
Sexuality in Families: The (Re-) Creation of Sexual Culture

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Sexuality and family are concepts that are interconnected in multiple, complex ways (Fisher, 2004; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Family is the context in which meanings of sexuality are initially learned: our understandings of sexuality, as well as our attitudes and values about sexuality, are influenced by our familial experiences in childhood and across the life span. Likewise, our understandings of “family” (i.e., what constitutes a “genuine” or “real” family) are grounded in our ideas and beliefs about sexuality. More concretely, many family relationships are born out of and maintained through sexual feelings and behaviors. Further, our families and our sexualities are shaped by social locations and statuses, including race, social class, age, and gender. Thus, sexuality is basic to family life; it is a

multifaceted concept with intra-psychic, interpersonal, and socio-cultural meanings rooted in family. In this chapter, we review social science literature on sexuality in family life, considering the ways that sexual culture gets created and recreated in families across generations. Our goal is to describe a “positive” vision of sexuality for families—a “sex education” that embraces sexuality as a natural, healthy dimension of personal development and family relationships over the life course. We first consider and define several key constructs that are important for understanding sexuality, and then describe the parameters of this chapter in light of our goals.

The Many Meanings of Sexuality

We begin by describing what we mean by *sexuality*. There are many dimensions of sexuality that each may have multiple meanings depending on historical time, place, culture, and an individual’s personal characteristics and experiences. These include not only behaviors, but also desire and attraction, knowledge, thoughts, and identities (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004; Mahay, Laumann, & Michaels, 2001). Sexuality-related research has primarily focused on the incidence and frequency of various sexual behaviors (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004), oftentimes leaving the meanings that people attach to these behaviors unexamined (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004). Savin-Williams and Diamond identify vague or undefined terminology as a crucial methodological issue in

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adolescent sexuality research that restricts our knowledge. For example, although researchers often interpret the term “sex” to mean vaginal–penile intercourse, the meaning of sex can vary among individuals and groups of individuals, oftentimes dependent upon age, gender, and sexual identity, as well as race, ethnicity, and/or social class. Savin-Williams and Diamond note that there is no singular definition of sexual behavior among adolescents themselves; these authors make the case for the critical importance of examining the “diverse and multifaceted meanings that adolescents attach to their sexual feelings and behaviors” (p. 196). Such information is invaluable for understanding how youth develop their conceptualizations about sexuality, as well as for understanding the influence of the family in shaping those conceptualizations.

Further, sexuality does not only refer to private behaviors, emotions, cognitions, or identities of individuals or families; it is also very much a public part of social life—and consequently is a subject for social regulation (Foucault, 1990). Public institutions regulate sexuality in such a way that directly influences family life. Specifically, heterosexuality is privileged in the United States: marriage is defined by the federal and numerous state governments as being between one man and one woman; more than 1,100 federal rights, benefits, and protections that go along with marriage (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004) are automatically bestowed upon heterosexual married couples. Government policy also plays a role in socializing sexuality by determining what youth are taught in public schools in regard to sexuality education; decades of funding for abstinence-only approaches have constrained public sexuality education to an exclusive focus on heterosexuality (Santelli et al., 2006). Thus, for the purposes of this chapter, our definition of sexuality is multifaceted. Our definition acknowledges that the various meanings associated with dimensions of sexuality are influenced by individual-level factors such as social location and status, relational factors because our partners’ sexual expectations and desires may be similar to or different from our own, as well as by institutional forces that shape (or constrain) these many dimensions of sexuality.

Sexual Socialization in Families

How does this multidimensional understanding of sexuality get transmitted within families? One of the primary functions of family is the socialization of its members, including socialization of sexuality. *Sexual socialization* is “the process through which an individual acquires an understanding of ideas, beliefs and values, shared cultural symbols, meanings and codes of conduct” regarding sexuality (Shtarkshall, Santelli, & Hirsch, 2007, p. 116). Sexual socialization is thought to occur explicitly through purposeful conversations and lessons regarding aspects of sexuality, as well as implicitly through conscious and unconscious verbal and nonverbal communication of attitudes and values (Stotzer, 2009; Townsend, 2008). Parents, who are thought to be the earliest and primary source of sexual socialization for children, send a wide variety of messages about sexuality (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). For example, through both observation and parental reactions, young children learn familial norms regarding nudity and privacy, as well as gender-specific expectations of conduct (Shtarkshall et al., 2007). Beyond childhood, families continue to influence their members’ attitudes and values related to sexuality. Although most discussions of family sexual socialization focus attention on adolescence, people continue to develop as sexual beings throughout the life span (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). Thus, family sexual socialization is a life-long process, creating the grounding for knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about sexuality over the life course. Finally, sources outside the family, which may provide conflicting messages about the meanings and consequences of sexuality and sexual behaviors, must also be considered agents of sexual socialization, and family members participate in and are influenced by these forces. Family sexual socialization practices are influenced by government policy, education practices, and religion; the influence of the media also has been well documented, with a growing focus on the media’s impact on adolescent sexual socialization (Wright, 2009b). These societal influences provide the broader context within which family sexual socialization occurs.

Sexual socialization produces *sexual scripts*, the shared understandings and beliefs about appropriate, desirable, and expected sexuality-related behavior (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004). According to Gagnon and Simon (1973), these scripts exist at three levels—cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic—and provide “a cognitive map to the domain of the sexual” (Kimmel, 2007, p. xi). Families help shape the social norms and standards that exist at the cultural level, and which have an influence on individuals at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels. Evidence of these norms is apparent in the traditional scripts that continue to characterize many heterosexual relationships (e.g., Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). For example, when asked to describe a typical first date of a heterosexual couple, both women and men tend to describe similar traditionally gendered sequences of behavior, as well as roles, for women and men (Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Rose & Frieze, 1993). Thus, even individuals who reject the gendered basis for these sexual scripts or engage in behaviors that contradict them are aware of dominant sexual scripts for individual behavior. Sexual scripts, however, seem to be shifting for heterosexual women and men: studies have revealed women as initiators of sexual activity, along with men’s desire for their female partners to initiate sexual activity (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2007; Ortiz-Torres, Williams, & Ehrhardt, 2003). Dworkin and O’Sullivan (2007), citing Messner (1992), state that “women’s and men’s everyday interactions might not simply derive from larger cultural scenarios but might actively reproduce, contest, or shift the gender order” (p. 118). Indeed, although individuals are thought to follow traditional scripts due to the strong influence of cultural norms, individuals also have the power to deviate from these scripts and, eventually, to change the very nature of societal sexual norms.

Overview and Parameters of the Chapter

Before turning to the heart of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that much of the prior research and thinking in the area of sexuality has

framed sexuality and sexual behavior as “risky.” Individual-level studies often approach sexuality from a framework of negative outcomes to be prevented (unwanted pregnancy; sexually transmitted infections), or in terms of sexual function and dysfunction (Russell, 2005). Much of the focus on family sexuality has emphasized the role of family socialization in preventing negative sexuality-related outcomes for youth. This literature has been reviewed elsewhere and is not our current focus; what is relevant is that the dominant frame of risk, dysfunction, and disease has overshadowed holistic, positive, or affirmative understandings of families and sexuality.

Why is the risk framework for understanding sexuality so intractable? Cultural factors, such as religious perspectives that view sexuality as “taboo” and/or “sinful” (Harris, 2010), media portrayals in which women’s bodies are objectified (Gordon, 2008), and the overriding societal view that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that do not strictly align with heterosexuality are “abnormal” and, perhaps, “dangerous” to family life (Oswald et al., 2005) fuel the persistence of this dominant frame, which remains an obstacle to a more positive approach to sexuality. That said, we acknowledge that “risk”-perspective research can be appropriate and necessary, especially when certain groups disproportionately experience negative, sexuality-related outcomes [e.g., HIV/AIDS rates among gay men and Black Americans (Harris, 2010)] due to systemic barriers to knowledge, education, and/or treatment. However, we believe that a fundamental emphasis on more positive approaches to sexuality and sexuality education is one of several ways to address some of these negative outcomes.

In this chapter we begin with an analysis of theories and perspectives that have been central for understanding sexuality in families. A family life course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993) provides a guide for understanding the sexual socialization of children and adolescents, but also of adults and the elderly, in multiple family contexts (e.g., single-parent, two-parent, or same-/different-sex couple families). Because they are statuses that shape the possibilities of the family life course, we give explicit attention to gender, culture, class, and race in our synthesis of prior work.

We consider social learning theory, symbolic interaction, and queer theory as important contributors in recent decades to understanding sexuality in families.

Following the discussion of important recent theoretical advances, we delve more deeply into questions of family sexual socialization, considering how sexuality is taught and learned in families. We then consider the sexuality expectations of family life across the life span, emphasizing the dominant expectations to be coupled and to have children. Contrasting with these dominant expectations, however, is a growing pattern: the lives of more and more people do not conform to these family sexual scripts. These alternative scripts are strategic areas of inquiry. What characterizes family sexual socialization for single adults or the aging adult population? With this background, we then consider positive sexuality development over the life course.

There are multiple issues that are beyond the scope of this review. There exists a huge research literature on sexual behavior in families: marital, cohabiting, and dating relationships (e.g., Christopher & Sprecher, 2000); the initiation, meanings, and implications of sexual behavior across the life span are beyond our focus here. There have been important advances in the literature on parent–adolescent sexual communication in recent years, particularly research on culturally distinct practices and perspectives (e.g., Kim, 2009). Other recent work has begun to consider the dynamics of sexual attraction, desire, and relationships (e.g., Diamond, 2008). Finally, a growing body of work in the last decade reminds us that “family” is not necessarily nuclear, co-residential, or even colocated; for example, the growing body of research on transnational families [i.e., families in which parents and children live in different countries (Dreby, 2006)] has pointed out implications for socialization and expectations of sexualities. Given the growing number of transnational families around the world, we predict and hope to see a growth in studies of transnational family sexuality. Lastly, we refer at times to sexual abuse, coercion, and violence throughout this chapter, topics which are crucial to discussions of family sexual socialization.

These dimensions of sexuality (i.e., “problems” or negative experiences) are defined in part by the loss of personal agency, as well as imbalances of power based on gender, race, class, age, and other social location factors. Because our focus is on a positive vision of sexuality in families, we do not attempt to review literatures on problems in sexuality; the issues are beyond our scope and we could not possibly do them justice here.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Socialization in Families

A host of theories have offered different lenses through which researchers have studied and sought to understand human sexuality. A life course perspective frames this chapter (Bengtson & Allen, 1993); we emphasize the importance of context, process, and meaning when examining sexual socialization across the life span. More specifically, a life course perspective prompts the examination of intergenerational transmission of family values, beliefs, and expectations in regard to sexuality (Bengtson & Allen). Further, this perspective highlights the importance of interpreting experiences in the context of historical time and as linked to the lives of others who are close to them (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). That is, generational differences in individual and societal attitudes in regard to sexuality are thought to impact the sexual socialization of family members. Moreover, sexual development continues across the life span, as family members continue to have an influence on each other as they each interpret (and re-interpret) their own sexualities and expectations for their sexual behavior throughout their lives.

When considering sexual socialization within families, then, we must look not only at childhood and adolescence but also at adulthood, and ask the question: How does the sexual socialization process continue throughout family members’ lives? Importantly, a life course perspective of sexuality is not so rigid as to specify normative progressions through set developmental stages that do not allow for transgressions from the norm (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Diamond, Savin-Williams, &

Dube, 1999). Thus, in this chapter, we take a life course perspective when examining sexual socialization in families, and ask: What messages do individuals receive across the life span about familial and larger social norms in regard to sexuality, and how do they uphold or resist these expectations at different stages of their lives? First, however, we will briefly discuss other prominent theories that have been utilized in the study of sexuality (for a more detailed discussion, see DeLamater & Hyde, 2004).

Biology vs. Society

Historically, the theoretical study of sexuality—especially sexual orientation development—has fallen into one of two camps: biological or social (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004; Tolman & Diamond, 2001). Sociobiology (Symons, 1979) and evolutionary (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) theories focus on biological, or “natural,” drives or determinants of sexuality. Those firmly grounded in this camp tend to attribute sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to essential qualities with which a child is born, and which result from human adaptations to mating challenges. For example, according to sexual strategies theory, men generally have stronger desires than women to engage in multiple, short-term sexual relationships due to the historical and adaptive imperative for men to “spread their seed” and ensure the procreative continuation of the species (Buss & Schmitt; Schmitt, Shackelford, & Buss, 2001).

On the other hand, a sociological or constructionist perspective focuses on the importance of cultural norms in regard to sexuality that are learned (DeLamater, 1987a). From this perspective, people are not “hard-wired” to think, feel, or behave in certain sexual ways but are taught from a very early age, by family, cultural group, religion, government, etc., what is “appropriate” for their gender. For example, script theory and role theory point to the cultural norms that shape interactions and expectations when it comes to sexual behavior (DeLamater, 1987b; DeLamater & Hyde, 2004). To continue with the example of sexual reproduction strategies, script and role

theorists would look to social forces that have taught men that they should seek and initiate short-term sexual encounters, and women that they should not. Individuals are thought to be socialized to behave in certain ways (i.e., to “follow a script”) in particular situations and as holders of distinct positions (e.g., eligible bachelor, single female; for more detailed discussions of script theory and role theory in relation to sexuality, see DeLamater & Hyde; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 2005; Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

Neither the biological nor the social camp alone can account for all of the variations that exist among people in regard to sexuality. Diamond (2008) elaborates on and critiques this debate between “die-hard” theorists on either side, emphasizing the importance of each perspective and the need to consider both biological and social determinants to truly understand the complexities of sexuality. Indeed, as theorists acknowledged the limitations of each polarized camp, more integrative “biosocial” perspectives emerged (e.g., Kenrick & Trost, 1987). We also take the perspective that it is important to consider both biological and social factors when considering sexuality (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004; Trost & Filsinger, 1993); however, we do focus more heavily in this chapter on the cultural, or “learned,” aspects of sexuality, given that our primary focus is on sexual socialization and the re-creation of sexual culture in families. Below we consider the ways that well-known theories—social learning theory, symbolic interaction, and queer theory—have been utilized in the study of sexuality.

Social Learning Theory

We first turn to social learning theory, also known as modeling or observational learning, given our focus for this chapter is on sexual socialization in families. Social learning theory combines elements of operant conditioning and social cognition (Bandura, 1986; Rotter, 1954, 1982); from this perspective it is assumed that people are goal-oriented, social beings who are aware of, and can be influenced by, their environment

(Hogben & Byrne, 1998). Behavior is thought to be strengthened and sustained through actual or anticipated positive reinforcement (i.e., reward) and/or enhanced self-efficacy, as well as avoidance of negative reinforcement (i.e., punishment), or weakened by aversive stimuli or loss of reward. Social cognitions mediate the cues individuals receive from their environments; thus, the same cue can be interpreted differently by different people (Mischel, 1973). Although social learning theorists may acknowledge aspects of sexuality as innate, most “believe in the powerful reinforcing value of sexuality and sexuality-related variables at all ages, (and) tend to dismiss the notion of sexuality as an exogenous force such as a drive” (Hogben & Byrne, 1998, p. 59).

Hogben and Byrne (1998) noted four areas of human sexuality research in which social learning theory has been most often applied: sexuality development, adolescent sexuality and contraceptive use, health-related sexual behavior, and coercive sexual behavior. Research utilizing social learning theory in the examination of the latter three areas has tended to focus on the reduction of undesirable behaviors/outcomes, such as teen pregnancy (e.g., Franklin & Corcoran, 2000), high-risk sexual behaviors associated with sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Nangle & Hansen, 1998; Paul, Catania, Pollack, & Stall, 2001), and dating violence (e.g., Christopher, Madura, & Weaver, 1998; O’Keefe & Treister, 1998). Social learning theory is known more, however, for its application to sexuality development, namely sex-typed gender role development (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 1966). Through the processes of differential reinforcement and modeling, children learn sex-typed behavior from parents, as well as from the many observations children make of “typical” or “appropriate” male and female behavior inside and outside their families (Perry & Bussey, 1979). Even very young children are aware of and influenced by gender role stereotypes (Stern & Karraker, 1989), as well as the anticipated or actual reinforcement they receive for adherence to or violation of gender stereotypical behavior. Because families are one of the first environments where children learn which behaviors are rewarding or punishing, the

family serves as an important social group of influence in this regard.

Although a classic interpretation of social learning theory would emphasize a child’s imitation of a same-gender parent’s behavior, later versions of the theory have recognized the importance of multiple influences, including extra-familial forces (Perry & Bussey, 1979). Thus, children observe and learn aspects of sexuality not only from their parents but also from other family members, teachers, peers, media, etc. This would pertain to children’s development of sexual orientation identity as well. For example, although it is a commonly held belief that lesbian and gay parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to raise children who identify as lesbian or gay themselves (Tasker & Golombok, 1997), research has not, as of yet, substantiated this claim. Studies have found that the vast majority of youth/adults with lesbian/gay parents identify as heterosexual, and are similar to the offspring of heterosexual parents in regard to same-sex attraction (Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach, 1995; Gottman, 1990; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

A social learning perspective, however, would also prompt us to imagine that children growing up in lesbian- or gay-parent households would hold less stereotypical views about gender-role behavior than children with heterosexual parents, and might be less likely to be discouraged from entering into same-sex intimate relationships. Indeed, as a result, we could postulate that children with lesbian and gay parents would be more open to, or likely to consider, the option of having same-sex intimate partners (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Research has substantiated these hypotheses: studies have found, for example, that children of lesbian mothers tend to hold less traditional gendered role attitudes than the children of heterosexual parents (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008). Further, Tasker and Golombok found no significant differences between young adults of lesbian mothers and young adults with heterosexual mothers with respect to sexual identity or experiences of same-sex sexual attraction; however, the young adults

from lesbian families were more likely to have considered the possibility of having a same-sex relationship and to have actually been involved in a same-sex relationship. In addition, Goldberg (2007) reported in her qualitative study of adults with lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) parents that some participants felt that growing up with a non-heterosexual parent led them to develop “less rigid and more flexible notions and ideas about sexuality” (p. 557). These findings are consistent with social learning theory, in that having one or more LGB parents appeared to broaden the range of acceptable options for these individuals, in terms of the types of sexual relationships they considered possible for themselves (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Social learning theory, like psychoanalytic (Chodorow, 1978) and cognitive (Bem, 1981) theories of gender development, has been criticized for treating gender (and, indeed, sexuality) identity as a stable characteristic that forms in childhood and remains static throughout adulthood (Connell, 1987; Kimmel, 2000). Lack of attention to issues of power and institutional forces in society is cited as additional limitations of these theories (Connell, 1987; Kimmel, 2000). We turn now to symbolic interactionism, and then queer theory, which address some of these shortcomings.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

The symbolic interactionist perspective—credited by some as an early source of constructionism (Plummer, 2007) and queer theory (Epstein, 1996)—focuses on individuals’ use of symbols and how the meanings of various symbols emerge out of social interaction (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Stryker, 2008). More specifically, the core concepts of symbolic interactionism include meaning, language, and thought, which lead to the creation of a person’s sense of self, or identity, and socialization into a larger community. According to Mead (1934), identities are critical in that they help people define and frame interaction by supplying shared meanings for behaviors and situations. Mead also posited that our symbols (i.e., words) are defined behaviorally. In

other words, as social actors, our world is mediated, as well as, created by symbols. The meanings attached to symbols (e.g., sex, sexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, marriage, “hooking up”) are created and *changed* through the process of social interaction.

Talk/language use is the quintessential form of symbolic interaction and is the process through which individuals gain their identities and construct meanings. Gecas and Libby (1976) examined the use of sexual language and how linguistic choices convey sexual attitudes and values. Language is rarely neutral; words have connotative and denotative meanings. Hence, the language used to talk about various sexual acts reveals different values or attitudes toward certain behaviors. Additionally, language use can vary based on individuals’ gender, social class, educational level, religious affiliation, etc., all of which influence understanding and meaning. Further, language use is intricately tied to our social scripts. Individuals learn the meanings of words and the labels attached to events as part of the learning process associated with social and institutionalized scripts (Mead, 1934). Even before children are able to master spoken language, they are taught various social scripts through interaction. More specifically, children learn to *do gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987) as they interact with their parents/guardians, siblings, peers, etc. There are scripts of appropriate “male” and “female” behavior that are revealed within social contexts. In addition to the spoken word, *how* information is conveyed cannot be ignored. Nonverbal communication is a powerful component of social interaction. Lefkowitz and Stoppa (2006) noted parents’ nonverbal messages about sexuality may contradict the verbal message (i.e., conversations around sexuality are embarrassing and/or uncomfortable). Hence, symbolic interactionism offers a useful framework to examine how children develop/create sexual identities and attitudes toward sexuality.

Lastly, symbolic interactionism is often mentioned as a useful tool to study how sexual scripts (Cahill, 1983) and sexual identities and the sense of self (Longmore, 1998; Weis, 1998) are created and maintained through social interaction.

According to Plummer (2007), as “the biological and the social interact; chance, choice, and determination interact; childhood learning and adult life interact; symbols and the material worlds interact,” symbolic interactionism is a “hands-on ‘down-to-earth’ empirical approach” that can embrace the “messiness” of people’s realities (pp. 22–23).

Queer Theory

Queer theory, stemming from symbolic interaction and feminist theories, is a framework that has been used to deconstruct categories of gender, sexuality, and family (Epstein, 1996; Oswald et al., 2005). The unique contribution of queer theory is the unit of analysis: heteronormativity (Oswald, Kivalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz 2009). Queer theorists have argued for a more critical and nuanced examination of heteronormativity as an ideology that treats traditional gender roles, heterosexuality, and the nuclear, biologically related family as normative (Oswald et al.). Further, queer theorists focus on the role of power in the perpetuation of false binaries that exist in relation to gender, sexuality, and family (i.e., male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, and genuine/pseudo families), and prompt us to question who benefits from maintenance of the status quo. For example, a critical analysis of the discrete groupings that are used to categorize sexual identities urges us to consider what is meant by *homosexual* and *heterosexual* (Berkowitz, 2009). It would also prompt examination of identities and relationships, such as bisexuality,¹ asexuality,² and polyamory,³ that exist—yet often remain invisible—outside (or within) the standard binary structure. Thus, “queering” refers to ideas, perspectives, and behaviors that resist heteronor-

mativity by contesting gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries (Oswald et al., 2005).

Queer theory has the capacity to reveal the complexity of gender, sexuality, and family relations by prompting researchers to investigate how heteronormativity is both upheld and resisted by everyone (Oswald et al., 2009). For example, a queer theoretical approach urges against a reductionist perspective that would view all lesbian- and gay-parent families as intentionally challenging traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and family (Goldberg, 2010). Indeed, Goldberg noted: “Just as it is very difficult to generalize a particular descriptor or statement to all heterosexual parents or heterosexual-parent families, it makes little sense to describe all lesbian- and gay-parent families as either assimilationist or radical” (p. 11). Further, a person or a family may simultaneously uphold *and* resist heteronormativity in different ways (Goldberg). For example, Kivalanka and Goldberg (2009) interviewed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) young adults with lesbian/bisexual mothers and found that although the mothers resisted heteronormativity through their own embodiment of queer parenting, some of them also upheld heteronormativity with reactions to their children’s disclosures such as: “I wish you weren’t gay.” Thus, queer theory demands that the limitations of existing perspectives be critically analyzed, and also allows for the development of new perspectives and ways of thinking (Goldberg, 2007).

Keeping these theoretical groundings in mind, we now turn to the heart of the chapter to consider how sexual socialization in families—the creation and re-creation of sexual culture—occurs across the life span. We begin with a discussion of sexual socialization in childhood and adolescence.

¹*Bisexuality* refers to an identity of someone who is attracted (sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically) to both men and women (Rust, 2001).

²*Asexuality* refers to an identity and/or the experience of someone who does not experience sexual attraction or desire (Scherrer, 2008).

³*Polyamory* refers to a relationship orientation that assumes “it is possible to maintain multiple love relationships and desirable to be open and honest within these” (Barker, 2005, p. 76).

Sexual Socialization of Children and Youth: What Do Families Teach and How Do They Teach It?

Sexual socialization of children and youth begins in family life; sexual socialization practices and intentions become a foundation for understandings and enactments of sexualities for the rest of

one's life. These socialization messages are sent explicitly through direct, purposeful teachings, but also implicitly or indirectly through conscious and unconscious verbal as well as nonverbal communication of sexual attitudes, values, and expectations. This diversity in family sexual socialization of children is often rooted in cultural and ethnic group differences. In this section we consider childhood sexual socialization, emphasizing gender socialization because it greatly overlaps with, and has received far more attention than, sexual socialization in childhood. We then examine family sexual socialization in adolescence, including the intersections of parent and child gender and communication, and recent research on culturally distinctive socialization practices.

Sexual and Gender Socialization in Childhood

Although parents are generally thought to be the earliest and primary source of sexual socialization during early childhood (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006), little research exists beyond the gender development literature on the family sexual socialization of young children. This is likely due to the fact that preadolescent children are rarely thought of in relation to sexuality.⁴ It has been noted, however, that although children do not generally engage in sexual intercourse until later developmental stages and are not "sexual" in the same way as adolescents or adults, even very young children are sexual beings who are exposed to sexual messages from family and society (Christopher, 2001). For example, parents' values and beliefs about sexuality are thought to influence their children's values and beliefs in this regard (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). A recent study by Martin (2009) explored how heterosexuality is reproduced and normalized in families with very young children. Martin found that most of the mothers in her study assumed their preschool children to be heterosexual, described to their children adult loving relationships as exclusively hetero-

sexual, and did not discuss with their children the existence of non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Thus, it seems that many parents of young children begin laying the foundation for the perpetuation of heteronormativity (Martin). Conversely, another recent study found that heterosexual young adults who were deemed to have positive attitudes toward LGB people identified early normalizing experiences in childhood (e.g., their heterosexual parents making their acceptance of LGB people known to their children from an early age, including their disapproval of heterosexism and homophobia⁵) as a key feature of their attitude formation (Stotzer, 2009). Indeed, Christopher (2001) asserted that "children do not enter into adolescence with a blank sexual slate" (p. 11).

As is true of the larger literature on sexual socialization, the topic of childhood sexuality is typically approached from a perspective of risk. According to Fisher's (2004) review, the few existing studies in this area have focused primarily on the influence of family environmental factors, including witnessing parental sexual behavior, family nudity, and co-sleeping, on children's later sexual attitudes and behaviors. Fisher concluded that these studies have provided little evidence for the common claim that such experiences are detrimental to children's adjustment. As a result of the relative inattention to childhood sexuality, little research exists on normative, healthy aspects of children's sexuality, such as engagement in activities that provide them with physical pleasure (e.g., masturbation) and information-seeking regarding sexual topics (Christopher, 2001⁶; for exceptions, see Bancroft, 2003; Sandfort & Rademakers, 2000).

⁵*Heterosexism* is defined as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (Herek, 1992, p. 89); *homophobia* has been defined as the negative emotions targeted at lesbian and gay individuals, their children, or their families and stems from heterosexism (Sears, 1992).

⁶A consequence of this inattention to childhood sexuality is a juggernaut for research: there are few empirical examples to follow, few well-documented methodologies for appropriate approaches, and persistent aversion from scientific authorities (funders; human subjects review boards) that undermine support for further research (O'Sullivan, 2003).

⁴A notable exception is research on childhood sexual abuse (e.g., see Fisher, 2004).

The majority of research related to young children's sexuality focuses on gender development. Although sexuality and gender are typically acknowledged as interrelated, they "have remained largely distinctive fields of inquiry" (Kitzinger, 2001, p. 272)—a divide we do not intend to perpetuate. Sexual socialization is closely tied to gender socialization, for example, in that how gender is defined and expressed within families contributes to children's ideas and beliefs about sexuality. Parents and other family members, along with extra-familial influences, play a primary role in influencing children's ideas about gender and the behaviors that are "appropriately" associated with being female or being male. Children learn at a very early age that women are expected to marry men, and vice versa (Martin, 2009), and that all women should be nurturing caregivers of babies. These concepts and constructs situate the roots of sexuality in the context of gendered family life. Although a thorough review of the gender development literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, some key points are necessarily highlighted here (see Powlishta, Sen, Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, & Eichstedt, 2001, for a more extensive discussion).

Powlishta et al. (2001) provided a review of the literature on gender development from infancy through middle childhood. According to their review, parents' attitudes about gender roles, as well as their personality characteristics, play a role in influencing children's gendered attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. That is, children who live in "nonconventional" households in regard to gender roles exhibit less traditionally gendered attitudes and behaviors than children who live in "conventional" households (p. 129). Likewise, more traditional parental gender-role socialization practices are associated with less flexible gendered attitudes and preferences in children. Gender socialization begins early, such that even toddlers have some knowledge of gender stereotypes in relation to many common activities, such as caring for children. By the time children are 5 years old, they have broadened their stereotypes to include roles and traits, such that being strong, loud, hard, and

powerful are among traits associated with males, and being weak, quiet, soft, and helpless are among traits associated with females. Powlishta et al. report group differences in gender socialization relative to socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and family structure. In general, children's higher socioeconomic status tends to be associated with less traditional gender-related attitudes and behaviors, while African American children seem to exhibit less stereotypically gendered behavior than European American children. Finally, boys living with single mothers have been found to display less traditional gender roles than do boys living in homes with fathers present. Consistent with Powlishta et al.'s review, a recent study found that lesbian mothers and their children held less traditional gender role attitudes than heterosexual parents and their children (Sutfin et al., 2008). Gender socialization in childhood sets the stage for sexuality development and socialization in adolescence and beyond.

Sexual Socialization in Adolescence

Sexual socialization in the adolescent years has received much more attention in the social science literature. Indeed, research has typically treated early adolescence (i.e., puberty) as the "starting point of sexual development" (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004, p. 191). The majority of research—and, thus, our focus—has been on parental influences on the sexual socialization of youth. Undoubtedly, other factors, namely peers and media, are also important sources of influence on adolescents' sexuality-related behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. Indeed, there is some evidence that youth may turn to or rely on peers and media more frequently than parents for information about sexuality (Heisler, 2005; Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002 as cited in Wright, 2009b). Parents, however, may be able to assist youth in interpreting the sexuality-related messages received from these various sources, while also sharing their own perspectives (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). Other family members, including

siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and fictive kin, also play a role in this regard, acting as potentially important role models and/or sources of information. Fisher (2004) reviewed the sparse literature on siblings' roles in sexual socialization of youth in the family, and found some evidence to support the notion that older siblings may influence the sexual behavior of younger sisters and brothers. Fisher reported that younger siblings tend to have sex at earlier ages than older siblings, and younger sisters with older sisters who get pregnant in adolescence are more likely to get pregnant themselves, and to hold permissive values regarding nonmarital adolescent childbearing. These few studies seem to be consistent with the "risk" focus of most adolescent sexuality research; thus, studies examining how siblings serve as positive role models for one another and, especially, as confidantes, who offer support and guidance, would be highly beneficial to a discussion of positive sexual socialization in families.

In terms of familial influence on adolescent sexuality, researchers have primarily focused on: (a) explicit socialization practices, namely the discussions between parents and their adolescent children about sexuality, and (b) family correlates of adolescent sexual behavior, such as family structure, socio-economic status, and race/ethnicity (Fisher, 2004). Thus, we know that family sexual socialization differs for single-parent compared to two-parent families. For example, youth with single parents may be confronted with their parents' sexuality if their parents are dating, while children in two-parent families witness parents showing affection to each other (or not) and, thus, implicitly learn about adult sexual relationships (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). Further, there may be social class and ethnic/cultural group differences in the ways families socialize adolescents regarding sexuality. In addition, the sexual socialization of adolescents is based in a complex interplay between family role (parent and child) and gender (mother/father; daughter/son). These dynamics are a backdrop for family sexual socialization, which we discuss below, considering the distinctive nature of these processes across culture and social classes.

Parent-Adolescent Communication About Sexuality

Much of the research on adolescent sexual socialization in families has focused on direct parent-adolescent communication about sexuality. This is one area for which there is a robust body of research (Fisher, 2004). It is clear from the research on family sexual communication that many parents and youth (at least in the United States) are generally uncomfortable discussing sexual topics with one other (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007). Indeed, fear of embarrassment was cited by both mothers and adolescents as a reason for their lack of communication about sexuality (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000). Certain sexuality-related topics may be particularly taboo; for example, studies have found that parents rarely discuss sexual desire or pleasure with their adolescent children (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). Some research has found that Black/African American parents are more likely to discuss sex-related information with their children than parents from other racial/ethnic groups (Fisher, 2004; Sprecher, Harris, & Meyers, 2008), while higher family social class seems to be associated with more extensive sex education between parents and adolescents (Sprecher et al.).

Mothers seem to engage their children in sexuality-related communication more often than fathers (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006; Sprecher et al., 2008); certainly, more research has focused on mother-child communication than father-child communication in this regard. According to Lefkowitz and Stoppa's (2006) review of the literature, the most frequently discussed sexuality-related topics between mothers and adolescents were STDs and AIDS, dating and sexual behavior, pregnancy, abstinence, and menstruation. Although studies have shown conflicting results in associations between frequency of mother-adolescent discussions of sex and adolescent sexual behavior, it seems that more extensive sex-related communication has been associated with reduced frequency of intercourse and unprotected sex among adolescents (Lefkowitz & Stoppa). Further, group differences by ethnicity have been explored in regard to mother-child communication; one study reported that Latina

American mothers dominated sexuality-related conversations with their adolescent children more than European American mothers, perhaps due to a cultural difference whereby Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanics to expect parents to be directive and children to be obedient (Lefkowitz, Romo, Corona, Au, & Sigman, 2000). Lastly, studies exploring how lesbian mothers teach their children about sexuality-related topics reported that lesbian participants aimed to educate their children regarding all aspects of sexuality, including options beyond heterosexuality, and to provide an open atmosphere in which to discuss such topics (Gabb, 2004; Mitchell, 1998).

Although most studies have focused on mothers as the primary sources of direct sexuality communication between parents and adolescents, studies have also included fathers in this regard. A recent review of 49 empirical studies of father-child sexual communication (Wright, 2009a) concluded that fathers are more likely to engage in sexual communication with sons than daughters, and that Black and Latino fathers engage in more sexual communication than do Whites. Social class was also found to be positively correlated with sexual communication, although less educated fathers may be more likely to discuss some topics (e.g., how to prevent pregnancy) compared to more educated fathers. In terms of influence, father-child communication about sexuality is associated both with children's knowledge about sexuality, and children's beliefs that they can communicate with partners about sexuality (Wright).

A promising development in recent years has been growing attention to family sexual socialization practices that do not involve direct verbal communication, and the degree to which sexual values and indirect communication practices are rooted in deeper ethnic or cultural values. This work has come largely from studies of Latino families (e.g., Lefkowitz et al., 2000), but recent work on Asian American families also points to important cultural differences in communication patterns that are relevant for understanding family sexual socialization (in all families). The body of research on parent-adolescent discussions

about sexuality is based largely on studies of European-American families, for whom direct verbal communication is a dominant cultural feature. However, scholars have pointed out that in collectivist or interdependent (as compared to individualist) cultures, the meanings derived from communication are often based in the physical context, external cues, and social relationships of the communicators (Gudykunst, 1998). This "high context" communication may be non-verbal and rely on indirect messages to communicate meaning. Thus, in a recent study of Asian American women's experiences of family sexual socialization, most women emphatically reported that their parents did not speak to them about sexuality, yet perceived clear, consistent messages about their parents' values and expectations for their sexual behavior through nonverbal and indirect cues (Kim, 2009). These Asian American women clearly perceived the sexual socialization goals of their parents through gossip, restricted social activities, and closely monitored behavior. When direct communication did occur, its purpose was not perceived to be for education, but for probing and monitoring daughters' behavior (Kim).

Such high context communication is rooted in several cultural factors, including the hierarchical nature of social relationships, particularly family relationships, and cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality. For example, in many Asian cultures, a strongly held taboo against recreational sexual activity, particularly for unmarried women, is coupled with a concern for "saving face" or remaining in good social standing. As a result there are strong motives for communicating expectations for daughter's sexual conduct, even in the context of pressure to avoid direct discussion (Kim, 2009). Not surprisingly then, in spite of the fact that Asian American women report clear sexual socialization messages from their parents (Kim), a recent study showed that mothers' reports of mother-child sexual communication were an important predictor of noncoital sexual activity for European American but not Asian American adolescents (Lam, Russell, & Leong, 2008).

Gender and Racial Expectations, Stereotypes, and Double Standards

As previously noted, prior research suggests that children and adolescents may be more likely to engage in communication about sexual issues with their mothers than their fathers (Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2008). Meanwhile, parents—especially mothers—seem more likely to talk with their daughters about sexual topics than their sons (Byers et al.; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998). Together, these processes perpetuate a gendered sexual socialization begun in childhood that sets the stage for the sexual double standard: adolescent girls are raised to be the gatekeepers of sex and sexuality, while adolescent boys, in their comparative lack of explicit family sexual socialization, learn expectations for their sexual agency through pervasive messages of hegemonic masculinity, both at home and in the larger society (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Indeed, parents may have different dating rules for their daughters than their sons, thereby allowing boys more sexual freedom than girls (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). For some Latino parents, for example, persistent concerns about girls' innocence or purity are often based on concerns for the reputation of the family (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). These cultural beliefs may lead some Latino families to engage in more direct messages about sexual expectations for Latina girls (Raffaelli & Green, 2003) or to restrict daughters' behavior, particularly regarding socializing with boys (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001).

In general, girls of most racial and ethnic backgrounds receive societal messages that they should make themselves attractive to men but be passive and/or in control of their own sexual desire (Reid & Bing, 2000), while boys are socialized to actively respond to their (expected) heterosexual sexual desires by "getting girls" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 23). This sexual double-standard may be one reason why young women are more likely to report feelings of guilt after first sexual intercourse, while young men are more likely to report feelings of pleasure (Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995). College women who recalled that their parents endorsed the messages that men are sex-driven and women are the gatekeepers of sex reported their first coital experience as "less

loving" than those who did not recall their parents endorsing such sentiments (Smiler, Ward, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2005). Conversely, college women who reported receiving parental messages pertaining to sexual freedom, including the benefits of sexual exploration, described their first coital experience as more positive and empowering (Smiler et al.). The sexual double-standard, meanwhile, also has been implicated as a primary contributing factor in the perpetuation of sexual harassment and dating violence among adolescents (Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003).

When considering gendered sexual socialization, it is necessary to analyze the intersections of gender sexual stereotypes with those based on race and/or ethnicity. The majority of scholarship in this regard has focused on girls of various racial/ethnic backgrounds, as opposed to boys, perhaps because girls are thought to be especially influenced by (sometimes conflicting) societal messages and influences (Tolman & Diamond, 2001). Stereotypes, or cultural stories, of the sexual natures of girls are imbued with racist and classist notions of "good" vs. "bad" girls (Reid & Bing, 2000). Tolman (1996) described the myths that exist in society about White girls—especially White middle to upper class girls—being "good" or "ideal" girls in regard to sexual virtue, while poor girls and girls of color (i.e., "urban girls") are viewed as naturally promiscuous and dangerous. Parents may play an important role in helping girls to resist these stereotypes; for example, African American mothers have been found to provide their daughters with alternative notions of femininity and female sexuality (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). Interestingly, however, as Tolman and Diamond (2001) note, research in the area of "risky" adolescent sexual behavior has reflected dominant sexual narratives: studies have focused disproportionately on girls, especially girls from poor families and girls of color. Conversely, the majority of studies on sexual socialization in adolescence have been undertaken with (presumably) heterosexual parents and their heterosexual children; thus, we turn now to a brief discussion of sexual orientation identity as a factor to be considered in the sexual socialization of youth.

Sexual Orientation Identity and Family Sexual Socialization

Individuals in our society are generally presumed to be heterosexual unless they “come out” otherwise (Oswald et al., 2005). Thus, most families tend to both implicitly and explicitly share their expectations that youth will experience heterosexual attractions, take on heterosexual identities, and pursue heterosexual relationships (Martin, 2009). In response to these assumptions, a new area of inquiry has developed in the area of family sexual socialization: studies of sexual identity. These studies focus on the sexual socialization in families where parents are sexual minorities (LGBTQ), in families where children are LGBTQ, or in a few studies, families where both parents and children are LGBTQ.

Although parental sexual identity is generally not a focus of inquiry in studies of adolescent sexuality (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006), studies of the sexual orientation identity of youth with lesbian and gay parents have often been undertaken in the interest of determining whether these children are more likely to identify as non-heterosexual than children of heterosexual parents. As previously noted, existing research (much of which relies on non-random sampling methods) suggests that lesbian and gay parents are no more likely than heterosexual parents to raise lesbian- and gay-identified children.⁷ Most youth and adults with lesbian and gay parents identify as heterosexual, and do not appear to be different from youth/adults with heterosexual parents in regard to experiences of same-sex attraction (Bailey et al., 1995; Gottman, 1990; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004). Tasker and Golombok’s (1997) longitudinal study, however, revealed complex findings regarding the sexuality of adults with lesbian parents. Although the young adults with lesbian mothers were similar to the young adults with heterosexual mothers, the young adults from lesbian families were more

likely to have considered the possibility of having a same-sex relationship and to have actually been involved in a same-sex relationship. Thus, having non-heterosexual parents may, to some extent, “queer” children’s notions of sexuality and gender in that these children are aware of possibilities for themselves beyond heterosexuality.

Children of lesbian and gay parents—at the very least, those of whom come to identify as LGBTQ themselves—may benefit from an early understanding of non-heterosexual relationships. For example, some participants in Kovalanka and Goldberg’s (2009) study of “second generation” youth (i.e., LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ parents) reported that, although they did not feel that there was a causal relationship between their parents’ sexual identities and their own, they believed that having non-heterosexual parents had given them broader conceptualizations of potential sexual/gender identity options. In addition, some felt they discovered their non-heterosexual and non-gender-conforming identities earlier than they might have if they had been raised by heterosexual parents. These data suggest that some LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ parents may recognize their sexual/gender identities sooner as a function of their unique familial context, which may in turn contribute to a less arduous and lengthy identity formation process than is often reported in the LGBTQ youth literature (Morrow, 2004; Savin-Williams, 1996).

Although it may be more obvious and salient for lesbian and gay parents to consciously and positively address variations in sexual identities and behaviors (Mitchell, 1998), it could be beneficial for all parents to provide their children with such information. Indeed, it is common for LGBTQ youth with heterosexual parents to fear rejection upon coming out to their parents (Savin-Williams, 1996) and to experience feelings of isolation (Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). In fact, a recent study documents the dramatic role of parents’ attitudes and behaviors regarding their adolescent children’s LGBTQ status (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanches, 2009); LGBTQ young adults’ reports of parental rejection during adolescence were strongly linked to mental and behavioral health risk several years

⁷Until large, population-based studies that intentionally include children of both heterosexual and same-sex parents are available, it will be impossible to draw definitive conclusions about whether lesbian/gay parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to have lesbian/gay children.

later. Although these studies do not tap direct family sexual socialization or communication, parental rejection of a child's LGBTQ status or identity is a clear socializing message about sexual and family values.

Sexual Socialization in Adulthood

Sexual development carries on throughout our entire lives (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). Likewise, sexual socialization also continues across the life span such that individuals continue to influence and be influenced by others. Life course, social learning, and symbolic interactionist theories tell us that what we learned about sexuality as youth carries over into our adult lives. We also receive messages about sexuality regarding each adult life stage we enter. Families continue to play a role in sexual socialization to varying degrees, for example, by implicitly and explicitly sharing their expectations regarding marriage and parenthood. We also influence others' expectations of us as adult sexual beings in different life stages by how we live our lives and whether we uphold or resist those expectations. The sexual socialization that takes place in adulthood varies across time and place and is influenced by such social location factors as race, gender, sexual orientation identity, social class, and relationship status. Unfortunately, less is known about the sexual socialization of adults—especially in the context of families. Most research has assumed that sexuality is something that is satisfactorily and permanently acquired by the time we enter adulthood. In this section, we consider some important aspects of sexual socialization in adulthood.

The Heterosexual Marriage Ideal

More people remain single for longer and more people never marry than ever before in U.S. history; thus, sex outside of marriage is becoming more common and more accepted. Despite these demographic and attitudinal changes, heterosexual marriage remains “the social context in which

sexual expression is thought to be most legitimate” (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002, p. 12). For most people in the U.S., the notion of sexuality is intimately associated with notions of romantic love and marriage (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2004). Further, couple relationships are still deemed central to our society, such that the vast majority of Americans do enter into marriage at some point in their lives. With many lesbian and gay rights groups advocating for the right to marry, it seems that those who are in heterosexual relationships are not the only ones feeling the “pull to the altar” (and/or to city hall).

Heterosexual marriage, however, is still widely viewed as the ideal couple arrangement and context in which to have children; it is considered something to strive for and to hold in high regard. Laws and policies perpetuate and solidify this view of heterosexual civil marriage by attaching to it a multitude of rights, benefits, and protections, which are reserved for those who enter into this contractual relationship.⁸ Families also often perpetuate the heterosexual marriage ideal, first by making seemingly innocuous comments to children, such as “When you grow up and get (heterosexually) married, ...” (Martin, 2009), and then later by more directly asking young adult family members if they “Have any (heterosexual) marriage prospects yet?” If/when a young adult family member does enter into heterosexual marriage, a common next question posed by those inside (and outside) the family is: “When do you think you’ll start a family?” This question implies at least three things: (a) the couple is expected to want children, (b) the couple’s family (and, indeed, society) expects them to have children, and (c) the couple is not a genuine family until they have children. In addition to heterosexual

⁸Despite the fact that six states and the District of Columbia now allow same-sex couples to enter into legally-recognized civil marriages, the 1996 Federal Defense of Marriage Act defined marriage as between one man and one woman for federal purposes; thus, even same-sex couples who get married in one of these six states or DC are not privy to the majority of the over 1,100 federal rights, benefits, and protections that accompany marriage for heterosexual couples.

couples who have chosen not to have children or are questioning whether to have children, those couples who want to have children but who have trouble getting pregnant may feel extra pressure from family members and others who ask questions and offer advice about how often the couple has sex, when they have sex, and/or how they have sex. Thus, sexual relations, usually presumed to be a private affair, become a matter of public scrutiny (Christopher & Kisler, 2004). Once a woman becomes a mother, however, she may be viewed as devoid of sexuality. Reid and Bing (2000) note the irony of maternity: motherhood is held by many to be the pinnacle of women's sexuality, yet in motherhood women are assumed to become asexual.

Recognition of the assumption, expectation, and idealization of heterosexuality is not novel—Adrienne Rich (1980) wrote about *compulsive heterosexuality* decades ago. Herdt and Koff (2001), however, built upon Rich's ideas and referred to the perpetuation of the marriage ideal as the "Heterosexual Family Myth." The Heterosexual Family Myth tells us two things: *only* by entering into a heterosexual marriage—and then having children—will people be truly happy, and *simply* by entering into a heterosexual marriage—and then having children—will people be truly happy. According to Herdt and Koff:

The incessant message tells how by falling in love with someone of the opposite sex and desiring to have children with the beloved (the greatest expression of love) a person achieves normal development and happiness. Something is abnormal or wrong with a boy or girl who does not get married, stay married, and have children, according to the formula of this sacred myth (p. 18).

Thus, this myth also presumes a "natural" order to these events—entering into heterosexual marriage and then having children—such that any deviation (i.e., remaining single throughout adulthood, identifying as lesbian or gay, cohabiting long-term with a same- or different-sex partner, getting divorced, remaining child-free throughout adulthood, having children out of wedlock, having children from a previous marriage) is considered less than ideal, incomplete, "abnormal," and/or "wrong."

Herdt and Koff (2001) used the Heterosexual Family Myth to help explain why heterosexual parents of lesbian and gay individuals often respond to the news of their son or daughter's sexual orientation identity with sadness and despair. Many of these parents spoke about their feelings of loss—loss of their dreams for their children to grow up and get married and become parents, as well as loss of the dream for themselves of becoming grandparents. Indeed, these parents were mourning their notions of familial happiness for their children and for themselves. Most people are at least aware of the existence of lesbian and gay parents; thus, this type of parental reaction seems to signify the idealized status that having a biological child in the context of a heterosexual marriage holds in our society.

Although the Heterosexual Family Myth is alive and well and still wields influence in many families, Herdt and Koff (2001) noted that the overall power and pervasiveness of the myth is weakening. The stigma of living an "alternative lifestyle"—identifying as lesbian or gay, delaying marriage, never marrying, cohabiting, being a single parent, divorcing, and living in blended families—is lessening as cultural attitudes and values change and as these "lifestyles" become more commonplace. As more and more young lesbian women and gay men (and their families) see parenthood as a possibility for themselves (Rabun & Oswald, 2009), and more and more families realize that marriage and having children are not the keys or the sole avenues to happiness, the havoc that the Heterosexual Family Myth wreaks on family members will continue to diminish. We turn now to a general discussion of sexual attitudes and behaviors of adults in the U.S.—with the primary focus on young adults and those in middle adulthood.

Sexuality in Young and Middle Adulthood

Adult sexuality research has grown in the past couple of decades. For example, researchers have begun to document "hooking up," as opposed to traditional one-on-one dating, as an avenue

through which many young adults (particularly on college campuses) pursue sexual activity (Bogle, 2008). Further, a large body of work has focused on adults' sexual attitudes and behaviors, drawing in part from representative national-level data (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). The vast majority of respondents to these surveys are individuals who identify as heterosexual and/or who are primarily in heterosexual relationships; only 4 % of the female respondents and 6 % of the male respondents to the groundbreaking National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs) reported some degree of attraction to the same sex (Laumann et al.). Although limited information exists in this regard, comprehensive reviews of the sexual relationships of lesbians and gay men can be found elsewhere (e.g., Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004).

Willetts, Sprecher, and Beck (2004) summarized findings from the NHSLs and the General Social Survey, both of which are nationally representative data sets that include responses from adults living in the U.S., as well as some smaller scale studies. Some of the major findings they reported include that the majority of adults in the U.S. are involved in sexual relationships with partners who are similar to them in terms of race/ethnicity, education level, age, and religion. Meanwhile, in terms of number of sexual partners, most women and men report having had one sexual partner in the past year, with the next most common response being zero. Sexual activity between partners tends to decrease with age and duration of the relationship, regardless of whether the couple is married, cohabiting, different-sex, or same-sex. Additionally, individuals in cohabiting relationships report engaging in sexual activity most frequently, followed by married, and then single, individuals. Although vaginal intercourse is the most commonly reported sexual activity among adults, Willetts and colleagues note that many couples reported varying their sexual activity, for example, by giving and/or receiving oral sex, taking showers or baths together, and/or going to a hotel to spend time alone with each other.

Many interesting attitudinal findings emerged from the NHSLs data set in regard to race/ethnicity, gender, and class. Mahay et al. (2001)

analyzed the NHSLs data to examine gender and racial/ethnic similarities and differences in sexual attitudes regarding premarital sex, homosexual sexual activity, the extent to which religion shapes sexual behavior, whether respondents would have sex only if they were in love, and whether any sexual activity between adults is ok with consent. The authors noted the widespread agreement among African Americans, Mexican Americans, Other Hispanics, and Whites in regard to these topics; the majority of women and men in all cultural groups did not believe that premarital heterosexual sex was wrong, believed that homosexual sexual activity was wrong,⁹ and agreed that any sexual activity between consenting adults was acceptable. Notable differences between cultural groups include that Mexican Americans and African American women appeared to have more traditional attitudes toward sexuality than Whites and African American men. For example, Mexican Americans were significantly more likely than Whites to regard premarital sex as wrong and to report that religion shapes their sexual behavior; further, Mexican American women were much more likely than White women to report that homosexual sexual activity was wrong. African American women were more likely than White women to report that religion shapes their sexual behavior, while African American men were less likely than men in other cultural groups to report that they would have sex only if they were in love. Of course, these findings should be interpreted with the understanding that there is wide variation *within* racial/ethnic groups themselves (Fine, Demo, & Allen, 2000).

Gender and socioeconomic class also played important roles in the interpretation of the NHSLs data on sexual attitudes. According to Mahay et al. (2001), gender was a more salient factor than race/ethnicity in shaping people's sexual attitudes. Women were more likely than men in

⁹Attitudes toward homosexuality seem to have changed significantly in recent years; according to a 2007 Pew poll (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/258.pdf>), 49 % of Americans said that homosexuality should be accepted, while 41 % said that it should be rejected.

all racial/ethnic groups to report that premarital sex is wrong, that religion shapes their sexual behavior, and that they would not have sex unless they were in love. These more traditional views may reflect the societal double standard that restricts women's sexuality more than men's. Some sexual attitudes, such as beliefs about homosexuality, appeared to be shaped most significantly by socioeconomic class, as indicated by level of education. For example, individuals who had at least attended some college were more likely than those with less education to report more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality, and less likely to agree that any sexual activity between consenting adults was acceptable.

Despite the wealth of information gained from these large-scale studies, scholars have noted that much is still unknown about adult sexuality. For example, although it is interesting and important to recognize differences in regard to sexual attitudes and behaviors based on race/ethnicity, gender, and class, it may be more important to learn about how and why these factors are important. These differences must also be examined in light of sexual stereotypes that exist in society about groups of people; for example, Tolman and Diamond (2001) point out that White, middle-class women have historically been seen as pure and without sexual desire, whereas African American, poor, and immigrant women were often viewed as the opposite: "naturally" more promiscuous and in need of greater social controls. Collins (2000, 2005) discusses historical and current sexuality images of African American women that are tied to myths about Black women's sexuality and have implications for their societal oppression.

It is also important to note that little is known from existing sexuality studies about adults' sexual feelings and experiences, as researchers "have adopted an impoverished approach to adult sexuality that tabulates acts, instead of eliciting their meanings and contexts" (Tolman & Diamond, 2001, p. 50). Plummer (2007) concurs, but also discusses a "vanishing sexuality" in both mainstream sexuality research as well as scholarship that focuses on meanings/constructions of sexuality. He asserts that little attention is given to people's sexual bodies and bodily desires, as

"there is little humping and pumping, sweatiness or sexiness in much sociological work" (p. 24). In an effort to better understand the complexities of sexual desire, Diamond (2008) looks at both biological bases of desire as well as how socialization influences people's experiences and interpretations of their own sexual desires. For example, whereas men are expected to have strong sexual desire and women are not, perhaps "women are, in effect, trained to discount their own bodily experiences of sexual desire because they lack the cultural basis to acknowledge and meaningfully interpret such feelings and experiences" (Tolman & Diamond, 2001, pp. 38–39). Thus, although there is neurological evidence that men may be more sensitive to sexual stimuli than are women (Laan & Janssen, 2007), it is also the case that women may be socialized to mistrust their physiological experiences of sexual arousal. Thus, there are important arguments for why constructions of sexuality should not, and cannot, be completely uncoupled from research on the biology and physiology of sexual response and experiences of sexuality. Lastly, information about the sexual experiences, feelings, and relationships of individuals and couples in *later* adulthood is also sorely lacking; the NHSLs, for example, only includes data on adults ages 18–59. Thus, we now turn to an understudied group in regard to sexuality: older adults.

Sexuality in Later Life

Similar to social constructions of children's sexuality, older family members are rarely the focus of sexuality-related discussions, research, or teachings. As a result, most adults are uninformed and/or misinformed about issues of aging and sexuality (Burgess, 2004); some—especially young adults—are uncomfortable with the thought of older adults having sexual feelings and/or acting upon those feelings (Allen, 2009). Research has revealed, however, that many individuals over the age of 60 are still sexually active (e.g., Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991; Matthias, Lubben, Atchison, & Schweitzer, 1997). Although the physical aging process can introduce challenges for sexually active older adults (Kingsberg,

2002), Burgess (2004) noted in her review of the literature that many older adults describe their later years as “the best time of their lives sexually” (p. 446), perhaps due to the absence of stressors such as raising children and worrying about getting pregnant. With the relatively healthy aging of the baby boomers who grew up during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and experienced unprecedented advancements in civil, feminist, and lesbian/gay rights, older adults will be likely to pursue late-life romantic relationships (Carr, 2004) and to practice an increasingly wide range of sexual behaviors (Burgess, 2004). Thus, as sexual attitudes of older adults change, the opportunity exists to, perhaps, more easily educate both older and younger cohorts about aging- and sexuality-related issues. Indeed, after showing the film, *Still Doing It: The Intimate Lives of Women Over 65*, to her undergraduate human sexuality class, Allen (2009) asks her students, among other questions, “What can younger people learn from older women about sexuality and intimacy?” (p. 356). The students’ responses reveal that the answer to the question is: a lot.

Burgess (2004) provides a comprehensive review of the literature on sexuality in midlife and later life, including what is known about the sexual lives of LGB older adults. Not surprisingly, Burgess reported that older adults who are married or cohabiting participate more frequently in sexual activities than single older adults—and those sexual activities include a wide range of sexual behaviors. For example, one study (Bretschneider & McCoy, 1988) cited in Burgess’ review found that the majority of respondents, who were 80 years old and older, reportedly often engaged in mutual caressing. Important factors related to sexuality in later life include gender, as women live longer than men; race/ethnicity, as certain cultural groups have lower rates of marriage than others (e.g., African Americans are less likely to marry than Whites); and class, as poor people experience health problems at younger ages, which inevitably affects their sexual lives (Burgess).

Younger family members may react negatively to an older adult family member’s interest in sexual behavior, especially if the older family member is a widow or widower (Carr, 2004). Moore and Stratton (2001) discuss disapproving reactions

on the part of adult children when their widowed parents start to date; for example, some of these younger family members may attempt to monitor their parents’ sexual behavior. This scenario was illustrated in a recent episode of *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, Bans, & Verica, 2009), in which an elderly man came to the hospital to have a penile implant. The man, who was a widower living in a nursing home, had gotten to know a woman with whom he wanted to “make love” but could not, due to his inability to maintain an erection. When the man’s son and daughter realize their father’s intention to spend his life savings on this surgery, they tell him that if he goes through with the surgery they will move him out of the nursing home and into one of their houses to share a room with one of the grandchildren. One of the doctors eventually steps in to convince the man’s children that they should not stand in the way of his happiness, but not before it is clear that the presumed notion is that older adults (like young children) are “nonsexual”—or that they should be (Kingsberg, 2002). Interactions between older and younger generations within families will inevitably have an influence on the sexual cultures within these families.

In summary, although attitudes about sexuality in later life are changing to include the possibilities of positive sexuality and thus family socialization for affirmative sexual expression in later life, tensions remain. It is still the case that for many adults in later life, there are persistent assumptions that sexual desire and behavior are or will become irrelevant. As they age and negotiate new life stages that may include dependence on younger generations in their families, many older adults are faced with the prospect of losing or having to give up their sexual agency, or challenge deeply held beliefs about their sexual lives.

Conclusion

In framing sexuality in families, we have considered several theoretical perspectives that we view as crucial for a critical analysis of the development and experiences of sexualities in the context of family relationships. We have reviewed contemporary understandings of how sexuality is learned

in family life through sexual socialization, both as this relates to the family sexual socialization of children and adolescents, where most attention has focused, but also as it relates to sexualities in later life. In our review our goal has been to emphasize the important social statuses and characteristics that, due to social inequalities, shape sexuality and its development over the life course: gender, age, race and culture, social class, relationship status, and sexual orientation identities.

For us, the review highlights that, despite the breadth of knowledge from these areas of scholarship, only recently has there begun to be a body of scholarship that seriously considers normative, healthy sexuality. Very recently, some scholars have focused on healthy sexuality development during adolescence (Russell, 2005), and on the role that families play in that positive development (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004); even less has been written about healthy sexual expression in adulthood. Given the emphasis on risk that has characterized the scholarship on sexuality, it is not surprising that studies have found, for example, that parents rarely discuss sexual desire or pleasure with their adolescent children (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). The aim of sexual socialization is often the prevention of sexual activity and its possible negative outcomes (i.e., teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, sexual coercion), rather than promotion of exploration of healthy, positive sexualities. This prevention-focused perspective, which may be predicated on religious and/or moralistic views of sexuality as “dangerous” or “sinful,” not only restricts our knowledge of adolescent sexuality but also stigmatizes normative behavior, thus promoting shame and silence on the part of adolescents (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004) as well as the elderly.

As we look to the future, there are promising areas of study that will contribute to understandings of sexuality and families. What positive messages can be offered, and how can families encourage positive sexuality development? How do families participate in the perpetuation of sexual stereotypes based on social statuses and inequalities? How could families play a role in addressing and deconstructing these stereotypes?

And how does childhood and adolescent sexual socialization set the stage for sexuality-related attitudes, values, and behaviors for the rest of life? We have solid understandings of sexuality at many isolated stages of the life span; prospective, longitudinal studies could deepen understandings of sexuality in family life by tracing these influences as families grow and develop. Thus, in addition to building from the strong research base in child and adolescent sexual socialization, there remains much to be learned about sexuality and family life over the life course.

In addition to these questions, recent advances in technology and methodologies for studying sexuality offer promising possibilities for the generation of new questions or even fields of study that may expand our understanding of sexuality in family life in the coming decade. For example, new technologies have become venues both for sexuality-related experiences (e.g., the internet and social media), as well as for the study of sexualities. This is an area for which scientific understanding is outpaced by social change, yet there are remarkable possibilities for studying sexuality in family life, as well as for reaching out to educate families through these technologies and new media. Similarly, we are learning much more about physiological sexual stimulation and response, and the role it plays in personal sexual motivation and desire. We are also just beginning to understand the complex interactions that may exist between physiology, desire, sociocultural expectations and scripts, and the personal meanings that guide sexuality (e.g., Diamond, 2008). Studies at the intersections of these fields will undoubtedly identify new questions regarding sexuality and its development in the context of family life.

Thus, sexuality and family life are rich areas for future research; perhaps such work could eschew the problem-focus that has characterized research on childhood and adolescence, and consider normative sexual development and expression in adulthood and later life. Hopefully such work might lead not only to greater understanding, but to the potential for improved and fulfilling sexual expression and health.

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