Adolescent Girls' Assessment and Management of Sexual Risks: Insights from Focus Group Research

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Abstract

We conducted focus groups with girls ages 14 to 17 (*N* = 43) in order to study how the dominant discourse of sexual risk shapes young women's understanding of the sexual domain and their management of these presumably pervasive threats. Through inductive analysis, we developed a coding scheme focused on three themes: (a) *types of sexual risk*; (b) *factors that moderate sexual risk*; and (c) *strategies for managing sexual risk*. Collectively, participants identified many risks but distanced themselves from these by claiming that girls' susceptibility is largely a function of personal factors and therefore avoidable given the right traits, values, and skills. We consider this reliance on other-blaming and self-exemption, as well as instances in which individual participants diverged from this group discourse, in the context of neoliberalism.

Adolescent Girls' Assessment and Management of Sexual Risk and Personal Responsibility

The notion of risk dominates American popular and academic discourse regarding adolescent girls' sexuality and in many regards, this attention is well-placed. In fact, the national birthrate among American adolescents rose in 2006 after 14 years of decline (between 1991 and 2005; Martin et al., 2009). Other statistics also belie any pretense of progress in promoting adolescent sexual health in the United States: adolescents account for 25% of the sexually active population but 50% of all sexually transmitted infection (STI)

diagnoses (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004); and in a study of almost 700 adolescent and young adult women, one in four reported some form of sexual coercion in the past year (Rickert, Wiemann, Vaughn, & White, 2004). Another reason for concern is the erosion of young people's access to sexual health information and services (Fine & McClelland, 2006). While attention to the sexual dangers confronting girls and women is clearly justified and necessary, some argue that simplistic and negative discourse of youth sexuality ultimately disables young people from making informed, health-promoting sexual choices (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002).

The weight given to a deficit-orientation to youth sexuality is evident in the massive research literature dedicated to sexual risk-taking (Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, the view of youth sexuality as inherently dangerous pervades formal sexuality education, which relies heavily on scare tactics (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Burns & Torre, 2004; Fields, 2008). Indeed, content regarding the dangers of premarital coitus are mandated components of federally-funded sexuality education curricula in the U.S. Popular media such as newspapers, magazines, television, and internet sites regularly announce and reiterate the pitfalls of adolescent sexuality, using headlines and images designed to heighten public alarm (Glassner, 1999). Apprehension regarding youth sexuality and its presumed negative consequences reflects not only Americans' relatively conservative moral stance vis-à-vis sexuality (Tiefer, 2004), but also the equation of youth with risk:

> [Y]outh is principally about becoming; becoming an adult, becoming a citizen, becoming independent, becoming autonomous, becoming mature, becoming responsible. […] Moreover, there is a sense in which becoming automatically invokes the future. Youth, as it is constructed in at-risk discourses, is at-risk of jeopardizing, through present behaviors and dispositions, desired futures. (p. 30, Kelly, 2001),

According to such a construction, adolescent sexual behavior, produced in tandem by youths' presumably surging libido and underdeveloped judgment, represents both the corruption of childhood innocence and the greatest threat to future prospects (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Lesko, 1996). At the same time, this preoccupation with sexual risk is accompanied by the growing popularity of sexualized entertainment and goods, much of which objectifies girls and women as it targets them as consumers (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Harris, 2004). Somewhat ironically, the proliferation of such sexualized material both perpetuates the objectification of girls and women and fuels public alarm that sexuality is dangerous terrain, particularly for young women.

Indeed, the risks of youth sexuality are compounded by the differential norms and roles assigned to adolescent girls and boys. Not only are girls and women more likely to bear the physical burdens of pregnancy and many STIs, but they are also more often saddled with the social, material, and emotional burdens of such outcomes (Travis, 2006). Furthermore, girls and women must negotiate the competing expectations of sexual receptivity to male sexual advances and of sexual responsibility for gatekeeping and regulating those same advances (Byers, 1996; Morokoff, 2000), which are argued to originate from an innate male sexual drive (Gavey, 2005; Phillips, 2000). Such an irrepressible and inherent male sexual drive is often invoked in explanations of women's experiences of sexual coercion and violation, while messages regarding sexual assault prevention commonly hinge on women's responsibility to dress, behave, and socialize with caution. What emerges from this intersection of gender, youth, and sexuality is a discourse of risk emphasizing both girls' sexual vulnerability and their concomitant culpability.

The notion that girls and women bear responsibility for their sexual traumatization and misfortune has a long history and remains well-entrenched. The tendency to blame girls and women for their own victimization was most recently laid bare by reactions to the physical assault of the pop star, Rihanna, by her equally famous boyfriend, Chris Brown. An article in the *New York Times* quoted adolescent girls disputing that the attack ever occurred (despite ample, publicly available evidence thereof), accusing Rihanna of having provoked the attack, and sympathizing with him (Hoffman, 2009). Aside from being rooted in sexism, such "victim-blaming" can also be understood as an attempt to preserve some sense of individual control and agency, as posited in system justification theory (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) and "just world" beliefs (see Furnham, 2003). We propose that the tendency to rely on models of individual blame is not only fueled by sexist norms and the need for a psychological buffer but is amplified further by prevailing cultural values of self-determination and personal responsibility. Narratives of individual striving and achievement dominate American social history but have been reinvigorated over the past decades as neoliberalism has taken hold not only of social and economic policy but also of cultural discourse (Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2004). Recent scholarship has studied how neoliberal principles such as faith in the meritocratic principles of free market competition and disdain for government intervention are translated into the denigration of mutuality and the valorization of self-interest (e.g., Adam, 2005; Coburn, 2000; McRobbie, 2004; Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2009). Coupled with this endorsement of individuals' rights to seek out and seize opportunities for personal success is the expectation that they accept full responsibility in cases of failure. Within a meritocratic, neoliberal logic, there are rich rewards for excellence and natural consequences for inadequacy; in short, one gets what one deserves.

A critical premise of this model is the constructed dichotomy of victimization and agency (Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2002), according to which being a victim is cast not as a matter of situation or circumstance, but one of character. Therefore, we shy away from calling a woman who has been raped a "victim" – even though her experience is one of exploitation and disempowerment – for fear that this will be seen not as a feature of her experience but as the total of her identity (i.e., as someone who is inherently and enduringly helpless, powerless, and vulnerable). A study of the unwanted sexual experiences among undergraduate women offered evidence of just how repellent the prospect of being seen as a "victim" could be: participants were more willing to blame themselves for unwanted sexual experiences, even those that occurred under highly coercive circumstances, than admit that they had been exploited by assaultive partners or disempowered by sexist norms (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). By taking personal responsibility for unwanted sex, participants' views of themselves as self-determining, freely-choosing, neoliberal subjects remained intact. Such adamant rejection of the notion of vulnerability led us to wonder how young women reconcile prevailing neoliberal ideals with a dominant sexual discourse that presumes them to be perpetually at risk.

Study Overview

Scholarship regarding fear-based sexual discourse often concentrates on its role in disabling young women from knowing and ultimately asserting their sexual interests and rights with male partners (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002). In the current study, we aim to extend this line of inquiry by examining how the discourse of sexual risk intersects with neoliberal ideals and manifests in young women's discussions of youth sexual culture and their own position within it. If researchers and practitioners have a fuller understanding of how young women make sense of and synthesize dominant discourses of sexual risk and personal responsibility, we may be better able to communicate and engage with young women in efforts to both prevent sexual risk and promote sexual well-being. In

order to pursue this objective, we analyzed focus group data drawn from interviews with American adolescent women. Unlike data gathered regarding individual experiences (e.g., through surveys or individual interviews), focus groups provide insight into the collaborative process by which adolescent women negotiate and establish socially normative positions (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006; Peek & Fothergill, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). In addition, they expose researchers to perspectives that might not be disclosed in a one-on-one interview since peers are able to question one another in a way that would be inappropriate coming from the authoritative position of the interviewer; as a result of such questioning, meanings can be clarified and issues can be probed more deeply.

Method

Participants

Participants were 43 adolescent girls, ages 14 – 17 years ($M = 15.16$, $SD = 1.19$), residing in a small city in the northeastern U. S. Participants were recruited from advertisements in local community papers. Approximately 68% identified themselves as European-American, 25% as African-American, and 6% Hispanic/Latina. Median household income was between $40,000 and $54, 900, which is consistent with the median household income for the surrounding county; 40% of the girls' mothers had a college degree and 57% of the adolescents lived with two parents.

Procedure and Protocol

The focus group data presented here was taken from a larger study conducted by the second author examining mothers' and their adolescent daughters' perceptions of teen risk and mother-daughter communication about risk behavior. For practical purposes of transportation, obtaining parental consent, and ensuring the participation of both members of the mother-daughter dyad, mothers and their adolescent daughters were recruited via advertisements in local newspapers to participate in separate, simultaneous focus group discussions. Mother-daughter pairs responding to the advertisement were screened for eligibility over the phone. Mothers gave verbal consent for their daughters to be screened. Mother-daughter pairs were eligible for the study if the daughters were 14 – 17 years of age, mothers and daughters resided in the same household, and both agreed to participate in the study.

A total of seven adolescent focus groups were run; each group was comprised of 4 – 11 participants (*Mode* = 5). To promote age-appropriate discussions, groups were organized based on daughters' ages, consisting of either 14-15 year olds (4 groups) or 16-17 year olds (3 groups). Group interviews were conducted at a research facility located in an urban area. Upon participants' arrival, the study procedures were explained to mothers and daughters together and parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained. To promote open dialogue, mothers' and daughters' groups were run in separate rooms and all participants were reassured that any information they provided in their groups would not be shared outside of their own group. As per the institutional review board's guidelines for focus group research, participants were cautioned that given the group setting, confidentiality could not be guaranteed by the researchers. Given this possible breach of confidentiality and our primary interest in understanding the perceived norms of the youth culture rather than details of participants' personal experiences, participants were assured that they would not be asked to reveal any personal or sensitive information. All discussions were led by female facilitators, lasted approximately 1.5 hours, and were audio recorded and transcribed. Each participant received $25 for her participation.

Because the current study focuses on understanding the adolescent girls' perceptions of sexual risk, only data from daughters' focus groups are analyzed here. Questions posed to daughters were designed to stimulate discussions of dating, sexual behavior, and sexual risks, among girls their age (see Appendix). Initial questions put to the groups were worded in a general way to elicit the participants' perspectives. For example, sexual risk was not formally defined by the interviewer; rather, participants were asked to describe what concerns girls had about being sexually active. Similarly, the phrasing of the initial questions did not specify heterosexual relationships as a point of interest. While this technically left open the opportunity for participants to consider same-gender relationships and risks, the groups' conversations focused exclusively on heterosexual interactions. As a result, any conclusions drawn from these data refer only to heterosexual interactions and risks. We consider the limitations of this passive approach to the inclusion of same-gender relationships at a later point.

Analysis Strategy

We approached the data inductively, beginning with a general interest in how group participants conceived of sexual risks. Our analysis strategy was intended to draw on the benefits of analyst triangulation. The first two authors, who conducted the bulk of the analyses, approach the subject of adolescent female sexuality from different disciplinary and theoretical positions. The first author has an interdisciplinary background in social work and psychology and is strongly influenced by feminist criticism of gendered sexual norms (e.g., Fine, 1988; Gavey, 2005; Tolman, 2002). The second author shares a background in psychology, but her work has focused on understanding the factors and underlying mechanisms linked to sexual risk behavior among adolescent girls and young women, particularly on the role of alcohol and drug use. As noted by others (e.g., Padgett, 1998; Patton, 1999), such diversity among analysts can help minimize the risk of selective perception.

The first and second authors initiated analyses by reading through the transcripts from each group separately. The first author conducted line-by-line open coding to establish categories and subcategories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). She then reviewed these preliminary coding categories, refining their parameters and discarding those that were less prominent and thematically coherent. Next, the first and second author reviewed and revised the initial coding scheme over the course of a constant comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both authors coded a transcript individually then compared their respective results, gradually building consensus regarding the meaning of individual codes and their relation to one another. Once consensus was reached with regard to the definitions and applications of the coding categories, the first author revisited the transcripts, coding two at a time using the final coding scheme. For each pair of transcripts coded by the first author, the second author coded one. The first and second authors conferred periodically to ensure agreement and coding convergence on those transcripts that both authors had coded. In the final stage of analysis, the third author, who was not involved in prior stages of data collection or analysis, performed an audit of the coding scheme using three randomly selected transcripts. Based on her feedback, the authors were satisfied that the codes had been consistently and sensibly applied.

As noted previously, one of the unique benefits of group interview methodologies is that they allow participants to question and even argue with one another, thereby deepening individual perspectives as well as broadening the number of perspectives offered (Peek & Fothergill, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). In this sense, group members serve as another source of data triangulation. While moments of contradiction or disagreement may be minority occurrences over the course of an interview, we treated these exceptions as potentially meaningful rather than as uninterpretable outliers. Therefore, in addition to noting emerging

themes among focus group participants, we also attended to points of disagreement or divergence.

Results

In response to explicit questions regarding what they perceived to be the costs associated with partnered sexual activity, group participants identified multiple fears and pitfalls, as well as their relative probability and severity. There were indications that the discourse of risk surrounding sexuality was one that many girls had internalized. As stated by one participant, "I think there's always a little voice somewhere that says, 'This could be an STD,' or 'You could have a baby,' or, like, something." In addition, we observed the unprompted emergence of two other thematic domains: participants' perceptions of the factors that affect girls' susceptibility to the identified risks; and participants' own strategies for distancing themselves from them. We noted that as participants described the dangers of heterosexual activity faced by girls in general, they also – often simultaneously – characterized themselves as invulnerable to the array of sexual threats by virtue of their own traits, values, and actions. The following themes and their respective subcategories were present in each focus group, with the exception of the "Right Values" subcategory, which was present in six of the seven groups.

Types of Sexual Risk

Participants identified several different types of risk, which we categorized as: *interpersonal* (e.g., difficulty, discord, or pressure in relationships with others, including parents, peers, and romantic partners); *intrapersonal* (e.g., embarrassment, damage to or loss of self-esteem, personal goals, autonomy); *physical* (e.g., pregnancy, STI, coital pain or discomfort); and *aggression* (e.g., sexual assault, physical violence, or explicit threats thereof). Participants across groups appeared to be highly preoccupied by the range of interpersonal risks associated with sexuality and relationships. They discussed at length being used and deceived by boys, being pressured to be sexual by peers, and then being pegged as promiscuous after a sexual encounter (or even a rumored one). This association was seen as hard to shake: "They'll say something bad about you, and once you get that reputation in school [as a slut]… then I don't know what to tell you (laughing)."

Not surprisingly, conversations regarding these interpersonal risks and social repercussions often revolved around the associated intrapersonal dangers. Groups discussed the potential psychological toll of a romantic or sexual experience (e.g., being an "emotional wreck," feelings of guilt and regret) as well as that of *not* having such an experience, including being "scared they're alone," and going "into depression." Participants in one group weighed the pros and cons of being in a romantic relationship. They noted that while a girl might enjoy the company and support of a boyfriend, it might also be distracting and "adding more stress" in a life already full of academic and extracurricular demands. On a similar note, a participant in another group remarked:

> Because, to have a boyfriend, especially at a young age, like seventh grade, eighth grade, you fall off track. You get worried about them, your grades slip, you sometimes get in trouble at home. Just because, based on my personal experience, I know boys can take half your mind and just spin you around, around, and around, take your focus off of everything else.

In their discussion of the various types of risks, participants differentiated between the probability of certain risks occurring and the damage they might cause to a girl's life and well-being. Pregnancy was believed to pose the greatest danger in terms of both likelihood and severity. Participants shared anecdotes of neighbors, classmates, and acquaintances who

became pregnant in high school, seemingly attesting to its high frequency and its potential to derail a girl's life:

> *Participant 1*: This one girl is seventeen and she had a baby last year, she was sixteen. She comes to school and she can only come for half a day, 'cause she has no one to watch the kid. So, her senior year is, like, ruined because she had a kid. So, now she has to take care of it and, like, her parents really don't help her. Like, it's just sad because, like, I don't even think she's with the guy anymore and, like, that's just horrible. But…

> *Participant 2*: It could easily not have happened.

> *Participant 1*: …uh-huh.

> *Participant 3*: That's what happened to my friend. She's a freshman and she's pregnant. She had to switch schools. I don't know what happened to her, but, my friend still talks to her and I guess, like, her parents are kicking her out and she never talks to her boyfriend, and she's, like, going to this pregnancy class or something. So, she's trying to make it better, but…She got pregnant last year and we're all like, 'How can you do that?'

What is striking about this excerpt is the attribution of blame to individual girls (but, notably, not to male partners) for becoming pregnant.

In contrast to the consensus across groups that "being pregnant is the worst" and is widely feared by adolescent girls, participants had mixed views of other risks. Many commented that adolescent girls often dismiss STIs as distant and unlikely. In the following exchange, participants offered an explanation for why "they're [adolescent girls] never scared about getting HIV" but that pregnancy is "the one thing that nobody wants to have happen to them":

> *Participant 1:* So, definitely, STDs, I don't even think they really come in anybody's mind when it comes to having sex. Like, it's more, "Use a condom, use birth control so you don't get pregnant." That's really what it's all about, is not getting pregnant.

> *Participant 2:* Yeah. I think it's largely because if you get an STD, you're still only caring for yourself. But if you have a baby, all of a sudden you're responsible for another life. And I think a lot of people aren't ready to do that and they're like… Well, besides from the fact that they think they're never gonna get an STD, just because it won't happen to them, even if they did they would still only be responsible for themselves and they're more comfortable with that than being responsible for a child.

Groups differed in their assessment of the frequency of sexual assault and unwanted sex. However, there was an interesting point of convergence, as evidenced by the following two quotes taken from separate groups: "I don't think it's [unwanted sex] very common. Maybe more so when we were younger or when people first started doing things [sexually], like girls didn't know what to do in that situation."; and "I think it's common, but if girls put their foot down and let him know, like, 'This isn't gonna happen,' then it won't, you know, it won't be so common. But, it's common." Although the participants disagreed about the frequency of unwanted sex, both suggested that there are factors that can mitigate the risk of sexual coercion.

Factors that Moderate Sexual Risk

While the interview protocol explicitly asked participants to identify different sexual risks, these questions also sparked discussions about the factors that might affect girls' susceptibility to those risks. It was clear that participants did not view all girls as equally prone; instead, participants noted three primary factors that could affect one's vulnerability: development and age; personal characteristics; and the surrounding environment.

Development and age—In each group, being young (in age and/or mindset) was perceived to be a primary risk factor, as exemplified by the earlier quote regarding unwanted sex. Participants commonly attributed sexual vulnerability to how old a girl is or rather, how old she acts: "I think younger girls are more of the people who will go do stuff that other people want them to, where, like, as you're older you feel like none of that stuff really matters."; "[L]ike, say there's a younger girl who goes to an older party, like, you can pick her out because she'll be the drunkest." Middle school and the first year of high school were often cited as times when the interpersonal risks associated with sexuality, especially pressure to be "cool" (i.e., not a "prude") and to please an older and/or more sexually experienced boyfriend, were greatest. In addition to believing that psychological maturity and the experience that comes with age were critical factors, participants in one group described a generational difference between themselves (16-17 year olds) and first-years in high school:

> I see a different moral sediment [sic] coming in, even when I came into high school, than the girls that are being produced out of middle school at this point. They're having these experiences and they're wearing these clothes and they're having these feelings and engaging in these relationships a lot earlier than say, just like, my generation or the people who I'm in class with.

The possible purpose of asserting such distinctions based on development, age, and generation will be examined in the section regarding girls' strategies for managing the multitude of perceived sexual risks.

Personal characteristics—In addition to developmental factors, focus group participants often argued that a girl might be particularly susceptible to sexual risks as a result of who she is as a person (i.e., her traits). Particularly with regard to interpersonal risks, participants believed that girls' vulnerability hinged on their internal strengths, such as whether they had the necessary independence, self-confidence, willpower, assertiveness, and courage. For example, participants in one group remarked that girls who are "desperate to fit in," whom they also referred to as "the invisible ones," are more easily influenced by the sexualized messages of the popular media. The following exchange serves as another example of group participants' inclination to attribute sexual risk to personal characteristics. In this instance, participants expressed little sympathy for girls who regret past consensual experiences and instead seemed to criticize them, perhaps for their lack of foresight, moral fortitude, or self-control:

> *Participant 1*: A lot of girls plan, "Oh, I'm gonna wait until marriage," and then they go out with a guy for a couple months and they think, "Oh, we're gonna last."

> *Participant 2*: "This is it."

> (Group laughter)

> *Participant 1*: And then they have sex. Then a month later they break up and they're like, "Why'd I do that? My plan was to wait." And then they just, like, throw everything down the drain. You can't take that back.

In another group, members discussed whether being in a relationship can limit the autonomy of girls. One participant recounted the experience of a friend whose boyfriend did not permit her to be friends with any other boys. Another participant in the group insisted that this was a matter over which girls had control: "No, it doesn't have to limit [a girl's autonomy]. It depends on if you let it limit."

Similarly, participants in another group discussed rape with one member noting that some girls lack the "courage" to say "no" and therefore are more likely to be exploited. In other groups, one's personality was argued to be a reason why some girls had unwanted and/or coercive sexual experiences: "If you [sic] easily manipulated. Like, if you're the type of person that's a follower, you're probably going to do something that you don't want to do." This position was shared by a member of another group:

> But, it's kind of, like, your personality. Like, if somebody comes on to you, like, if somebody came on to me and said the wrong thing, like, it wouldn't be a good situation. Like, I would probably say something to them or be like, "Get out of my face before I call the cops." Like, it's basically, like, it's your personality. Like, if somebody comes on to you really strong and you're an introverted person, a lot of people will panic and won't, like, say the right thing, or just be like, "OK." You know what I mean? So, it's a lot, like, basically who you are inside. Like, whether you're willing to let somebody take advantage of you or not.

Once again, the significance of the participant's carefully drawn distinction between herself and other girls will be considered later.

Environment—In addition to ascribing a girl's vulnerability to intra-individual factors, there was some discussion within groups of the role of a girl's environment in leaving her either well-defended against or prone to danger. Participants in all groups commented on the detrimental impact of macro-level, atmospheric factors such as the highly sexualized messages and norms disseminated by the media. However, it is important to recall that, as previously noted, participants believed the influence of the media to be moderated by personal characteristics. In addition, participants' comments regarding girls' home environments indicated some insight into why some girls might have low self-esteem or a great need for attention, leaving them less capable of warding off some sexual risks. When asked why some girls were seen as wanting to be in a relationship "all the time," one participant responded, "Sometimes lonely. Lonely people need to have a boyfriend, or people who need a lot of attention. If you, like, seek for attention, a lot of girls find it in a boyfriend. Like, maybe they don't get it at home and stuff like that." Participants also speculated that girls who are often criticized may be susceptible to boys who try to "sweet talk" them into sexual activity: "That complimenting goes far with certain girls. If they being put down a lot, getting a compliment from a boy probably will bring their spirits up so much that they'll want to hear it again and again, so they'll do whatever the boy wants them to do." In all groups, participants remarked on how having parents who were abusive, neglectful, intensely critical, or overly protective (to the point of failing to provide their daughters information about sexuality) could place girls' sexual well-being in jeopardy.

Strategies for Managing Sexual Risk

Individual participants repeatedly distanced themselves from risk and vulnerability over the course of the different focus groups. In doing so, they made downward comparisons between themselves and other girls, whom they viewed as lacking the requisite maturity, characteristics, and environments necessary to avoid negative consequences. The tendency to place individual blame on girls for their own vulnerability to sexual risks emerged repeatedly across all groups and is evident in the exchanges below as well as several of the

previous excerpts. This is a matter that we consider at length in the Discussion. Within this theme, we organized participants' tendencies to distance themselves from sexual risk into three categories, each based on participants' belief that they – unlike other girls – have the "right" things working in their favor, namely: the "right" personal factors; the "right" values; and the "right" plans of action.

Right Factors—Whether criticizing or expressing sympathy for girls whom they perceived as endangered sexually due to their age, personality, or environment, participants often contended that these factors were not at play in their own lives; they were personally well-defended, if not invincible, with regard to sexual risks. As exemplified by the following quotes (each excerpted from a different group), participants described the factors that increased other girls' vulnerability, while simultaneously distancing themselves from those same factors. Regarding girls' ability to avoid boys and relationships that impinge on their autonomy:

> Because, when we first started going out, like, I made it clear to him, like, what I was going to accept and what I wasn't going to accept. That eliminated a lot of the disadvantages, right off the bat. Because, if you, like, if you go into a relationship and you're sure of yourself and you're sure of what you want, then people find it harder to take advantage of you and impose those disadvantages like, you have to be somewhere or, "You have to call me." You make it clear that you don't have to do anything that you don't want to do, then that eliminates the disadvantages right there.

Regarding girls' ability to avoid unwanted or coerced sexual experiences:

> I think we are old enough where we can, if we don't want to do something, we can just not do it. Don't let someone else take control of you.

Regarding girls' susceptibility to sweet-talking:

> It depends on the type of girl you is. If it was somebody like me, it goes in one ear and out the other, especially if it's a boy that's been studied already.

In addition to these direct comparisons between others' risk and their own protected status, participants also appeared to distance themselves by mocking or scorning others. Participants used words such as "naïve," "gross," "nasty," "stupid," and "slut" when referring to girls who willingly engaged in sexual behaviors deemed inappropriate or immoral (e.g., casual sex) or who were judged as lacking the aptitude to avoid those behaviors in the first place. Even when the participants resembled other girls in some way, they still identified a difference between their own behavior and that of others, as in the following commentary regarding girls' styles of dress:

> I think it has a lot to do with self-esteem, too. Because, the way that you view yourself and the way that you dress and the way that you carry yourself transfers over to the way that you handle your life. And, a lot of girls, like, won't have self-esteem, so they try to compensate for their lack of self-esteem by getting attention from other guys by wearing those mini-skirts. I have denim skirts, I have mini-skirts, but if you carry yourself in a certain way then, like, you can tell the difference between somebody who's confident wearing those clothes, and there's limits. […] Yeah, I think everybody, every girl wears 'em, but it's just how you wear it. Like, some just is too tight and too high, and they're bending over, like, "Yuck."

The following excerpt, taken from the same group as the previous one, captures how participants not only distance themselves from those they judge to be lacking in some way, but also attribute girls' sexual vulnerability to their own presumed faults:

> *Participant*: Well, like, my friends and I, like, we'll be at a party and, like, ok, I'm not trying to brag or nothing, but we're known. Like, we know everybody. So, it's like, we know our limits and who not to talk to and all that. Then you see the little girls coming in. Well, I'm not going to call 'em little girls. The freshman or middle-schoolers, and they drunk and they acting all out of control, and you know who it is. And, like, sometimes they come on to the guys. […] These are the little ones. They don't know how to carry themselves well.
>
> *Interviewer*: Do you think they're targeted by the guys?
>
> *Participant*: I think they make themselves a target.

Right Values—In addition to suggesting that sexual risks can be avoided given the correct constellation of personal qualities and factors, participants also indicated that they themselves are protected by the values they hold, particularly regarding the appropriate age and relationship context for sexual activity. Participants articulated their own value positions through disapproving comments regarding others' behaviors (e.g., during a discussion of the importance of girls telling partners if they do not want to have sex, one participant clarified that she was talking about communicating with boyfriends, not "random people at parties," and added, "Which is gross, but."). They also made their positions explicit through statements such as: "I think, while you're still a teenager, you're still too young [to engage in coitus]. In my opinion." Participants appeared to invoke their own personal values as a way of explaining why they felt they were exempt from worrying about particular risks in the first place.

Right Actions—When participants did acknowledge the possibility of sexual risks for themselves, they proposed taking relatively simple but unequivocal action. In several instances, participants laid out their anticipated strategies for how they would handle sexual coercion from a male partner. Plans ranged from simple to dramatic: saying "no"; breaking up (or threatening to break up) with boyfriends who are coercive or controlling; "fighting back" during a sexual assault; threatening to call the police; taking self-defense classes; pouring a drink on the boy; and telling him, "I have an STD. You don't want to be doing this." In addition, participants suggested other means of avoiding potentially dangerous situations in the first place, such as staying near friends while at parties and watching boys carefully in order to discern their intentions and trustworthiness (i.e., a process one participant referred to as "studying" a boy and a participant in another group described as, "you look for respect towards other people, respect towards their family, like, temper problems sometimes, other things that they do that you might not like. And, just, kind of the way they live and the way they carry themselves stuff like that.").

Exceptions and Complexities

We were interested not only in the ways in which participants concurred with one another, but also in the instances in which they differed. We did not observe any participants disputing or challenging the notion that sexual risks were varied and widespread, or that some girls are at greater risk than others. However, a minority of participants diverged from the tendency of others in the groups to construe sexual risks as easily avoided given the right qualities and strategies. Instead, these participants expressed ambivalence and admitted confusion about how to manage sexual risks. In each group, there was at least one instance when a participant countered others' declared strategies for distancing themselves from various threats by acknowledging that sexuality is a complicated and dynamic domain in

which there is not always a single or obvious "right" way. For example, participants occasionally pointed out potential flaws in the plans they identified for protecting themselves. Girls' intentions to "study" and get to know boys could be ineffective, as suggested by a participant who related the story of a friend who had a controlling boyfriend who had seemed like a "funny and nice kid." In addition, the plan to attend parties only in the company of friends could be undermined, as one participant pointed out to other group members, if the friends started drinking and became distracted. Participants also wondered how to weigh self-interest against loyalty to friends in party situations: "You could get scared and leave, but what type of friend would you be just to leave your friend at a party that she probably don't know nobody there." Saying "no" was often treated as an obvious response to an unwanted sexual overture. However participants at times acknowledged that wantedness was not always so clear-cut (see Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005), as in the case of a young woman who worries about alienating a boy she is interested in:

> You can really be into a guy, and if he doesn't like you, or if he likes you but he just wants to have sex with you, and you say "no," then he's gonna be upset or something. Then it's like, now you're like, "No, I like you," and now you're, you know, you want to do it now just because he's not gonna like you, so. I don't know, it's kinda hard.

In another group, another participant wished for guidance about "[h]ow to say 'no' in a way that, like, if you actually really do like the guy, like, not so that he would break up with you." Even when girls say "no," some participants pointed out that it was hardly a failsafe strategy: "But, like, I mean, if you say 'no' a guy's not just gonna be like… I mean, if that were the case, that a guy would believe 'no,' then there wouldn't be those rapes that you hear about. There wouldn't be all that stuff. Obviously 'no' doesn't mean 'no' to guys." In another exchange, participants vacillated on the correct response to feeling pressured by a boyfriend to have sex:

> *Participant 1*: Break up with him.
>
> *Participant 2*: Depends on how they bring it up.
>
> *Participant 3*: Or maybe I might talk to him.
>
> *Participant 1*: Like, if they're like, "We have to do this." Then it's like, "No."
>
> *Participant 2*: It depends on how serious you are.
>
> *Participant 1*: If it's like, "I want to talk about this." Then it's like, "Yeah."
>
> *Participant 2*: Yeah. If you've been going out for, like, a year, I don't think…I don't know.

On occasion, some participants also took a more complex view of the relation between values and sexual behavior, noting that "casual sex," for instance, is not a uniform construct:

> Um. I agree with them [other group members] on the context of a one night stand, that that's never acceptable. Like, if you just met somebody that night and had sex with them. That's never acceptable. But, like, there's a difference between knowing somebody and just meeting them that night. Sex is not always completely, like, one hundred percent wrong at all times. That's what I'm trying to say.

In another group, a participant also made clear that the link between values and behavior may not always be what it appears:

> A girl can make the decision that she's ready to have sex, but she might not have the boy that she's ready to do it with. So, you could have the belief that sex before marriage is ok, but you're not going to do it because you don't have the right

> partner or something. So, just because you're abstinent doesn't mean you don't believe in it [premarital sex].

When one participant asserted that abstinence until marriage could help avoid the psychological costs associated with breaking up with someone who you have had sex with (because marriage would presumably last), another participant rebutted, "I think you're always risking it, like, you don't know who you're gonna be with. Like, if you find somebody that you love, something might happen, you might end up breaking up or something."

In other cases, individual participants contested other members' denigration and blaming of other girls for lacking the "right factors." In the group in which some participants criticized the immaturity and sexualized presentation of "little girls" (i.e., middle-school and first-year high school students), one participant encouraged a more supportive, sympathetic, and flexible stance:

> I think it's important, like, as older girls, not to judge them. […] I feel like it's just important not to judge them and to just take people for who they are, because everybody has different experiences at different times. But, a lot of people in my class, who are girls, don't feel that way and they will say things to these girls and, like, pick on these girls and, like, single them out, and make them feel that, because they're doing this, they're, for lack of a better word, like, a ho. […] Like, they will say things, to that effect, to them, to make them feel…and I don't know how that mixes with their self-esteem, and all their doing that, but I know it's not a good combination.

In each of these incidents, participants took exception to the more homogenized, monolithic positions assumed by other members of the groups and presented an alternative, more complex perspective on girls' abilities to manage sexual risks. As two participants from different groups articulated, "Yeah, it's so hard. It's confusing," and "There's not always, like, a clear path."

Discussion

Overall, participants across groups identified many of the same sexual risks and were in agreement that many of these were serious, even life-changing, threats. Despite this assessment, participants did not appear personally fearful of sexuality; rather, they employed a range of strategies to distance themselves from risk. Our observations are consistent with those of Norris, Nurius, and Dimeff (1996), who found that college women recognized risks associated with sexual assault, yet expressed an optimistic bias, believing themselves to be invulnerable. Our data build on this earlier study by providing greater insight into how participants selectively apply this bias when referring to themselves, while maintaining the vulnerability of others. In general, participants took the position that while risks were varied and widespread, they were avoidable given the right individual qualities (e.g., maturity, life experience, assertiveness) and life conditions (e.g., loving, involved parents). Girls that fell victim to sexual dangers were typically characterized as lacking the requisite strengths and skills. In contrast, participants referred to themselves in ways that set them apart from and above vulnerability. We found their projections of competence and self-assurance – and their collective critique of others' deficiencies in this regard – to be reminiscent of Phillips' (2000) "Together Women," who are adept at talking the talk of female empowerment while also attributing girls' and women's challenges to their own individual shortcomings. In this way, participants appeared to rely upon the dichotomous model of agency and victimization described in the Introduction (Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2002), wherein agents possess the qualities needed to place themselves out of harm's way and stand in diametric opposition to

victims, who lack the "right" factors, values, and planned actions. This tendency to blame individual girls was most clearly articulated in some of the quotes cited earlier, including participants' assertion that some girls "make themselves a target" of older, sexually coercive boys. In addition, when asked if girls are "well prepared or given enough information about [safe sex]," three girls responded in quick succession: "No."; "No."; and "They don't give you too much information about doing it." However, rather than pursue this emerging critique of sexuality education, participants shared anecdotes of girls whose lives—or high school experiences—has been "ruined" by pregnancy. The girls lapsed into a mode of individual blame that concluded with the previously quoted statement, "She got pregnant last year and we're all like, 'How can you do that?'"

It is important to clarify that in highlighting participants' inclination to assign individual blame, it is not our intention to accuse these young women of lacking empathy or compassion for others (and revert, ourselves, to individual blaming). Rather, we interpret the group's reliance upon and collaborative reproduction of the values of personal responsibility and self-interest as an indication of the discursive dominance of neoliberalism and the concomitant "responsibilisation" (Kelly, 2001) of youth. Returning to Phillips' (2000) figure of the Together Woman and the dichotomization of agency and victimization, it is possible to understand the appeal of neoliberal norms and logic. Adherence to a vision of the self as autonomous and freely choosing projects strength and indomitability, whereas claiming structural disadvantage (e.g., sexism) is an admission of weakness and fallibility that entails the relinquishment of agency. If identifying disadvantage or difficulty automatically disempowers young women, at least in the eyes of others, it is possible to understand why young women, including those who participated in these focus groups, opt instead for individual exceptionalism. In such a narrative, young women can acknowledge the dangers that exist around them yet position themselves as superior or immune to such threats. Participants' assignment of individual blame is therefore not only an outgrowth of cultural neoliberal rhetoric, but also a potential coping method: a means for holding at bay the numerous and pervasive sexual risks surrounding them. Individual-based explanations for vulnerability allowed participants to feel a sense of control and superiority whereas a broader critique of gendered norms and power differences, for instance, might have led participants to identify all girls, including themselves, as equally ill-equipped and susceptible to a myriad of sexual risks. While this tandem of system justification and individual exceptionalism may be an adaptive strategy for conforming to dominant social norms, warding off anxiety, and preserving a sense of individual agency (as studies of system justification suggest; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), it is also quite problematic. The perpetuation of an individual, victim-blaming perspective stunts young women's collective orientation and their critique of the social conditions and norms that render them sexually vulnerable in the first place (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2003). Without a clearer view of the origins of girls' sexual vulnerability, we will be limited in our ability to develop practical strategies (e.g., in sexuality education) for minimizing sexual risks and enhancing sexual well-being.

While the dominant trend both within and across focus groups was to blame others and exempt oneself, there were notable exceptions in which participants articulated the challenges in assessing and managing sexual risks. At different times during each group, one or more participants refuted simplistic explanations and prescriptions for avoiding danger. For instance, they voiced uncertainty and confusion about how to proceed in certain sexual or relationship situations and doubted whether there was much they could do to protect themselves in some cases (e.g., "Obviously 'no' doesn't mean 'no' to guys"). These bold and candid departures from the scripts that dominated both the focus groups as well as society at large opened up opportunities for participants to consider the complexity, mutability, and ambivalence of interpersonal relationships, particularly those that are laden

with gendered norms. Rather than interpret participants' uncertainty and lack of clarity as a sign that they were somehow uneducated or inept at managing sexual risks, we viewed these as signs of insight and realism with regard to the challenges that young women face in the sexual arena. These comments by participants, along with Harris' (2005) reflection on Fine's (1988) groundbreaking work on the "missing discourse of desire," prompt us to wonder what "safe spaces" exist – and how more might be established – in which young women are released from the pressure to be Together Women and free to express their sexual questions, concerns, and challenges without being marked as lacking in some regard (e.g., strength, direction, agency).

Focus groups are often suspected to be more prone to social desirability bias than other research methods (for counterpoints, see O'Toole & Jowett, 2006; Peek & Fothergill, 2009; and Wilkinson, 1998). However, we regard the use of focus groups in this study as essential to the exposure of how young women interpret, reproduce, and position themselves within sexual discourse. We believe that these results are significant precisely because they offer perspective on how young women engage in and encourage a neoliberal discourse: individuals are charged with making their own decisions and taking responsibility for them; negative consequences are presumed to be natural (i.e., unavoidable and deserved) consequences of faulty decisions or traits. Witnessing the coherence of each group around this theme, with the exception of a few instances of dissent, lends these data their impact, making it clear how formidably young women wield neoliberal ideals of individual entitlement and personal responsibility. Furthermore, the moments of divergence, when participants articulated an opposing, or less stridently assured position, are brought into relief against this backdrop of collective – if not consensus – disdain for vulnerable others and assertion of their own superiority. It becomes evident in this group context that it takes tremendous courage to defend others (such as the participant who called for more generous treatment of those derided as "little girls") and to admit confusion. At the same time, it is possible that the strident claims of individual invulnerability and distance from risk enabled the quieter expressions of doubt and ambivalence. Following from the principles of system justification, it may be the case that instances of insecurity could be tolerated and contained precisely because the meritocratic and just nature of the current system was so strongly upheld. If this is true, such sentiments might have been difficult to elicit in individual interviews; and even if articulated, their power and meaning in context would have been lost.

Although we believe there are many benefits to focus group methods, we recognize that these findings and our interpretations are hampered by several important limitations. To begin with, our convenience sample was comprised of a fairly select group of adolescent girls: those who read the newspaper advertisements; those who were interested and able to participate themselves; those whose mothers consented to their daughters' participation; and those whose mothers were interested and able to make time to participate in the corresponding mothers' groups. Groups were racially mixed and although attempts were made to balance the racial composition of the groups, balance was not always achieved. This may have inhibited minority adolescents from fully expressing their views. In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct racially homogenous groups for girls of color, to explore culturally diverse perceptions of sexual risk and management. The interviews were conducted in an office that is centrally located in a small city and accessible by public transportation; nevertheless, it is possible that the location and scheduling of the interviews precluded some interested individuals from participating. Based on previous research conducted at this institution, we have reason to believe that the location was less of a deterrent to low income and minority women than it was to suburban European-American women who were reluctant to come to an urban location to complete an interview (Testa, Livingston, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2005).

It is also important to consider the drawbacks of the study's narrow focus on heterosexuality. As described previously, the initial questions posed to the focus groups did not refer specifically to sexual orientation; in this sense, participants were not formally restricted to discussions of heterosexuality. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that given the potency of heteronormativity in popular discourse and our passive inclusion of same-gender relationships, it is not surprising that participants' discussions gravitated toward heterosexuality. It is also not possible to determine the degree to which the heterocentric focus of the interviews was a result of participants not thinking of same-gender relationships or of participants thinking about, but not stating aloud, same-gender relationships. More active efforts on our part to include and legitimate the relevance of same-gender relationships might have expanded the groups' discussions and subsequently enriched these data. For instance, though certain dangers (e.g., STIs, pregnancy) are more likely in – if not exclusive to – girls' experiences with male partners, there may be other risks associated with same-gender relationships (e.g., social stigma) that warrant attention. In addition, violence and coercion in same-gender relationships are often overlooked despite evidence of its prevalence (Freedner, Freed, Yang, & Austin, 2002). The perception and negotiation of sexual risks in same-gender relationships is an important issue for future research.

Conclusion

In the focus groups comprising this study, participants considered together the myriad physical, psychological, and social risks associated with sexuality. They expressed awareness of the troubles and dangers that heterosexual activity presented, but also tended to characterize them as avoidable. Participants shared many of their ideas about how these risks could be circumvented, most reflecting a neoliberal model of personal responsibility in which vulnerability is attributed to individual flaws and shortcomings. Although the assignment of individual blame deflects critical attention away from the social conditions and norms that expose girls to risks of unintended pregnancy, STIs, varying degrees and sources of sexual coercion, and social sanctions in the first place, we also recognize the ways in which this strategy of distancing oneself from vulnerability serves as an important and adaptive means of coping with the seeming ubiquity of sexual risk and preserving a sense of agency. Occasionally during the interviews, girls articulated an alternative to this discourse of other-blaming and self-exemption, one that admitted confusion, uncertainty, and ambivalence. While this may not seem like an optimal set of sentiments for girls to have toward sexuality, particularly within a neoliberal logic that vaunts unqualified self-determination, striving, and success, this may be a far more realistic and honest assessment of the complexity of their sexual lives. Based on the insights provided by participants, we argue that researchers and practitioners must be attentive not only to the myriad sexual risks that threaten adolescent women, but also to the complex task of reconciling a discourse of pervasive risk with one of unfailing personal agency.

Acknowledgments

Appendix

Key questions used in the adolescent focus groups:

1. What are some of the advantages of being in a relationship at this point in your life? What are some of the disadvantages?

2. What concerns do girls have about having sex? About not having sex?

3. What are the reasons that some girls have sex and some do not?

4. To what extent do girls your age feel pressured to do something sexual? (Who does the pressuring? What kinds of things are girls pressured to do?) Is there similar pressure to be abstinent? (Have group define abstinence; From whom?)

5. If a girl feels uncomfortable with something sexual that her partner wants to do, what should she do or say? (What would happen if she did/said this?)

6. How prepared are girls to protect themselves from: pregnancy, STDs, unwanted sexual advances?

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