

**PUBERTY, SEXUALITY,
AND THE SELF**

GIRLS AND BOYS AT ADOLESCENCE

KARIN A. MARTIN

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DEDICATION

**To
Christine Ann Martin
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ADOLESCENT BODIES AND SEXUALITY

Young women are engaged with questions of “being female”; that is, who will control, and to what extent can they control, their own bodies?

—Michelle Fine, *Disruptive Voices*

chapter 1

IN THE course of researching this book, as I sat with one teenage girl after another asking them to tell me about themselves, I heard over and over again lukewarm and critical self-descriptions. Some girls said they were too quiet, while others said they were too loud. Others said they were unhappy with recent decisions they had made. Some girls said they were too sensitive to others' criticisms. Many girls criticized their appearances, and many girls found it difficult to describe themselves at all. Although each girl was different, some shy, some giggly, some poised, some outgoing, most shared this self-critical eye. Boys, in general, did not. Why, I wondered, do adolescent girls think so poorly of themselves?

Research documents a large drop in girls' self-esteem¹ that occurs at adolescence. Therefore, in answering the question of why girls think so poorly of

themselves, I looked to adolescence and the experiences that are most transformative at adolescence—puberty and first sex—for an explanation.

Much to the disappointment of many adult women whom I spoke to about my project, I found that in the 1990s gender still profoundly shapes adolescent experiences of sexuality. For example, girls still feel shame about their adult bodies, particularly breast development and menstruation. Girls still “do it” to keep their boyfriends, and boys often “do it” so that they can “go tell their friends, ‘Yeah! Yeah!’”

Certainly some things are different about teenage sexuality today compared to forty, or even ten years ago. As Lillian Rubin suggests in her book on the sexual revolution, teenagers today now feel “entitled” to sex.² Girls and boys both talk more openly than their parents did about both puberty and sex, and many school systems now provide some form of sex education. Thus, far fewer girls begin menstruating with the fear that they are bleeding to death (although this phenomenon has not disappeared entirely). Masturbation is less taboo for boys and at least sometimes acknowledged for girls. Norms about sexuality are also slightly more accepting. Girls no longer automatically become “sluts” because they have sex. Rather, their age, their reasons for having sex, and the context in which they have sex are judged before labeling them sluts (an admittedly small improvement). There is still, however, no parallel to a slut for boys, although girls do call some boys “himbos,” a clever parallel to bimbos.

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Despite these changes, many old taboos, feelings of shame, guilt and fear, and gender differentiated experiences still exist and come to the forefront of adolescent life. These gendered experiences of puberty and sex affect adolescents’ self-worth. For girls, these experiences lead them to feel badly about themselves, and although it is not “easy” for boys to navigate puberty and first sex either, their selves emerge more intact. These differences are not due to different psychological or biological makeups of girls and boys, but to the gendered cultural meanings that girls and boys learn, absorb, and use to make sense of the world during puberty and their first sexual experiences.

In the following chapter I examine these ideas about body, sexuality and self further. Chapter Three examines in detail how puberty—menarche, breasts development, masturbation, voice change, shaving, weight gain—affects boys’ and girls’ selves differently. Chapter Four examines teenagers romantic and sexual relationships, particularly girls’ propensity for “ideal love.” It discusses the different expectations girls and boys have of sex, how they make decisions to have sex with each other, and how they differently experience first sex. In Chapter Five I look at parents’ influences on adolescents selves, agency, and sexual subjectivity. Chapter Six and Chapter Seven ask where the possibilities are—school, sports, feminism, mothers—for girls to construct a positive sense of self and sexual subjectivity. It also asks what social changes might help facil-

itate more agency and sexual subjectivity in adolescent girls and eventually adult women. Before continuing, however, let me describe what interviewing teenagers about puberty, sex, and self is like.

“IT’S JUST LIKE WHAT THE DOCTOR ASKS YOU”:

INTERVIEWING ADOLESCENTS

Because most research on puberty and teenage sexuality has not examined in detail *how* adolescents subjectively experience changes in their bodies and their sexuality or how these changes affect their senses of self, I conducted a qualitative study, consisting of fifty-five semi-structured, in-depth interviews with adolescent girls and boys from the ages of fourteen to nineteen. (See Methodological Appendix and Interview Schedule for more detail.) The relationships between puberty, sexuality, and sense of self are clearly present in the interviewees’ narratives.

In choosing interviewing as my method, I assumed that the best way to find out how people feel about themselves and what makes them feel that way is to ask them. Of course people can lie in interviews, just as they can on surveys. However, it is more difficult to lie or tell half-truths in open-ended interviews, because the inconsistencies in a story become visible. Some of the most interesting data I gathered is found in these inconsistencies which reveal the interviewees struggling with an issue. When I turned off the tape recorder at the end of the interview, I would sometimes hear “the rest of the story.” Also, the interviewees told me *stories*, versions of “true” experience, told retrospectively, and constructed partially by the interview setting, myself, and the questions I asked.³ But the fact that these stories were constructed in this setting does not mean that they are not at the same time versions of or pieces of actual social experiences that we can study.

Researchers always face a set of problems when setting out on a project, and I faced several. First, since people reconstruct experience in light of their present lives, the best way to have done this study would have been longitudinally. Since most interviewees had completed puberty by the time of the interview, this presented a problem with regard to questions about pubertal experience. However, given a lack of resources for such a time-consuming and expensive study, interviewing teens who had just recently reached puberty was a reasonable compromise. In fact, interviewing older adolescents had some advantages. In a face-to-face interview, teens who are just beyond puberty may be better able to articulate what happened to them than those who are in the throes of puberty and who are either uncomfortable with or unsure about what is happening to them. Teens are also still close enough to puberty not to have distorted their experiences much, and many had recently had sex for the first time or were thinking of “doing it” soon. Finally, if one were to longitu-

dinally study pubertal experience, she would run the risk of distorting the experience for the adolescent and therefore distorting her data.

Puberty and sex are difficult topics to discuss, especially for adolescents.⁴ I was concerned about how much adolescents would be willing to say to me, and even if they would agree to be interviewed, given the formidable consent form they were presented. As it turned out, they were more willing than I expected. Most of the girls and the middle-class boys seemed to enjoy telling me their stories. Girls were more forthcoming than boys, and middle-class adolescents were more talkative than working-class ones. This class difference seems to result from school structure. There was an insistent authority and lack of freedom in the working-class school where I interviewed, especially compared to the open campus, almost college-like atmosphere of the private schools. Students were constantly being told to "Get to class," or asked "Where are you supposed to be?" or "Do you have a pass?" or told, "You're late. Go to the office." Working-class adolescents, in the more authoritative school structure, were not used to adults asking them to discuss their feelings and opinions at length and often stayed within the boundaries of the interview structure more than middle-class adolescents did.

Interviewing teenage girls was easier than interviewing teenage boys. Since I am a woman, the teenage girls tended to treat me as something between a sex education teacher and an older friend. Several girls made comments throughout the interview like "I've just got to tell you this!" Interviewing adolescent boys about sex was more difficult.⁵ Boys are reluctant to volunteer for such interviews and often reluctant to speak. Sharon Thompson writes that during her project she repeatedly had to raise the age of her male interview subjects, and finally she abandoned interviewing boys entirely.

By the end of the project I was reduced to interviewing twenty-five-year-old boys, who told me in tones suggesting that they were baring their chests for the good of the project, pubertal anecdotes revolving mainly around early heterosexual play or disconnected homosexual episodes like circle jerks.⁶

I did not fare quite so badly. It *was* more difficult to persuade boys to volunteer to be interviewed. Most teachers and principals knew that it would be difficult to convince boys to participate and chalked it up to the character of adolescent boys. I originally wanted to remedy this problem of depending on good-hearted, interested volunteers by paying interviewees ten dollars each for the interview and hoping this would motivate more reluctant students. However, the principals of the schools thought this inappropriate. I began asking the boys and girls whom I did interview why they thought I was having a more difficult time enticing the boys. As they put it,

It's probably sensitivity. Boys tend not to, they don't really want to get sensitive or anything. I think boys are a lot more lazy myself. I'm a class officer and whenever we do anything we always have about twice as many girls as boys. Almost everything [activity] I'm in at school has more girls.

—Marc

Umm, they don't want to do it. They're too chicken. I don't know. "It's stupid. It's queer. What's my benefit out of this?" We're just kind of lazy.

—Paul

However, those who did volunteer were generally willing to talk, although they were not as articulate as girls when it came to discussions of relationships⁷ and their actual experiences of sex. Boys were less reflective about their experiences and seemed to have thought less about these issues than girls. The younger age of the male interviewees and the fact that they tended to be boys who were responsible and involved in school (in student council or other school organizations) may account for these differences. Although this group may not be representative of all the boys in these schools, this possibly biased sample probably leads me to *underestimate* gender differences at adolescence. The boys that my study is missing are the stereotypic braggers, those boys whose experiences would be even more different from girls. Furthermore, childhood ethnographer Barrie Thorne has noted that the type of boys who *are* in my sample are understudied. She suggests that quiet, good, well-behaved boys who are not aggressively masculine often get lost in studies of children.⁸

As a female interviewer, boys responded differently to me than they would have to a male interviewer. This is especially true given that I was talking to them about puberty and sex. I do not think what they told me was untrue, but perhaps it was only one version of the story that boys tell. Boys are, however, familiar with talking seriously to women about sexuality.⁹ Mothers tend to be the ones who teach boys about sex when they are young. All but one of the male interviewees said their mothers were involved in teaching them about puberty and sex. Often mothers were the only one who talked to them about it. Also, most sex education teachers are women, and this was true at the schools where I interviewed.

Boys seemed to put me in the role of a sex education teacher or doctor,¹⁰ and told me more of the "facts" of pubertal and sexual events and less of the story of the events than girls did. At the end of the interview I asked interviewees what they thought of it, and most of the boys (and girls) said that it was not as embarrassing as they thought it was going to be, given the consent form they had to sign. No one said it was embarrassing, and no one refused to answer any particular question.

Boys' discussions about sex with fathers and other men are quite different from those with women. We know that fathers and men tend to gender type children more than mothers and women do.¹¹ My data shows that when fathers do talk to boys about sex, it is often in the vein of joking or boasting about sex and women or warning them to use condoms. Thus, a male interviewer might elicit more of the boastful, exaggerated stories that boys are often said to tell about sex. Although I think a male interviewer might elicit *different* material from teenage boys, I am not convinced that he would gather more *truthful* stories about puberty and sex.¹²

Boys, however, were not the most reluctant subjects I interviewed. Two Asian-American teens—a boy and a girl—whose families were recent immigrants, had little to say about puberty and sexuality. (Two other Asian-American adolescents whose families were not such recent immigrants were no different in their amount of talk than other teens.) Chan suggests that it would be very difficult to interview such teens about the topics in this study. She explains,

The distinction between the public and private selves is an important concept in most Asian cultures. The public self is that which conforms to gendered and familial role expectations, behaves in a manner in accordance with social norms, and seeks to avoid actions that would bring shame not only upon oneself but also upon one's family. Sexuality would rarely be expressed in the context of one's public self. Only within the context of the private self can such a subject find easy expression. The private self is never seen by anyone other than one's most intimate family and friends (in some cases, a person may choose never to reveal a private self to anyone).¹³

Chan cautions us that we should not confuse the reluctance to talk about sex with asexuality.

In the next chapter, I examine the stories that other theorists tell us or fail to tell us about gender, sexuality, and the self. I ask how those stories can be modified to help us understand the voices of the teens we hear throughout the following chapters.

THEORIZING SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY, GENDER, AND ADOLESCENCE

But the only hunger I have ever known was the hunger for sex and the hunger for freedom and somehow, in my mind and heart, they were related and certainly not mutually exclusive.

—Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*

chapter 2

MANY RESEARCHERS have been trying to answer the question of why adolescent girls think so poorly of themselves, but none have looked closely at puberty or first experiences of sex.¹⁴ In particular, the American Association of University Women's study of adolescent self-esteem and the work of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have received much popular and academic attention.¹⁵ The main finding of these studies is that, although boys' self-esteem drops somewhat at adolescence, girls' sense of self dwindles and their self-esteem drops significantly more than boys' does.¹⁶ Girls, these studies find, sense what they know, are unhappy with themselves, and become less interested in school, especially in math and science.

Brown and Gilligan's new work on adolescent girls is the most theoretically developed piece of all this new research. Their new work follows "women's psychological development back through girls' adolescence and