



# *Crossing Boundaries, Workshopping Sexualities*

## WORKING PAPER ON **YOUTH AND SEXUALITIES**

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### I. TOPICS IN NEED OF FURTHER STUDY

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A. There are several areas of research that are currently underdeveloped. One of those is the study of (young) men. We need to know more about how men think about women; how men occupy certain institutional spaces; how male socialization occurs within the family; how men transition across space and age categories; how age changes meanings of masculinity; about young people who are not in college; non-dominant college students; and on non-white men. Summing up more generally, we need to tell more stories about men. There is some work on Christianity, but we need more work on alternative spaces for men, in which men can create alternative definitions of masculinity—i.e. Pascoe’s example of the theater in high school).

B. A second area is that of technology. We need more work on the role of new media in relationships; the negotiation of other people’s space and information online; the use of new media and teen romance without moral panic overlay; parents’ use of new media in regulating kids’ (and other people’s kids’) behavior; new standards of regulation; facebook stalking—self-regulation from stalking—and whether this has a gendered dimension; more on which behaviors people keep public and private; how does technology change cheating – both in terms of making it possible and getting caught – and whether the boundaries and definitions of cheating changed with new media; more attention to the global face of technology and global relationships; more on examining preconceived notions about meeting people online—in romantic setting and the transitions from “online” space to physical space and the negotiation of that transition.

C. Across topic areas, there is a need for more attention to the major axes of difference (for instance, geography, class, and nation) that shape the experiences, including those of marginalization and empowerment, that young people have in relation to issues of sexuality.

## II. THEORETICAL ADVANCES

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We need to more empirical information about different spaces and cultural repertoires of men—but at the same time we need more theoretical development of girls/women/femininity; and an expansion of hegemonic femininity. We need to tackle and go beyond the gendered component to current moral panics—we need to critique this and better highlight the ways in which this influences current feminist work (example: hook up culture). Related are the questions of girls and the relationship between power and desires for sexual activity, and how girls have to position themselves within particular narratives that are available about them. We need to understand how theories of masculinities and femininities fit together: how do they relate and how do the ways in which they relate contribute to our understandings of them? This may mean moving beyond “doing gender”—connecting spaces and transcending spaces in a way that “doing gender” framework does not—when appropriate, perhaps using multi-level theory.

## III. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

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One of the challenges articulated by members of the working group is how to give people the opportunity to find new ways of understanding the self and giving voice in the area of sexuality— especially given the constraining frameworks that prevail in society at large. With regard to youth sexualities, there is the additional problem of imposing adult perspectives on the experiences of youth, which must be understood on their own terms. There is also the question of how to accurately portray people when for many reasons they don't always accurately portray themselves or their histories? One approach is longitudinal, qualitative, ethnographic work to triangulate and deal with these issues. Individuals who are studied over the long term reveal more about themselves: examples: women admitting hookups once they are in a relationship, men who pledged abstinence admitting pre-marital sex once married.

## IV. POSITIONING THE STUDY OF YOUTH SEXUALITIES, CONCEPTUALLY AND POLITICALLY

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A. Researchers who study sexuality face several misconceptions—on the one hand, the belief that this is a “post-sexuality” society—prejudice and discrimination are no longer issues—

and on the other hand the tendencies toward moral panic around youth sexualities. Researchers of youth sexualities face the challenge of balancing attention to the vulnerabilities of children and youth, with the recognition that their experiences of sexuality are valid, normal, and potentially enriching. At the center of this challenge lies the normative question: “Are youth and children allowed to have a sexuality?” Answering this question requires redefining sexuality not in terms of prevailing adult definitions of sexuality, such as in terms of acts of intercourse or fixed identities and orientations. It also raises the question of what are children/youth, and what is the role of parents—and how historical and cross-cultural research illuminates these socially constructed categories. It also requires researching youth sexualities from the perspective of youth themselves. Some larger frameworks that can address both “vulnerability,” “emergence,” “risk” and thriving are “human rights”, “sexual citizenship” and “positive youth development.”

B. Beyond constructing overarching conceptual frameworks that can supersede the “risk-based” framing of youth sexualities, researchers also face the challenge of creating a broader political climate in which better research and services to address the sexualities of youth are possible. In order to create a more favorable political climate for the research of youth sexualities, we must call on our discipline as a whole, and create coalitions with other professions, to promote a “paradigmatic” change. Many non-profits and professional groups active within sexual health and sex education are trying to expand the conversation, and collaborating with these groups should be a priority. We must also work on the “communications” that allows us to address questions such as “is sexuality a human right” without resorting to jargon. This conceptual and political work to articulate a conception of sexuality that empowers as well as protects youth, will help with the methodological challenges researchers face, e.g. in regard to IRB approval.

## V. RESOURCES

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