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## Teen Magazines and Parents: Their Impacts on Adolescent Female Sexual Scripts and Contraception

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# Teen Magazines and Parents: Their Impact on Adolescent Female Sexual Scripts and Contraceptive Use

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**Audrey Hickey**

## **ABSTRACT**

*This literature review examines how magazines and parents portray cultural ideas about sex, how girls use these ideas to understand their own sexuality, and how these ideas impact their contraceptive use in interpersonal relationships. Simon and Gagnon's Sexual Script Theory is used as a theoretical framework to explain these three levels of sexual scripts: cultural, interpersonal and personal. American teen magazines and parents are compared with their Western European counterparts to illustrate how cultural presentation of sex impacts contraceptive use. In the United States, where there were 41.5 births per 1,000 to girls aged 15-19 in 2008, sex is portrayed as a guilt-producing activity. Similarly, contraceptive use is seen as burdensome. Conversely, in Germany the birth rate in 2008 was 9.8 per 1,000 and 5.2 per 1,000 in the Netherlands. These significantly lower birth rates are explained by the presentation of sex as pleasurable, as well as high acceptance of contraceptive use. While a national change in the presentation of teenage sex is impossible, increased discussion of contraceptive use in the United States could help remove the stigma, thereby decreasing both sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy rates among teenagers.*

## **TEENAGE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE UNITED STATES**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2009 girls aged 15-19 reported the greatest number of chlamydia and gonorrhea cases as compared to other age and sex groups. In addition, the CDC reports that two-thirds of births to females younger than eighteen were unintended. The explanations for these statistics include: a lack of information about contraception, an inability to pay for it, and fear of possessing it because of parents' sexual attitudes (CDC 2009). Nevertheless, a poll conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that 88.9% of girls describe consistent birth control use as "very important" or "somewhat important" (2000: 1). This poll indicates that teenage girls are well informed about safe sex practices; however sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and pregnancy rates suggest otherwise. This phenomenon cannot be explained by government statistics alone. Cultural mechanisms, such as teen-focused magazines and parents, which girls interact with daily, help to explain the gap between what girls believe in regarding contraception and how they actually use it.

Presentation of sex by magazines and parents to teenage girls reflects the dominant views of sex in the United States, and perpetuates ideas about appropriate female sexual behavior. Studying the ideology of sex in the United States explains why girls fail to use contraception consistently. Consequently, failure to use contraception on a regular basis leads to the high STD and pregnancy rates.

The goal of this literature review is to study how magazines and parents reflect cultural ideas about sex, how girls use these ideas to understand their own sexuality, and how these ideas impact their contraception use in interpersonal relationships. A cross-cultural comparison between the United States and Western Europe highlights how different sexual ideologies result in different understandings about sexuality, as well as impacts contraception use.

## **INTRODUCTION TO SEXUAL SCRIPTS**

Simon and Gagnon's (1986) definition of Sexual Script Theory refers to how individuals understand their sexuality and how this understanding affects which sexual acts individuals pursue and enjoy (Jones and Hostler 2002). There are three scripts within Simon and Gagnon's model: cultural, interpersonal, and intra-psychic (personal). Mass media, like teen magazines, and authority figures, such as parents, represent cultural-level scripts. These mechanisms reflect and perpetuate dominant cultural ideas (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Individuals internalize cultural-level messages and adapt them to fit idiosyncrasies. The product is the intra-psychic script. Both cultural messages and internal beliefs structure interpersonal interactions.

## **CULTURAL SCRIPTS**

To understand magazines' and parents' messages about sex, it is essential to examine how the United States conceptualizes sex. The United States almost always constructs sexuality in heterosexual terms (Joshi et al. 2011). In this view, men are the pursuers of sex, whereas women are the objects of male sexual desire (Diamond 2005; Fine 1988). In addition, women should be passive, and should see men's sexual desire as more important than their own (Kim and Ward 2004). Aside from creating a dichotomous view of sexuality along gender lines, the heterosexual script works to make female sexual desire deviant (Tolman 1994). Similarly, the majority of adolescent girls accept a lack of pleasure from sex as normal (Tolman 2002), while at the same time stress the importance of the male's pleasure (Kim and Ward 2004).

Hofstede's (2001) distinction between masculine and feminine countries is helpful in explaining these norms. In masculine countries, the United States being the quintessential example, sex is viewed as a negative and guilt-producing activity (Hofstede 1998). The masculine stance on sex in the United States is especially evident in discussions of teenage sexuality. Sex is viewed as risky, dangerous, and something the bad kids do (Carpenter 2001; Sinikka 2010). The potential consequences of sex are frequently cited as justification for why teenage sexuality is so dangerous (Pinkleton et al. 2008). Conversely, feminine countries

conceptualize sex as pleasurable and natural (Hofstede 1998). A more in-depth discussion of sexual ideology in feminine countries will be discussed later in the review.

### *Teen Magazines*

Teen magazines are a useful cultural medium through which to study national ideas about sex because of their prevalence. For example, three-quarters of adolescent females report reading an issue or more per month (Klein et al. 1993). In addition, Hearst Magazines (2011) report selling 20 million copies of Seventeen magazine annually. Magazines inform readers about the female role in relationships and within American society (Carpenter 1998; Kim and Ward 2004). Moreover, they explain socially accepted ways of being sexual (Carpenter 1998; Joshi, Peter and Valkenburg 2011). It is frequently the case that magazines portray females as passive (Josh et al. 2011) or as objects of men's desire (Garner and Sterk 1998; Kim and Ward 2004). Girls are not supposed to want sex (Tolman 2000). This is a far from complete picture of female sexuality (Kim and Ward 2004), as it fails to acknowledge the desire for sex girls experience (Tolman 2000). The result is that girls feel trapped in the contraction between the sexual feelings they experience and the lack of discussion about these feelings in magazines. Consequently, girls experience confusion about how to portray their sexuality (Carpenter 1998).

Not only do magazines tell readers to be passive when it comes to sex, but they frequently present sex as a risk (Carpenter 1998; Kim and Ward 2004). For example, Carpenter (1998) found half of the articles about sex in Seventeen referred to girls being victims of unwanted sexual advances. It is also the norm for magazines to attribute responsibility of sexual consequences to girls, thereby absolving males of any responsibility. Clarke (2009) found that the majority of magazines told female teenagers it was their responsibility to prevent sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy, and to generally avoid sexually-driven males. The only solution given for these issues was abstinence. By treating sex as dangerous, and by giving girls full responsibility for the consequences of sex, magazines perpetuate dominant American norms that state that girls should be passive in sexual relationships. This unequal treatment of female sexuality is also prevalent amongst parents (Carpenter 2001).

### *Parents*

Parents, similar to teen magazines, problematize female sex more than male sex. For example, parents worry about their daughters' sexual behavior much more than their sons' (Clarke 2009). Furthermore, when discussing sex with their daughters, parents frequently emphasize female defenselessness and sexual hazards, whereas sons are encouraged to explore their sexuality through experimentation (Sinikka 2010).

Beyond these gender differences, the majority of American parents hold conservative beliefs regarding teenage sexuality; many disapprove of premarital sex, especially among teenagers under age 16 (Carpenter 2001). Sinikka (2010) attributes American parents'

conservatism to the conflicting opinions about appropriate teenage behavior and to the fears about their children's future job opportunities.

Sinikka (2010) claims that it is a commonly held belief in the United States that teens are not mature enough to learn about sex and they are too hormonally charged to be trusted with such information. In response to these conflicting discourses, many parents adhere to the view that teen sex should be restricted (Carpenter 2001). Another means by which parents navigate the barrage of conflicting information about teens is to adopt the opinion that their own children are asexual, while viewing teens as a demographic as hormonally charged (Sinikka 2010). By doing this, parents maintain their own children's innocence.

Another factor Sinikka (2010) discussed as an explanation for parents' construction of their teens as asexual was The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. This law stipulated that sex education programs should teach children that marriage is the only acceptable outlet for sexual behavior. In all other areas, abstinence was crucial. Also, sex was only appropriate when an individual was financially independent. Teen sexuality violates both of these conditions and thus, became further stigmatized.

The legislation accompanied changes in the United States' economy including: the outsourcing of manufacturing, a rise in minimum wage service positions, and increasing economic inequality (Sinikka 2010). In this climate, individuals became more aware of their personal responsibility for future prospects, which meant preaching abstinence to teenage children in order to ensure their future success. In other words, parents "present their children as deserving, worthy citizens by desexualizing them" (Sinikka 2010: 208).

## **WHEN MAGAZINES AND PARENTS OPPOSE DOMINANT CULTURE**

Magazines and parents often work in concert to perpetuate gendered norms about sexual behavior. The research shows that contradictory messages about sex in fact occur, which further creates a fear of sex among girls. For example, although *Seventeen* usually discourages teens from having sex, they also present it as a recreational activity by including quizzes that girls can use to decide if they are ready to have sex (Carpenter 1998). While *Seventeen* warns girls about the dangers of sex, it is also the case that editors advise readers to direct their desires towards fantasy or masturbation (Carpenter 1998), rather than simply encouraging abstinence or disregarding the sexual feelings girls experience.

A study conducted by Joshi et al. (2011) studied the depictions of pleasure in teen magazines and found that pleasure was given equal treatment, regardless of sex. This finding indicates that presentation of sex and gender roles are becoming less binary than in the past (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004).

While it is more common for magazines to oppose cultural norms, some studies have shown that parents contradict dominant ideologies, as well. Sinikka (2010) and Clarke (2009)

found that parents viewed girls as aggressive temptresses to adolescent boys, namely their sons. In addition, these parents saw their sons as naïve and too immature to be interested in sex (Sinikka 2010). These findings confirm Sinnikka's belief that parents view their own children as asexual, while hyper-sexualizing other teens, but these ideas do go against gender norms.

### **THE FORMATION OF INTRA-PSYCHIC SCRIPTS BY MAGAZINES AND PARENTS**

Girls internalize dominant messages about female sexuality from culture to a great extent. They adopt the opinions that boys are sexually aggressive, that females should be passive, and that engaging in sex is a major risk (Carpenter 2001; Joshi et al. 2011). However, Sinikka (2010) demonstrated that girls do not uncritically accept these culturally dominant messages: teenagers do not "absorb these lessons uncritically; youth play an active role in this process" (Sinikka 2010: 208). Rather, they seek out other scripts to explain their desires in a world that constantly tells them they should be devoid of sexual feelings. Various sexual scripts are common in heterogeneous societies, like the United States, where diversity is inherent (ibid). While the United States' heterogeneity has led to confusion about which sexual scripts are appropriate, the positive side of this diversity is that adolescents have more scripts from which to form their sexual identities (Carpenter 1998).

Thus, magazines and parents both perpetuate dominant norms that stipulate that female sexuality is dangerous, and that boys should be allowed to experiment with their sexuality. And furthermore, that sex is only acceptable within marriage. At the same time, studies indicate that magazines and parents do present sexual scripts that are discordant with dominant norms (Carpenter 1998). As a result, girls must navigate a variety of scripts in order to shape their sexual identities. The form that this identity takes is the basis for interpersonal relationships (Simon and Gagnon 1986).

### **CULTURAL AND INTA-PSYCHIC SCRIPTS DICTATING INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS**

The position a girl espouses through reading magazines and parental interactions results in a variety of outcomes. For example, a teenage girl may subscribe to the notion that men are inherently more aggressive than women (Kim and Ward 2004). Such a belief may lead a teenage girl to act in accordance with this belief, resulting in what Merton (2010) calls a self-fulfilling prophecy. By doing so, the girl conforms to the culturally constructed view of normative female sexuality.

However, it could also be the case that differing scripts help a girl solidify an identity that opposes dominant scripts through reading about gay peers, peers who have experienced sexual assault, or those who have a sexually transmitted disease (Clarke 2009). The presentation of alternate scripts in readily available cultural mediums may lead to a girl feeling more comfortable with her own sexuality.

Although there is more presentation of alternate sexual scripts and a more egalitarian presentation of gender roles (Blozindahl and Myers 2004), normative gender roles continue to be most prominent. The stigma surrounding sex and the lack open discussion about it is still apparent in the United States. Consequently, girls feel unsure of who they are sexually. This confusion then leads girls to not speak about their desired contraception use, as demonstrated by the results of the Risky Business Poll (2000). The majority of girls know contraceptive use is important, but 30-38% fail to use it consistently (1). In addition, the poll found that 54.2% of girls did not use contraception regularly because they believed their partner was against it. This indicates the lack of power girls feel in their sexual relationships. It also highlights the way in which cultural messages dictate personal understandings of sexuality and how these understandings affect interpersonal relationships, specifically contraception use within these relationships.

A cross-cultural comparison with Western Europe serves as proof of culture's power in dictating adolescent sexual scripts and their contraception use. Western European countries serve as effective comparisons to the United States because both regions are industrialized, wealthy, and have democratic governments (Carpenter 2001).

### **SEXUAL ATTITUDES IN WESTERN EUROPE**

In 2008, the birthrate for teens 15-19 was 41.5 per 1,000 in the United States, 9.8 per 1,000 in Germany, and 5.2 per 1,000 in the Netherlands. The discrepancy between the United States and similar European countries is the result of a liberal presentation of sex in Europe (Carpenter 2001), as well as positive attitudes towards it (Furstenberg 1998).

Carpenter (2001) found that sex-related material (including nudity) was frequently shown in mainstream media and that contraceptives were widely advertised. Bravo! magazine from Germany presents virginity loss as positive and emphasizes that contraceptives are essential for sexual pleasure (ibid). Joshi et al. (2011) studied three Dutch teen magazines and found that sexual "wanting" was given equal coverage for both genders and that Dutch magazines placed little emphasis on sexual risks.

Western European parents also reflect dominant messages about sexuality. Adults view teen sex as a normal part of development (Furstenburg 1998). Consequently, teens do not have to hide their sexual activity from their parents, and they feel comfortable discussing contraceptives with them (Carpenter 2001).

These European examples are a stark contrast to the presentation of sex in the United States. Carpenter's 2001 study compared Germany's Bravo! with the United States' Seventeen and found that Seventeen presented virginity loss as negative. In addition, contraception was viewed as a burden and an afterthought to sex. In comparing Dutch magazines with American teen magazines, Joshi et al. (2011) found that there was more emphasis on sexual risks in American publications.

The liberal stance towards sexual behavior in Europe is one explanation for these findings, as is Hofstede's (2001) discussion of feminine societies. Feminine countries, like the Netherlands, focus on the pleasure of sex and see it as a means to strengthen a relationship. Also, unlike in the masculine United States, teen sex is not viewed as dangerous. Although the teens are educated about pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease protection, neither is given as a justification for not having sex (Schalet 2000).

As the low pregnancy rates show, the open and accepting presentation of sex in Western European countries leads girls to feel more comfortable discussing sex and using contraception than is the case in the United States. This shows that a culture's view of sex impacts how cultural mediums present it, which influences how individuals view sex. This in turn impacts their behavior in interpersonal relationships.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overwhelmingly, teenage female sex in the United States is viewed negatively. Girls are instructed to not want sex (Tolman 2000) and to be passive in sexual situations (Joshi et al. 2011). Cultural mediums, specifically teen magazines and parents reinforce these scripts. As a result, girls' personal understanding of their sexuality reflects these cultural messages. The passivity they are encouraged to display leads them to remain silent about their desired contraception use. When girls fail to use contraception, STDs and pregnancy result. A cross-cultural comparison with sexually liberal Western Europe shows that the United States' conservative stance on sexuality is a contributing factor to its high STD and pregnancy rates. When discussion about sex and contraception is acceptable, as it is in Europe, individuals (especially girls) feel comfortable insisting on contraceptive use. The result is lower STD and pregnancy rates.

While a change in the United States' stance on sex would help to alleviate the high STD and teen pregnancy rates, it would be nearly impossible to institute such a wide-scale change. However, a revitalization of sexual education programs, in which abstinence-only programs were abolished and discussion of contraception was more open, could lead to less of a stigma surrounding sex and could increase contraceptive use. Therefore, research on how changing sexual education programs influences cultural ideas about sex is recommended.

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