

Agency and Error in Young Adults' Stories of Sexual Decision Making

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Abstract: We conducted a qualitative analysis of 148 college students' written comments about themselves as sexual decision makers. Most participants described experiences in which they were actively engaged in decision-making processes of "waiting it out" to "working it out." The four patterns were (a) I am in control, (b) I am experimenting and learning, (c) I am struggling but growing, and (d) I have been irresponsible. The diverse ways in which young adults perceive themselves as sexual decision makers and actors reveals multiple contexts for promoting healthy sexual development through parental socialization, education, and research.

Key Words: adolescent sexuality, gender relations, narratives, premarital sex, sexual risk behaviors.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has been successful in separating sex and reproduction from marriage (Coontz, 2005). Premarital, unmarried, and postdivorce sex are now conceptualized as individual choices for *both* men and women (Risman & Schwartz, 2002). The liberation of individual choice regarding sexual decision making is reflected in Western media, which is saturated with contradictory messages and images that alternately exploit and repress sexuality. Teenagers, growing up in this era of highly sexualized media, are sexual actors, with the vast majority having initiated their sexual practices by the time they reach age 20 (Irvine, 2004). Understanding how young people have constructed and currently perceive their sense of agency as sexual decision makers is of critical importance for parents, educators, and policymakers who have the potential to guide and support them in making wise choices for agentic sexuality (Baber, 2000).

Learning to Make Sexual Decisions

Family, Peer, and Social Contexts

Families are the primary context in which messages about sexuality are first communicated. Children's earliest learning occurs as they observe and make meaning from their parents' actions. Parents who provide a stable and secure home environment facilitate their children's ability to form stronger sexual and emotional relationships as they develop (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). A positive socialization context for children allows them to experience more connection and emotional bonds with significant others, learn to regulate their behavior through the imposition of consistent limits, and develop a stable sense of self and personal autonomy (Barber & Olsen, 1997).

Socialization is complex, and multiple contexts, such as peers, schools, and social institutions interact,

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particularly as children transition to early then later adolescence (Peterson & Hann, 1999). Although families provide the foundation for children's socialization, not all parents are interested in or are adept at providing for children's positive sexual socialization. For example, as DeLamater and Friedrich (2002) pointed out, some parents instruct their children not to touch their bodies or they forbid talk about sex. Furthermore, as children become adolescents, peer influences rival or replace parenting influences as sources of knowledge and support. Richardson (2004) surveyed middle school students (ages 10 – 15) about the kinds of topics they would like to talk about with their parents. The most important issues they preferred to talk about with parents centered around the parent-child relationship, including autonomy and privileges, love, support, conflict, and trust. Far less important to these young adolescents was seeking out their parents for information about sensitive issues such as drugs, alcohol, sex, and pregnancy. Rosenthal and Feldman (1999) also found that adolescents did not approach their parents directly for sexual information.

Parents are often perceived as lacking the will and knowledge to openly discuss sexual topics with their sons and daughters, as Brock and Jennings (1993) found in their retrospective study of adult daughters' reflections on their mothers' sexual communication, and Fingerson's (2005) study of adolescent experiences with masturbation. Instead, Pistella and Bonati (1998) found that adolescents relied on a complex network of kin and nonkin sources for information about reproductive health and family-planning services. Siblings and peers are strong influences on adolescents as sources of knowledge and role models (Reinisch & Beasley, 1990). From a life course perspective, the period from childhood to adulthood is no longer easily demarcated as a distinct developmental phase. Young people are more aptly seen as emerging adults—no longer adolescents but not quite independent adults. Many are still financially and emotionally dependent on parents, but as emerging adults, they are experimenting with a variety of romantic and sexual roles (Arnett, 2000).

Sexual and romantic experiences among peers interact in multiple ways and often differ by gender (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006). Young men and women confront complex choices and make decisions about initiating sexual contact and giving consent (Regan, 1998). As

Risman and Schwartz (2002) observed, although the sexual revolution has been successful in disentangling sex from restrictive behavioral norms, double standards still play out in gendered relationships. Although young women have acknowledged their desire for sex, their behavior is constricted by the condition that sexual expression occur only within their romantic relationships (Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 2002). Female sexual desire is still regulated through the tool of sexual reputation, with women carrying the burden of protecting their reputation *and* ensuring safer sex and contraceptive responsibility, perhaps more so than ever (Baber, 2000; Jackson & Cram, 2003). Casual sex remains a male prerogative (Risman & Schwartz).

The new social construction of heterosexuality, in which women are expected to be both responsive to the wants and desires of their male partner *and* responsible for the care and maintenance of their intimate sexual relationship, acknowledges the triumph of the sexual revolution but also the stalled gender revolution (Risman & Schwartz, 2002). Men's needs and desires are privileged, and women's are muted (Fine, 1988). Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thomson (1998) found that young women's expressions of desire were not about their own experiences but represent their internalization (e.g., "the male in the head") of male needs, bodies, and desires. This incomplete gender revolution puts women, more so than men, at risk of being labeled promiscuous and feeling disempowered about their sexuality. Women's margin for error in sexual decision making is much narrower than their male counterparts.

Competing with the idea that families, parents, and peers are the main socializers of adolescent sexuality, Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle (2005) claimed that in the 21st century, private electronic media has become the primary sexuality educator of youth. Summarizing data from the Kaiser Family Foundation Report of 1997, DeLamater and Friedrich (2002) stated that young teens (ages 10 – 15) consider the mass media (e.g., movies, TV, magazines, music), as more important sources of information about sex and intimacy than parents, peers, and sexuality education programs. Mass media helps construct, reflect, challenge, and exploit human sexuality and gender relations. Sex is used to sell everything from household products to luxury vehicles and fast food; explicit sex acts are shown on prime-time television; and pornography is easily

available on the Internet. Children and adolescents are increasingly exposed, often unintentionally, to pornographic or violent images, or both, at younger ages through aggressive advertising, personal Internet use, and various entertainment outlets (Greenfield, 2004; Valkenburg & Soeters, 2001). These media depict contradictory messages about sexuality that alternatively perpetuate and challenge gendered expectations.

Contradictory gendered discourses are also found in popular magazines that promote female sexuality, even sexual prowess, yet also push for the perfect romance or love story (Tolman, 2000). Women are encouraged to be readily available for sex without any relational context but are simultaneously encouraged to be in a romantic loving relationship before engaging in sexual behaviors. Furthermore, Jackson's (2005) analysis of advice columns dealing with sexual health and identity from *Girlfriend*, an Australasian teen magazine, found that the majority of articles constructed sex as painful or dangerous. A discourse about safe sex or sex as a technique for self-exploration was rare, and few articles positioned young women as active, aware, or desiring sexual agents.

Although sex saturates both private and public discourse and is used to persuade and sell, Americans, both historically and today, are queasy about acknowledging the sexual desire of children and youth (Irvine, 2004). If adults are reticent to proactively and fairly address sexuality issues, such as the tension between sexual exploitation and repression, then, young people will remain vulnerable to misinformation from the very institutions (e.g., families, school, faith communities, and the media) that are charged with providing sex education. Young people will be left to generate their own ideas about what constitutes healthy sexual development and positive sexual decisions (Baber, 2000; Russell, 2005).

If young people begin their sexual careers with an inadequate knowledge about what constitutes sex, they are unprepared for the risks and responsibilities, including unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and participation in sexually coercive behavior. They are also unprepared to act with agency on behalf of their own sense of sexual desire. Lacking the knowledge to be empowered, their threshold for error—and the possibility of making mistakes—is lowered. Understanding the variety of ways in which sexual behavior can occur, such as sexual touching and kissing, vaginal intercourse, oral-genital

stimulation, anal intercourse, and self-pleasuring through masturbation (Baber, 2000), as well as the variety of relational contexts in which sexual desire is felt and expressed, such as romantic relationships, dating, and casual sex (Tolman & Diamond, 2001), can demystify some of the misinformation promoted by inaccurate and multidetermined sources (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). How young adults develop a sense of sexual agency given fragmented and contradictory knowledge, uncertain sexuality educators at home, school, and in the community, an overall exploitive culture of sexuality, and inequitable gender schemes is critical because young people *are* clearly being sexual in their everyday lives (Bearman & Bruckner, 2001; Irvine, 2004; Manlove, Franzetta, Ryan, & Moore, 2006; Russell, 2005).

Critical Feminist Framework on Developing Sexual Agency

To examine these issues, a critical feminist perspective guided the current study on sexuality. Our goal was to examine sexuality and power relations in society as manifested in the divergent sexual scripts that confront young people in the process of becoming sexual agents. The concept of sexual scripts from a feminist perspective focuses on structural intersections with personal biographies and views participants as active agents in their own lives (Baber, 2000). A feminist perspective is critical of the exclusive focus on the normative model of male sexual desire and behavior (Wood et al., 2006).

Feminism critiques traditional sexual scripts as cultural scenarios that reflect gender inequalities, heterosexism, and racism (Baber, 2000). Traditional gender scripts presume that young women are passive, compliant, and responsive to male needs and sexual prowess, and young men are assertive and knowledgeable about sexuality. Young women, of course, are not simply victims; they are agents who can negotiate affirming and empowering sexual meanings in their lives (Wood et al., 2006). A feminist perspective also considers the possibility that young men are not simply sexual leaders in relationships. They, too, can desire affirming and mutually empowering relationships (Regan, 1998). Traditional scripts contain both harmful and inaccurate messages. Viewed from a critical feminist perspective, the reality faced by emerging young adults is far more complex.

Method

Research Approach and Guiding Questions

The growing literature on emerging adults reveals that contemporary young people are dealing with sexuality as a central developmental issue, despite the lack of affirmative discourse on adolescent sexuality in the research literature or in public institutions (Russell, 2005). Qualitative, narrative approaches provide in-depth information about the ways in which young people give voice and ascribe meaning to their own sexual behavior (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Russell; Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 2002; Wood et al., 2006). Given the promises of a narrative approach, we asked young people to reflect on their emergent experiences as sexual agents. We framed this reflexive opportunity in the context of sexual learning in their home environments and its possible connections to making mistakes and learning from those mistakes. We wanted to know how young people made sense of their own sexual histories, how they connected their sexual experiences to family and other important relationships, and how they perceived their earlier sexual experiences now that they were transitioning to young adulthood.

Three research questions guided this study: (a) How do young adults conceptualize their learning process about responsible sexual behavior? (b) In what ways, if any, do they perceive that making mistakes has helped or hindered them in developing sexual agency? (c) How do they account for family influences in their stories of making mistakes and developing sexual agency?

Sample Description and Data Collection Procedures

Data consisted of 148 undergraduate students' written responses to three questions from an open-ended survey. Students were enrolled in an upper division human sexuality course at a public university. Students from every college on campus (e.g., architecture, agriculture, arts and sciences, education, engineering, human development) were enrolled in the class, which had a particular focus on global issues in human sexuality. All four authors have instructed the course. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the university Institutional Review Board.

The procedure used to collect data was to first show a 45-min film, *Teen Sex* (Discovery Channel University, 2004). The video is a documentary that follows the lives of several male and female adolescents from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds as they explore their sexuality. For example, in one story, a 14-year-old girl is acting out sexually in the midst of her peers. The video captures her conversations and actions, along with several of her male and female friends. Both she and her mother are interviewed about how much knowledge each thinks the mother has about her daughter's sexual behavior. A second story involves a 19-year-old couple who have decided to wait until marriage before engaging in sexual activity. The video portrays both partners' perspectives of sexual decision making as well as that of the young woman's parents. The video captures the struggles inherent in the decision they have made and chronicles their relationship over time.

We selected the video as a prompt for the current study because of its attention to the family, peer, and social contexts associated with teen sexuality. Reasoning that this film provided a common context for students to focus their written reflections, we showed the video following a unit with instructor lectures on childhood and adolescent sexuality. As feminist researchers, we made use of the "situation at hand" (Fonow & Cook, 1991) to collect qualitative data on a topic relevant and critical to the lives of the young people we teach.

To compose the questions for the students' responses, we viewed the film together as a group of researchers, discussed the content of the film following the first viewing, and then reflected individually on the salient themes. We each composed a written reflection, then met as a group to discuss the themes, questions, and concerns about teenage sexuality that emerged from our individual narratives. Many of the comments shared among the researchers included reflections of our own experiences with sexuality in adolescence and early adulthood. As human sexuality teachers, using our reflexive processing of the content of the film (e.g., do teenagers perceive their behavior as mistakes; are parents informed of their children's behavior) and our knowledge of the literature, we crafted three open-ended questions to focus students' reflection upon their own experiences with sexual decision making as teens and emerging adults.

The film was shown to students attending the first author's human sexuality class, in which 163 students were enrolled. Immediately following the film, students were given a form consisting of requests for their gender and age, as well as the three open-ended questions. They were asked to write a narrative response to each question:

1. Were there any experiences in your home life when you were growing up that influenced your sexual behavior or sexual decision making? Please describe.
2. Sometimes the best learning experiences come from a mistake. Did you make any mistakes in regard to your sexual decision-making when you were a teen that you learned from? If so, please describe the experience, and who or what helped you through it.
3. If the filmmakers had interviewed the people who raised you, what would they have said about you, and how accurate would they have been?

After the participant responses were collected, their names and any identifying information were removed. The narratives were photocopied, and a research team member typed student responses into a Word document. The data were subsequently entered in a qualitative software program, MAXqda, for data management and coding purposes.

A total of 148 responses were collected (100 female [67.6%] and 48 male [32.4%]). The average age of the participants was 20 years, with a range of 18 – 24. Although students were not explicitly asked other demographic information, we were able to ascertain the following: The course is a university core requirement, with students from diverse majors enrolled; therefore, course enrollment reflects the demographics of the university as a whole. That is, 70% of the students were from in-state. Two thirds were from suburban areas and one third from rural areas. Regarding undergraduate enrollment patterns by race, 72% of students were White, 7% Asian, 4% African American, 2% Hispanic, 2% International, less than 1% Native American, and 12% unknown.

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis was guided by our theoretical framework, research questions, literature review, and insiders' experiences as teachers of human sexuality (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We conducted a constructivist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006), where the categories that emerge from our analysis

are a function of our collective interactions with and questions about the data. We completed an initial phase of open coding, first independently reading the student narratives multiple times, noting nouns, verbs, themes, trends, and storylines that informed the initial open-coding process. For the second phase of data analysis, we again read the cases independently. Over a period of several months, we met together to read each case aloud to discuss and reflect on emerging themes and contradictions as we developed a fully elaborated coding scheme. This process involved independent coding, which we then reviewed together, one person sharing codes, often reading the data aloud, to consider nuances and interpretations. Through constant comparison and reflective analysis, we discussed coding disagreements in the context of the entire narrative until we reached 100% consensus on a final coding scheme that was applied to the data.

Our first coding scheme consisted of 10 major categories but after 12 iterations and revisions, we arrived at 6 major categories: (a) social contexts for sexual learning, (b) students' perceptions of their parents as sources of knowledge about sex, (c) how my parents perceive me as a sexual being, (d) sexual mistakes college students said they made, (e) the discourse of mistakes, and (f) students' stories of self as sexual decision makers and actors.

Results

The analysis for this study is focused primarily on students' stories of self as sexual decision makers and actors. We generated four substantive codes regarding students' self-perceptions of sexual agency: I am in control, I am experimenting and learning, I am struggling but growing, and I have been irresponsible about my sexual behavior (see Table 1). Because of insufficient information, seven student narratives could not be coded. For example, a 19-year-old female said that her parents did not really talk to her about sex, she did not make any mistakes, and her parents do not know anything about her sexual experiences. Thus, we did not code this case (and 6 others) because of such limited information.

As we explain below, we define students' self-perceptions of sexual agency within the context of making mistakes and consider how students situate their narratives in relationship to their family environment. Collectively, we tell a story of sexual decision

Table 1. *Young Adults' Self-Perceptions of Agency in Sexual Decision Making*

Group	Self-Perception of Sexual Agency	Males	Females	Subgroup Subtotals	Total
A	I am in control	24 (50%)	42 (42%)		66 (45%)
	1. Waiting it out	3 (6%)	13 (13%)	16 (11%)	
	2. Taking it slow	21 (44%)	29 (29%)	50 (34%)	
B	I am experimenting and learning	13 (27%)	36 (36%)		49 (33%)
C	I am struggling but growing	5 (11%)	16 (16%)		21 (14%)
D	I have been irresponsible	2 (4%)	3 (3%)		5 (3%)
	Could not be coded	4 (8%)	3 (3%)		7 (5%)
	Total	48	100		148

making within the context of individual and family development, as young people struggle with the tensions of developing agency and dealing with error.

I Am in Control

Nearly half of the sample (45%) expressed a view that they were in control of their sexual decision-making process. They had not made mistakes, either because they had not yet had any, or many, sexual experiences, or they saw themselves as making good decisions. The message in their narratives was, "I am exercising agency by following my own values and/or morals, and I learned them from my family." These individuals perceived that their behaviors and decision making were congruent with their values. Only a few said they arrived at their values and morals independently of their parents' influences.

We found two subgroups in the "I am in control" category: (a) those who were sexually inactive ("waiting it out") and (b) those who were acting in a responsible or relational manner, or both ("taking it slow"). Although the two subgroups differed in terms of degree of sexual activity they reported, they were alike in their self-perception of not having made any mistakes. Students in this group had learned to "protect" themselves—in the broadest sense of the word—by waiting out the decision to act sexually or by resisting peer pressure and taking their time to make sexual decisions that were right for them. They were not ready or willing to take risks, or both, beyond their family's teaching or beyond their own comfort level.

Waiting it out. In this first subgroup of 16 students (3 males and 13 females) who felt in control of their sexual decision making, the prominent storyline was "I am inactive." These students, 11%

of the sample, explicitly indicated that they are not sexually active. Mostly, they said they are waiting to have sex until marriage or they are abstaining from sex altogether. In responding to questions about their experiences growing up, mistakes they have made, and what their parents would say about their sexual behavior, inactive students referred to their parents' values, religious convictions, and childrearing strategies as having strong influences on their decisions to "wait it out." Two female students, aged 21 and 19, respectively, said,

The way I was raised affects my sexual decision-making. I was taught to wait till I get married and that has had a huge impact on my decisions about sex. I have never been put in a sex related situation. . . . I am a virgin.

I grew up Christian with the idea that no sex before marriage was the right way to go. I became involved with a Christian organization on campus and that strengthened my feelings even more. . . . My parents would say that they were sure I was not sexually active and they would have been right.

A 23-year-old male echoed these sentiments about parental influence, religiosity, and sexual abstinence:

I grew up in a very religious family. My parents never had a discussion about sex with me or my older brother. They expected us to wait until marriage. The conservative nature of my family has definitely influenced me to not commit to any sexual activity until marriage. Considering the fact that I am still a virgin and

have never had a girlfriend, I've never had to make a decision about my sexual activity.

A 19-year-old male indicated that although he was able to act on his own behalf, he also credited his parents for their educational guidance:

My parents talked to me about sex and made it very clear that when I do it, it would be my decision. They even offered me condoms when I went on a trip to the beach with my friends, in case that I decided to, I would be safer about it. That all helped me feel more comfortable about making a decision for myself, which is as of now to abstain until marriage. I have never made any mistakes; I came close, but always found the strength to overcome.

Taking it slow. In the second subgroup of students who felt in control of their sexual decision making, 50 narratives from 21 males and 29 females, consisting of three storylines, emerged: "I am responsible," "I am relational," and "I am relational and responsible." Unlike the "waiting it out" group, all the "taking it slow" students indicated that they had been or currently were sexually active. One third of the sample (34%) fell into the "taking it slow" subgroup. Males were overrepresented here (44% of males in the sample), with the majority of them telling the "I am responsible" storyline (33% of males in the sample). Clearly, a gendered script of male responsibility was prominent in this group.

The first storyline involves *responsible* students (16 males and 14 females) who did not perceive that their learning about sex came from making mistakes. They credited their sense of responsible decision making to (a) the lessons learned from their families, (b) observing and learning from others' mistakes, or (c) having a good head on their shoulders. Two 20-year-old males, who indicated a degree of influence from their parents, stated:

My parents allowed me to be responsible for my own decisions and tried to make sure I used good judgment.

I usually think about my actions and consequences and many things come into play in my mind . . . [My parents] would say that I am responsible, make wise decisions, and think before I act, yes.

Responsible students tended to share specific stories about the people around them. Again, several males commented on seeing the unplanned or unexpected pregnancies of others as influencing their responsible decision making. A 21-year-old explained:

When I was 10 my brother got his [girlfriend pregnant]. I felt like sex was the direct cause (not their wrecklessness [sic]).

A 19-year-old male shared:

There was one situation in my house that influenced me. My stepsister became pregnant and went along and had the baby. This showed me how easily your life can change [with] one decision.

Other responsible students credited their behavior to having a good head on their shoulders. They did not question their decisions because they did not feel they had made mistakes. They were matter-of-fact, as if it went without saying that they would be responsible and make the right choices because they were informed. A 21-year-old male simply stated:

I haven't really made mistakes. I've never regretted any of my sexual decisions. I didn't have any sexual mistakes; I'm a very responsible person.

In the second storyline, *relational* students (three males and six females) explained that their sexual decision making was tied to being in a relationship with the right person. These students were choosy about the people they had sex with. Their decision-making process was based on a commitment to their sexual partner. This commitment was used synonymously with, or as a substitute for, love. Two 21-year-old females demonstrate the importance of love as a precursor for having a sexual relationship.

I have not made any mistakes regarding sexual decision-making. I am proud of my choice to wait until I was in love.

I, personally, have never made a sexual mistake. I'm engaged and being with him (and only him) is the best decision I've ever made.

The third storyline in this subgroup consisted of 11 students (2 males and 9 females) who *blended*

responsible and relational narratives. These students learned from other people's choices and mistakes and then applied those lessons to their own lives. A 21-year-old female said:

Actually, I had a few friends who were extremely sexually active with multiple partners. By watching them go through the regret [and] the bad reputation made me realize that I want my first time to be with someone special.

A 19-year-old female concurred:

Everyone was having sex and such in high school, and I didn't want to be like everyone else, so I didn't. I waited until I was almost 17 and in a serious relationship before having sex. I don't regret it at all. I just learned from everyone else's mistakes and didn't want to make the same ones.

Some of these students said they arrived at that decision on the basis of their own experiences or their sense of personal preference rather than someone else's influence, as this 19-year-old female explained:

I wanted to wait till I felt mature enough and was in a loving, mature relationship. No, I did not make any mistakes. I think all of my decisions were right for me.

I Am Experimenting and Learning

The next group consisted of 49 students (27 male and 36 female) comprising 33% of the sample. They were actively engaged in learning about themselves as sexual actors and decision makers. Although the *Taking it slow* (relational/responsible) subgroup in the previous example of the *I am in Control* group said they learned from *others'* mistakes or behaved in congruence with their own ideals about sexuality, the *Experimenting and Learning* group was learning to exercise agency by incorporating their *own* sexual experiences into their personal sense of self as a decision maker. They were in process: reflecting on their past experiences and, in reaction to their experiences, they were *working it out*, by constructing their own ideas about what sexual behaviors were appropriate for them. They were actively shaping their own sense

of personal agency, telling stories that were less congruent or less concerned with parental values. Typically, the active shaping of their sense of agency led them to expand their horizons beyond the expectations of their family.

The majority of young people in this group (38) *resisted* the researchers' language of mistakes and instead talked about regret, which only a few students felt (3 females). Five students (4 female and 1 male) suggested they would do things differently if they could, but the rest of the respondents downplayed or resisted the idea of making a "mistake." Instead, they said that they had learned valuable life lessons from their behaviors.

This 18-year-old female, who went to a private Catholic school, explained that sex was a "forbidden" word in her house. She described herself as precocious and said she had fewer regrets than her friends:

I've learned a lot from sex. It's helped me decide that waiting for marriage is not necessarily a good idea. Sex can change a relationship drastically. I've also learned that it's ok to say no and that sleeping with someone doesn't guarantee closeness to that person. . . . I've only been with 2 people that I deeply cared about.

The following 21-year-old female, who resisted the language of mistakes, said she acted "like a guy" in high school and explained that it was good preparation for college life.

I made so many "irrational" decisions pertaining to my sexual awakening but I wouldn't call them mistakes. Many of my sexual experiences I feel equipped me for life out on my own. . . . I lost my virginity at an early age and experienced many ups and downs with the opposite sex while I was in the confines of my parents house and their rules. . . . Now that I am in college I am so appreciative that I have gone through those stages, this way I don't take advantage of my freedom. I've known many females who were "sexual angels" in their parents' house then came to [school] and end up heart-broken and ready to drop out.

Yet, over half of the young women (19 of 36) in the *Experimenting and Learning* group also spoke about sex in the context of love and relationships.

As the following 19- and 20-year-old females explained, their mistakes involved the absence of love or commitment in their first relationships:

I had a few sexual experiences that I wish I didn't participate in, now that I look back as I take it from a point of view of being in a serious monogamous relationship. At the time it was fine—but now I kind of regret it.

I “hooked up” with a guy at 16 who I was not in a relationship with, and because there was no emotional feelings I thought it was horrible and it made me want to wait to have sex even more so that it would be special when I was with someone I loved.

Conversely, 4 of the 13 males in this group explained that love and commitment were not desired prerequisites for sex. The following 21- and 22-year-old males rejected emotional attachments with females:

Sure, I hooked up with girls that had a tendency to get attached. I learned to try and stay away from those kinds.

I had oral sex with a female and she became too attached afterwards. Calling all times of the day. I learned that women take things a lot more serious than men.

A 20-year-old male, who struggled with family loyalty issues, explained how he had managed to distance his emotions from sex:

My first sexual encounter I think was affected by attachment more than other guys. . . . I've learned to take sex less seriously in the past few years.

I Am Struggling but Growing

In the third group, we found 21 students (5 males and 16 females) comprising 14% of the sample. These students were also in the process of working out their own sense of sexual agency, but they were facing difficult challenges about their earlier decisions. As with the previous group, *Experimenting and Learning*, the students in the *Struggling but Growing* group also believed their experiences have

provided valuable lessons for them as sexual actors and decision makers.

What differentiates these students from the previous group is the echo of pain that resulted from past experiences. They are actively engaged in exercising agency by acknowledging, often with great sadness, humility, and pain, that their mistakes had serious consequences. The language of burden permeated their sexual narratives, suggesting that they were grappling with how to assimilate past behaviors into their current sense of self. More students in this group than the previous two groups expressed ambivalent views about their families. Few of the struggling students cited their parents as sources of support in working out lessons that could be learned from making mistakes. As indicated below, they were more likely to cite helpful friends.

This *in process with pain* group was sadder but wiser, as the following reflective statements reveal. A 19-year-old female said:

I was at a party and ended up hooking up with a guy. After this I felt obligated to continue to do this with every guy I was with. But I talked with my friend and she made me realize that just because I made a mistake once, I didn't need to keep on making it.

A 20-year-old male described an experience he continues to rue:

I have one regret that changed my life forever; although I would prefer to refer to it strictly as a learning experience as I may not have been the person I am today had it not occurred. But we decided to abort—although at least I know I work.

The students in this group were struggling typically to come to grips with their past decisions and experiences. The residual pain from past mistakes challenged them as they negotiated their path forward as sexual decision makers and actors. A 19-year-old female described how her friends supported her when she decided to make more agentic choices following an earlier time of regret:

I definitely made mistakes—having sex too early, having unprotected sex, having sex with people I had no business sleeping with. I've

been lucky to escape unharmed. Friends always helped me through this learning process.

I Have Been Irresponsible

Irresponsible students, two males and three females, comprised the smallest portion (7%) of the sample. These five students did not overtly acknowledge remorse for their sexual behavior nor did they engage in a reflective process as sexual decision makers. Irresponsible students stated or implied that they had made risky sexual decisions. Their narratives suggested they are not exercising agency. All but one student expressed ambivalent views about their families.

The two males were coded solely as “I have been irresponsible,” in contrast to the females who were also coded as irresponsible and relational/responsible. As a 22-year-old male stated:

I never really had any mistakes that cost me more than buying a few pregnancy tests. . . . In hindsight, the anxiety sucked and the risk was great, but I would and still do it today.

The following 20-year-old female indicated her extra burden in dealing with reputation issues in relationships:

Oral sex at too young an age with basically a stranger—I knew after that it was dumb—it never happened again for years, especially because a lot of guys at school knew and would joke around—I didn’t want to be known as ‘that girl’ and get around.

A 20-year-old female described her behavior as irresponsible and recognized it as not smart:

I was in a long-term relationship with a boy. I decided I didn’t want to be in a relationship like that anymore and I went crazy. I started dating another guy and right off the bat we were sexually active and not smart about it.

Discussion

In this study, we conducted a qualitative analysis of 148 college students’ written comments about their

views of themselves as sexual decision makers. We found four patterns in which students described themselves as sexual actors: (a) I am in control (either waiting it out or taking it slow), (b) I am experimenting and learning, (c) I am struggling but growing, and (d) I have been irresponsible. Taken together, participants described several kinds of experiences in which most were proactively engaged in decision-making processes ranging from “waiting it out” to “working it out.”

In the first group, students expressed agency as a sense of self-control. They were choosing to follow prescriptions they had learned at home and from their parents’ values, to wait until marriage before initiating sexual activity. For a few, they had relaxed the marital proscription and were choosing to wait until they were in a significant relationship characterized by love. A few more were waiting it out because they simply had not had an opportunity to be sexual, and perhaps in that sense, they were not yet exercising agency, but like their cohorts in this group, they had not yet made mistakes.

A subgroup of students in the self-control group revealed that they were already sexual, but they had not made mistakes. Their sexual learning, for the most part, had occurred in the context of and in congruence with their parents’ teachings. Their narratives, though following mostly a gendered script of men as responsible and women as relational/responsible, revealed agency in the sense that these young people were “taking it slow.” By following cultural narratives of responsible and/or relational decision making, they perceived themselves as exercising sexual agency in ways that were self-protective *and* validating. They were very clear that their decision-making process had kept them from making mistakes.

These qualitative data revealed a new understanding of young people’s sense of agency in which making mistakes was not an issue. The women, in particular, said they were waiting to begin having sex until the time was right *for them*. This finding can be interpreted in light of Sprecher and Regan’s (1996) survey of college students who remain virgins. The primary reasons that college females cite for remaining abstinent are (a) not feeling love; (b) being fearful of AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy; or (c) having beliefs supportive of virginity. Although our findings support Sprecher and Regan’s information about college females, we also found a small subset of college *males*

who had beliefs supportive of virginity and/or waiting to have sex until they were ready. Overall, our finding is consistent with recent trends in the literature about the complex relationship among young people's self-judgments, sexual expression, and experiences in close relationships (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

In the *in process* groups, students who perceived their past behaviors in the context of their own mistakes and who were working out their sexual agency beyond parental influence revealed narratives that seemed to reflect society's dominant views about gender and sexuality (Holland et al., 1998; Risman & Schwartz, 2002). Males were more likely to excuse themselves for their own sexual choices and disregard a partner's desire for intimacy and emotionality, even when they were being reflective about their past experiences. Females were more likely to describe how they had to deal with the sexual double standard when handling and recovering from mistakes. On the surface, these differences can be explained in gendered terms: More young women than men described themselves as sexual actors within the context of a relationship, whereas more young men than women described themselves as responsible sexual actors independent of a relational context.

At a deeper level, however, the data revealed that more females than males were critically reflective about the process of *becoming* sexually agentic. The females were more effusive about the process of *claiming* their sexuality, albeit for some, in the context of their relationships. The males, on the other hand, seemed to presume they were automatically responsible as sexual agents without the critical reflection evident in females' narratives. The dominant discourse still ascribes sexual agency to men, but women must struggle to achieve it. Women used language that indicated they were working harder at becoming sexually agentic (e.g., it helped me decide; I feel equipped, I don't take advantage) because sexual agency was not something they took for granted. Women's work in claiming their sexuality is evidence of new sources of agency *and* responsibility in sexual relationships, as explained by a feminist perspective (Baber, 2000).

The students in the process of working it out, whether *Experimenting and Learning* or *Struggling but Growing*, were actively engaged in exploring their sexuality and learning about themselves as sexual agents. The outcome of their early explorations involved varying degrees of regret. Some students

had no regrets at all; others resisted the idea of making mistakes and claimed life lessons from their experiences; and others who felt regret, or carried the burden of pain, were in the process of assimilating, understanding, and reconciling their behaviors. Sexually active students who were in process told stories about growth, change, and discovery of new ways to be a responsible sexual person in today's world. Student mistakes included (a) jumping in too fast, (b) being coerced into sexual relations, (c) experimenting without understanding the consequences, (d) experiencing faulty contraceptives, or (e) making bad decisions on the basis of incorrect relational assumptions. Despite their level of regret, these students also described themselves as agentic sexual decision makers: experimenting, learning, and constructing their own beliefs about what healthy sexuality is for them. The only students who seemed to lack any form of agency in this study were the ones who claimed to be irresponsible. Specifically, they did not indicate a desire to learn from or change their irresponsible behavior.

Our data reveal an important connection between students as agentic sexual decision makers and (non) actors and the context of their family environments. The groups who see themselves as having made mistakes, from which they are now learning, some more painful than others, suggest that they had more challenging home environments. Only in the *I am in Control* group, where students did not see themselves as making mistakes, did students express congruence between their own views of themselves as sexual decision makers and how they perceived their parents would see them (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Peterson & Hann, 1999).

In the groups where students acknowledged experimentation and subsequent struggle, that is, where mistakes were made and lessons learned, students expressed more self-reliance and support from peers. Their more complex and at times contradictory stories suggested ambivalent or distant family relationships. The lack of connection to family and home environment was prevalent only in the narratives of students who reported a learning experience in spite of painful mistakes. They were more free or willing to experiment and take risks and thus to make mistakes. The ambivalent stories about their family environment inspired this group of students to take sexual learning into their own hands and as a result to learn, often with difficulty, from their experiences.

Implications

The variety of ways in which young adults perceived themselves as sexual decision makers and agentic actors reveal multiple opportunities and contexts to promote healthy sexual development through research and practice. The findings, however, are limited by a volunteer sample of primarily White, middle class college students enrolled in a human sexuality class at a public university. Future research should examine more diverse and representative samples. A second limitation involves the data collection process. Although qualitative research on young adult sexuality is among the most illuminating to date (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000), the use of an open-ended written survey prevented us from asking follow-up questions that would have enabled deeper levels of understanding about each participant. Although students were encouraged to share their stories and be reflective about their past experiences, not all students provided rich information. This limitation may speak to some students' lack of careful process or simply to their unwillingness to provide a thoughtful response. Despite this limitation, our qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of new pathways into how young people perceive and reflect upon their past and present sexual experiences (Russell, 2005).

These data reveal that college students consider their adolescent experiences important building blocks for constructing their current ideas about sexual agency and behavior. The sexual revolution may have liberated women and men from the institution of marriage, but the appropriate context within which they are socialized to engage in sexual activity is still gendered. Even though young women are empowered to make sexual decisions, the road is not smooth; many students in our sample revealed they jumped in too fast. In the face of a pervasive, sexually saturated, and exploitive media environment, the narratives of emerging adults provide ample evidence of opportunities where parents, teachers, and community leaders can be proactive about ensuring that children and teens are well supported, socially connected, and accurately informed as they begin to make independent choices that have consequences for their personal and relational development.

One result of this study that bears further investigation is the small yet cautionary number of students who stated, without regret or reflection, that they

were irresponsible sexual decision makers. Most students in the sample who had made mistakes contextualized them as "learning from the past," but the candidness of the five irresponsible students who simply "admitted" mistakes bears follow up. In what ways is error or irresponsibility linked to student isolation from peers, inadequate parental support, or not receiving accurate information about human sexuality and intimate relationships? Perhaps students who lacked responsibility for their past behaviors were disconnected from others. This possibility has implications for both family socialization practices and sexuality education programs where the focus should be on the nexus of developing communication skills and knowledge (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002).

Finally, sexuality education programs must be of high quality in order to prepare young persons for the complex world in which healthy sexual choices can be made (Russell, 2005). Students who indicated they had engaged in the most risky behavior, at the youngest ages, and that they regretted the most, were least likely to cite parents as influential sources of knowledge and support. Students who were or had waited until they felt ready for a mature sexual experience felt congruent with parental values and support from family—both signs of positive parent-child socialization (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Peterson & Hann, 1999). The mass media is making incursions into young lives at earlier ages, with greater frequency, and more explicit content, but parents and peers can serve as positive socializing forces as young people learn to make agentic sexual choices.

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