriculum group. As a beginning researcher, I also reflected upon the research experience, including the challenges and the joys (see page margin for descriptors of the journal entry).

My Post-interview Comments & Post-Session Comments
University A: Session 5
Nettie: Interview #1

I’m driving home from University A…

Had my first interview with Nettie tonight. We met before the fifth session so we discussed the first four sessions.

Nettie is fairly quiet during the session, she does speak up though, she seems very insightful, like she is contemplating things during the sessions. I thought the interview went well. She definitely had a lot to talk about and wasn’t shy about any of the questions. She seemed very open to wanting to talk about stuff. She said she feels like she might even want to pursue a career in this area—sexuality education or at least talking to women about sex, sexuality, sexual health—so that might be part of it, why she is interested in being a study participant. She said she was a tomboy growing up so I guess I could relate to that. She might be one of those that doesn’t come across as overly friendly if you don’t know her, she usually has a fairly somber appearance as far as not, maybe smiling so much, but once you get to talk to her or get to know her, she is pretty cool, pretty down to earth. I guess I wouldn’t put her in the category of being a “girlie-girl,” um, long, blonde/sandy blonde hair, plain in dress—jeans, t-shirt, tennis shoes, jacket, not a ton of make-up. She grew up near Midwestern City, which we talked about that because I know the town she grew up in. So hopefully, she seemed to feel pretty comfortable during the interview—I don’t think there was anything that we talked about that was awkward to her. I don’t know if the conversation or the interview was too conversational. I felt like I interjected some stuff but I also felt like I wanted to keep it conversational. But, yeah, I was happy with how the interview went. It seemed to be pretty good, there wasn’t a lot of lulls in the interview and we kept the pace up fairly well, it went by pretty quick. I think we talked for probably 45-50 minutes. So, yeah, I don’t if I asked, got at
questions of her experience going through the curriculum. I hope I did!
I guess if I could pull out themes from the interview, it would be things such as: she definitely thought that this was beneficial to her, she’s learning a lot. She said she wishes she could have gotten this information at an early age. That was definitely a theme. There were some comparisons between her and what she would call, like, you know “your typical girl her age” or the “typical young woman her age,” and how she doesn’t always agree with some of the lifestyle choices that girls her age make. She talked about being a Christian, talked about growing up in the Church but she didn’t come across as being overly religious or overly wrapped up in religion. Maybe a little conservative but I wouldn’t say conservative in a religious sort of way, just conservative as far as, you know, quiet, not really needing to get into other people’s business, um, just more concerned with herself and her family and her boyfriend….What other themes?
She said she enjoyed the anatomy review, especially when they—in the last session they talked about STDs and how to protect themselves from STDs—and she said, that she had heard about all those, you know, types of contraception and types of safer sex “tools” but she was glad to finally see how they worked with the models that Dawn brought in and how she demonstrated those. So yeah, I definitely think she understands the concept of object and subject even though that was something that she said she had really never thought about or that she didn’t really understand what that meant when we first brought it up in the first session but she definitely, I think she definitely “got it.” Even though she is quiet in the sessions, I definitely think she is paying attention and taking it all in.
As far as the session tonight, tonight was session five. I was there for 1 through three and missed session four and then tonight was session five. Tonight’s session was the “Zoe and Aleica’s Stories” session which I think Rhonda thinks, or Rhonda set this session up to be the pinnacle session and I thought it went really well. We had four people there, one girl, one student that hasn’t been able to come very often because she has, she works on Thursdays and then the other three are fairly regular. And the conversation went well. I thought that they were a little bit more talkative tonight which was a good sign. Again, I think Dawn could allow more time for comments. Sometimes she asks a question and she doesn’t really give them a chance to respond before she jumps back in and I don’t think that that is, I just think it is kind of “not
wanting to have silence” and that is just part of learning how to facilitate groups like this. Some interesting comments that were made, the topic was obviously female desire and the difference between desiring sex and desiring love, sexual desire vs. desire for attention or affection and I thought it was interesting that Nettie, who I interviewed tonight, said at the end of the session that it was “Neat to talk about female desire because it is not a topic that is not discussed very often” so, I thought that was a good sign. I definitely think that the, I think, I guess this is just my own opinion—especially after talking to Nettie tonight—I definitely think that the young women are getting something out of these sessions, I’ll be interested to see what I find out in my next set of interviews. But yeah, even though they might not have a chance to comment as often as, maybe, I think they should be able to, I definitely think that the conversation picked up at the end and I definitely think they are getting something out of it. One thing though, one theme that I definitely think we need to come back to or that Dawn reiterated tonight which was good, is kind of, just how women tend to not be allies with each other. With the “Zoe and Alicia” story, that was kind of brought up in the fact that Zoe carried a condom, Alecia didn’t and then we discussed what the stereotypes tend to be for women or girls who do carry condoms, you know, we were thinking back to high school, those were the “slutty” girls or the girls who were “sexually active” (sarcastically negative) and we kind of talked behind their backs about it but yet we knew other people were sexually active and at least those girls were willing to protect themselves. So, yeah, there are definitely still some tensions that the girls in the group point out about, you know, relationships between women and or relationships between girls and how we do still need to be an ally versus nit-picking or being catty with each other, so . . . . As for my methodological log, I guess my biggest frustration has just been the drive and tonight wasn’t as bad because at least I had an individual interview so I felt like I got something accomplished but, as far as driving four hours to be there for an hour, it just kind of seemed fruitless (yawning), but I understand it is the long term and not the short term. And the money situation isn’t exactly helping either as far as not having any and having to spend $40 every time I drive to University B just on gas. I must say that I don’t exactly know what I am looking for when I am in the group and I’m doing observation. I guess I try to write down comments that the participants make, but as far
as the general mood, it seems to be fairly consistent. There are a few people that do tend to talk a lot, but unfortunately for me, a couple of those students are not ones that want to be interviewed which kind of sucks, but what do ya do? Sometimes I can’t tell if they are anxious to get out of there because it is at night or if it is just Dawn doesn’t give them the opportunity to think about things and respond before she jumps in. She kind of doesn’t like the silence, so therefore, she asks a question and then they don’t have time to respond before she responds for them. So, I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I want to interject but I don’t, although tonight I did make a couple of comments—more so than I have in past sessions. As far as where I sit, the room is fairly small and kind of arranged in a circle. And I’ve tried different places as far as sitting, I’ve tried to kind of be nonchalant and sit off to the side but that doesn’t really work. Tonight I was just kind of part of the circle. I think now, the participants are comfortable with me there; they know I’m taking notes so it is not quite as awkward as it was maybe the first or second night. So, yeah, I definitely think the comfort-level has increased since the beginning—both with me and with each other, the participants themselves. And some of them are not afraid to share stories or, ya know, bits of information about themselves regarding their experiences and friends they have or cousins or sisters or things they’ve read, etc. What am I looking for? Ahhh. I guess, I’m busy writing most of the time, I’m trying to write down comments. I guess I try to pick up on the mood of the group, but the mood hasn’t exactly been, it’s not a bad mood usually, it’s not necessarily, I mean I thought tonight was a maybe a little bit more talkative, the mood was more talkative or more open tonight, but again, they are fairly quiet.

I think from what I can tell, the age range is anywhere between 19 and probably 22, 23. We have a couple of participants that are not actually students, one woman is nurse at the university hospital. As a far as demographic, all are white. Just, for the most part, quote-unquote “typical” Midwest college students, except for the ones that are not in college anymore, but they still would fit the stereotype of that, I guess. I think for the most part, the ones that have consistently shown up seem fairly comfortable in their skin. I haven’t gotten the vibe for any real awkward “awkwardness” regarding the topic. I don’t know if that is because they kind of knew what to expect or if it is because they are already in a human sexuality class—that is how they found out about this group. But yeah, no huge shock affect, I don’t think. What else?
As far as me as a researcher, I guess I’m just trying to figure it out as I go. I’m probably not as organized as I should be. One of the things that I figured out quickly with driving to University B is that it is a little bit more challenging to figure out when to do the interviews, hold the individual interviews because I really don’t want to make more than one trip a week to University B. So, that has kind of been a concern, but it worked out tonight, I just don’t know if it will always work out for Thursday nights, obviously because of my teaching schedule. But the first night I realized that I really didn’t have a way for to contact them so I just quickly had them jot down their email addresses and told them that that would be how I would contact them about setting up interviews. That worked for tonight’s interview with Nettie, as far as the other ones, we’ll see. I originally had five people agree to be interviewed but only two of those participants have consistently shown up for the sessions, Nettie being one of them. We’ll see, I might end up having only two people that I can get interviews from.

As far as how the interview went, I mean, I went over my notes, and I had some introductory questions about, like, “Tell me your background, etc. etc.” but I did pull questions that I had jotted down during the sessions to ask and had Nettie reflect on the session topics. For the most part, the flow of the interview was pretty good. She kind of talked about or touched on some topics that I had prepared questions about and was going to ask about later in the interview so, it kind of gelled together pretty well. Again, I don’t know if I talked too much during the interview. I don’t know whose call that is, but I definitely wanted it to be more conversational. She talked the most but I interjected either with sharing my own experience or, ya know, I guess, further questions. Is it emergent? Am I being bias? Ya know, I don’t know. I guess I was just talking to another young woman about issues that I think are important for women and that have been discussed in the curriculum so, if that is not right as a researcher, then I guess I’m guilty of it. I don’t know. Do I like what I’m doing (laughs)? When I’m on the road for four hours, I don’t. When I was in the interview, I did enjoy myself, I really liked talking to Nettie about the curriculum and I thought the session went really well tonight so I guess when I’m there, I like it. It is just that this traveling can be a pain. I really hope that the University B group gets formed and it pans out.

I definitely think that this curriculum would be good for this age group and even, ya know, older high-school aged young
women. As Dawn and I have talked, some of the things might need to be changed for an older audience simply because they are just not things college-aged young women would want to do. For example, 2 weeks ago the portfolio activity was to do “arts and crafts” and to have them make their own arts and crafts project regarding positive images of the vulva and Dawn gave them the option to do that but nobody did, so I don’t think that would be an activity that Rhonda will want to keep in if it is going to be geared toward a college-aged population. The time length: Rhonda always has 90-minutes for each session but we’ve been fairly consistently getting out within an hour. Part of that might be the fact that Dawn is quick to answer her own questions, not in a bad way, it is just not having experience in facilitating the group. But I think it could be lengthened and there could be more group discussion, um, I don’t know if Dawn senses that they want to get out of there because it is at the end of their day or if she is nervous about the silence, but I don’t think she is giving them enough time to talk or to think about something before they can answer. But again, I guess, am a critiquing the facilitator? That is not my role here, but that is just an observation I have, probably because of my own teaching experience.

Me as the research tool? My preparation probably isn’t that great. Like today, I went over the interview questions probably two hours before I actually did the interview. I don’t have a copy of the curriculum with me but I chose to not have it at the interviews because I don’t want that to dictate the flow of the conversation. I guess I want it to go where the participant wants it to go. Although, there are questions that I am trying to get at. I say that I don’t know if I got at Nettie’s “experience” tonight, but I also didn’t want to “dig” and make her uncomfortable. Was I digging? I don’t know. (Pause). She definitely volunteered that she enjoyed the curriculum and that she was getting a lot out of it before I even asked, so I guess that is a signal that, you know, this is useful information, this is beneficial to her, and she definitely thought it would be beneficial to other women her age.

Is there anything else I can think of? I guess I just look forward to more interviews. I look forward to, hopefully, next semester I can do more individual interviews per participant because I won’t have the drive-time. I don’t know. Am I doing feminist interviewing? I think I am. What exactly is feminist interviewing? I definitely let her know that she didn’t have to answer any questions she was not comfortable with. I started off telling her that if she at anytime...
had questions of me to definitely ask. I gave her a rundown at
the beginning of the interview about the topics I wanted to
during our interview and the things that I would be asking
questions about. And then after the interview was over, you
know, we talked more and I guess I tried to show an interest—
well, I mean, I was interested but I definitely tried to convey
that to her. And I thanked her and I explained again why I was
doing this study and why these interviews were important to
me. Um, I guess, (pause) I tried to be encouraging of her and,
in the fact that she said she might maybe want to go down this
career path. Um, pick up a sexuality studies certificate. I
definitely encouraged that. So, I mean, am I doing feminist
research? Am I doing feminist methodology? Am I doing
feminist interviewing? (Pause) I think so. That’s tough. I guess
maybe I should go back and “review” but at the same time, I
am who I am and I’m doing it the best I can. I hope and think
there wasn’t a huge power differential between us tonight
during the interview. I think I made her feel comfortable. I
think I made it a non-threatening environment. (Pause) I don’t
know. I guess, we’ll see.
APPENDIX F: SAMPLE CODING

reckless sex, but I know at the beginning of ever semester, you know, they put condoms in everyone’s mailbox and just with a little note saying “we are looking out for you guys, if anything happens, just keep this in your purse at all times and if a situation arises, then take care of yourself” so, um, I don’t think they put as much thought into it, but I know we are always prepared. Like, I think that that is just a given when you are intimate with a guy at this point, it is just an unspoken rule that you have to protect yourself, yes.

E: good, um, do you think there was a difference in, um, okay so Zoe was obviously prepared in that she had thought about it but do you think there was also a difference in how she handled, just the fact, that she had thought to herself, “I like French kissing, I like being close to somebody” but then she set those boundaries... That was kind of the point of this exercise, to demonstrate that Zoe had thought about her own desires, meaning what she liked to do sexually, and Alicia, almost like she was...

G: think more about what he wanted

E: yeah! What he wanted! And, again, I’m kind of leading you, just to kind of fill you in on the session, but do you think in general, young women think about their own desires or do you think they tend to focus on their partner’s desires?

G: I think we tend to focus on our partner’s desires. Um, just in general, I mean you read any “women’s” magazine and it focuses, like, one of the top things, is “Ten Sex Moves He’ll Love” or “Ten Sex Moves that will Blow His Mind” and it doesn’t ever, I mean occasionally you’ll see an article, ya know, “What Can You Do to Enjoy Sex Yourself?” but I think generally it’s about pleasing your partner and keeping him around, when not enough attention is focused on keeping you around, but, I know personally, there was definitely a period where—and I’m, I’ve been in a pretty long, steady
relationship—and there was definitely a period where I was like “Oh, crap, does he want more, is he gonna, ya know, like what should I be doing?” And I don’t think until just recently, like (pause) I’ve actually started thinking about what I want and how comfortable I am and if I’m enjoying things cuz if I’m not enjoying it, then it is not exactly worth it, but, I think sometimes you kind of need to be, you either need to be very, very confident to enjoy or you need to start getting comfortable with who you are with, because I think if you are not comfortable, it just seems awkward and you’re like “oh, well, I have to make this other person happy” so.

E: Okay, um, you and your boyfriend, you’ve been together since you were in high school, right?

G: Mmmhmm, yes we’ve been together for three and a half years.

E: And he’s a year older than you?

G: Yes. Which was another worry in the fact that he was little older and he might want more.

E: Um, have you had conversations about—um, you said that you had kind of set your boundaries, so, you’ve talked—you’ve had those conversations, how did those go? And you don’t have to go into all the details (laughs).

G: Yes, yeah, (laughs) yes, I don’t care, I can tell you, I’m pretty open.

E: Like what brought on that conversation?

G: Um, towards the end of my—and if this gets too detailed, let me know—towards the end of my senior year we just had sex once and then, um, this is, it was the summer of my junior year and then the summer of my junior year, err, I mean senior year, sorry, like just going into my senior year, and he was coming up here (ISU). And we both really enjoyed it but we wanted to kind of, ya know, with him being away and me
other jobs that might be better to actually get some experience. I
was a CA for four semesters. So I have had kind of a good
experience and was kind of ready to move on. I'm a junior.

E: Um, when, as a community advisor did you, what kind of, and
this is again your opinion on what you saw, so, what, um, and even
thinking about when you were like back in high school with your
friends or people in your high school, what did you think the
perceptions were around sex and sexuality for either the students
that were in your community or during high school, or just
thinking back.

S: I think that actually one of the subjects, like it changes with the
point of view and like who's talking about it, because listening to,
say, the girls talk about it in high school or anything like that, it
was, um, depending on the group of girls for that matter, the girls
that liked to go out and party was talking about it in like the wild,
"I had so much fun this weekend. I hooked up with this guy. It
was great." You know, and then the girls that were a little bit
more, the soft spoken girls, you know like, the boyfriend and you
kind of knew it was going on, but it was never a "Guess what we
do," and the guys, I mean, (pause)—they're guys (emphasis by
Sam), you know. They say all sorts of crazy things from one end
to the other. Um, and in college you know it actually kind of still
stays that way. There's those groups of girls who, I mean I work
in all girls' dorms, so for three of the four semesters, so I mostly
got that side. There were certain girls that, um, you know they
kind of hold it close to them. It is something that is important to
them, and then there's girls that don't, at all. Um, it kind of went
from girls who don't hold it, you know, important—they go out
and party and have been with multiple guys. There's girls that
don't find it important, like, something happens, so their way of
like, instead of going out and drinking alcohol or doing drugs, they
go have sex with guys. So, I don't know, it's really still one of
those things that is very intrinsic to that person versus, like, one
specific "this is how sex is viewed throughout society."

E: Did you ever have to address anything, as a community
advisor?

S: I actually had one girl who (long pause) she, I'm not sure what
happened, I want to say that maybe it was her dad died, or
something like that. It was something that happened, it was bad,
and um, (long pause) I'm not sure if it was her or her roommate
that actually came to me. I want to say that it was her and—no, it
wasn't her. It was the girl across the hall told me that they found
her in the bathroom and she had a lot of alcohol and she was
apparently at an orgy party earlier because she was very upset.
S: I would have been able to handle it, but I was ultra-naive growing up. I mean, I was the kid that didn’t drink alcohol until like, I’m 21 now, so it’s legal, but I didn’t do it until I was, you know, second year of college, at the end of my first year of college. And yet, I’ve never really been crazy with it. Never really went to parties, never, you know, dated around, did crazy stuff in high school. So being kind of naive, you know, I could have handled it, but I would have had a different perspective on it. But the girls, but then the other girls that do that stuff all the time, I think it would be good for them. Um, but at the same time the whole confidentiality part, at that age in high school when there is still a lot of cattiness. I think it would be really difficult to have to be like, uh, something outside of school. It’s not like, “Here’s the class you have to take in school,” because then not everybody wants to participate. And it’s the people that don’t want to participate that you have problems with when it comes to that kind of stuff. And so, I think it would be a good program, but I don’t know how exactly in a high school it would be implemented. Unless it was like, “Hey, there’s this group and we are going to meet right after school, or right before school and not conflict with anything,” you know, “it would be good for you.” And just kind of see if it would work.

E: And the author did originally, that was the plan was to not have it associated with school because I think she was kind of thinking the same thing that you don’t want to bring a group of 10-15 young women together, it’s like forcing them to take part in this together because it wouldn’t necessarily be a safe environment for some of those young women. But it was going to be, try to be set up as something like, “Hey, this is a before school thing, or after school thing, this is through a youth group, or through a...”

S: I would think that it would be good through a youth group and things like that where’s it’s a certain communities of people that are, already feel a little kindred with each other. Um, because it’s easier to open up, rather than just being, “we’re all just females. Let’s talk about some stuff.”

E: Yah.

S: I also think that at that age that it’s kind of an uncomfortable subject because all you hear about it is STDs. “sex is bad,” you know, or pressure from the guys—don’t give in, don’t drink alcohol and have sex. That’s really, I mean, they hear the same thing over and over. Basically, they are getting beat in the head with it. So, you know, I think it’s still a scary subject for them versus in college, kind of that time to explore yourself I guess.

Comment (ENCL7): Naivety came up in GBH interview as well. “Doing naïve in high school” seems to be equated with not having sexual experiences, and/or not drinking and partying, and not having “understanding” of all that, particularly not having an understanding of sex, sexual behavior, or sexual experiences.
APPENDIX G: SAMPLE CODING—EXPANDED BLUE CODES, MEMO-WRITING OUTLINES, AND THEME INTERPRETATION DIAGRAMS

Expanded Blue Codes for Gabi – Interview #1

**Background—Family/Peers (+/-):** Refers to background info of Gabi, family-related or peer-related, positive or negative.

**Communication with Family:** This code simply refers to examples or family communication in Gabi’s life, whether during her childhood and early teenage years or currently, particularly family communication regarding sex, sexuality, etc.

**Agency—Non-sexual(NS)/Gender-related(G):** Initially, this code was reflective of examples of Gabi demonstrating agency in her life, whether as a child/teen or currently. I further defined it to reflect non-sexual agency (simply showing confidence or assuredness in herself, her decisions not related to sex or sexuality) and gender-related agency (showing an agency in gendered activities/behaviors… not wanting to have to do the “Powder Puff Derby” but wanting to do the “Grand Prix”).

**Perceptions of Gendered Experiences—Blind/Aware/Sex Knowledge (♂vs♀) /Motives for sex (♂vs♀):** This code represents instances in which Gabi either experienced (Aware) a gendered experience (see Powder Puff Derby example above) or discussed such experiences but did not identify them as such (Blind) (high school sports example). Also, this code represents examples of gendered experiences in which Gabi identifies differences between Male/Female experiences/knowledge/motives for sex, etc.

**Prior Sex Ed—Formal & Informal/The Sex Talk/ Focus on Reproduction:** This code and subcodes refer to any instance in which Gabi discusses prior sex ed (prior to O2S). This could be references to Formal sex ed in school, Informal sex or “The Sex Talk” with parents, etc. (although this could also overlap with “Other Sources of Sex Info”—a later code). Also, Gabi’s discussion of Prior Sex Ed highlights that most sex ed focuses on Reproduction/Pregnancy prevention.

**Naïve:** This code emerges often throughout Gabi’s two interviews. She describes herself (verbatim) as being naïve in her earlier adolescence regarding “all things sexual.” This code, I think, will lead to a bigger theme… linking this self-description of naivety with the Double Bind (knowledgeable vs. naïve, virgin/whore dichotomy). Naivety seems to be acceptable for young women, although it might be dangerous and cause stress/anxiety later on and, perhaps, lead to unsafe choices/behaviors, loss of or lack of subjectivity and agency.

**Other Sources of Sex Info:** refers to discussion of sex information coming from “other sources” such as magazines, TV, movies, friends, etc. “Other” than parents or school.

**Why O2S?:** This simply refers to why Gabi got involved with the O2S curriculum group and what she is gaining or learning from the curriculum content and group sessions.

**Confusion:** This code refers to instances in which Gabi seemed to exhibit confusion regarding the terms “sex” and “sexuality” or discussed confusion over certain sexual topics, such as the use of slang terms when she was in high school.
Memo-Writing about Blue Codes

OTHER SOURCES: The lack of accurate and comprehensive sex education results in young people turning toward other sources of (mis)information. These sources include magazines (e.g., Cosmo, Maxim), internet, friends, peers, media. These source do not necessarily provide accurate, relevant, or complete information.

CONFUSION: A pattern that I see consistently in the data (for the most part) and in my experience as a sexuality educator (heck, even talking with family and friends!) is an apparent confusion regarding what is “sexuality” and how it is different from sex, sexual behavior, and/or sexual orientation.

(1) This confusion could, perhaps, cause much confusion and guilt for young people
a. If they don’t understand that “sex” is not necessarily the same thing as “sexuality,” but yet think of “sex” as bad, they would then think that any talk of sex OR sexuality is bad. If sex is bad in their minds and sex and sexuality are one-in-the-same, then sexuality is bad as well.

b. Sexuality would include feelings, curiosities, physiological reactions and all of these might, then, be equated with “bad” as well, causing guilt and confusion for a completely human “thing”—natural thoughts, feelings, reactions, etc.

TABOO: The taboo of talking about sex/sexuality as a young person—whether it be with peers, partners, adults, parents, teachers—is a barrier to knowledge and understanding (what I am defining as “knowledge naivety”) and this naivety, then, can have multiple possible outcomes.

(1) The young person will remain knowledgeably naïve and relatively experientially naïve until late adolescence/young adulthood
a. Any information/understanding will come from “other sources” that are often inaccurate/not thorough/not comprehensive and can be bias/negative, use scare tactics, rely on myths and stereotypes. These “other sources” might include:
   i. Peers, friends, media (TV, movies, music, magazines, internet), personal experiences (not always safe experiences), incidental sexual education through school/churches/youth groups, or incidental conversations with parents/adults

(2) The young person will remain knowledgeably naïve yet will engage in sexual behaviors (become “experienced”) during adolescence/young adulthood
a. These experiences might be positive or negative. Negative experiences might include coercion, force, or ones in which protection from STD transmission and/or unplanned pregnancy (pregnancy prevention) is not utilized. In the majority of these experiences (mainly referring to heterosexual couples), the young woman’s desires/needs/pleasure is not a concern or is not central to the act (compared to that of the male),
therefore, the lack of pleasure results in a negative, or at the very least, a neutral experience for the young woman.

(3) What is the Taboo??

   i. Permission to talk to others about sex is not apparent, acknowledged, silenced explicitly and implicitly.

b. Am I normal?
   i. Young people have anxieties about their bodies, their needs, their desires, their thoughts because we don’t normalizing sexual talk and discussion of experiences, etc.

c. De-mystifying the female body
   i. For many young women (for many WOMEN,) their own bodies are a mystery, again, because we don’t discuss them.
   ii. Example: that women have three openings—the urethral, the vaginal, and the anus.
   iii. Example: the taboo regarding menstruation (see Schooler et al., 2005)
   iv. Example: the lack of awareness of what the clitoris is and what it’s sole function is. Also, see urethral sponge discussion in O2S.
   v. How hormonal contraception works with the female body.

d. talk about staying healthy “down there” and staying healthy mind/body/soul (“using protection/protecting oneself)
   i. Protection seems “negative”
   ii. This can/should include maintaining health rather than “protection”
   iii. Empowerment regarding knowing and loving one’s body and the health of that body (“My Body is a Temple” stuff!)

e. Talking about female desire/pleasure
   i. It is okay to say the word “clitoris!”
   ii. It is okay to say the word “orgasm!”—women have them, too!
Theme Interpretation:
“Permission to Discuss All that is Taboo”

“The Female body is Cool, but Weird. We Never Talk about all that is ‘down there’”

“Discussing issues such as STDs might take away the stigma of testing”

“It is sad that I had to wait until college to learn about this”

“Learning about what others are doing makes it “ok” to learn about myself”

“If we were allowed to talk about these things as teens, maybe we would learn to respect our bodies”

This theme is a work-in-progress. I see much overlap with other themes and subthemes (ex: a safe place, communication, lack of education/information). The subthemes, for the most part, are quotes (or my paraphrasing of the quote) from the transcripts—terms/phrases used by participants. I need to continue to tease apart/flesh out this theme and subthemes; perhaps there is so much overlap with other major themes that this one should be blended with others.

The term “taboo” kept popping up in the transcripts or in my head while reading the transcripts. It seemed as though the participants were referring to the topics discussed in O2S as past topics that were “taboo.” They seemed to be saying that the group gave them permission to discuss these taboo topics. Their comments implied that because these topics tend to be taboo as we grow up (i.e., we receive messages that it is not appropriate to do certain things, talk about certain things, feel certain feelings), we either get false information or no information until we hit a certain age (college, for many). Perhaps if these issues were discussed, the negative connotations would not exist and some of the stigma attached to sex would go away—some of the unhealthy behaviors, beliefs, misconceptions, myths, would be remedied. Permission to discuss these so-called “taboo” topics would give teens/young people the chance to decide for themselves how they want to treat their own bodies, how they want others to treat them, and how they want to treat others in return.

Terms/phrases connected to this theme include: taboo, permission, “I never got ‘the talk’, “I never learned about that in school”, maturity, learning to respect self, knowledge is power, stigma (of knowledge), female desire.

On a side note, this past semester (fall 2008) I had a student ask/state: “We get all these messages growing up that we shouldn’t do this, think this, feel this, etc. but then we get to college (or a certain age) and we are supposed to know it all, like it, love it, want it because it is cool and hip and expected…” (check CLASS ‘first day’ quotes)
Theme Interpretation:
“A Safe Place to Talk”

This theme is the first theme that has really “stuck out” to me. The subthemes are a combination of my own interpretations and some terms/phrases used by participants. All of the participants mentioned that they liked being able to have a place/space/group to discuss issues related to sex/sexuality/etc. Words/phrases related to this theme (from the transcripts) include comfortable, relaxed, casual, not judgmental, safe, mature.

The diagram depicts examples of experiences that keep young women from being able to have “a safe place” to discuss such issues. The From Object to Subject group was their safe place.
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