

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226259185>

Adolescent Girls' Sexual Empowerment: Two Feminists Explore the Concept

Article in *Sex Roles* · June 2012

DOI: 10.1007/s11199-011-9995-3

CITATIONS

88

READS

3,310

2 authors:



Sharon Lamb

University of Massachusetts Boston

70 PUBLICATIONS 1,540 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Zoe D. Peterson

Indiana University Bloomington

61 PUBLICATIONS 1,598 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Forgiveness Work [View project](#)



Sexual Ethics [View project](#)

Adolescent Girls' Sexual Empowerment: Two Feminists Explore the Concept

Sharon Lamb · Zoë D. Peterson

Published online: 11 May 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

Abstract Although all feminists tend to value empowered female sexuality, feminists often disagree, sometimes heatedly so, about the definition of and path to empowered sexuality among adolescent girls. In this theoretical paper, two feminists, who have previously expressed differing perspectives regarding adolescent girls' sexual empowerment (Lamb 2010a, b; Peterson 2010), discuss their disagreements and attempt to find some common ground in their viewpoints on girls' sexuality. A critical question related to sexual empowerment is whether empowerment includes a subjective sense of efficacy, desire, and pleasure. In other words, are girls sexually empowered if they feel that they are empowered? The authors identify three themes that make answering this question particularly challenging—age differences, exposure to sexualized media, and the pressure to please a partner. Despite these challenges, the authors identify several points of consensus, including agreeing that adequate sexuality education and media literacy education are vital to optimizing adolescent girls' sexual empowerment.

Keywords Feminism · Empowerment · Adolescent girls · Sexuality

Introduction

Historically, the broad ideology of feminism has included individuals, who hold a variety of contradictory perspectives, but who share an overarching set of values about a need for gender equity (Crawford 2006). Nevertheless, it has been hard for feminist theorists and researchers not to fall prey to what we see as endless dichotomizing of feminist thought, a kind of dichotomizing that splits feminists from one another, denies commonalities, and feeds into the thinking of those who would blame feminism for a myriad of social problems (see Duits and van Zoonen 2007; Gill 2007 for a discussion of this). Some of this dichotomizing has been around quantitative vs. qualitative research; the importance of gender difference vs. gender similarity; and biological vs. social constructionist explanations of gender. Many of these dichotomies relate specifically to differing feminist views of girls' and women's sexuality. For example, some of the dichotomies that are frequently imposed upon feminism include pro-porn vs. anti-porn, 2nd wave vs. 3rd wave, and sex-negative vs. sex-positive (Baumgardner and Richards 2003; Edut 2003).

This trend is partially why we, as theorists and researchers, who in previous writings (e.g. Lamb 2002; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007) have worked in between dichotomies, celebrated ambivalence, and promoted the importance of girls' and young women's lived experiences as they interpret them, found ourselves placed in a position in which we were expected to argue two sides of a dichotomy in which we weren't fully invested. Our

S. Lamb (✉)
Department of Counseling and School Psychology,
College of Education and Human Development, UMass Boston,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
100 Morrissey Blvd.,
Boston, MA 02125, USA
e-mail: Sharon.lamb@umb.edu

Z. D. Peterson (✉)
Department of Psychology, 325 Stadler Hall,
University of Missouri-St. Louis,
1 University Blvd,
Saint Louis, MO 63121, USA
e-mail: petersonz@umsl.edu

positioning was unintentionally supported by the “Feminist Forum” framework in *Sex Roles*, a framework common in a number of academic journals, which seemed to call for opposing positions, yea and nay, for and against, theory and commentary, or in the words of *Saturday Night Live* (Michaels 1978), “point/counterpoint.”

In the “Feminist Forum,” an author (in this case, Lamb 2010a) completes her or his manuscript through the editing process and one or more other authors then respond to it (in this case, Peterson 2010). The original author is then presented with the finished commentary and can rebut or reply to it in a response to the commentary (Lamb 2010b). This interactional approach is designed to present the reader with a lively debate on an important issue, and it typically does. In our case, however, we found that it inadvertently and inaccurately led us to positioning our viewpoints about adolescent girls’ sexuality as diametrically opposed and in an adversarial way that in retrospect made us uncomfortable. Further, after the rebuttal to the commentary, the process of interaction was finished, leaving many issues unresolved. Through subsequent “behind the scenes” interactions about the content of our articles and commentaries in the Feminist Forum, we were reminded that, although we may have some minor differences in viewpoint, there is far more overlap than division between our positions, a fact that might have been obscured in a point/counterpoint format. We also hypothesized that this might be the case for other feminists who experience disagreements among themselves about the complex issues of adolescent girls’ sexuality.

We hope that by writing this follow-up piece, we not only will be working out our differences but also will be developing a more nuanced and incorporative view of female adolescent sexuality. Such a joining would work against the tendency to dichotomize and oversimplify feminist views about adolescent sexuality. In undermining this tendency, we believe that we might make a contribution to naming some of the shared theoretical sticking points around which many feminists—regardless of their positions on concepts such as pornography and girls’ sexual expression—likely experience similar conceptual struggles.

Thus we begin by outlining the points made, commented on, and rebutted in *Sex Roles*, volume 62, issues 5–6, and then move on to work on four points that may have seemed contentious in our commentary but where we believe that our views may be more similar than opposing. We also choose these four points because they reflect conflict in the field at present.

I, Lamb (2010a), began my article about the idealization of female adolescent sexuality, by raising questions for feminist theorists and researchers about our theorizing about “desire”, “pleasure”, and “subjectivity.” I identified

how these concepts had arisen and become important to feminist thinking about sexuality. I then criticized the way these concepts are understood and used today. For example, I wrote that the idealizing of subjectivity reifies a dichotomy between subject and object in sexual practice, one that I believe doesn’t exist so rigidly. I also criticized the way an overemphasis on pleasure as a gauge for what makes sex “good” for girls (good in terms of physical feelings, self-protection, and ethics) crowds out other important feminist goals regarding girls and sex. I argued that ideas of desire, pleasure, and subjectivity may have different historical meanings and context for girls of color and that a healthy sexuality that includes all these elements may be unrealistic to achieve and more of an expression of what adult women want for themselves, but imposed on teens. I advocated for more realistic goals for female adolescent sexuality that took into account girls’ development. In mocking, to some extent, the idealized picture of the adolescent girl who feels pleasure, desire, and subjectivity as described by these theorists, I noted that this picture is ironically similar to the commodified, sexualized, marketed teen girl that Levy (2005) brought to our attention in her work on “raunch culture” and that Gill (2008) has argued is now a part of advertising culture. I wrote that typically, for feminist theorists (Debold et al. 1993; Fine 1988; Fine 2005; Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck 2005; Lamb 2002; Tolman 2002; Tolman, and Debold 1994; Welles 2005), it would seem that empowerment is conflated with the idea of choice, and that the choices made may feel like choices to girls but not be choices at all; that is, imitating sexuality that’s highly marketed to girls may reveal less agency than girls themselves may argue they have. I also wrote about how some theorists tried to resolve this issue about empowerment by discussing authentic versus inauthentic sexuality (e.g. Tolman 2002) but I found this a very problematic solution. In the end, I offered some brief thoughts on mutuality as an interesting concept to bring to the table in promoting a certain kind of sexuality to adolescent girls.

I, Peterson (2010) agreed with many of Lamb’s critiques of the potential disadvantages of a model of healthy adolescent sexuality that focuses exclusively on desire, pleasure, and subjectivity, but I felt that one very specific aspect of Lamb’s paper—the portion in which Lamb argued that sexual desire, pleasure, and subjectivity are not necessarily signs of adolescent girls’ sexual empowerment—was a risky view and had the potential to be misread and misused. I did not think that these concepts fully defined empowerment, but I worried about prioritizing an “expert” view of empowerment over girls’ own subjective sense of empowerment. I worried that devaluing desire, pleasure, and subjectivity could result in giving

girls the hurtful message that, although they *feel* empowered, their sense of power is, in fact, a false consciousness marketed to them by a sexualized advertising culture. Thus, in my commentary, I argued that empowerment might best be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct. From this perspective, sexual desire and pleasure could be viewed as two valuable dimensions of sexual empowerment; in other words a subjective sense of empowerment *is* legitimate empowerment, but it is only one aspect of legitimate empowerment. Other dimensions of sexual empowerment could include successfully negotiating with sexual partners about wanted and unwanted sexual activities and intellectually and politically challenging restrictive cultural discourses about girls' sexuality. Girls might simultaneously experience empowerment on one level and disempowerment on another level. However, in attempting to promote the importance of girls' pleasure, desire, and subjective feelings as relevant elements of sexual empowerment, I may have wrongly suggested that Lamb doesn't respect or value girls' lived experiences.

In this way and on this particular issue, we had placed ourselves in familiar feminist dichotomized positions, with Lamb believing that Peterson could celebrate a teen girl giving a football player a lap dance at a party as a sign of empowerment and Peterson believing that Lamb didn't value pleasurable sexual experimentation as a sign of empowerment. Peterson argued that some forms of sexual expression (even those that imitate media culture) could, on some levels and in some instances, be viewed as positive experimentation in the service of future desire, subjectivity, and pleasure. Lamb argued that borne as many of these acts are from the worst of pornography, they are always suspect. We recognize that neither of these positions is very satisfying, and we would like to take the opportunity to expand on and identify the shared space between these positions.

There are certain fundamentals that we would like to set out as points we agree on.

We do not want to place a burden on the newly sexually active or merely sexually curious teen to become a super-teen with regard to sexuality (always knowing and understanding her desires, pleasure-seeking, and strongly able to say no or yes in a myriad of positions and situations). Nor do we want to support the public opinion that children are asexual before they reach adolescence (see Lamb 2002, 2006 for work on childhood sexuality). While it is important to honor the place of sexual desire, pleasure, the ability to say no, and activism around restrictive discourses, we agree that this super-girl ideal is itself restrictive (Girls, Inc. 2006). Moreover, it doesn't allow for ambivalence in sexual experiences, which we both agree is normative. That is to say, it is

not always problematic for a girl to feel ambivalent about sex and sexual participation (Lamb 2002; Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005).

We agree that the idea of sexual empowerment is a potentially important one that could inform sex education and girls' growing understanding of how to be sexual in the world at all ages. We also agree that the term empowerment has been overused and co-opted by marketers who then suggest that empowerment can be achieved through consumerism (e.g., Goldman et al. 1991), so a subjective feeling of empowerment may not be the only indicator of whether or not a girl is actually powerful. As Peterson (2010) wrote, "Sexual behavior that feels sexually empowering for a particular girl may function to reproduce cultural and institutional constraints on women's sexuality more broadly" (p. 308; see also Barton 2002). We agree that there are different aspects of and definitions of empowerment including the subjective feeling of empowerment (Zimmerman 1995) and access to political power and resources (Riger 1993).

Despite our many agreements, a sticking point in our positions seems to be whether we, as "experts", or in the very least, as adults who care deeply about girls' development, can ever make the strong point, theoretically or directly to a girl, that a girl who feels empowered is actually not empowered. There is the smaller dilemma about whether it is wise or productive to say this to a girl, for example to influence a daughter's decisions. And there are two larger issues associated with this question: One that asks whether we can ever know if such acts do not empower or are damaging, and the other which asks whether experts are the best judges of that. Throughout the rest of the paper, we explore the complexities of this conflict: Can an adolescent girl's subjective feelings of empowerment—including feelings of sexual desire, pleasure, and agency—count as one dimension of sexual empowerment that may in some ways serve her well in the future and contribute to her ability to know herself sexually, make positive sexual decisions, become a true partner in relation to another person, and not participate in sex in a way that supports oppressive practices? Does the answer to this question change depending on the age of the girl? What role does sexualized media, including explicit pornography, play in our answer? How does our answer relate to girls' desire to please a sexual partner? We explore these challenging topics related to adolescent sexuality because we recognize that they are potentially fertile ground for disagreements among feminist scholars, ourselves included. Most of our discussion of these issues deals specifically with adolescent girls in the U.S., although we also use sources that address these issues for adolescent girls who are from the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

Age and Sexual Empowerment

In discussions of adolescent girls' sexual subjectivity and empowerment, "adolescent" often is poorly defined. In some cases, this may contribute to feminist disagreements about what is appropriate sexual exploration for adolescent girls. Some authors may be thinking of a girl who is 13- or 14-years-old, and some may be thinking of a girl who is 17. Indeed, the range might be even larger when it comes to discussions of girls' sexuality. The National Institutes of Health (1999) defines "child" as anyone under 21 because many individuals are still in the education system and dependent on their families until at least age 21. On the other end of the spectrum, a commonsense.org public service announcement sparked controversy by featuring an 11- or 12-year-old girl singing into a videocamera, "Fuck me," in imitation of a pop star (Morrissey 2010). Thus, when it comes to discussions of adolescent girls' sexual empowerment, feminists may be envisioning girls ranging in age from 11 to 21!

Most feminists and psychologists would probably agree that what is developmentally appropriate for a 17 year old is not necessarily appropriate for a 13 year old. Yet, when discussing adolescent girls' sexuality, we often forget to address the vast differences among adolescents in terms of their development (Else-Quest and Hyde 2009).

Of course, age is not the only, or necessarily the best, measure of socio-sexual development. Not all 17 year-olds are equally prepared to handle sexual activity or equally capable of interpreting and critiquing sexual media content. And we would argue against any biological definition of "readiness" to handle sexual activity, especially given that we know that even prior to adolescence, individuals experience a variety of forms of childhood sexuality, some of which are perceived as positive and normative and some of which are perceived as confusing and/or abusive (Friedrich 2007; Lamb 2006). A problematic kind of readiness discourse exists in Abstinence Only Until Marriage sexuality education curricula as "emotional readiness" (Mast 2001), and we do not wish to support this narrow concept of sexual readiness either. We both believe that "emotional readiness" discourses as well as "biological readiness" discourses promote a false idea that there a specific time point at which every adolescent or young adult moves from being unambivalently unready for sex to being unambivalently ready for sex.

Further, it is important not to look at older teens' expressions of sexuality as standing apart from younger teens' and even girls' sexuality. Younger girls look to older sisters and older teens in the media for information about what it means to grow up sexually. Learning about one's sexuality doesn't begin in adolescence, and to some extent, the representation of sexuality in and by older teens has an

effect on younger girls. So, if an older teen experiments by pole-dancing and shows off a sense of sexuality and power, as did Miley Cyrus on the Teen Choice Awards in 2009 (FoxNews 2009), even with the knowledge that she was just playing around, who is responsible for how this is understood or "read" by her younger fans? Yet despite these complications, to ignore age and developmental level altogether also seems irresponsible.

So, recognizing that all 13-year-olds are developmentally different, if we consider a typical 13-year-old, the one who the Sexualization of Girls Task Force may have had in mind when they warned parents about the dangers of media sexualization (APA 2007), what might empowerment look like for her? Must she know and experience "desire" in order to protect herself from the media, from rape, from other exploitation? And what does it mean to experience "desire" in a positive way when one is 13? Many feminists might agree that it means that this 13-year-old thinks positively about becoming sexual, that she is learning about sexual development and sexual relationships in non-threatening ways and in places where questions and exploration are welcome, and that she looks forward to both initiating and responding to sexual advances in relationship to peers to whom she is attracted.

Now we consider the ways in which a 13-year-old might subjectively feel empowered in her decision to have intercourse, and we choose this example using a 13-year-old to push the boundaries of the discussion. Neither of us believe that most 13-year-olds will benefit from choosing to have sexual intercourse, and research supports that early sex is very risky for girls (e.g., Kaestle et al. 2005; O'Donnell et al. 2001). So, (1) She could feel strong and positively valenced physical and emotional desire for intercourse (or for some intense sexual experience). Regardless of her decision about having intercourse, we might say that this is a form of empowerment because, in a culture that has suppressed female sexual feeling, it is something to celebrate when a girl feels desire this intensely and positively. (2) She could feel empowered about making the *decision* to have intercourse. This feeling of empowerment could derive from thinking about herself as an independent chooser, weighing options, and becoming more and more certain over time. This feeling of empowerment may be supported by her not having to ask permission from her parents. (3) She could feel empowered in her decision because she feels certain that it is the right one (perhaps because she feels she really loves her partner). (4) She could feel empowered in that she has thought through birth control and is going out to buy some condoms or getting on the pill. This would show a sense of responsibility about her decision. So we have several situations, one that describes empowerment as desire, another that describes empowerment as autonomy (e.g.,

from parents or other influencing forces), another that describes empowerment as certainty, and a fourth that describes empowerment as responsibility.

Any of these scenarios could qualify as some dimension of sexual empowerment based on some definitions. Yet, any of these scenarios could ultimately result in a negative outcome—she could be left by her partner shortly after they have intercourse, she could get pregnant, she could contract a sexually transmitted infection, she could get a bad reputation among her peers. This raises the following question: If she experiences a negative and unwanted outcome as a result of her subjectively empowered sexual experience, was she ever really empowered? We do not think that a negative outcome necessarily negates empowerment. We think instead that the kinds of empowered feelings she had to begin with may need inspection. Perhaps her initial feelings of sexual empowerment reflected only one dimension of empowerment, or put another way, her sense of empowerment may have been ambivalent at best (Peterson 2010). Given this, how do we judge the value or accuracy of her subjective feelings of empowerment?

On the one hand, these subjective feelings of empowerment may come from oppressive situations in her life. For example, what if her feeling of sexual desire comes from imagining herself re-enacting a pornographic act that she has seen on the internet? What if she comes to feel that she has made an autonomous choice about her decision to have sex after she has received considerable pressure from her 17-year-old boyfriend? Or what if her sense of certainty is based on her false belief that she and her partner will be together forever? Any one of these feelings of empowerment could be encumbered by less than empowering contextual factors.

On the other hand, many 13-year-olds who do have intercourse do so without planning and without the requisite desire, autonomy, certainty, and responsibility that we feminists associate with empowerment. Surely it is better that a girl experience her sexual desire as positive rather than as negative. Surely a subjective sense of autonomy and responsibility are better and possibly more psychologically protective than feeling coerced and out of control.

And yet, she is 13. There are good reasons for us as adults, who have more knowledge and life experience than she does, to not want her to feel desire so potently at this young an age, to not want her to make autonomous and absolute decisions that may place her at emotional or physical risk. Moreover, she is not even of an age when she can legally consent to sex except perhaps to another 13 year old (depending on the state). Thus, perhaps subjective empowerment is suspect when we are considering a 13 year old who may not be in the best position to evaluate the context and background behind her own sense of empowerment. Again, this highlights the

complexity and possibly the multi-dimensionality of our concept of sexual empowerment.

Now what if we think about older adolescent girls and young women who are more physically and emotionally mature and for whom sexual activity is increasingly normative? After all, research suggests that 30% of girls have had intercourse by age 16, and 67% of girls have had intercourse by age 18 (Chandra et al. 2005). If we de-emphasize the importance of subjective sexual empowerment for 13 year-olds, at what age can we value subjective feelings of empowerment as a worthwhile goal? Is it valuable or important for a 17 year-old girl to feel sexually empowered? A 21 year old woman? A 35 year old woman? A 55 year old woman? Or are women's subjective feelings of empowerment always suspect? After all, as we discuss in the next section, girls' and women's images and stereotypes of what it means to be sexually empowered sometimes come from sources (e.g., sexualized media) that are predominantly created by and marketed to men. Yet, to challenge all adult women's subjective feelings of sexual empowerment seems invalidating given there are few other sources available to women that "teach" about sexual empowerment. Thus, these difficult questions lead us back to empowerment as a subjective feeling that one of us is eager to validate, the other of us is afraid to. One of us finds it a useful concept; the other finds it too mired in a discourse that has been damaged and connected to heavily to problematic institutions (media, pornography, heterosexism).

Sexualized Media and Experimenting with Empowerment

Although Lamb's (2010a) original Feminist Forum article and Peterson's (2010) response did not focus heavily on the role of pornography and other sexual media in adolescent girls' sexual lives, this was an important subtext within a larger discussion of the "pornification" of the culture in which adolescent girls live. Indeed, in Lamb's (2010b) rebuttal to Peterson, the relationship between explicit sexual media and empowerment was highlighted as a major source of disagreement, just as it has been a major source of disagreement among feminists for many decades (see e.g., Cornell 2000).

Central to our disagreements about the role of sexualized media in the sexual subjectivity of teen girls were two questions: (1) If a girl is inspired by highly sexualized media representations (including explicit pornographic representations) is she less empowered? (2) Does empowerment have something to do with the way in which she positions herself in relation to these representations?

One point that we agreed on in our original article and commentary (Lamb 2010a; Peterson 2010) is that there is

no such thing as an “authentic” sexuality. All sexuality is shaped and modified by social forces and cultural discourses (e.g., Gagnon and Simon 1973), so it does not make sense to discuss an “authentic” sexuality that is somehow free from social constraints and influences, and sexualized media is one potentially important social influence. Nevertheless, even if all girls are influenced directly or indirectly by sexualized media, the amount of ownership or control that girls feel over their own sexuality in the face of strong media messages may vary—both between different girls and within the same girl over time and across relationships. Some imitation of sexualized media may be playful and lighthearted and some may be more obligatory or self-defining, and yet we can’t base our judgments on these forms of imitation simply on how lightheartedly they seem to be enacted.

Why do girls imitate sexualized media and how conscious is this imitation? A girl may imitate sexualized media thinking this is the norm for teen sexuality and simply that she is conforming to what “all the kids” do. She may imitate it because she has learned “boys like this.” She may also imitate it in a more conscious or deliberate way, experimenting, playing around with how it feels and finding that it’s pretty exciting to imitate these sexualized moves and ways of expression. These three descriptions of imitation aren’t mutually exclusive, either, but they all raise the broader question—Is a girl who “buys into” mass-media-promoted forms of sexuality less empowered and does an awareness of media, an ability to critique it or observe its influence, make a girl more empowered even as she imitates?

On the one hand, it seems likely that teen girls’ interpretation and conceptualization of their own sexual imitation is central in determining the psychological and interpersonal impact of their mimicry. If a girl sees herself as a sexual object who must perform to get or keep a boy’s attention, aren’t the consequences likely to be different than if she sees herself as engaging in fun, playful experimentation? Of course, this is potentially an empirical question that could and should be tested in future research.

On the other hand, even if we were to agree (and potentially demonstrate through research) that experimentation, consciously or unconsciously, with mass-media-produced versions of sexuality could be healthy and nonproblematic, there would still be a secondary critique about what the goals and intentions of these representations are and to whom they are sold. There is a problem with these kinds of representations being “sold” to younger and younger girls; these images seem to dictate that girls need to be sexual at a young age, and they may dictate to adolescent girls some narrow version of what it means to be sexual. Indeed, advertisers may intentionally promote sexual insecurity among young girls in order to sell

products that will supposedly turn girls into sexy teens (APA 2007; Durham 2008; Levin and Kilbourne 2008). There is also a problematic lack of diversity of sexual expression and of models of “sexiness” in mainstream and explicit pornographic media. Gill (2008) writes that this version of media sexuality is profoundly ageist and heteronormative as well as classist and racist. Thus while these media images of sexuality may be empowering to some extent, they are also incredibly restrictive and shape desire and subjectivity into forms that are more mainstream. And they bring up the issue that what might feel empowering to some may feel so in a context in which these images disempower others. Is it thus better to have desire and subjectivity even if it’s an imitation of a marketer’s version than to have no desire or subjectivity at all?

We agree that girls are not passive viewers of the media. Even when advertisers and other producers of sexualized media have ill intentions, as they commonly do (such as to promote and exploit girls’ insecurities for the sake of product sales), that does not necessarily imply that girls automatically accept the intended message (Lerum and Dworkin 2009). Thus, even when undesirable or limiting representations are sold to girls, these representations do not necessarily leave all girls harmed or unempowered. Thus, one can and should critique the methods and motives of those that create the media without taking the position that media representations of female sexuality are always harmful to all girls. Further, this highlights the potential value of media literacy training for adolescents; in classrooms, adolescents can get some distance from the images’ potential to transform their sexuality by dissecting the intentions and multiple possible meanings of these messages. It is encouraging that such efforts to include media training in sexuality education curricula are already underway (APA, personal communication, 2010; Dines, personal communication 2010; Lamb, personal communication, 2009; Tolman, personal communication, 2010).

Finally, we need to consider the argument made by some feminists that when empowered young women imitate sexualized media there is potential for them to transform it in ways that undermine its original intention (i.e., make it empowering rather than demeaning), and this kind of imitation needs to be examined differently. There was considerable discussion in the 1980s and 90s in LGBT studies about reappropriating and reclaiming labels and events that derived from oppression and by reclaiming and re-using them, changing their meaning. The possibilities for this kind of reclaiming were explored by Butler and hooks in their essays on the film *Paris is Burning* (Butler 1993; hooks 1991). The term “queer” has more or less been successfully reclaimed to mean something different than it was originally meant to mean. We agree that the possibil-

ities for this kind of transformation of sexualized media messages are there; however, this political kind of resistance through redesigning and subverting media representations seems unlikely in the average 17-year-old, let alone in a 13-year-old, but perhaps with good sexuality education and media literacy training it is not impossible.

Empowerment and Pleasing a Partner

Regardless of whether one is interested in Abstinence Only Until Marriage or Comprehensive Sexuality Education for adolescents (Kirby 2007; Lamb 2010c; Luker 2006), in U.S. culture it is the norm to tell girls to wait for sexual activity until they are certain that they want and desire sex; we tell them not to engage in unwanted sex just to please their partner. However, sometimes girls and young women may feel ambivalent about wanting sex (Lamb 2002; O’Sullivan and Gaines’s 1998; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; Tolman and Szalacha 1999), and sometimes girls and young women may legitimately desire sex because they want to please their partner or increase closeness with their partner (Impett et al. 2005; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). Indeed, Lamb (2010c) points out that far too often in sexuality education, the other person (or partner) is ignored so that sexuality education is all about making the right choices for oneself with no consideration of other people. Thus, girls may be left feeling confused and uncertain about how to follow our well-intentioned advice to wait until they clearly want and desire sex.

Of course, engaging in sex to please a partner can mean a variety of different things, and there is likely a range of subjective positions by which girls sexually please boys. For example, Impett & Peplau (2003) suggested that complying with sex due to approach motives (e.g., to show love or promote intimacy with a partner) may frequently have positive consequences, whereas complying with sex for avoidance motives (e.g., to avoid a partner’s anger or rejection) may tend to have negative consequences.

Further, when we tell girls to wait until they want and desire sex (and when we make this a condition of sexual empowerment), we may be (sometimes unintentionally) promoting traditional sexual scripts that suggest that boys are constantly striving to get sex and that girls are responsible for sexual gatekeeping (Edgar and Fitzpatrick 1993). In these scripts, girls are supposed to be unambivalent about their [lack of] desire and boys are assumed to always unambivalently want and desire sex. In actuality, research shows that boys and men feel much more ambivalently about sex and wanting it, than public opinion and media representations might indicate (Giordano et al. 2006; Oswalt et al. 2005; Tolman et al. 2003), and certainly we know that girls often do want and desire sex.

It is also important to note that sometimes girls don’t have the option to only have sex when they want and desire it; some girls are forced into sex. Thus knowing and not knowing what one wants becomes complicated and sometimes irrelevant when the other person is exploitative. If we define sexual empowerment as including sexual assertiveness skills (e.g., being able to clearly refuse unwanted sexual activity), sexual empowerment may help to protect some girls/women from coercive sexual experiences, but even women who are assertive can be sexually victimized, so sexual empowerment (regardless of how we define it) certainly is not guaranteed protection against forced sex.

Considering Empowerment as a Continuum

Peterson (2010) proposed that one way of resolving the many complexities of sexual empowerment might be to conceptualize girls as on a developmental path toward empowerment and on the way, trying on a variety of forms of sexual expression, some of which might be modeled after media images of girls’ and women’s sexuality. Thus, a girl performing a strip tease for her boyfriend because she watched a pole dance on TV, might in some cases merely be showing playful sexual experimentation rather than a sign of sexual oppression. The strip tease need not define the girl’s sexuality. In other words, the same girl could perform a strip tease on one occasion and also assertively refuse unwanted sexual activity on another occasion. After all, adolescents “try on” on a variety of behaviors, values, and identities along the road to adulthood (La Guardia and Ryan 2002); it makes sense that they would try on different ways of being sexual as well. Peterson (2010) acknowledged that there is no ultimate version of sexual empowerment at the end of the pathway; rather, empowerment is a continuous and multidimensional construct. Although empowerment may be a developmental process, at any given time, girls (and women) are likely to experience sexual empowerment on some levels and disempowerment on other levels.

Lamb wonders two things. First, how can we assume a developmental path when we are unclear about the endpoint? Second, Lamb wonders what makes experimentation “just” experimentation and thinks that much of the literature on play supports the idea that play has real influence and power to constitute who one is as one grows up. She wonders if imitating a stripper in the dancing of a 13 year old or a porn star in the act of intercourse for the 18 year old, because it is such a powerful image that may reap rewards from boys and men (who are also influenced by narrow representations of male sexuality), could lead a girl at any age to construct sexuality along a narrow

dimension. And while she may feel empowered, even feel sexual feelings in her body (and imitative sex does not necessarily mean that a girl won't feel sexy, sexual, and even have an orgasm), one has to consider that, in the developing adolescent these experiences may have a formative effect. In other words, even if it's experimentation, these experiments, with their concomitant rewards and sexual feelings are pretty powerful and can form the adult sexuality of a person in problematic ways. So is there a path (or multiple paths) to sexual empowerment?

We agree (to varying extents) that media images have the potential to be both promoters of and threats to girls' sexual empowerment. Especially as girls get older and begin developing their sexual identities, sexual media has the potential to play a positive role. Sexual media has the potential to help dispel sexual shame, provide education, and promote a diversity of ways of being sexual (Strossen 1993; Tiefer 1995). We also agree that most mainstream media fails to achieve its positive potential and instead constructs girls' sexuality in a way that is narrow and restrictive. Perhaps one reason that restrictive media images are a threat to girls' sexual empowerment is that, for many girls, the media may be their primary or only source of information about sexuality and that girls take in media in a way that isn't mediated given the poor state of sexuality education and media literacy in the US.

We further agree that sexuality education is an important component of sexual empowerment and denial of access to this is tantamount to oppression (Fine and McClelland 2006). Even Obama's call for evidence-based sexuality education (2009) still only gives funding for pregnancy prevention, which is a very limited form of sexuality education. Girls who are disadvantaged in multiple ways—for example, girls who are living in poverty, who have immigrant parents, and/or who have limited access to health information or health care—are particularly harmed by the lack of readily available sexuality education. These girls may be forced to rely on media depictions of sexuality as their sole source of education. One path to empowerment might include a good sexuality education course, which is rarely available (especially to these disadvantaged girls) given the decades of exclusive government funding of Abstinence Only courses (Fine and McClelland 2006). Another path to empowerment might include media literacy training, which also doesn't exist in most schools except occasionally as a couple of lessons added on to an English curriculum.

Conclusions

One of our goals for this paper was to identify the many points of agreement that we as feminists share regarding adolescent girls' sexuality because many of these common-

alities were obscured in our original point/counterpoint articles. We have addressed our areas of agreement throughout the paper. Below we summarize some of the most important points on which we whole heartedly agree:

1. We want adolescent girls to grow into women who can receive pleasure and enjoyment from their sexuality.
2. We agree that the media often provides girls with confusing and damaging messages about their bodies and their sexuality, and we agree that the media, especially when combined with media literacy training, has the potential to promote positive images of girls' sexuality.
3. We agree that girls frequently experience ambivalence and uncertainty about their sexual wants and desires. To deny or pathologize that ambivalence is harmful to girls.
4. We agree that comprehensive sexuality education is essential to help address negative media messages, acknowledge and validate girls' ambivalence, and encourage sexual communication skills, all of which will contribute to long-term sexual satisfaction and pleasure.

Throughout this article we have raised many questions that we have left unanswered. In many cases these unanswered questions reflect our differing perspectives as individuals on the difficult issues that we have discussed here. However, even in cases in which we might provide different answers to the questions we have raised, we both agree that there is not a single clear or definitive answer. For example, sexually empowered behavior likely varies across different individuals, different ages, different relationships, and different social and cultural contexts.

We have discussed these questions theoretically, but empirical research could also shed light on these topics. Potentially fruitful areas of research in the future include investigating how adolescent girls' conceptualizations of sexual empowerment, sexual desire, and sexual pleasure differ as a function of their age; examining how girls (of varying races, ages, and ethnicities) interpret and respond to sexualized media images; and investigating how girls' desire to please their partner may have an impact on their sense of empowerment, their sexual desire and pleasure, and their ability to practice sexual assertiveness.

We believe that these unanswered questions will require on-going discussions, struggles, and perhaps even conflict among feminist researchers and writers, and we think that these issues are worthy of this attention. We also believe that differing feminist perspectives on these challenging questions are valuable in that they will contribute to a richer and more productive exploration of adolescent girls' sexuality.

Acknowledgement The order of authorship is alphabetical. The authors contributed equally to this article.

References

- American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>.
- Barton, B. (2002). Dancing on the Möbius Strip: Challenging the sex war paradigm. *Gender & Society, 16*, 585–602. doi:10.1177/089124302236987.
- Baumgardner, J., & Richards, A. (2003). The number one question about feminism. *Feminist Studies, 29*, 448–452.
- Butler, J. (1993). Gender is burning: Questions of appropriation and subversion. In S. Thornham (Ed.), *Feminist film theory, a reader* (pp. 336–352). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Chandra, A., Martinez, G. M., Mosher, W. D., Abma, J. C., & Jones, J. (2005). Fertility, family planning, and reproductive health of U.S. women: Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. *Vital and Health Statistics, Series 23, Number 25*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_025.pdf.
- Cornell, D. (Ed.). (2000). *Feminism & pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crawford, M. (2006). *Transformations: Women, gender, & psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Debold, E., Wilson, M., & Malave, I. (1993). *Mother daughter revolution: From good girls to great women*. New York: Random House.
- Duits, L., & van Zoonen, L. (2007). Who's afraid of female agency?: A rejoinder to Gill. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 14*, 161–170. doi:10.1177/1350506807075820.
- Durham, M. G. (2008). *The Lolita effect: The media sexualization of girls and 5 keys to fixing it*. New York: Overlook Press.
- Edgar, T., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (1993). Expectations for sexual interaction: A cognitive test of the sequencing of sexual communication behaviors. *Health Communication, 5*, 239–261. doi:10.1207/s15327027hc0504_1.
- Edut, O. (2003). *Body outlaws: Rewriting the rules of beauty and body image*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Else-Quest, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2009). The missing discourse of development: Commentary on Lerum and Dworkin. *Journal of Sex Research, 46*, 264–167. doi:10.1080/00224490903079559.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Education Review, 58*, 29–53.
- Fine, M. (2005). X. Desire: The morning (and 15 years) after. *Feminism & Psychology, 15*, 54–50. doi:10.1177/0959-353505049708.
- Fine, M., & McClelland, S. (2006). Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*, 297–338.
- FoxNews. (2009). Miley Cyrus gets raunchy with a pole at the Teen Choice Awards, wins six trophies. *Fox News*. Retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com>.
- Friedrich, W. (2007). *Children with sexual behavior problems: Family-based attachment focused therapy*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gagnon, J., & Simon, W. (1973). *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gill, R. (2007). Critical respect: dilemmas of choice and agency in feminism (A response to Duits and Van Zoonen). *European Journal of Women's Studies, 14*, 69–80. doi:10.1177/1350506807072318.
- Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism & Psychology, 18*, 35–60. doi:10.1177/0959353507084950.
- Giordano, P., Longmore, M., & Manning, W. (2006). Gender and the meanings of romantic relationships: A focus on boys. *American Sociological Review, 71*, 260–287. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30038988>.
- Girls, Inc. (2006). *The supergirl dilemma: Girls feel the pressure to be perfect, accomplished, thin, and accommodating*. New York: Author.
- Goldman, R., Heath, D., & Smith, S. L. (1991). Commodity feminism. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 8*, 333–351. doi:10.1080/15295039109366801.
- hooks, b. (1991, June). Is Paris Burning? *Z*, 61.
- Horne, S., & Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J. (2005). Female sexual subjectivity and well-being: Comparing late adolescents with different sexual experiences. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy, 2*, 25–40. doi:10.1525/srsp.2005.2.3.25.
- Impett, E. A., & Peplau, L. A. (2003). Sexual compliance: Gender, motivational, and relationship perspectives. *Journal of Sex Research, 40*, 87–100. doi:10.1080/00224490309552169.
- Impett, E. A., Peplau, L. A., & Gable, S. L. (2005). Approach and avoidance sexual motivation: Implications for personal and interpersonal well-being. *Personal Relationships, 12*, 465–482. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2005.00126.x.
- Kaestle, C. E., Halpern, C. T., Miller, W. C., & Ford, C. A. (2005). Young age at first sexual intercourse and sexually transmitted infections in adolescents and young adults. *American Journal of Epidemiology, 161*, 774–780. doi:10.1093/aje/kwi095.
- Kirby, D. (2007). *Emerging answers 2007: Research finding on programs to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases*. Washington: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
- La Guardia, J. G., & Ryan, R. M. (2002). What adolescents need: A self-determination theory perspective on development within families, school and society. In F. Pajares & T. Urdan (Eds.), *Academic motivation of adolescents* (pp. 193–220). Greenwich: IAP.
- Lamb, S. (2002). *The secret lives of girls: What good girls really do – sex play, aggression, and their guilt*. New York: Free Press.
- Lamb, S. (2006). *Sex, therapy, and kids: Addressing their concerns through talk and play*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lamb, S. (2010a). Feminist ideals of healthy female adolescent sexuality: A critique. *Sex Roles, 62*, 294–306. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9698-1.
- Lamb, S. (2010b). Porn as a pathway to empowerment? A response to Peterson's Commentary. *Sex Roles, 62*, 314–317. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9756-8.
- Lamb, S. (2010c). Toward a sexual ethics curriculum: Bringing philosophy and society to bear on individual development. *Harvard Educational Review, 80*, 81–106.
- Lerum, K., & Dworkin, S. (2009). An interdisciplinary commentary on the report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls. *Journal of Sex Research, 46*, 250–263. doi:10.1080/00224490903079542.
- Levin, D., & Kilbourne, J. (2008). *So sexy so soon: The new sexualized childhood and what parents can do to protect their kids*. New York: Ballantine.
- Levy, A. (2005). *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York: Free Press.
- Luker, K. (2006). *When sex goes to school: Warring views on sex—and sex education—since the sixties*. New York: Norton.
- Mast, C. (2001). *Sex respect: The option of true sexual freedom*. Bradley: Respect Incorporated.
- Michaels, L. (1978). *Saturday night live [Television series]*. New York: NBC.
- Morrissey, T. E. (2010). Anti-gaga PSA warns parents about dangerous pop culture icons. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com>

- #15627458/anti+gaga-psa-warns-parents-about-the-dangers-of-pop-culture.
- Muehlenhard, C. L., & Peterson, Z. D. (2005). Wanting and not wanting sex: The missing discourse of ambivalence. *Feminism and Psychology, 15*, 15–20. doi:10.1177/0959353505049698.
- National Institutes of Health (1999). *Questions and answers about the NIH policy and guidelines on the inclusion of children as participants in research Involving Human Subjects*. Retrieved from http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/children/pol_children_qa.htm#q04name
- O'Sullivan, L. F., & Gaines, M. E. (1998). Decision-making in college students' heterosexual dating relationships: Ambivalence about engaging in sexual activity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 15*, 347–363. doi:10.1177/0265407598153003.
- Obama, B. (2009). Inaugural address. In J. T. Woolley & G. Peters, *The American presidency project*. Retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=44>.
- O'Donnell, L., O'Donnell, C. R., & Stueve, A. (2001). Early sexual initiation and subsequent sex-related risks among urban minority youth: The Reach for Health study. *Family Planning Perspectives, 33*, 268–275. doi:10.1363/3326801.
- Oswalt, S. B., Cameron, K. A., & Koob, J. J. (2005). Sexual regret in college students. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 34*, 663–669. doi:10.1007/s10508-005-7920-y.
- Peterson, Z. D. (2010). What is sexual empowerment? A multidimensional and process-oriented approach to adolescent girls' sexual empowerment. *Sex Roles, 62*, 307–313. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9725-2.
- Peterson, Z. D., & Muehlenhard, C. L. (2007). Conceptualizing the “wantedness” of women's consensual and nonconsensual sexual experiences: Implications for how women label their experiences with rape. *Journal of Sex Research, 44*, 72–88. doi:10.1080/00224490709336794.
- Riger, S. (1993). What's wrong with empowerment? *American Journal of Community Psychology, 21*, 279–292. doi:10.1007/BF00941504.
- Strossen, N. (1993). A feminist critique of “the” feminist critique of pornography. *Virginia Law Review, 79*, 1099–1190. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1073402>.
- Tiefer, L. (1995). *Sex is not a natural act and other essays*. Boulder: Westview.
- Tolman, D. L. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tolman, D., & Debold, E. (1994). Doing desire: Adolescent girls' struggles for/with sexuality. *Gender & Society, 8*, 324–342. doi:10.1177/089124394008003003.
- Tolman, D. L., & Szalacha, L. A. (1999). Dimensions of desire: Bridging qualitative and quantitative methods in a study of female adolescent sexuality. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 23*, 7–39. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1999.tb00338.x.
- Tolman, D. L., Spencer, R., Rosen-Reynoso, M., & Porche, M. V. (2003). Sowing the seeds of violence in heterosexual relationships: Early adolescents narrate compulsory heterosexuality. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*, 159–178. doi:10.1111/1540-4560.t01-1-00010.
- Welles, C. E. (2005). Breaking the silence surrounding female adolescent sexual desire. *Women & Therapy, 81*, 31–45. doi:10.1300/J015v28n02_03.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*, 581–599. doi:10.1007/BF02506983.

Copyright of Sex Roles is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.