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*This chapter introduces and defines the notion of positive adolescent female sexuality and summarizes the diverse perspectives that each of the chapters in this volume takes regarding this topic.*

## Introduction: In Search of Good Sexual-Developmental Pathways for Adolescent Girls

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Historically, research has portrayed adolescent sexuality as a source of problems and risks rather than an integral aspect of human development. This is particularly true with regard to research on adolescent girls, traditionally cast as sexual gatekeepers whose primary task is to fend off boys' sexual overtures and set aside their own sexual desires in order to reduce their risks for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Michelle Fine powerfully identified and critiqued this cultural framework over fifteen years ago in a seminal review article on school-based sex education discourses (Fine, 1988). By spotlighting the multiple ways in which sociocultural forces function to silence girls' sexual voices and stunt their sexual agency, Fine's analysis provided an important spark for researchers to begin creatively reimagining what healthy, self-affirming sexuality might look like for girls and how we might best identify and promote it.

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 female sexuality that will allow us to conceptualize (and, ideally, advocate for) healthy sexual-developmental trajectories. This volume takes up the challenge by presenting a series of chapters by accomplished sexuality researchers setting forth diverse perspectives on healthy sexuality development among adolescent girls.

These perspectives emphasize the complex interactions among ideological, biological, cultural, familial, intrapsychic, and interpersonal influences, and they underscore the importance of using multiple methods to investigate sexual ideation and experience.

First, certain clarifications are in order. Just what is meant by “positive sexuality” or “healthy sexual development”? These terms might seem relatively straightforward, but a review of current social scientific articles reveals a broad range of (typically implicit) definitions. The authors in this volume generally hew to the interpretations offered by the World Health Organization (2004), which convened a meeting on sexual health in 2002 to clarify such definitions. According to WHO, sexuality “is a central aspect of being human” that incorporates eroticism, intimacy, pleasure, reproduction, and one’s own gender identity. Manifestations of sexuality include not only sexual behaviors, but wishes, desires, fantasies, attitudes, roles, and relationships. WHO also views sexuality as inherently multidimensional, integrating biological, cultural, social, economic, psychological, ethical, and spiritual factors. “Positive” or “healthy” sexuality, then, requires that individuals have adequate freedom and knowledge to pursue safe and satisfying sexuality. In the compelling words of the WHO, “Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence” (2004, p. 3).

The chapters in this volume provide diverse and fascinating perspectives on this important goal. We begin with Carolyn Tucker Halpern’s integrative synthesis of biological contributions to positive female sexual development and their interactions with social and interpersonal factors. In her developmental systems approach, set out in Chapter Two, biological factors (specifically, hormones) are shown to have probabilistic rather than deterministic effects on sexual experience and behavior, which must always be considered in the light of their social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, she calls for attention to a broader range of potential hormonal contributions to adolescent female sexuality than has previously been considered. For example, she highlights the potentially important role of oxytocin, a neuropeptide hormone that has been shown in animal research to be related to attachment and affiliative processes. Given that such processes are clearly relevant to women’s experiences of sexual desire and attraction, she calls for greater developmental research on their role in normative female sexual development. Such approaches offer exciting new directions for integrative biosocial investigations of positive sexual development.

Julia Graber and Lisa Sontag offer another powerful example of this integrative approach in their review of the psychological and social impacts of puberty on girls’ self-concepts, particularly regarding sexuality. They demonstrate in Chapter Three how the hormonal and social transformations

of puberty affect not only girls' bodies and brains, but also their feelings about themselves, perceptions of their bodies, and engagement in their social world. They focus particular attention on girls' body images and how pubertal changes interact with concurrent peer influences to shape adjustment. Importantly, these changes are shown to have differential influences on girls as a function of diversity in maturational timing. Their analysis prompts us to consider a multifaceted conceptualization of "positive" puberty that takes a broad range of interacting processes into account.

Moving into the realm of family relationships, Eva Lefkowitz and Tara Stoppa provide in Chapter Four a unique, positive perspective on parent-adolescent communication about sexuality. Contrary to most prior research on this topic, which has typically emphasized the specific messages that parents communicate about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, Lefkowitz and Stoppa focus on the process of communication rather than simply its content. Their approach elucidates how parents subtly and not so subtly shape girls' sexual-emotional trajectories through implicit and explicit discussions of sexual values and attitudes. By examining not just what parents say but how different types of messages are transmitted in the context of an unfolding interpersonal interaction, they reveal communication dynamics that help us to understand the antecedents of potentially positive sexual-developmental trajectories.

Chapter Five, by L. Monique Ward, Kyla Day, and Marina Epstein, focuses on the potentially positive roles for the media in adolescent girls' sexual development. Contrary to prevailing views of media influences as uniformly negative, stereotypical, and hypersexualized, they emphasize the positive contributions that media images and messages can make to girls' development. Not only can certain types of media outlets provide sexual information that may be missing elsewhere, but some media outlets offer diverse sexual role models for girls that might allow them to observe and vicariously experience romantic and sexual scripts in a safe context. This analysis highlights the fact that many young women's use of media is proactive rather than reactive, involving the active selection of media content (some of it proudly antimainstream, such as zines) that they find compelling, appealing, and informative. Ward, Day, and Epstein demonstrate the importance of combining critiques of negative media influences with a focus on the potentially positive functions of media images that might help girls to find creative models of sexual self-expression and empowerment.

Finally, Deborah Tolman, one of the most active advocates for more positive approaches to adolescent female sexual development, provides a powerful set of reflections on what nonetheless remains missing from such approaches: a critical focus on compulsory heterosexuality, Adrienne Rich's (1980) conceptualization of the hegemonic cultural privileging of patriarchal heterosexual relations. In a tour de force that weds feminist theory with insights into social scientific methodology, Tolman points the way toward new strategies of asking complementary questions about girls' and boys' sexual

feelings and experiences that make more visible the broader cultural nexus of race, class, and gender in which sexual development unfolds.

### What Sets Positive Approaches Apart?

To provide a context for these authors' insights and findings, it is useful to step back and consider the process of conducting positively oriented research on adolescent female sexuality. What makes this process and its findings different from traditional approaches? If the programs of research spotlighted in this volume represent exemplars of such an approach, what unites them, given the notable diversity of their topics, theories, and methods?

It is certainly not a narrow focus on "good" aspects of sex or a denial of the challenges and risks that face female youths. Rather, many of the chapters explicitly address potential negative sexual-developmental outcomes such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Yet the context in which such negative phenomena are considered is notably different than it is in traditional research on adolescent sexuality. This is because the positively oriented approaches represented in this volume are distinguished in a number of ways.

**Interplay Among Contextual Factors.** Contrary to research approaches that treat sexual behavior as if it occurs in a vacuum, all of these chapters place considerable emphasis on the multiple interacting contexts in which sexual development occurs: peers, parents, romantic relationships, and a media-saturated, patriarchal, heterosexist culture. Importantly, none of these contextual factors operates in isolation; rather, they intersect to push and pull girls' sexual development in different ways at different developmental stages. Hence, efforts to promote positive sexual-developmental trajectories among girls will be compromised unless such contexts are taken into account. No matter what we might do to bolster a girl's psychosocial adjustment, interpersonal skills, emotion regulation, sexual knowledge, and self-efficacy, we must contend with the fact that her larger social environment can work either for or against such efforts. For example, Graber and Sontag point out that girls with a higher body mass index were less likely to date, suggesting that they were not considered attractive dating partners by the boys in their social networks. Thus, even if we succeed in communicating acceptance of a more diverse range of positive body types among girls, this may have little impact if their peers, parents, and the media continue to relentlessly communicate a restrictive, excessively thin ideal. Thus, promotion of positive sexual-developmental trajectories for girls necessarily involves the promotion of positive cultural change across a range of interconnected contexts. Ward, Day, and Epstein's final "wish list" of positive media changes is an excellent example of thinking through to what sorts of environments might be necessary to optimize girls' positive sexual development. Tolman's call to action is more radical, advocating a systematic dismantling of the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality that continues to constrain notions of "normal" sexuality among both girls and boys.

**Integration of Biological and Social Factors.** Historically, research on sexuality has tended to be segregated between approaches that focus on cultural factors and approaches that focus on biology. As Tolman and Diamond have argued previously (2001), this has long hampered investigations into women's sexuality and is particularly detrimental for understanding sexual development, given the notable biological transitions that characterize the adolescent years. Yet biology is obviously not destiny, and thus the most effective approaches are sensitive to the complex, nuanced interactions between biological processes and their psychological, social, and cultural contexts. These chapters exemplify such an approach.

**Attention to Processes Outside the Strictly Sexual Domain.** Sexual feelings and behaviors are obviously nested within broader psychological, cognitive, and interpersonal processes. Thus, attempts to understand and promote positive female sexual development must understand how factors such as social competence, emotion regulation, self-esteem, body image, and communication skills (to name just a few) influence how girls experience, understand, manage, and act on sexual desires. Each chapter in this volume views sexual development as nested within these concurrent processes and domains, providing a richer and more multifaceted understanding of the processes that both promote and hinder positive sexual development.

**Life Course Perspective.** A recurring theme throughout the chapters is that positive sexual development cannot simply be turned on at sexual maturation. Rather, positive sexual-developmental trajectories have their origins much earlier, in pathways of positive interpersonal and psychosocial development that become established in childhood. The transitions of sexual maturation weave together different strands of psychological, physical, and social development in powerful and potentially transformative ways. Unless those individual strands already contain the foundations for healthy self-concepts, feelings of agency, and social competence, it is unlikely that girls can suddenly repair prior deficits and craft new and healthy sexual pathways to adulthood. Thus, advocacy for positive sexual development must begin with advocacy for positive child psychosocial development more generally.

**Emphasis on Relationships.** Research has conclusively demonstrated that one of the most distinctive aspects of female sexuality—not only during adolescence but throughout the life course—is its sensitivity to relational contexts. For girls, experiences of sexual desire, sexual agency, and sexual self-concept are often directly linked to their experiences of satisfaction, confidence, and mutual intimacy with their romantic or sexual partner. Thus, understanding this relational component of girls' sexuality, and helping girls to master specifically relational skills, is fundamental to understanding and promoting positive female sexual development. At the same time, critical ambivalence about the relational aspects of female adolescent sexuality is warranted, as it has its roots in historical and ideological constructions of female sexuality as acceptable only within the confines of committed (ideally marital, but always heterosexual) relationships. Thus, as

Tolman's chapter emphasizes, we must remain deeply critical of the pervasive forces in girls' environments that reinforce such potentially negative, patriarchal, and heterosexist messages. The goal should be to investigate and understand not only relational influences on sexuality but also how girls can develop a strong and positive individual sense of ownership over their sexual feelings.

## Looking to the Future

With this diverse and powerful group of analyses as a road map, what might we expect and demand from future research on positive female sexual development? Certainly, one pressing need is more systematic attention to issues of sexual desire and pleasure among female adolescents. Tolman's work (1991, 2002) has long highlighted the "dilemmas of desire" that confront girls growing up in a culture that continues to cast female sexuality as inherently dangerous. We must provide girls with the space and support to develop positive, empowering sexual self-concepts that include desire and pleasure. It is ironic that although the broader culture (and, of course, pharmaceutical companies) has drawn increased attention to low sexual desire among adult women as a form of sexual "dysfunction," the potential roots of this dysfunction in the negative messages we send to adolescent girls about the dangers of sexual desire and pleasure remain underinvestigated. Clearly, we require a more thorough understanding of—and advocacy for—healthy trajectories of erotic desire in order to truly foster girls' sexual self-concepts and empower them to make positive sexual choices.

Greater attention to same-sex desire, affection, and behavior is also important. Clearly there has been a laudable surge in research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth over the past twenty years that has highlighted how the cultural privileging of heterosexuality can create developmental challenges for youths whose desires fall outside this normative ideal. Yet we must guard against a strict bifurcation of the adolescent population into "gay" and "straight" youths, with correspondingly distinct developmental trajectories. Rather, research increasingly suggests that many heterosexual youths have (sometimes highly significant) same-sex romantic and sexual desires and experiences, just as many gay and lesbian youths have (sometimes highly significant) other-sex romantic and sexual desires and experiences (Diamond, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). Thus, the most comprehensive and generative models of positive adolescent sexual development must include both same-sex and other-sex sexuality among both heterosexual and sexual-minority youths.

Finally, we require more integrative investigations into the necessary intersections between positive trajectories of female and male development. Although this volume focuses specifically on female adolescents and emphasizes the importance of gender-specific models, we must remain mindful of the fact that cultural constructions of womanhood go hand in hand with constructions of manhood. Thus, positively oriented, forward-

thinking approaches to sexual development will be most effective when they take these interbraided cultural constructions into account. As Tolman explicitly argues, cultural messages and contexts facing girls are accompanied by complementary messages and contexts facing boys, and it is by internalizing ideologies of both femininity and masculinity that girls and boys enact and reproduce patriarchal dynamics. Thus, although it will remain helpful and important to investigate trajectories of positive sexual development separately for boys and girls, we must also work to develop systematic, integrative models of their necessary interrelationship.

My hope is that in another fifteen years, the field of developmental psychology will have generated multiple, nuanced perspectives on positive sexual development that model increasingly complex interactions among biological, cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal influences and account for broad cultural ideologies as well as microlevel interpersonal dynamics. Correspondingly, in another fifteen years, girls and boys may be growing up with expanded conceptualizations of sexuality that emphasize autonomy, agency, and knowledge and represent the full range of their diverse desires and experiences. The powerful chapters in this volume represent an important step toward this goal.

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