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SEXUAL PRACTICES AND RELATIONSHIPS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

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Thinking about adolescent sexuality can be an uncomfortable exercise. Young people's sexuality and sexual behaviors often cause social panics. What do these panics reveal about how sexuality is understood, managed, and morally negotiated? Adults and adolescents alike might agree that young people's sexuality is fraught, though for very different reasons. Adult approaches primarily focus on waiting, reducing sexuality and sexual development to attempts at preventing sexual behaviors. By contrast, youth tend to focus on negotiating body image, sorting out their desires, managing risk across relationships, while balancing everyday obligations of schoolwork, sports, jobs, social media presence, and so on. Such a youth experience captures a more realistic and expansive understanding of sexuality beyond the narrow script of penile-vaginal intercourse.

Sexuality, as the term is used throughout this chapter, is comprised of the following aspects and their intersections: sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual and reproductive health, and experiences and understandings of intimacy and sensuality.[1] Sexuality is defined by more than engagement in behaviors; it is

> an embodied component of the human capacity to know and a way to communicate and [express] one's self-understanding… . Our sexuality is developed in personal (and systemic) relationships affected by social, biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual forces. Thus, what our sexuality means to us at any given time is historically and culturally constructed.
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> *(Ott 2007: para. 11)*

Sexuality and the ethics that accompany it are complex, contextual, and shift across a person's lifespan. During adolescence, which is generally defined by an age range beginning and ending on either side of the teenage years, one's sexuality may change more rapidly due to physical and emotional transitions. And behaviors may carry more immediate consequences, due in part to the level of social surveillance. Yet, in spite of social constraints, adolescents have a high level of sexual subjectivity: sexual self-understanding, experiences, and the ability to engage in sexual decision-making. They also routinely navigate relational complexity: understanding how relationships with parents, friends, self, and partners are intertwined and affect one's sexuality.

Adolescents reside between cultural myths (imagined/symbolic figures) about sexuality: one about children as innocent, asexual beings, and the other about adults as sufficiently rational and independent to ethically engage in sexual behaviors (Renold et al. 3). The active assumptions related to sexuality and agency that stereotype children and adults create a curious response to adolescent sexuality. Biological changes catapult the adolescent from an assumed asexual child

DOI: 10.4324/9781003286523-22

status to a sexual person, because they can now reproduce having reached menarche and spermenarche. This approach to defining "sexual" as the ability to reproduce reduces sexuality to sexual behaviors and more specifically heterosexual reproductive potential. In response, laws treat sexuality—like alcohol use—as "age graded" in terms of risk, meaning that as a person ages, their risk is reduced from a public health perspective. As the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) state, sex "is generally considered to be socially acceptable once a person reaches a particular age or developmental milestone, rather than consistently considered to be a dangerous or unhealthy behavior across the lifespan" (NASEM 2020: 11).

These policies and definitions overlook the multiplicity of ways young people are sexual in ways apart from heterosexual intercourse, such as engaging in solo sexual behaviors like masturbation, having crushes on peers or celebrities, and taking risks like taking and sending nude photos. As part of our project in articulating a philosophy of adolescent sex, we draw on the work of feminist, Black feminist, and queer ethicists who have long challenged the androcentrism of sex in the West: the idea that "real sex" is goal-oriented toward procreation and that it must involve an active (male) partner and a passive (female) partner. From their pioneering work, we understand sexuality to be inclusive of many different behaviors, attitudes, orientations, and values, some that fit the typical white Western definition of "sex" and many that do not.

The primary questions we engage in this chapter are: how do we express and engage human sexuality in ethical ways at different ages, stages, and relationships? In particular, what are the issues unique to adolescence (and adolescents)? Does society inappropriately de-sexualize young people (i.e., ignore or try to suppress their sexual desires or expressions) or alternatively, sexualize young people (often using commercial means to exploit young people's sexuality for profit)? How can we conceive of sexual consent in the context of a person who is dependent and lacking sexual experience? What are the ethics of young people engaging in sexual behaviors with each other? If a young person desires a sexual relationship with an older person, how should we think about this? To answer these kinds of questions, we need a more complex understanding of sexuality, power, and ethics that takes into consideration dependent, unequal, and relational dynamics.

First, we define adolescence and current approaches to adolescent sexual development that determine the subject of this inquiry. Social constructions of the "adolescent" related to historical and geographic differences impact ethical responses to adolescent sexual relationships and behavior. In some sense, there is no singular "adolescent" about which we can speak, both because of the uniqueness of each person and the variation in social, legal, educational, and familial practices. We provide historical and sociological examples in the next section to further explain these points. Because of this wide variation, we approach adolescence as an ontological status—a status of being in the world in relationship to others—informed by various social, biological, and psychological traits often confined to a specific age group. This allows us to re-shape common assumptions about sexual decision-making and relationships including those where dependency is marked by age such as for a youth or teenager. In the end, we move away from determining morality based on a formulaic rules-based approach dependent on specific behaviors or relationship statuses to a values-based assessment, stressing the importance of mutuality, pleasure, and shared power within adolescent sexual experiences. Such a sexual ethic, then, is based on a robust definition of sexuality as presented above and requires nuanced decision-making that focuses on how to say "yes" and discern "when" based on erotic attunement, contextual awareness, and relational impact.

Defining Adolescence —Historically and Globally

Physical changes related to sexual development play a key role in distinguishing age ranges between children and adults. Adolescence has often been biologically determined as the average period during which the physical changes of puberty occur, somewhere between age ten and eighteen.

However, adolescence is not only a biological category dependent on puberty; more often it is culturally defined by economic, racial, gender, and educational categories in various societies. That is to say, adolescents are unique, interesting, diverse people within an age span. *Adolescence*, however, is a category constructed by sociological, psychological, anthropological, medical, legal, and religious perspectives, within particular times and places, that generalizes and flattens these differences. The policies and social practices that stem from this flattening reflect power structures that favor adults and are shaped by social oppressions like racism, heterosexism, and classism.

The term *adolescence* has been in use since at least the 1760s, but it was given its modern cultural meaning by G. Stanley Hall, an early twentieth-century American child psychologist, and pedagogue (Owen 2020: 30). In developing his theory of adolescence, Hall adopted aspects of two contemporary thinkers: Charles Darwin and his evolutionary theory and Sigmund Freud and his psychosocial development models. Hall wrote about adolescence at a time when categories for manhood and whiteness were thrown into a frenzy due to growing corporate capitalism and the influx of Eastern-European immigration. Both challenged earlier notions of manliness (the self-made man) and white supremacy (clear demarcations of white and non-white persons). Hall saw adolescence as the turning point of a young white man's life in which he could become the shining example of his race. A healthy adolescent was outdoorsy but not "savage," worldly but not "overcivilized" (Bederman 1995: 77). Such an adolescent was on his way to becoming the ideal citizen of America and the Anglo-Saxon race. Hall also applied this term, *adolescent*, to non-white races that he saw as unfit and unable to "grow up" without white men's help (111–112).

For Hall, adolescence was the life stage most ripe with possibility: "Never again will there be such susceptibility to drill and discipline, such plasticity to habituation, or such ready adjustment to new conditions" (Hall 1904: xii). On the one hand, adolescence was the time of life when young men and women could be disciplined into healthy adulthood. On the other hand, it was a time when adolescents were most vulnerable to neurasthenia, an ill-defined disease akin to anxiety or melancholia caused by being overly civilized (i.e., spending too much time indoors and tending to intellectual activity). Drawing on the work of Freud, Hall suggested that all major psychic disorders, including neurasthenia, had their root in one's sex life (1904: 285). For young men specifically, either the "overexcitation" (i.e., chronic masturbation) or the "repression of sexual functions" caused a whole host of psychological and psychosomatic issues (1904: 278). Therefore, a young man had the potential to either eschew manliness by over-expending or repressing his sexual desire, or he could learn to channel his sexual energy into his education (Bederman 1995: 103). This education did not look like the book-learning of the overcivilized but as adventures out into the wilderness (Hall 1904: xi). Hall suggested that, if the adolescent male's energy was properly wielded, he could grow to become the fittest of the Anglo-Saxon race (Moslener 2015: 42–43). Hall gave young women the opposite advice: they were not to channel their sexual desire into their education, which would further exacerbate their neurasthenia and "permanently damage their reproductive capabilities" (Bederman 1995: 103).

The construction of adolescence in the Anglophone West has been paraded as a universal norm while being singularly modeled on white male adolescence and transition to white male adulthood. Hall went as far as calling adults of non-Anglo-Saxon races "adolescents of adult size," who "need the same careful and painstaking study, lavish care, and adjustment to their nature and needs" (1904: 649). These ideas laid the foundation for the United States' growing interest in Social Darwinism, imperialism abroad, and, later, eugenics. At the same time Hall was writing his texts on adolescence, prevailing views of young women—that they were helpless victims to vices such as "white slavery" (prostitution)[2]—led US reformers to fight to raise the age of consent from the single digits in most states to upward of twelve to eighteen years. Reformers sought to protect Anglo-Saxon girls from the unrestrained sexuality present in some adolescent males and in the "lesser" races (e.g., Black men, Eastern Europeans, and Jews), as Hall had warned about (Donovan

2005: 37–55; Pivar 1973: 139–146). This interchange between development models, legal, and educational practices colluded to define age-based categories linked to sexual decision-making into the twentieth century.

Most researchers across fields of education, medicine, psychology, criminality, and so on maintain Hall's and his contemporaries' developmental construction of adolescence. Erik Erikson proposed that adolescence is a time of a mounting sense of identity, especially vis-à-vis a young person's peers. Adolescents seek self-expression and resist roles placed upon them by adults or broader society; for they would rather look foolish to their elders than to their peers or to be untrue to themselves (Erikson 1968/1994: 129). Erikson calls adolescence the "least 'stormy'" developmental stage, yet when feeling constricted by conventions of their growing adulthood, adolescents "may resist with the wild strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives. For, indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" (Erikson 1968/1994: 130). It is in this stage, writes Erikson, that young people learn to be faithful to something (a hobby, a career choice) or to some*body* (235).

Another important figure in shaping prevailing concepts of adolescence is Jean Piaget. For Piaget, preadolescence and adolescence coincide with his Formal Operational Stage, where young people are able to think abstractly, hypothetically, and about the future (1969/2000: 207). This stage transitions young people into adulthood, helping them to take the ideas and values they have developed in childhood and find a use for them in a career (234). Piaget considered the stage of Formal Operations as the final development period; beyond it comes only an "increase in depth of understanding" (Singer and Revenson 1996: 26). Erikson and Piaget thus reinforce notions of independence and rationality as defining features of adulthood and moral maturity.

The categorization and acceptance of adolescence as a life stage has spread globally as other countries adopted Western educational and economic systems that rely on trained, skilled laborers and a growing professional middle-class (Global Early Adolescent Study 2019). Non-Western youth outcomes are often measured by the psychosocial, evolutionary, developmental, and reproductive political constructs of adolescence positioned by Erikson, Piaget, and their contemporaries (Janssen 2015: 27–32). Challenging the presumption of a "universal" or "natural" adolescence—and adolescent sex—Diedrick F. Janssen argues that such social scientific approaches themselves reify dominant whiteness, capitalist economic success structures that rely on heterosexual family systems, and distinct, uniform male and female sex and gender categorizations erasing those who are non-binary or transgender (2015: 23). Janssen and other current scholars working on youth sexualities follow the Foucauldian revolution in sexuality studies, recognizing that these too are social constructions. Of course, this is not to say that biological, psychological, and cognitive development are not "real" processes of adolescent (sexual) experience. More frequently, however, they are interpreted through socially constructed frames intended to support dominant structures of power (Foucault 1978/1990).

Adolescent Sexual Subjectivity

The in-between identity of adolescence (not a child, not yet an adult) raises particular problems for Western philosophical systems dependent on notions of persons as independent, rational, and experienced as the foundation for moral agency, making adolescent sexual subjectivity a routinely contested issue and status. Adolescence represents a liminal, or in-between, stage for agency, and in particular, sexual subjectivity—which includes agency or the capacity to make moral, consensual sexual decisions. Childhood Studies scholarship revises the characteristics of agency showing how children and especially adolescents have moral agency and deploy it in nuanced ways related to sexual decision-making. This revision of agency provides new ways of understanding adolescent sexual subjectivity.

Philosophical and legal approaches to moral agency, or the ability to make moral decisions, rely on a definition of a "subject" as someone who is rational and independent. In addition, most writings make a stark distinction between child and adult. There is often no discussion of a nuanced difference for a teen or older youth because definitions of agency often come from historic time periods that did not account for adolescence, or from legal definitions that function only with the category of adult or not-adult.

Across childhood (and feminist) studies, the requirements of rationality and independence have been challenged for their reliance on adult male models of decision-making.[3] One example related to debunking rationality as the maker of moral agency is the work of Cristina L. H. Traina. She advocates for the rights and full inclusion of children and youth—by challenging the foundations by which moral agency is defined. Often the argument against children's moral agency is their inability to give rational reasons for their ethical choices. Drawing on the work of Nomy Arpaly, Traina stresses the difference between *giving* reasons and *having* reasons. Children may not be able to explain why they hit their sibling or helped a neighbor with their groceries, but that does not make their choices any less "morally weighty, less intentional, or less rational" (Traina 2009: 23). Whether it is a young child, teenager, or adult, they make important moral decisions with a knowledge base—their heart or gut—without being able to articulate why. At the same time, even if someone can give reasons for why a behavior is morally wrong, that does not mean they will act morally.

Additionally, moral agency is often considered synonymous with independence, again a trait in most social circumstances held by an adult male with racial, economic, and educational privilege. Traina also challenges the assumption that autonomy and vulnerability are "zero-sum game[s]." She understands all humans as interdependent, having various levels of independence and connection impacted by social, physical, and emotional abilities. With regard to children who are often seen as completely dependent, "[c]hildren are neither marionettes nor mere conduits for powerful adults' actions," she writes, "[t]hey possess moral freedom even when that freedom is (sometimes rightly) circumscribed" (24). Many philosophers equate moral agency and the social assets or power that allow one to actualize it. Traina is separating them and helping us understand that agency is something all humans have regardless of age. As one's social assets, abilities, and power grow, often aided by their interdependent status, they are able to actualize their ethical decisions and give reasons for their behavior. Thus teens have more ability to actualize their moral agency than children do, but they still have less than adults.

Scholars suggest that children and youth are particularly vulnerable *because* they are dependent on adults for their primary needs. For example, Traina describes a situation where a child might choose to acquiesce to her father's physical abuse as a means of survival and to preserve the parent-child bond essential to her growing sense of self and economic well-being. This does not make the child a passive actor, but nor does it make her legally or morally accountable for the harm done to her. Traina connects this to Lisa Tessman's notion of "burdened virtues": often individuals must make a seemingly "unvirtuous choice" (e.g., acquiesce to abuse) because of the injustice of the circumstances. It's the idea that "[i]t is not my fault that someone 'set the world up like this'" (27). This reinforces the claim that the legal reliance of children (anyone under eighteen) on adults, especially parents, can perpetuate situations of abuse (2010: 153). R. Danielle Egan and Gail L. Hawkes suggest the legal and cultural dependence of children on adults for their agency privatizes children's agency in the home a way that can hide sexual abuse. They call for a robust understanding of the "mutual codependence of children and adults" in order to end the dependence and privatization of children's agency on other adults, particularly parents (2010: 153). Instead, we could advocate for legal and cultural communities of accountability that involve families, teachers, healthcare workers, and neighbors as well as providing all children with

age-appropriate, comprehensive sexuality education and abuse identification increasing sexual literacy and agency among children's peers and access to a variety of supportive adults.

Thus, moving from the broad category of moral agency to the specifics of sexual agency, an expansive understanding of sexual agency requires an intricate understanding of how familial, interpersonal, and social networks interact (Angelides 2019 xxiii, 189). Historical renderings of sexual desire have painted radically different images of the adolescent—the unruly teen as one who cannot control their desires; the innocent child-like teen who must be protected from outside corrupting desires; or a magical growth point or age at which a child becomes a sexual being with full moral decision-making ability. Gender historian Steven Angelides describes this process as the "agentive sexual child or adolescent *under erasure*" (xi). Overwhelmingly, adults deploy the rhetoric of the "Teen," overgeneralizing their own experience as a teenager or slipping into adult stereotypes of "those teenagers these days" that neglect the nuance and diversity of teen sexual subjectivity. Adults often do this in order to justify the need for economic and legal independence as a marker of agency (Aggleton, et al. 2019). Independence takes multiple shapes but is often thought of in the framework of neoliberal reproductive family structures. That is to say, can a teen become the sole caretaker of a child if pregnancy occurs, who pays for the healthcare required if a sexually transmitted disease requires treatment, and what are the costs of lost education, preparation for future labor, and so on? An adult over and against a teen is mythologized as rational and independent when it comes to moral agency and its intersections with sexuality. Yet, adults also have unplanned pregnancies, lack adequate health insurance to cover sexual and reproductive health needs, create shared structures of childrearing and face limitations with future employment and educational prospects. Humans are interdependent in relationships with others and with social systems.

Sexual desire has often been described as corrupting rationality and thus the need for various approaches to "control" that supposedly come with experience: the ability to engage sexual desire for a greater good like procreation, to resist it all together like abstinence, or to cultivate it to deepen relational connections to another person. Only one of these responses to desire is considered within the realm of adolescent sexual subjectivity—abstinence. The idea that teens can successfully choose abstinence is an affirmation of adolescent agency. However, it is often distorted in Western capitalist societies as a way to further promote notions of purity and innocence inviting adult surveillance and control (Levine 2002). The purity literature of conservative American evangelicalism, for example, promotes the agency of young men to control their sexual appetites by "bouncing the eyes" away from attractive young women and sublimating their sexual desires into physical activity like weightlifting (Hendershot 2004). The young evangelical woman, like the perceived innocent child, is thought not to desire sex for herself but must be protected by her father, church, and the government against boys' desires or societal corruption (Ehrlich 2014; Gish 2018).

There are also secular examples of the fear of the sexual subjectivity of girls in popular culture, illustrated by concerns over "twerking" tweens (i.e., dancing bent over with buttocks gyrating) and sexting teens (i.e., teens who send naked pictures or narrativized sexual desires via direct messages) (Peterson-Iyer 2013). "More often than not [these fears] represent adult preoccupations and anxieties about the nature, corruption and correction of the child's sex as well as the nature of society," write Renold et al. (2015: 4). The teen is not recognized as a subject or actor but as an "imagined child," the symbol of innocence and future hope for a world gone corrupt (Renold 2015: 3). Through regulation and control, innocence as projected onto the youth is to be protected at all costs. There is little imagination that girls (or teens more generally) choose to move or dress or behave outside of the adult gaze, even when this is proven to be true (García-Gómez 2017). This practice raises questions about the youth as a sexual agent versus the youth as a sexual object. Projecting asexuality and innocence onto teens objectifies them in a similar manner to how mass

media sexualizes them. Both treat teens as objects for adult agendas and belie other biases beyond age (Egan and Hawkes 2010: 147–151).

However, not all youth are viewed as the vulnerable "imagined child," as scholar Robin Bernstein has pointed out. In the United States, Black and mixed-race youth have not been given the privilege of being presumed innocent just as in the premodern West, thinkers like Augustine and Calvin eschewed theologies that suggested children were anything but devilish imps (Bernstein 2011; Wall 2010). Once again, we are confronted with the ways in which adolescence and sexual agency are socially and culturally constructed by adults implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) upholding particular racist and religious structures. Indeed, adolescence is often the mechanisms for adults to "[address] other cultural anxieties (e.g., racial purity, affirming the institution of marriage, and constructing more rigid gender boundaries)," write Egan and Hawkes (2010:155). But, as we've argued previously, adolescence and adolescent sexuality exist simultaneously as diverse lived experiences and ways of being *and* highly negotiated adult constructions.

Adolescents are sexual subjects and have sexual subjectivity (Egan and Hawkes 2010: 153). That does not mean they make sexual decisions in wholly rational ways, or independently take responsibility for all outcomes of sexual behaviors. Many adults cannot do this either. In fact, a closer look at notions of agency and sexual subjectivity invites the revision of current, prevailing constructions of agency described in this section that rely on rationality, independence, and control. Instead, the relational ontologies—or interdependent ways of being—of teens better match a holistic understanding of sexuality presented in the introduction and align with a range of ethical sexual behaviors.

Adult perceptions of youth sexuality focus on preventing reproductive sexual intercourse and denying the full range of youth and child sexual expression. The teleologically directed ethic of heterosexual reproduction gets translated into a teen sexual ethic of abstinence, or "Just Say No" (Appleton et al. 2019). Sexuality is reduced to prohibited behaviors and heterosexual orientation (Bernardini 2019: 138). The vast majority of sexuality education programs focus on prevention and reproductive facts, benchmarking their success against heterosexual marriage (Auteri 2015). "As originally applied to sexual behavior, risk avoidance refers to refraining from non-marital sexual activity" (NASEM 2020: 9). This severely limits ethical considerations of the expansiveness of adolescent sexual subjectivity and perpetuates a sexual ethic that is heterosexist and fear-based. In response, Egan and Hawkes suggest we see children's and youth's sexuality *as it is*, not only in relation to adulthood as a "prefix of adult sexuality" (2009: 154).

Orgasmic Failure as Adolescent Sexual Ethics

Adapted from queer theorist Jack Halberstam's concept of *queer failure*, we propose *orgasmic failure* as recognition of adolescent sexual subjectivity that values the erotic ethical encounter with self and others. We hope the term brings to mind the common social anxiety of the failure to orgasm and the practices heightened by media portrayals of faking orgasm, all directed at a single ideal. By intentionally playing with the male, heterosexual, goal-oriented ideal of reproductive sexual intercourse, we are also simultaneously lifting up the importance and complexity of adolescent erotic desire and the approach of practice and failure rather than success. That is to say, the reality of adolescent sexuality is much less goal-oriented or teleological than is presumed by the adult obsession with preventing reproductive sexual intercourse.

Adolescent sexuality is often an experience of failure in response to the developmental ideals of "adult sexuality." Adolescent sexuality is queer, non-normative, and strange, when compared to adult sexuality. We use the term *queer* in a broader sense than its limited use as a stand in for sexual orientation. We take the language of failure from Halberstam to express the non-normativity of youths' desires that in any form frustrate the adult-centric, neo-liberal, white, heteropatriarchal

construction of sexuality (2011). Halberstam explains: "…failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (2011: 3). Paired with *orgasmic*, the concept asserts adolescents have pleasurable, sexual experiences without tying them to specific behaviors or the anticipation of a successful, goal-oriented completion. Orgasmic failure signals a similar messiness and non-normativity found in revisions of moral agency as play or art mentioned in the last portion of the previous section (see also, Dyer 2020; Ott 2019). We propose orgasmic failure as a creative response to how youth understand their unique sexualities with full recognition of their desires and relationships not as practice for the "real thing," but as contingent, vulnerable agential actions.

Adolescent sexuality and moral-decision making includes a variety of non-intercourse aspects like rapidly changing bodies and body image, sexual self-exploration, and a wide variety of partnered sexual behaviors, digitally mediated sexual expressions and presentations, and a host of emotional and psychological changes related to sexual desires and relationships. As an ethic, orgasmic failure not only addresses how to respond to a traditional heterosexual teen couple deciding whether or when to have penile-vaginal sexual intercourse. It also addresses the emotionally and physically intimate friendships of heterosexually-identified boys, or the sexual desires of a questioning non-binary teen, or the navigation of an interracial, lesbian relationship in a rural high school. All of these experiences shape sexual subjectivity and contribute to sexual self-understanding. They are also all examples of orgasmic failure in action.

From the work of feminist ethicists who have challenged androcentrism in Western constructions of sex, we take renewed and inclusive views on sexuality and pleasure, not often applied to youth sexuality. For example, Christine Gudorf challenges procreationism by expanding her definition of sex beyond penile-vaginal intercourse. With a denotation that includes non-procreative behaviors like mutual masturbation, anal and oral sex, and non-penetrative sex or "outercourse," Gudorf revises what ethical sex could look like (Gudorf 1994: 32). Rather than placing moral weight on the gender or biological sex of one's partner, or whether a sex act leads to offspring, Gudorf considers pleasure a necessary ethical criterion for evaluating how morally-good sex is (114). Gudorf suggests that pleasure ought to beget more pleasure—that it does not begin and end with a single person's pleasure. Thus, she considers mutuality a key virtue in sexual relationships. Marvin Ellison takes Gudorf's ethic further by addressing adolescent sexuality specifically. For him, ethical sex centers pleasure and doing the least amount of harm within the context of a peer relationship, related to age, social power, and so on, where the power dynamics of active and passive partners are circumvented (Ellison 2012: 134; Fortune 1995). By recognizing adolescents as sexual subjects, he argues that adults should "[equip] young people with the tools and encouragement to develop their capacity for informed moral agency about sex and sexuality," rather than regulating or surveilling their behavior (Ellison 2012: 132). Part of that education includes challenging the eroticization of power or dominance prevalent in normative ethics in the West (134).

Unlike Gudorf and Ellison, who suggest that mutuality can best be expressed through the eroticism of equality, Cristina Traina frees sex from strict regulation of behaviors and participants by focusing on erotic relationality between people relatively equal in power—based on age, gender, race, or role—and, sometimes not. Her "erotic attunement" suggests reciprocity between lover and beloved that defies the need for a strict rule-based ethic. "If we are attuned … we keep amative space open, reciprocally allowing others' particular needs to speak to and work on our subjectivity," Traina writes (2011: 242). Her generative ethic allows for eroticism between those of unequal power, especially mother and infant, recognizing the necessity of the eroticism (i.e., sensuality, pleasure) of children for their thriving. In a similar way, Murial Dimen challenges Freud's preferred term *libido*, for the German term *Lust*—nestled within his footnotes—as a helpful alternative that, perhaps, facilitates Traina's non-androcentric vision. While libido seeks the release of

discharge and of satiation, *Lust* finds pleasure in desire for desire's sake, whether it resolves or not (Dimen 1999: 424–425). This *Lust* or pleasure or eroticism is accessible to all bodies, whether they orgasm, release seminal discharge, or neither, and no matter their age.

How and where do we recognize these desires? We find them in children's queer affects; we notice the ways that children and childhood "exceed the confines of normalcy and resist normative assessments of emotional and social growth" (Dyer 2020: 6). Dyer's use of the term children is inclusive of adolescents. Queer affects are the desires that must be "discarded in order to 'grow up'" (7). We might see children's queer expressions when two young Black girls on the playground decide to marry and parent a white child-friend; when a young white boy's sporting loss results in uncontrollable sobbing; when a group of teenage girls show each other their genitalia at a sleepover; when a Latina cuts off her hair and binds her breasts to play on the baseball team, and so on. There are distinct material consequences for expressing queer affect that differ based on the nationality, class, race, or gender of a child. That is to say, the social reactions to the examples above change when race, class, or gender is altered in the scenarios.

Hannah Dyer argues that children's "feelings and experiences that resist the prohibitive restraints of development endanger the ambitions of morality and culture. Thus they may be termed 'queer.' Thinking of queerness in this way helps locate childhood's creative and enigmatic reimaginings in response to practices and policies serving adult power structures that maintain specific cultural ideals of sexuality (31). The affective queerness of children, Dyer suggests, "runs wild" in their "creative art and play" (7). Of course, the notion of play described here also pushes against adult-centric minimizations of play as not real, puppy love, cute, a phase, and any other demeaning and dismissive term adults use to describe youths' queer expression. Play is not a utopia or idealized as uninformed by social oppressions, as in the examples social oppressions are being directly negotiated; play is contingent, creative, constrained, and generative all at the same time. "Children create little completely and utterly anew, but like everyone else, work with the worlds before them as materials for appropriation" (Cook 2019: 134). Some play reinforces the disciplining normativity of adulthood, but as it is performed by a non-adult, we also see the ambiguities of play and failure as an ethical practice in the endeavor itself.

The rooting out of queer affect, non-normative expressions, in youth requires a fixation on "successful development" and denial of subjectivity, especially related to sexuality. Orgasmic failure welcomes play as ethical response and engagement. Youth engage in various relationships and expressions of sexuality in temporary and experimental forms, similar to play. Wall describes ethical formation as a circular and ongoing experience of play as both being and becoming this way: "Who I am—my very being-in-the-world—is from birth to death at once historical and free: a circle in which I am both played and player. I both am given to myself and give myself to myself ever anew: a circle of play itself. To be in the world is to play with its possibilities for creating meaning" (2010: 52). Subjectivity is a given, demonstrated through the reciprocal playful actions that happen with no linear, successful finality.

We are arguing that orgasmic failure as an adolescent sexual ethic invites queer affect and operates with a new configuration of agency—defined as a creative response to encounters with otherness (of self, another person, or nature). As argued in the previous section, moral agency is something all people have, regardless of age (or other identity markers). Agency is enacted in constrained social circumstances that mark moral-decision making as interdependent, affectively complex, and mundanely practical.

An ethic of orgasmic failure first and foremost centers on adolescents' experiences. Their sexual expression and experiences which we term "ethical play" are recognized as their own, not only mimicking adult behaviors or reflecting adult constructs of sex, especially concerning what "counts" as sex and who ought to participate in it (Bernardini 2019: 148–149). This makes room for failure (failure to orgasm, failure to connect, failure to meet personal/societal expectations)

and values the process, with self or others, of sex play itself, not just its arrival at orgasm, discharge, or intimate connection. In this, orgasmic failure allows for the reality of hurt (hurt feelings, hurt bodies) and negative affects. We recognize hurt and harm as two different realities: hurt being the natural but painful consequences of some sexual behaviors, and harm, like sexual violence, being about unwanted and coerced sexual encounters. In fact, orgasmic failure attempts to mitigate significant harms like rape and incest through its adoption of Traina's erotic attunement—awareness and acknowledgment of one's erotic desire. This erotic "dance" of attunement invites sexual actors to recognize their own power and vulnerability in a relationship which may shift from partner-to-partner or even season-to-season (Traina 2011: 217, 140). Not to mention the hurt that often comes from the idealized, dominant constructs of adolescent sexuality: as Halberstam acknowledges, " … while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (2011: 3). Orgasmic failure gives adolescents the space to play while also deepening their ethical awareness of self, relationality, and interdependence.

Conclusion

We are not the only writers to propose a rethinking of sexual agency and subjectivity of adolescents. Many of the scholars we have cited along the way share related concerns and provide similar proposals. We build on their approaches because they move beyond a rules-based sexual ethic focused on preventing reproductive sexual intercourse as a teen sexual ethic. The ethics they propose generally rely on achievement of or striving toward values discussed above such as mutuality, pleasure, shared power, and erotic attunement. They simultaneously recognize and call for the social conditions that allow these values to be realized as any adolescent relates to themselves and others. These social conditions require a holistic definition of sexuality, an inclusive view of various gender and sexual identities and relationships, a decolonized understanding of race, sex, and power, and sexuality education that supports adolescent sexual subjectivity. Orgasmic failure is our contribution to an ongoing, robust, interdisciplinary, and increasingly intersectional engagement with adolescent sexual subjectivity. Paired with a values-based (mutuality, pleasure, shared power, and erotic attunement), rather than rules-based approach, orgasmic failure adds appreciation and encouragement of "ethical play" for the ways it promotes radically diverse adolescent sexual subjectivity and simultaneously unmasks social systems that continue to confine, define, and regulate adolescent sexuality.

Returning to the primary questions posed at the start of this chapter, we understand, express, and experience our sexuality differently dependent on our age, relationships, social, emotional, and physical state. Accounting for these multiplicities requires we become "more comfortable with ambiguity" (Egan and Hawkes 2010: 155). Relational and dependent agency found robustly in play by children and youth revises past age-based ethical conceptions of moral agency. De-sexualization or rhetoric of childhood innocence and sexualization of children and adolescents equally erase their sexual subjectivity and perpetuate narrow definitions of sex and sexuality often in service of adult fears or desires.

Sexual consent in this new ethical landscape does not easily default to an age setting. Sexual consent instead rests on a situational assessment of social power that acknowledges perpetually unequal relationships of interdependence. Considerations of race, economics, ability, and gender are some of the factors that feed into assessments of social power. Thus, consent takes on a quality of contingency and immediacy. Consent, in its most erotically attuned awareness, demonstrates a mix of emotional maturity, relational awareness, and educational preparation. Consent in this context avoids the pitfalls of many discussions on the topic today, where

fixations on birth dates and specific sexual behaviors overshadow more important concerns (we argue) of adolescent thriving.

Young people should engage in various forms of sexual behaviors with themselves and others as they desire. If a young person desires a sexual relationship with an older person, the ethical analysis thereof should not be solely determined by age. Just sexual relationships are marked by mutuality, pleasure, shared power, and erotic attunement. In some circumstances, that may mean that forms of sexual intercourse are not permitted between adults, or adults and teens, or teens and teens. However, we can also imagine rare circumstances where a teen and an adult achieve these values; though, any increase in social disparity which increases power differentials, whether that be age, physical or mental ability, race, class, gender, or orientation, make it exponentially more difficult to achieve these values. In other words, we need a more complex understanding of sexuality, power, and ethics that takes into consideration dependent, unequal, and relational dynamics. Orgasmic failure is one attempt to push against adult surveillance and control of adolescent sexuality, creating ample space for ethical play and failure to witness to and affirm youths' sexual multiplicities and cultivate sexual subjectivity through practices of attunement. The field of sexuality studies needs to continue to wrestle with ethically evaluating sexuality across various unequal circumstances while seeking more just relationships socially and systemically.

Notes

1 Sex educator Heather Corinna, in their handbook for adolescents, defines sexuality as a complex, lifelong project:

> Sexuality isn't just about your genitals, though, or about having sex. It's a mix of many different things—of physical, chemical, emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural aspects—and that mix is different for, and unique to, everyone. Our physical and emotional development from children into adults shifts our sexual wants, needs, and identity. Infant sexuality and adult or adolescent sexuality are very different. By the time we're well into or finished with puberty, our sexuality usually becomes or has already become something that can feel new to us even though it really isn't and that usually feels like a much, much bigger thing than it ever did before.
>
> *(Corinna 2016: 14–15)*

2 *White slavery* was a broadly used term at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century that described young white women's behaviors, like sex work and entering interracial relationships, as a form of slave trafficking (Donovan 2005).

3 Feminist and childist studies expose the use of a rational, independent, white, adult male as the normative model by which philosophical, ethical, medical, and developmental processes should be judged. In fact, increasingly, writings in queer and men's studies on toxic masculinities demonstrate how these assumptions hurt the very subject they claim to valorize. Additionally, postcolonial and Black studies elucidate the anti-black and colonial logics embedded in these normative ethical criteria. Over the past half century, multiple disciplines contribute to this critique. See Dyer 2020, Ott 2019b, and Wall 2019 for overviews of this history in the disciplines of child psychology, religion, philosophy, and political theory that are represented in this chapter.

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