Dangerous Desires and Safe Spaces: 
Constraints and allowances in Western female sexual identity development

This paper will explore the social and biological factors that inform female sexual identity development in Western anglophile cultures. I will discuss the role of puberty, specifically the experience of menarche and breast development as well as the role of cultural messages available to adolescent females: the negative silence of adults, the (mis)education in schools that focuses on a danger discourse, the policing from and of peers, and the available media messages that are often absent, often condemning, but later with the possibility of exploration, though only available for middle class adult females. The class divide is a salient distinction as the narratives available differ for middle, working class, urban and suburban teens. For the working class and urban, the focus is on the imminent danger of sexuality while the suburban and middle class narrative stresses danger but also allows for pleasure in the context of a heterosexual relationship. This romance narrative stresses the need for a partner and obfuscates the possibility of seeking pleasure with oneself and for the sake of oneself. There is a potential link between the romance narrative and the later adult middle-class sexual narrative that encourages women to masturbate, though the consumer messages stress relationships.

To illustrate this dilemma of female sexual identity development and new sexual consumer discourses, I offer the following anecdote about my experience working at a female-oriented sex store while pursuing an undergraduate degree. Many women came into the store to buy vibrators for the first time, often nervously giggling
and hesitant to ask questions. One woman in particular stands out in my memory.

Instead of quietly pacing around the store and peering at the vibrators, she came
directly to the front counter. In tones so hushed I had to ask her to repeat herself she
said, “I need a… vibrator.” The last word was such a tense whisper that it sounded
like a hiss. I came around to the front of the counter and started asking her questions
to help narrow down what she might like but she was emphatic about maintaining her
silence. She looked at me with fretful eyes and told me to pick out anything and just
ring her up. Her anxiety was so marked that I became uneasy and wondered why she
was even in the store. As I rang her transaction, I attempted to explain the best way to
use the products she was purchasing as well as recommending books to read but
stopped because my advice was only creating more visible nervousness.

Why would a woman voluntarily endure visibly high levels of anxiety? What
would encourage anyone to submit themselves to this kind of distress? On one hand,
any discussion of her sexuality sent her into a panic. On the other hand, she seemingly
had a legitimate desire to purchase a vibrator. At the heart of her reaction is a conflict
between the silencing and dangerous discourses of female sexuality and a newly
emerging consumer focus on female sexuality. Through shows like Sex and the City
and the burgeoning adult industry sector of female-oriented sex toys, females are
receiving the message to acknowledge (certain) sexual desires (Attwood, 2005 and
Markle, 2008). Compared to the messages adolescent females are raised with (and
adult women are subject to) it becomes clear why this woman would engage in an
anxiety provoking experience.
Adolescent females going through the processes of puberty and becoming women must sort through the silence surrounding their desires, the sexualization of bodies in a culture that prohibits teen female sexuality, incessant danger narratives of sexuality and conflicting messages of sexual desirability without an agentic sexuality. Adult women (and to a certain extent, adolescent females) have a safe space to express their sexuality within the context of a heterosexual relationship, but not even that space is assured. There is still the possibility that a woman’s desires will be considered unacceptable if they fall outside of the context of vaginal intercourse.

What factors foster the anxious conflict that characterizes female sexual identity development? Cultural messages alone do not determine female sexual identity development, but rather a delicate interplay between experiencing developing female bodies, the social discourses that define the significance of those bodies, and the critical relationship that females have with the often conflicting narratives offered by parents, peers, schools and the media. The overarching themes of developing female sexuality are of silence, danger and desexualization. Considering the marked differences between male and female puberty, one can see how much easier it is to desexualize the female experience.

Menarche (first menstruation) and spermarche (first ejaculation) are, respectively, the female and male markers of physical sexual viability. Spermarche is surrounded by relative silence in both the school and family environments but references to ejaculation abound in public discourses which lead adolescent boys to be aware of an impending first ejaculation and to associate it with adult sexual functioning (Frankel, 2002). Indeed, it would be nearly impossible to disassociate
ejaculation from the explicitly sexual due to the accompanying orgasm. Menarche, in contrast, is surrounded by discourse from the family and schools but is not explicitly tied to sex (Lee, 1994). Discourses about menarche focus on the medical and consumer aspects of the experience, but absent are discussions of sexual capacity. Narratives of first menstruation are characterized by feelings of uncleanliness, alienation from one’s own body and anxiety (Lee, 1994).

The consumer culture surrounding menstruation promotes feelings of internal uncleanliness. The very term ‘feminine hygiene product’ (as well as the names of these products) implies that the purpose of tampons, sanitary napkins, cleansing wipes, and douches is to clean a mess being generated by the female body. Females report going to great lengths to hide their menstruation by wearing heavier clothes and keeping their menstruation a secret from anyone aside from their mothers until after experiencing several cycles (Lee, 1994). Females tend to be group oriented with more highly developed interpersonal identities (Lytle et al., 1997; Thorbecke and Grotevant, 1982), so the act of hiding menstruations demonstrates the deep feelings of shame surrounding the experience.

Alienation from one’s body is another common theme among menarche narratives and, more often than not, women speak of menstruation in the passive voice, describing the experience as something happening to them (Lee, 1994). Unlike ejaculation, which can be controlled to some degree through acts like masturbation, menstruation happens constantly and can begin at anytime and in anyplace. In a patriarchal society that stresses sexual passivity for females, the experience of menstruation fosters a deeper sense of oneself as inert with regards to sexuality. The
only avenues to control menstruation are by medical intervention in the form of hormones or by starving oneself. Indeed, females suffering from anorexia nervosa often discuss their motivation in terms of control (Fairburn, 1998).

The desexualizing discourse of a physiological event signaling sexual maturity is one factor that contributes to the high levels of anxiety that females associate with menarche. Social discourse surrounding female sexuality intensifies this emotion. Not only is menarche desexualized, it signals reproductive capacity and sexual availability within a discourse that defines female sexuality as dangerous and places serious constraints on females’ sexual conduct, limiting sexual expression to the confines of committed, adult heterosexual relationships for the purpose of love and affection. Sexual conduct outside of this realm can result in a tarnished reputation and social fallout. Social policing on the female body is strict and, for adolescents especially, sexual conduct is not the only reason to dole out social castigation. Bodies that appear too sexual are associated with deviant female sexuality and subject to regulation (Tolman, 2002 and White, 2002).

Early, noticeable breast development associated with precocious puberty often earns adolescent females tarnished reputations at the hands of peers (Lee, 1994 and White, 2002). Menarche can be hidden but breast development is an overt signal of female sexuality. Breasts are highly sexualized in Western culture and the early presence of breasts on a female leads to a negative overssexualization, often earning these girls reputations as sexually promiscuous even in the absence of sexual activity. When drawing female bodies, premenarchal early adolescent females tend to draw more explicit breasts while postmenarchal late adolescent and adult females tend to
draw less explicit breasts (Rierdan and Koff, 1980). There exists the possibility that
deeplinesking breasts when drawing female representations evidences a disconnect
from experiencing female sexualization.

There is serious social motivation for females to distance themselves from
their own sexuality and during adolescence one of the major motivations is to avoid
the ‘slut’ label that is so ardently enforced by peers, overwhelmingly by other females
(White, 2002). As noted previously, females tend to have higher developed
interpersonal identities and are therefore more group and friendship focused (Lytle, et
al., 1997). This translates into heightened intergroup sexual conduct regulation on the
part of adolescent females and, indeed, they are the ones intensely scrutinizing each
others’ sexual conduct and appearance and applying the ‘slut’ label. The rules of
conduct are deeply internalized and projected onto other females.

Female sexuality is characterized by what feminist scholars refer to as a
‘double bind’. While females must be sexually desirable they must avoid sexual
activity and refrain from expressing overt sexuality; females must be sexual objects
for consumption (by males) but not be sexual subjects (Hird and Jackson, 2001;
Tolman, 1994, 2002; White, 2002). Female sexuality is complementary to male
sexuality in the sense that they are responsible for their own as well as males’
sexuality because male sexuality is defined by a biological drive that men have no
control over. Aspects of sexual pleasure are replaced by the relational pleasure
derived from pleasing a partner and feeling affection and love, effectively restricting
female sexual pleasure to heterosexual relationships. This contradictory set of
expectations leaves females open to both sexual violence (i.e., if she had not been
dressed provocatively, he would not have raped her) and the slut stigma.

While boys’ motivation to spread rumors about girls’ sexual conduct is to
publicly assert their image as a sexually desiring and effectual heterosexual male
(Hird and Jackson, 2001), girls’ motivation is one of group inclusion and self-
distancing from the ‘slut’ label. By participating in spreading a rumor, adolescent
females take part in a group inclusive activity (White, 2002). In addition, spreading a
rumor about another girl implies that the person publicly decrying their actions is
separate from the rumor’s subject. Female adolescents are constantly aware of the
potential to be the subject of such rumors and that these rumors can emerge with no
substantive evidence and, once started, spin out of control. Females suffer perpetual
anxiety about the possibility of such rumors because they witness the process over
and over again (Tolman, 2002 and White, 2002).

Tarnished reputations and sexual violence are not the only dangers articulated
in the discourse surrounding female sexuality. In the public school sex education
curricula, the focus is almost exclusively on the dangers of sex. In a groundbreaking
essay exploring the silence surrounding adolescent female sexual desire in sex
education, Michelle Fine asserts four major discourses of sexuality: violence,
victimization, individual morality and desire (1988). (The latter is ultimately a rarity
and not part of the official curricula.) The discourse of violence relies on instilling
fear by discussing only the physical dangers of premarital sex. Proponents call for
silence in schools concerning sexuality, afraid that speaking about sex will lead
adolescents to engage in sex. Victimization is the most prevalent of the discourses and
emphasizes females’ vigilance in defending themselves against STDs, pregnancy and males’ coercive sexual behaviors. Females in this discourse are represented as potential victims of males’ unchecked sexual aggression, which they alone can prevent. The primary prevention method is that of heterosexual marriage, a method which ignores the possibility of sexual violence in the context of marriage. The discourse of individual morality stresses self-reliant decision making and while this discourse recognizes female sexual subjectivity, it does so only if the subjectivity leads females to choose abstinence until marriage (Fine, 1988).

The discourse of desire does not exist in the formal curricula but emerges in the unstructured classroom interactions mediated by teachers consciously subverting the official sex education agenda (Fine, 1988). These teachers are in the minority. The prevailing discourses silence even the possibility of female sexual desire and instead promote sex as something inherently dangerous for females. This is not to suggest that these dangers are not real or do not merit discussion, but the fact that females are warned of negative consequences without learning of positive outcomes shrouds sex with anxiety and fear. Not only must females regulate their conduct in addition to males’, they must also be vigilant in protecting themselves from the potential negative social and physical outcomes. These dangers are also part of the public discourse and create an air of anxiety about female sexuality that focuses on the dangers while silencing desires.

Parents echo the sentiment of selective silence in public education and express marked anxiety discussing sexuality with both male and female adolescent children (Frankel, 2002 and Tolman, 2002). They are often unsupportive and only voice the
dangers of sex while ignoring the pleasurable aspects. This demonstrates the deep-seated fears surrounding adolescent sexuality, but because there is no prevailing discourse of female desire, it is females (as well as non-heterosexual males) that experience the greatest internal sexual conflict of desire. Although supportive parents that discuss both the positive and negative tend to have daughters who feel more connected to their sexuality and engage in less risky behavior, this does not solve females’ dilemma of desire in the face of competing cultural messages (Tolman, 2002). Sadly, the danger discourses and sexual silences are too pervasive to be resolved by parental intervention.

The most insidious aspect of silencing desire in favor of a danger discourse is that sexual desire exists for nearly all females (Impett and Tolman, 2006). The Madonna/whore dichotomy is deeply embedded and negotiating sexual desire (province of the ‘whore’) is difficult and confusing for girls experiencing sexual desire while wanting to remain ‘good’ girls. Without a desire discourse to draw from, how can female adolescents make sense of their emerging sexual desires in the face of the anxiety producing messages about sex? Because female sexuality is surrounded in silence and adolescent females understand the dire social consequences of discussing their desires with others, the strategies for mediating the dilemma of desire are individual and constructed from girls’ own experiences and critical relationship with the world around them.

The coupling of potential negative sexual consequences with sexually maturing female bodies is a formula for cognitive dissonance. Some adolescent females silence and ignore their desires in order to avoid this internal conflict
(Tolman, 2002). While an easily accessible strategy, ignoring desire removes any sense of sexual agency which in turn fosters risky sexual behaviors. A lack of agency means a lack of decisiveness in sexual decision making and leaves choice in the hands of sexual partners whom are often male and operating under the cultural assumption that their own sexuality is beyond their control and pleasure is the only reason for engaging in sex. Thus, condoms are likely left out of the picture in order for the male to feel more pleasurable sensations.

Another strategy, used by females who recognize the bind in which they operate, is to simply erase their desire by forgetting, moderating or regulating (Tolman, 2002). By forgetting, females can rearrange their memories of sexual experiences and fantasies to expunge desire and reestablish their self-concept as a ‘good’ girl. Moderation is enacted by limiting the number of sexual experiences in a given time frame, a strategy that makes sense in a culture that champions male sexual conquests while admonishing high female sexual tallies. Restricting the amount of experiences is like restricting the amount of partners. The third aspect of the desire erasure strategy is to regulate or control desires while still recognizing their existence. In Deborah Tolman’s book “Dilemmas of Desire” a girl named Inez succinctly elucidates this strategy: “My body does not control my mind. My mind controls my body…” (Tolman, 2002, p. 96). Considering the lack of agency and control experienced physically through menarche and socially through victimization discourses, one can understand female adolescents’ need to exert some form of power with respect to their sexuality.
While rarer, there are female adolescents that critique or even reject the double bind (to a certain extent) and choose to express their desire (Tolman, 2002). The minority of female adolescents that reject the double bind and choose to accept their sexual desires speak angrily about the political and institutional aspects that regulate female desire. While their outrage is directed at the larger culture, they still view their dilemma as personal (Tolman, 2002). Other females that choose to recognize their sexual desire do so by finding ways to justify experiencing sexual pleasure and still remain in the ‘good’ girl category. This strategy entails expressing sexual desire in specific contexts while still maintaining the distinction between good and bad girls. Their strategies to accomplish this internal justification are unique and vary from expressing a feeling of entitlement to engaging in sex while intoxicated in order to reassign the blame onto their hazy frame of mind (Tolman, 2002).

These negotiation strategies utilize the notion of safe spaces for sexual expression. Although they are carving out their own mental safe spaces, many females turn to the most prevalent safe sexual space: a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. Where male sexual motivation is framed as pleasure-motivated, female sexual pleasure is framed as motivated by feelings of love and affection (Tolman, 2002 and Williams, 2002). Female adolescents place a strong importance on male affection and having a boyfriend (White, 2002 and Williams, 2002). Considering the limitations placed on female sexuality in nearly every other social arena, it is not surprising that female adolescents would strongly desire a context that lessens these sexual restrictions and creates breathing room around their sexuality.
Feminist theorists define this cultural necessitation as compulsory heterosexuality (Tolman, 2002). By placing a myriad of conflicting social controls on females’ sexual conduct and offering one space where they can express their desires, females become dependent on men in order to be socially viable. This is best illustrated by the gendered concepts of the bachelor and the spinster, two unattached adults. Past her sexual prime and unable (or unwilling) to have found a husband, the spinster is a desexualized figure to be pitied when compared to a wife and mother who has fulfilled her social obligations. In contrast, the bachelor is comfortable with his independent, single station in life. He is free to choose multiple sexual partners and spend his time without the constraints of marriage. While the spinster archetype is becoming less prominent, women’s social standing is still greatly influenced by marital and childbearing status.

Compulsory heterosexuality is a dangerous and problematic institution that encourages women to remain in abusive relationships and repudiates the existence of lesbian women. For adolescent females with same-sex attractions, this means that their desires can become a source of frustration, isolation and a dearth of opportunities for sexual expression when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Tolman, 2002). Compulsory heterosexuality eradicates the opportunity for safe spaces of sexual expression for those seeking same-sex experiences.

Outside of the realm of monogamous, heterosexual relationships there are no well established spaces for socially sanctioned female sexual expression. Even the safe space of monogamous heterosexuality is not available or as pertinent for certain groups of female adolescents (Tolman, 2002 and Williams, 2002). For ethnic
minorities and working-class female adolescents, their conceptualization of sexuality tends to focus far more on the dangers of sex, a mental framework that is reinforced by media representations of a dangerous teen sexuality that leads to pregnancy and seeing their peers experience the negative outcomes of sex (Tolman, 2002 and Williams, 2002). Even the limited, emerging discourse that advocates for female sexual agency does so through consumerist rhetoric that addresses the financially prosperous middle-class.

The internationally acclaimed and highly popular HBO series *Sex and the City* catalyzed a nascent public discourse of female sexual empowerment that stresses independence and sex for the sake of pleasure (Markle, 2008). Accompanying this discourse is the growing female-oriented sex toy industry that goes to great lengths to repackage sex for pleasure in a way that can be incorporated into preexisting female sexual identities, stressing fashion, appearance and consumables while offering sexual exploration as a way to enhance preexisting relationships (Attwood, 2005). In this new discourse, female sexual pleasure is attained through consumables and a refashioning of the self by way of sexually provocative clothing (such as lingerie) and sex toys (such as vibrators). Fashion, appearance and consumables are all part of heterosexualized femininity, so it makes sense to repackage sex in familiar, feminized territory. It is important to note that the emphasis is not on pornography or any sexually explicit imagery (sexual consumables that are notoriously catered to males) but on toys and dressing up (Attwood, 2005). There is an implicit association with adolescent activities that involve trying on identities, an association that seems to be a
cognitive bridge to a developmental marker that originally restrained sexual expression.

Is this new discourse a positive safe place for adult females to try and embrace their sexual desires and assert themselves as sexual subjects? In a way, yes, but like the safe space of heterosexual relationships, this discourse only speaks to white, heterosexual, middle-class females. Also, the discourse still stresses compulsory heterosexuality and this trying-on of sexual desire is a form of identity play that is not well established in the broader social climate and is not integrated into female sexual identity development because it is simply play. Even so, because female sexual identities develop on such individual levels, the existence of this type of identity play at least creates the opportunity for some portion of the female population to explore their sexuality. Of course, on a microcontext level, there are certainly smaller communities (most likely in large, affluent urban areas) that already support and foster adult female sexual expression, but they are not the norm nor are they embedded in the larger social discourse.

As stated before, it is the silencing of desire that creates so much anxiety for females. Without a discourse to name and explain one’s desires, only confusion and tension can emerge. That this discourse even exists in the public consciousness means that the idea of female sexual agency is being made available to adolescents, regardless of their level of personal connection to the messages. Several of the girls profiled in Deborah Tolman’s study of female adolescent desire explicitly mentioned the role of media in their awareness of pleasure entitlement and potentially gratifying sex acts aside from vaginal intercourse (2002). While media images of female
sexuality are overwhelmingly negative, restrictive and reinforce sexual and gender inequalities (Kim et al., 2007), there is the potential for positive female sexual empowerment through this new discourse of female sexuality.

Female sexual identity development is marked and restrained by the omission of pleasure and sexual agency. Available messages for adolescents about female sexuality stress the dangers of sex without discussing the positive aspects and leave females bearing the burden of sexual conduct regulation for both genders. The already tenuous relationship that girls have with their bodies is exacerbated by a contradictory social desexualization of females that simultaneously expects females to exude sexual desirability, effectively rendering them as passive sexual objects. Female sexuality evolves uniquely and distinctly within individual females as the culture promotes silence even between other females via the threat of the ‘slut’ label.

Despite all of these constraints, females still experience their desire and a large part of their anxiety is how to best mediate between their sexual desire and the desire to be a ‘good’ girl. Positive discourses about female sexual agency are limited to adult, heterosexual, middle-class females and ethnic minorities and the working class are left with discourses of danger. But within the emerging positive discourse, there exists the possibility of sexual expression for some females. The anxious woman I mentioned earlier may very well have gone home and felt comfortable exploring her sexual desires and was able to do so because of the emerging positive discourse presented to her in the media. Likewise, she may also have gone home and thrown away her toy out of sheer apprehension. As a culture, we seem to tangle female
sexuality into a tightly wound ball which we must later deconstruct if a sexually engaged adult relationship is to occur, but only for society’s powerful.
References


