

The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality

Laina Y. Bay-Cheng

Published online: 5 March 2015

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2015

Abstract Young women's sexuality traditionally has been marked along a gendered moralist continuum of sexual activity, ranging from virtuous (virgins) to licentious (sluts). However, this one-dimensional model cannot easily accommodate substantive changes in the norms that influence girls' sexualities. Contemporary scholarship generated across the Anglophone West includes many signs that such a shift has occurred, ushered in by the cultural and ideological suffusion of neoliberalism. I enlist interdisciplinary and international evidence of neoliberalism's influence on constructions of girls' sexuality to argue that in the U.S., girls are now judged on their adherence not only to gendered moralist norms, but also to a neoliberal script of sexual agency. In addition to reviewing conceptual and empirical grounds for this claim, I consider the multidimensional normative field created by the intersection of this Agency Line with the long-standing Virgin-Slut Continuum. The primacy of agency within neoliberal discourse seems to legitimize women's sexual autonomy and its subjective nature may permit them some control over their position above the Agency Line. But upon critical inspection it becomes clear that young women remain confined to a prescribed normative space that divides them from one another, compels self-blame, and predicates their worth on cultural appraisals of their sexuality.

Keywords Young women · Adolescent female sexuality · Sexual agency · Neoliberalism

Introduction

Young women's sexuality has often been treated in popular U.S. discourse as a bellwether of cultural decay and dysfunction (Brumberg 1997; Luker 1996; Odem 1995). But rather than follow a conventional script of moral panic over female sexual behavior, some of the recent discursive lightning rods in the U.S. seem to serve as outlets for moral outrage over male sexual entitlement (e.g., the *#yesallwomen* Twitter campaign; Thrift 2014), female sexual blaming (e.g., SlutWalk demonstrations; Ringrose and Renold 2012), and the gendered dictates of romantic relationships (e.g., hook-ups and friends with benefits relationships; Armstrong et al. 2010). Those of us who study girls' sexuality – from a variety of disciplinary angles and focusing on different units of analysis – have worked hard to incorporate, interpret, and respond to these changes (e.g., Evans and Riley 2014; Lamb and Peterson 2012; Levy 2005). Yet even as we witness substantive changes in gendered sexual norms, we rely on unaltered models and language to describe them. It is unclear, for instance, how the unapologetic sexual displays of Levy's (2005) titular "female chauvinist pigs" or the "sexy abstinence" touted by the Candies Foundation (Smith 2009) can be fit into a one-dimensional framework dividing virgins from sluts or be discussed only in terms of double binds and double standards. Rather than helping to reveal and investigate girls' situation vis-à-vis sexual norms, these models and terms now seem inadequate, outmoded, and proscriptive.

It is on these grounds that I propose an updated characterization of the contemporary normative field in which girls' sexuality is constructed and enacted in the U.S. Surveying empirical findings and cultural discourse, I see convincing evidence that at least in the U.S., young women's sexuality is now measured – whether by specific individuals, in the rhetoric of popular media, or from the broader perspective of the generalized other – not only in moralist terms of abstinence and promiscuity, but also in neoliberal ones related to

L. Y. Bay-Cheng (✉)
School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, 685 Baldy Hall,
Buffalo, NY 14260-1050, USA
e-mail: LB35@buffalo.edu

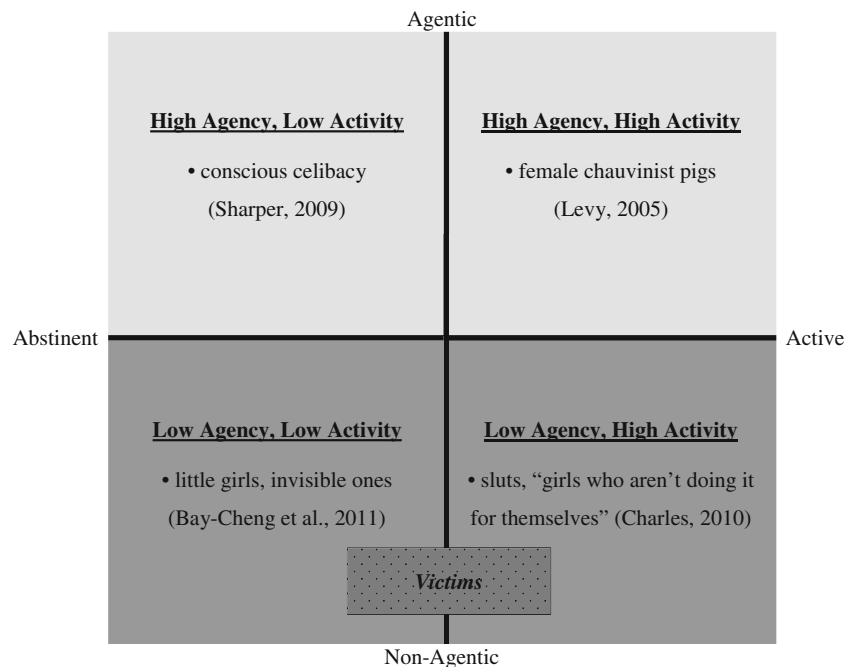
individual agency and personal responsibility. These two evaluative metrics, the existing *Virgin-Slut Continuum* marking girls' supposed sexual activity and an emerging *Agency Line* marking their supposed sexual agency, intersect with one another, creating a multidimensional matrix that young women must now navigate (see Fig. 1). I provide a critical review of recent studies of girls' sexuality to substantiate the model's necessity and explore the quadrants created by the intersecting axes the Virgin-Slut Continuum and the Agency Line. My primary objective in suggesting this model is to facilitate various stakeholders' (e.g., researchers, policymakers, practitioners, parents) ability to offer relevant and meaningful support to young women. Therefore I attend carefully to the ramifications of this new normative field for girls. I am especially concerned that the neoliberal imperative of personal agency incites sexual blaming and shaming, particularly of girls already marginalized by racial and socioeconomic injustices.

I wish to clarify at the outset certain parameters of this proposition. To begin, by suggesting that girls are now evaluated on the basis of their sexual agency, I do not mean that they no longer contend with gendered and moralist prescriptions of female sexuality (Tolman 2002). I also am not referring to agency in the psychological terms of an individual's capacity to exert her will (e.g., Bandura 1989). Instead, I take up a neoliberal discourse of agency, one that regards unfettered free will to be an ideal state for systems of all sizes, from nations to individuals. Neoliberalism is most commonly associated with macroeconomic and social policies that open markets, deregulate industry, and abandon social welfare (Brown 2003; Harvey 2005). Since the 1990s, it has also come to permeate popular culture and discourse (Duggan 2003;

Harvey 2005), championing self-interested striving through depoliticized tropes of personal empowerment (Bay-Cheng 2012; Charles 2010; Evans and Riley 2014; Goodkind 2009; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2008). Fundamental tenets of neoliberal economic policy manifest psychologically in a neoliberal rationality: the prioritization of self-interest and self-service; entitlement to autonomous choice and striving; personal responsibility for all consequences (Brown 2003). Brown (2003; 2006) explains that unlike various forms of conservatism, which stake out moral ground and impose corresponding regulatory practices and punishments, or liberalism, whose social welfare systems and policies are interpreted as intrusive and paternalistic, neoliberalism is ostensibly amoral and liberating, offering release from external strictures (e.g., gendered sexual moralism) in exchange for personal responsibility. As I will argue in some depth, neoliberalism purports to celebrate and protect agency, but it also operates as a hegemonic imperative such that not exerting free will – no matter the reason – invalidates one's status as a fully-fledged human. In this way, neoliberalism does not simply affirm agency, it demands it. My interest is in how this cultural mandate manifests in relation to girls' sexuality and has come to affect how we see girls and how girls see themselves and each other.

My argument is based on a critical synthesis of recent scholarship regarding girls' sexuality generated by researchers in the Anglophone West (i.e., industrialized nations in which English is the official language; unless otherwise noted, all cited empirical studies employed U.S. samples). In drawing on and extrapolating from this international literature to study U.S.-specific trends, I am not implying that this is a homogeneous cultural bloc nor do I mean to take a U.S.-universalist

Fig. 1 Virgin-Slut Continuum x Agency Line



view, presuming all research to be somehow generalizable or applicable to the U.S. Yet despite the diversity between and within these nations, I believe there is enough political, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic commonality and exchange among them to justify the identification of cross-cutting trends and themes. This is especially true for the U.S. and U.K. given the tandem rise of neoliberalism under the respective Reagan and Thatcher administrations (Harvey 2005). It is also the case that some of the most incisive analyses of the cultural implications of neoliberalism, especially in terms of female sexuality, have been conducted by scholars outside the U.S. (e.g., Gill 2008 and McRobbie 2008 from the U.K.; Gavey 2012 and Stringer 2014 from New Zealand). Their perspectives are vital to cultivating a parallel critique in the U.S.

Throughout the paper, I use *girls* and *young women* interchangeably to refer broadly to the time period ranging from early adolescence to emerging adulthood. My intention is to avoid tying the proposed framework to one particular developmental stage or age group. I see neoliberal injunctions to agency as conveyed to girls in the same ways that gendered warnings against promiscuity are: explicitly and implicitly; by proximal and distal socializing agents; and continuously over the course of childhood and adolescence. Girls may not be subject to measurement along the axes of sexual activity and sexual agency until they are identified by others as sexual (an indeterminate status largely tied to visible secondary sex characteristics; Martin 1996), but they are certainly made aware of these norms' existence and social potency long before that (e.g., Martin and Luke 2010).

The Virgin-Slut Continuum: Measuring Sexual Activity

The Virgin/Whore Dichotomy is a cornerstone of conventional rhetoric regarding female sexuality (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Tiefer 2004). According to this binary model, girls and women are divided in two discrete groups on the basis of their alleged or actual sexual behavior: either they are abstinent and presumed virtuous (i.e., virgins) or they are active and therefore contemptible (i.e., whores). Although still commonly invoked in both popular and academic discourse in the U.S. (see Valenti 2010), moral appraisals of female sexuality have not hewed to this presence-absence dichotomy for some time. Instead, the Virgin/Whore categorical model was gradually reconfigured over the 20th century into a spectrum of women's possible sexual conduct (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988). Anchored by the presence of partnered sexual activity at one end and the absence thereof at the other, the *Virgin-Slut Continuum* allows for gradations of acceptable sexual behaviors, specifically those occurring in heterosexual, monogamous, long-term relationships with conventionally gendered roles (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988).

Staying within the bounds of a “charmed circle” (Rubin 1984/2011, p. 152) of approved sexual conduct, however, is a tricky, if not impossible task for young women. Gendered sexual norms create an untenable, oft-critiqued double bind for girls: to be desirable, but not desiring; to be a sexually responsive girlfriend while also being a sexually responsible gatekeeper (Gavey 2005; Morokoff 2000; Tolman 2002). Girls and women are sanctioned if they do not court male sexual interests to some degree, but may be called teases for provoking without satisfying male sexual desires. Whether divided into binaries or rated along a continuum, women's sexuality is framed in terms of their responses to men's sexual drive, which is presumed to be incessant, urgent, and irrepressible (Gavey 2005). This formulation presupposes female sexuality to be non-initiating and of negligible intensity (Morokoff 2000; Tolman 2002), with girls' only recourse to agency being refusal or consent to men's sexual overtures (Gavey 2005).

Although such limited and limiting notions of female sexuality persist, there are also meaningful indicators that the normative field surrounding sexuality and corresponding gender roles is shifting. A recent Gallup poll of U.S. popular opinion found greater acceptance of same-sex relationships and nonmarital heterosexual relationships, an effect that is especially pronounced among young adults (Wilke and Saad 2013). Youth sexual repertoires and relationships are diversifying (Claxton and van Dulmen 2013; Herbenick et al. 2010) and increasingly acknowledged as developmentally appropriate and enabling of future psychological and relational well-being (Fortenberry 2014; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Hensel et al. 2011; Tolman and McClelland 2011). Gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors appear to be overstated and/or shrinking (Petersen and Hyde 2010) and studies of the sexual double standard indicate that it is no longer unilaterally imposed or felt by young women (Lyons et al. 2011; Marks and Fraley 2005). Young women's own attitudes and beliefs about sexuality are also growing more favorable and more liberal (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Noland et al. 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest the charmed circle may be widening and growing more permeable, able to encompass a broader range of partners, relationships, and behaviors among both men and women.

Loosening sexual mores and gender prescriptions are also evident among the prolific, overtly sexual, and arguably sexualized depictions of girls and women. Many of these conform to the long-standing pattern of presenting the female body as a dehumanized, passive object for others' scrutiny and consumption (Bartky 1990; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). But they are also joined by displays that defy traditional ideals of sexually compliant or coy femininity. Many of the performances and personae of young women, celebrities and non-celebrities alike, seem to showcase female sexual power and appetite: women commanding sexual attention, demanding

sexual pleasure, and pursuing sexual fun, all without apology. The rise of “raunch culture” (Levy 2005, p. 7) in the Anglophone West has provoked vigorous and meaningful debates about the implications of sexualization, the distinction between sexualization and sexual empowerment, and girls’ abilities to capitalize on and/or resist such trends (Evans and Riley 2014; Gill 2008; Lamb and Peterson 2012; Lerum and Dworkin 2009). In any case, it is clear that girls’ sexual agency, whether authentic or pantomimed, and whether an unequivocal sign of progress or a double-edged sword, is no longer construed as merely reactive to male overtures (Evans and Riley 2014). Popular discourse now includes girls and women, perhaps more mythic than realistic, who present as unabashedly desiring and initiating, apparently unbound from and unconcerned by gendered sexual norms. Their sexual exploits are not cautionary tales of the disasters that follow sexual indulgence, are never out of their control (though it may be raucous, irreverent, and excessive), and are not meant only as solicitations of male desire and approval (though seduction may be part of the fun). Instead, their pleasure-seeking is volitional, savvy, and self-interested.

Taking the rising cultural prominence of this discursive strain of female sexuality into account, sexual agency appears to have taken on a meaning and significance of its own in girls’ enactments, and others’ appraisals, of their sexuality. However, the one-dimensional sexual activity continuum and the attendant constructs of the double bind and charmed circle do not easily accommodate sexual agency’s emergence. As colleagues and I (Livingston et al. 2013) remarked on our own struggle to characterize the contemporary normative field of girls’ sexuality:

[T]he conventional notion of a “double bind” might be too simplistic a description of young women’s entanglement within a complex knot of multiple, seemingly opposed normative injunctions: to abstain, to resist, to comply, to seduce, to express, to arouse, and to perform. (p. 39)

An additive approach, in which new expectations regarding girls’ demonstrations of agency are layered on top of the Virgin-Slut Continuum, does not account for the various combinations of sexual agency and sexual activity. For example, both girls’ abstinence from sexual activity and their pursuit of sexual pleasure could be ascribed to sexual agency. Similarly, low levels of agency might result in a dearth of sexual experience (e.g., due to difficulty in initiating interactions) or in a plethora thereof (e.g., due to difficulty in resisting interactions).

To accommodate these possible interactive effects, I propose a conceptual model in which the enduring evaluative metric of sexual activity is joined by a second, distinct normative standard: sexual agency. Rather than another layer of

gendered sexual expectations, I argue that sexual agency operates as a new, independent dimension in a cultural rubric used to appraise girls’ sexuality. Young women may now be rated by specific, known others as well as the generalized other of U.S. popular opinion, along two intersecting axes: the Virgin-Slut Continuum (i.e., sexual activity) and the Agency Line (i.e., sexual agency). No longer simply divided between virgins or sluts or marked along a single continuum founded on their alleged sexual behavior, girls are now also evaluated according to the degree of control they proclaim, or are perceived, to exert over their sexual behavior.

The Agency Line: Measuring Sexual Agency

A growing body of research indicates that sexual agency, as construed in neoliberal terms, is a key criterion in the differentiation between accepted sexual conduct (i.e., behaviors and experiences that appear to be freely chosen and self-determined) and that which is condemned, pitied, or both (i.e., behaviors and experiences that result from weakness, ineptitude, and/or irresponsibility). U.S. adolescents in Abbott and Dalla’s (2008) mixed method study often framed their approval of others’ sexual behavior in the patently neoliberal terms of personal autonomy and responsibility rather than traditional expectations of conformity to gender roles or moral codes. The dominant position among their participants was that individuals should be free to make any sexual decisions they wished as long as they accept responsibility for any consequences. “Slut” remains a potent and frequent slur against girls and women (for analyses of the complexities of slut discourse, see: Armstrong et al. 2014; Attwood 2007; Ringrose and Renold 2012); however, its meaning appears to be shifting such that it signifies being sexually out of control, not simply being sexually active. Armstrong et al. (2014) found it operated less as a stigma against sexual activity than as a delimiter of class status. Affluent participants in their longitudinal ethnography of undergraduate women at a U.S. university associated “sluttiness” not with the number of one’s sexual partners, but with the degree of one’s control over oneself and the interaction. One participant explained, “Slutty doesn’t mean how many people [you slept with]. It just means how easy you are.” (p. 110).

The contempt at the crux of contemporary slut-shaming, then, may have less to do with a girl’s adherence to gendered sexual morals than her lack of neoliberal agency. This was expressed by adolescent women in Jackson and Cram’s (2003) New Zealand-based focus groups, who endorsed the initiative of a hypothetical girl who “went out, she looked for it [sex], she got what she wanted...” (p. 118) but disapproved of “girls [who] just go crazy and say yeah to everything” (p. 120). Schalet et al. (2003) identified two bases of sexual subjectivity among young women of color involved in San

Francisco gangs: sexual respectability, which conformed more or less to the heteronormative and gendered moral bounds of the charmed circle; and sexual autonomy, which prized women's sexual and material independence from men. Proponents of sexual autonomy derided other women as sluts for “[...] *the lack of control over self and others*, not promiscuity or even prostitution” (emphasis added, p. 134). Among the Australian high school girls Charles (2010) interviewed, being a slut was only distally associated with sexuality and was used instead to denote one's value and viability as an independent, striving agent:

Ruby's deliberations around what is and isn't a slut is not really about rejecting the appearance of being “sexual,” or even particular sex acts. It is more about the significance of self-determination. A “slut” is someone who has no choice, someone who is not doing it “for themselves.” (p. 42)

In this light, it is possible to see that neoliberal ideology is not an affirmative celebration of agency; instead, it is the hegemonic institution of agency, deviation from which brings social sanction. Similarly, neoliberal versions of freedom and autonomy are not as liberationist as they appear on the surface. Neoliberalism does not advocate freedom in the form of nonconformity or challenging of authority. Instead, what it offers in its coupling of personal freedom and personal responsibility is something akin to a liability waiver: do what you will, but at your own risk. The neoliberal pretense that the U.S. functions as a post-prejudice meritocracy (Duggan 2003) fuels a rhetoric of unprecedented and unfettered opportunity, especially for women. Without any apparent fences or external obstacles, limitations are reasoned to be self-imposed and wounds are regarded as deserved and even self-inflicted. As I will argue, neoliberalism's brand of sexual agency may be marketed in terms of choice and freedom, but is more likely to foster blame and divisiveness than empowerment and liberation (see also Evans and Riley 2014).

Staying Above the Agency Line

Scholars commenting on young women who seem to combine blatant sexual behavior with apparent sexual agency have referred to *Midriffs* (Gill 2008, p. 437), *Can-Do Girls* (Harris 2004, p. 13), *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (Levy 2005, p. 93), *Phallic Girls* (McRobbie 2008, p. 718), and *Together Women* (Phillips 2000, p. 47). These are not meant as descriptors of actual girls, but as monikers for a new cultural figure or character type, one with a distinctly neoliberal profile: ambitious, independent, unencumbered, autonomous, self-serving, in command, calculating, unapologetic. Such a girl is clearly

positioned above the Agency Line insofar as she is perceived to be in total control of her sexual conduct and under the control of no one. Many female pop stars adopt such a persona, flaunting not only their sexuality but also their transgression of sexual norms. As one example, Miley Cyrus's performance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards included simulations of masturbation, analingus, and dildo use (<http://www.mtv.com/ontv/vma/videos/we-cant-stop-blurred-lines-give-it-2-u-medley/942064>; for analysis of the controversy surrounding a prior performance by Cyrus, see Lamb et al. 2013). Content such as this is often criticized along the lines of gendered moralist prohibitions against female sexuality, but even people who find such performances tasteless or unappealing may defend them nonetheless on grounds of individual liberty and self-determination. In the case of Miley Cyrus's 2013 performance, many commentators used blogs and social media to support what was presumed to be agentic sexual self-expression. Exemplifying this defense, Kagel (2013) wrote in the *Huffington Post*: “[W]e should give her props for being audacious enough to explore female sexuality in a world where she had to expect she would be slut-shamed for it” (para. 12; see also Bernstein 2013). To those who worried that the performance was a sign of mental distress or exploitation by puppet-master agents and promoters, Cyrus retorted that her performance was carefully orchestrated – by her – and that if she appeared to be out of or losing control, that was all part of the plan: “You could watch that performance from the VMAs and think that it's a hot mess, but it's a *strategic* hot mess” (emphasis added; Bozymowski 2013). This invocation of premeditated strategy – particularly in the interest of profit – helped define Cyrus in ideal neoliberal terms: a rational actor pursuing personal success by any means necessary (Brown 2003).

Traditional discourses of abstinence and virginity are laden with religio-moralist dictates of feminine chastity and purity (Carpenter 2005; Valenti 2010). Girls' gatekeeping obligations are certainly predicated on control, but a circumscribed and selfless version that revolves around holding the male sex drive at bay (Gavey 2005) and exercising restraint in service to higher moral authorities. In contrast to this characterization of dutiful and obedient good girls, sexual abstinence has begun to be filtered through a neoliberal lens, viewed in terms of self-possession, independence, and personal ambition. Janie Fredell, a leading abstinence advocate while an undergraduate at Harvard, decried the caricature of “meek little virgin females” in an interview with the *New York Times Magazine* (Patterson 2008), just as Evette Holyfield, daughter of boxer Evander Holyfield, described her choice to abstain from premarital partnered sexual activity as an outgrowth of self-knowledge, self-worth, and self-confidence (Martin 2013). Themes of self-interest and self-realization are carried forward in multiple blog posts by young women (many feminist-identified) discussing virginity or “conscious celibacy”

(Sharper 2009) as acts of “pure, unadulterated choice” (“Does feminism,” 2014, para. 10) and proud nonconformity:

But I finally realized I was playing someone else’s game. [...] I had to reteach myself not to allow other people’s ideas about sexuality to dictate my sex life. [...] No need to try to force myself into something I don’t want. And no need to try to be normal. I’m a 22-year-old virgin, and I am cool with that. (Collins 2014, para. 14; see also Lindholm 2013; Malone 2013)

Several studies with young women find them refraining from partnered sexual interactions and/or romantic relationships for reasons that have less to do with sexuality, gender norms, or morality than with their determination not to get distracted or waylaid from academic, professional, and material success (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Maxwell 2006; Patrick et al. 2007; Thomson 2000). This agency-centered construction of abstinence hardly precludes sexuality, as illustrated by the Candies Foundation’s 2009 abstinence promotion efforts. Selling tight white tank tops printed with phrases such as “I’m Sexy Enough to Keep You Waiting” and “Be Sexy! It Doesn’t Mean You Have to Have Sex,” the campaign parlayed abstinence into sex appeal, what they dubbed “sexy abstinence”. Thus girls populating the low activity x high agency quadrant of the matrix (i.e., those who are agentially abstinent) are not young naïfs or guileless rule-followers shying away from sex; they are self-assured neoliberal strivers asserting their agency.

The narrative of young women postponing sex and relationships in favor of personal and professional ambition calls to mind a privileged, high-achieving, hyper-responsible “alpha girl” (a term coined by Kindlon 2006), yet young women at less advantaged social locations are not isolated from this neoliberal normative climate or exempt from its requirements. Racialized and socioeconomically disadvantaged girls are also expected to strive toward the same goals of individually-won prosperity and prestige. However, their efforts are neither adequately undergirded by the ever-diminishing social welfare system nor are they underwritten by accumulated and inherited social, material, and cultural capital. Instead, young women denied adequate means and equal access must apply themselves that much more assiduously to the pursuit of success. In facing demands for individual achievement but with scarce tangible support, avoiding romantic and sexual involvement may emerge as the only rational choice. Girls in this precarious position of “anxious achievement” (Burns and Torre 2004) cannot spare the time and energy for relationships, nor can they risk being derailed by something such as pregnancy; they cannot afford *not* to abstain (for examples of how this discourse is deployed in practice, see Froyum 2010; Goodkind 2009). In other cases, girls of color and/or with low SES may use abstinence to

deflect racist and classist stereotypes that they are unambitious, unintelligent, undisciplined, and hypersexual (Attwood 2007; Bettie 2003; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Reid and Bing 2000; Stephens and Phillips 2003).

An illustration of the symbolic significance of abstinence in assertions of agency was provided by an undergraduate woman in a study I conducted of women’s adolescent sexual experiences (see Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008). She was an enthusiastic, forthcoming participant who seemed to enjoy recounting her sexual experiences and joking about how long the interview would take given her extensive sexual history. She reported having had 16 sexual partners (all male) starting when she was 15 years old and with whom she had engaged in an array of sexual behaviors except coitus. In fact, her identity as a virgin was a point of pride. All but one of her partners had been 1 to 5 years older than her, the vast majority of the interactions had taken place outside of any romantic relationship, and many involved some amount of alcohol consumption by her and/or her partner. Her sexual history included what many would see as red flags for sexual risk and social sanction as a slut (i.e., numerous older partners, nonrelational interactions, coincidence of alcohol and sex), but she seemed unperturbed by and even unaware of these possible threats. In fact, she took pride in her sexual experience and in her sexual abstinence, with agency and control running through both. As she reasoned:

[I]f drinking was a problem then I wouldn’t be a virgin right now, to be completely honest. Because, you know, that’s when most people do have sex. It’s when they have a lot to drink. And *if I haven’t done that [coitus] then I feel like I’m in control.* (emphasis added)

For her, coital abstinence served as incontrovertible proof of her command and allowed her to deflect, at least in her own mind, any doubt about her standing as an agent.

Falling Below the Agency Line

The high stakes involved in securing one’s position above the Agency Line – whether sexually active or abstinent – are brought into relief by the debasement of those who fall below it. Girls perceived to lack control or choice over their sexualities are stigmatized foils to their counterparts above the Agency Line. The use of slut to censure not sexually active women in general but specifically those deemed wantonly and indiscriminately so (Charles 2010; Jackson and Cram 2003; Schalet et al. 2003) exposes the contingent nature of the cultural acceptance of female sexual behavior. Judgments of women who venture beyond the charmed circle rest largely on their sexual impression management skills: their ability to persuade others that their sexual experiences and conduct are

entirely of their own choosing and doing. This effective presentation of one's sexual self is not simply a matter of individual skill: some girls are bolstered or shielded by race and class privilege (Armstrong et al. 2014) while others must ceaselessly work against racist and classist stereotypes of hypersexuality and irresponsibility. Without a credible portrayal of agency, sexually active girls risk designation as sluts, girls who “just go crazy” (Jackson and Cram 2003, p. 120) or who are “not doing it for themselves” (Charles 2010, p. 42), and are likely to be met with disdain, perhaps most of all for their perceived lack of self-possession.

Just as cultural appraisals of girls' sexual activity hinge on inferences regarding intentionality and self-determination, sexual abstinence is also subject to a sort of agency test. When cast in terms of agentic self-interest and fortitude, abstinence might garner respect. But without such neoliberal trappings, abstinent girls may be pitied for missing out (as in the case of one of Armstrong et al. 2014 participants) or for being undesirable. Those whose sexual inexperience is believed to be involuntary rather than volitional may then fall below the Agency Line, at the abstinent end of the sexual activity spectrum. There has been little empirical attention to youth who are involuntarily celibate, though there are signs that lagging behind one's peers in initiating coitus can be a source of embarrassment (Donnelly et al. 2001; for an overview of predictors of celibacy into adulthood, see Haydon et al. 2014). Girls may not face the same type or intensity of stigma as boys for being virgins (Carpenter 2005), but profound anxiety about physical appearance and heterosexual appeal are almost compulsory features of U.S. girlhood (Brumberg 1997; Travis et al. 2000). Girls' beauty concerns are not unfounded: those deemed unattractive according to heteronormative, racialized ideals contend with internalized shame and social marginalization (e.g., Cheng and Landale 2011; Murnen and Smolak 2013). Girls regarded as undesirable may not be reviled in the way that sluts are, but they are still subject to dehumanizing ridicule, pity, and condescension (for an explication of the various dimensions of dehumanization, see Fiske 2013). Colleagues and I (Bay-Cheng et al. 2011) observed this in a focus group study, in which adolescent female participants spoke derisively of “little girls” (p. 1181) and “invisible ones” (p. 1178), girls desperate to attract male attention and mocked for being unable to do so.

Just as girls above the Agency Line share an ostensible command over their sexual behavior and decision-making, those who seem to fall below it are seen as equals in their ineptitude. It is their inferred deficiency in conducting themselves and affecting their circumstances judiciously, willfully, and responsibly that also leaves them prone to becoming victims. Victim status is not merely a descriptor of what has happened to a young woman (e.g., whether a chance accident or an intentional violation). Instead, in the context of girls' sexuality – and neoliberal culture more broadly – victim

functions as a totalizing identity, one associated with weakness, damage, and impotence (Lamb 1999; Mardorossian 2002; Stringer 2014). Reflecting critically on the cultural figure of Ophelia, both from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Mary Pipher's 1994 bestseller *Reviving Ophelia*, Gonick (2006) wrote, “Fragile and vulnerable, Ophelia is shadow twin to the idealized empowered girl. Without intervention she is at risk of failing to produce the required attributes of the neoliberal feminine subject” (p. 15). Similarly, Harris (2004) identified the “at-risk girl” as the antagonist to the “can-do girl” (p. 13). The diametric opposition of agents and victims casts the latter as absent the wherewithal – whether in terms of forethought, assertiveness, or discipline – to protect themselves and their interests (Bay-Cheng and Fava 2014; Lamb 1999; Stringer 2014).

In cases of sexual behavior perceived as uncontrolled, outcomes such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection, or assault may be regarded as unfortunate and even elicit some measure of sympathy. But in keeping with the neoliberal tenet of just deserts, these are also reasoned to be natural, deserved consequences of careless behavior. Sexually inexperienced, non-agentic girls may also be seen as at risk, but for reasons of inadequacy and insecurity. Empirical findings substantiate the heightened sexual risk of girls who begin partnered sexual activity later than their peers. This may be because they are driven by circumstantial opportunity, leading to more impetuous sexual interactions that are less likely to involve trustworthy partners and consistent condom use (Carpenter 2005; Humphreys 2013). However, their exposure to risk may say less about their intrinsic traits than extrinsic forces. For instance, even after they initiate partnered sexual activity, girls deemed unattractive by peers are less likely to report romantic involvement (Cawley et al. 2006). Averett et al. (2013) found overweight young women to be significantly more likely to engage in anal intercourse than their peers. Reminiscent of the historical exploitation of low-income women for sexual interactions considered too base for class-privileged women (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988), researchers speculate that marginalized girls' limited social capital and leverage makes them acceptable and even prime partners for some sexual purposes (i.e., those to which many girls, specifically those with options and leverage, would not agree). Yet they remain closed out of the dating market and dismissed as legitimate romantic interests, targeted instead by self-serving, opportunistic sexual partners.

Several studies document young women's tendency to ascribe victimization – both their own and others' – to personal shortcomings: not being assertive enough, not being savvy enough, not being in control enough (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Hlavka 2014; Phillips 2000). This depoliticized, individualized discourse of who is at risk and why is reiterated in popular media, current events, and interventions (Gavey 2012; Goodkind 2009; Harris 2004; Kelly

2001; Stringer 2014). While victims may be regarded with sympathy and pity, they nevertheless serve as a cautionary tale of the pitfalls of personal weakness and losing control. According to a neoliberal logic, being a victim is not the result of violation by another person, systemic injustice, or even just bad luck; it is the manifestation of one's ineptitude as an agent.

Toeing the Agency Line

Previously, women's placement along the Virgin-Slut Continuum was primarily based on specific behaviors, whether actual or supposed. The weight now assigned to agency, however, reapportions evaluative attention to the stories women tell about their behaviors and how they cast themselves in those narratives. The subjective nature of agency means that women may have some sway over others' appraisals of their sexual conduct and therefore some opportunity to navigate and strategically situate themselves in relation to the agency and activity axes. By crafting scripts and roles that accord with hegemonic neoliberal norms, young women may be acknowledged as agents and granted all due respect for their freedom of sexual choice. Taken at face value, the overtly sexual displays of some women may be interpreted as the embodiment of women's liberation from gendered sexual prohibitions. To the contrary, critics see this neoliberal agent prototype as a prescribed, canned role within a "post-feminist masquerade" (McRobbie 2008, p. 66; Gavey 2012; Gill 2008; Evans and Riley 2014). Rebutting the popular premise that girls today enjoy the boundless freedom of a post-prejudice meritocracy, they argue instead that the normative burden on girls has only increased in load and complexity. Agency has not erased or eclipsed the Virgin-Slut Continuum or the sexism that results in pervasive sexual assault, harassment, and shaming of young women. Girls must still ward off accusations of promiscuity, but they now do so while also compelled to play the parts of sexual libertines.

Thus what appears to be an expanded, liberated space is actually a normative minefield, one that requires continual self-monitoring, impression management, and a full complement of defensive and offensive maneuvers. For one, given the prevalence of sexual coercion and assault, a sizable proportion of young women presumably face the dilemma of accounting for violation without jeopardizing their status as agents. Key tactics for avoiding demotion to being a victim are to deny victimization experiences as such or else to relabel them in neoliberal terms. Investigations of unacknowledged assault indicate that many women do not see their experiences as fitting the dominant rape script (i.e., a woman violently attacked by a stranger) and therefore do not believe labels such as rape, assault, and victimization apply to them (Gavey 2005; Kahn and Mathie 2000; Phillips 2000; Stringer 2014). In other cases, a woman may define an experience as violation but opt

against disclosure in an attempt to avoid the associated stigma (Miller et al. 2011; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004). Women may also engage in extensive "narrative work" (Martin 1996) in order to reconcile victimization with their self- and public images as agents. Treating coercion as a "miscommunication" (Littleton et al. 2009) downplays its traumatic potential and implies mutual culpability, casting the woman as an equal player rather than an exploited dupe. Other women may admit to being harmed by a partner, but rhetorically translate any damage done into a lesson learned (Baker 2010; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008). Post-traumatic growth and thriving are certainly possible (Joseph and Linley 2006), but a neoliberalized discourse of resilience substitutes the need for system change with a depoliticized celebration – and implicit expectation – of personal triumph and self-help (Goodkind 2009; Harris 2004; Stringer 2014). This narrative converts violation from an artifact of structural, symbolic, and material inequality into an opportunity to grow stronger and wiser than ever before, almost a sort of blessing in disguise.

Tapping this vein of self-improvement, a common throughline in women's reconstructions of victimization as miscommunications or growth-promoting learning experiences is some type of self-blame: for not conveying her wishes clearly or vehemently enough; for having led a man on; for having shown poor judgment. Although self-blame has complex and multiple causes, its gravitational pull may be intensified by the neoliberal mandate of personal responsibility. A woman who steps up to take responsibility for her own victimization may find neoliberal redemption in holding herself accountable; one who is seen as shirking responsibility and making excuses, on the other hand, may be seen as dishonorably weak (Baker 2010; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Stringer 2014). Attributing victimization to one's own lapse in judgment or prior immaturity allows a woman to temporally bracket their vulnerability (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008). In doing so, she defends herself on multiple fronts: against a sense of powerlessness within a pervasively unjust system; against being seen as someone trying to deflect blame and shirk responsibility; and against indelible classification as a victim. Instead, the incident is minimized and compartmentalized as an aberration, as a life lesson, as a one-time dip below the Agency Line.

In an ironic twist, young women's apparent sexual agency provides cover for men's acts of sexual aggression; indeed, rejecting this pretense was the catalyst for SlutWalk demonstrations (Ringrose and Renold 2012). Not unlike standard rape myths refrains of young women "asking for it" based on their physical presentation or preceding sexual experience (Edwards et al. 2011), a woman playing the part of a stridently and unapologetically sexual agent may be presumed to be up for anything, anytime. Defined by her willingness to say "yes," it is incredible that she would ever say "no." The purported meritocratic state of the U.S. and the imputed sexual

empowerment of young women effectively neutralize any claims to gender-based inequality and exploitation. According to neoliberalism's dualist construction of agents and victims, one cannot have their individual agency and their systemic vulnerability, too. This leaves young women who wish to retain their standing as agents with no recourse other than to deny victimization or to take responsibility, thereby shielding from blame and even from view the coercive and abusive behaviors of perpetrators.

Another insidious but unsurprising implication of the Agency Line is that in order to secure one's position above it, young women are compelled to push others below it. The observable behaviors of women on either side may not be visibly different: those high or low in agency might be sexually active, just as they might be sexually abstinent. What distinguishes those with agency from those without is whether they can persuade others that their sexual conduct is self-determined, self-interested, and under their own control. Girls must draw sharp contrasts between themselves and others, largely through slut-shaming and victim-blaming, in order to prop themselves up above the line. Whatever freedom or control girls are perceived to enjoy as they position themselves as agents comes at the expense of those against whom they push off. Racialized and economically disadvantaged girls are made easy targets for such downward comparisons by race and class-based constructions of them as over-sexed and under-disciplined (Armstrong et al. 2014; Attwood 2007; Bettie 2003; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Reid and Bing 2000; Stephens and Phillips 2003). Thus girls' tactics for navigating the matrix created by intersecting gendered moralist and neoliberal norms often follow – and thereby carve even more deeply – discursive tracks that degrade and dehumanize others on the basis of race, class, and other marginalized statuses.

The divisiveness fostered by this construction of sexual agency also exemplifies one of the troubling, inherent ramifications neoliberalism: that by naturalizing and valorizing self-interest, it erodes collective responsibility and mutuality (Brown 2003; Duggan 2003; see also Savani, Stephens, and Markus 2011). Lamb (2010) argued that even feminist approaches to sexual socialization bear this neoliberal imprint, emphasizing girls' sexual self-interest so strongly that it trumps the ethical priorities of care and mutuality between partners. This every-man-for-himself stance leads to and even justifies not only deprioritizing partners' interests, but endangering their well-being. For instance, participants in Adam's (2005) study of barebacking (i.e., unprotected anal sex between men) reasoned that if precautions against STIs were a priority for the receptive partner, it was the partner's responsibility to speak up; if he did not, then the penetrative partner could not be faulted for proceeding without a condom. Analogous rationale also protects sexual coercion in the forms of "working a yes out" (Sanday 2007, p. 129) or equating the

absence of "no" with the presence of consent (Friedman and Valenti 2008). Such standards only require individuals to observe explicit, verbal, vociferous, and repeated refusals; otherwise, anything is fair (i.e., legal) game (for an alternative, see the principles of affirmative or enthusiastic consent; Friedman and Valenti 2008). Neoliberal ideology insists on unconditional personal responsibility while it simultaneously exempts us from any obligation to one another.

Finally, the neoliberal premium on individual agency not only undercuts our sense of solidarity and collective investment, but also stunts our critical consciousness and dialogue. Feminist analysis of the cultural climate and conditions surrounding female sexuality is often cornered by a neoliberal logic that instantly converts social critique into personal aspersion. Inquiry into the origins, grounds, or implications of girls' sexual behavior is often treated as an invalidation of an individual's competence to choose or her right to do so. Those who question the norms embedded in representations of girls' sexuality or the impetus behind the popularity of sexualized/sexualizing behaviors (e.g., pole-dancing, lap-dancing, etc.) must defend themselves against accusations that they are invalidating girls' sexual expression or that they are adopting condescending, adultist positions. In this way, neoliberalism's reflexive individualization, depoliticization, and sanctification of choice threatens to lead critical discourse into a fractious dead-end (for in-depth consideration of this dilemma, see Evans and Riley 2014).

Girls' Sexuality Outside the Lines

Neoliberalism is shielded by an effective system of rhetorical defenses. Its individualist and meritocratic refrains may seem like a celebration of tried-and-true, core U.S. values rather than a distinct, encroaching ideology. But this superficial cultural resonance and the alluring discourse of freedom are deceiving. Despite neoliberal claims of female sexual empowerment, U.S. women's entitlement to reproductive and sexual health choices is in a highly precarious state ("A statement on abortion," 2013). Youth are obstructed from exercising their sexual rights and accessing supportive services by their lack of independent material means (e.g., finances, housing, transportation) and by formal policies such as parental consent laws (Fine and McClelland 2007). Gendered and age-based barriers are compounded by institutionalized discrimination on the basis of race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, disability, citizenship status, English language fluency and literacy, and so on. These structurally unjust conditions lay bare the duplicity of neoliberalism's championing of personal freedom. Far from its proclaimed objective of defending individuals from any infringement on their liberty, it actually expands the rights and dominion of some at the expense of others.

Sexual agency's emergence as a distinct dimension in the evaluative rubric applied to young women's sexuality attests to the cultural suffusion of neoliberal ideology. My intention is to offer a framework that can support fresh analyses of the normative field that girls now navigate and help us identify ways to be effective allies to young women. This model does not vet the authenticity of girls' agency, nor is it a prescriptive or diagnostic instrument for classifying girls as agentic or not. Whether one is assigned a spot above or below the Agency Line is neither random nor necessarily evidence-based, but is heavily influenced by intersecting vectors of gender, race, and class discrimination (as is the case with appraisals of girls' sexual activity). Just as the Virgin-Slut Continuum provides critics of gendered moralism some common ground in explicating and contesting the prescription of girls' sexuality, I offer the Agency Line as a collective reference point in our efforts to sort through the impact of neoliberal ideology on our treatment of girls' sexuality and consequently, on our treatment of girls.

Beyond confirming that the Agency Line exists and operates as I propose in the U.S. and perhaps elsewhere, we also need more intentional, methodical examinations of how the neoliberal agency imperative affects young women's sexual lives. Women's aversion to being classified as victims already indicates just how high the stakes are in being identified as an agent, but studies might probe more deeply into girls' strategies for keeping themselves above the Agency Line and the consequences thereof for them and for their relationships with others. Careful intersectional analyses might also shed light on how neoliberal construals of agency reify racial and socioeconomic inequalities. This could help expose the role of a neoliberal rhetoric of individual agency in depoliticizing young women's sexuality, exacerbating estrangement among girls, and in perpetuating systemic bias and injustice.

Those invested in young women's sexual well-being, including girls themselves, can resist the displacement of responsibility for inequality from systems to individuals by shifting focus away from girls themselves. As long as we continue to look at girls – whether as problems or for solutions – we abide by and reinscribe rules that train our focus on individuals. A politicized discourse of girls' sexuality looks not at girls' sexuality at all, but instead turns outward to examine the circumstances of girls' lives, refusing to take part in the almost ubiquitous scrutiny and surveillance of girls themselves. This reorientation toward examining social conditions of girls' vulnerability rather than individual risk (Maxwell 2006) might sensitize us to the social and material levers that exert force in young women's sexual lives, leading not only to a politicized discourse but also to a much-needed politicized course of action. For example, we might return to the original tenets and promise of empowerment (Gutiérrez 1994), allying with girls to transform, not just accommodate, the conditions that threaten their safety and their rights (e.g., misogyny, racism, economic injustice; Bay-Cheng 2012).

The emergence of agency as an evaluative dimension opens up new choices and offers young women greater latitude vis-à-vis sexuality, but it also creates new dilemmas. Girls may be able to move off of the Virgin-Slut Continuum and outside the charmed circle, but they must now answer to the neoliberal charge of being in control at all times. The discourse of sexual agency and choice on offer by neoliberalism props up a façade of personal freedom that conceals the constant strategizing, divisive status jockeying, and relentless self-surveillance entailed in keeping oneself above the Agency Line. Even the conspicuous, seemingly freewheeling sexualities of some young women are rigidly scripted according to a canned “technology of sexiness” (Gill 2008, p. 53). Young women are still required to account for their sexual behavior, only now by staking their claim as agents, even when they have been violated by a partner or are hamstrung by inadequate and unjust social and material conditions. Oppression is disguised and thereby enabled by casting girls' negative sex-related experiences as manifestations of personal deficits and matters of personal responsibility. The Agency Line may introduce substantive changes and a new multidimensionality to contemporary constructions of girls' sexuality. But the addition of this new metric has not dislodged gendered moralism, nor has it abolished the measurement of girls' social worth according to their sexual conduct. Young women continue to be confined within a prescribed normative space, now divided and disempowered even further by the neoliberal pretense of sexual agency.

Acknowledgments This work has been presented at: the University at Buffalo's Buffalo Center for Social Research (March, 2014); the Society for Research on Adolescence Biennial Meeting in Austin, TX (March, 2014); and the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, & Women's Studies Program (November, 2014). I thank J. Dennis Fortenberry and anonymous reviewers for their careful feedback on preliminary drafts.

References

- A statement on abortion by 100 professors of obstetrics: 40 years later. (2013). *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 209, 193–199. doi: 10.1016/j.ajog.2013.03.007.
- Abbott, D. A., & Dalla, R. L. (2008). “It's a choice, simple as that”: Youth reasoning for sexual abstinence or activity. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11, 629–649. doi:10.1080/13676260802225751.
- Adam, B. D. (2005). Constructing the neoliberal sexual actor: Responsibility and care of the self in the discourse of barebackers. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 7, 333–346. doi:10.1080/13691050500100773.
- Armstrong, E. A., Hamilton, L., & England, P. (2010). Is hooking up bad for young women? *Contexts*, 9, 22–27. doi:10.1525/ctx.2010.9.3.22.
- Armstrong, E. A., Hamilton, L. T., Armstrong, E. M., & Seeley, J. L. (2014). “Good girls”: Gender, social class, and slut discourse on campus. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 77, 100–122. doi:10.1177/0190272514521220.
- Attwood, F. (2007). Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female identity and sexual agency. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16, 233–247. doi:10.1080/09589230701562921.

- Averett, S., Corman, H., & Reichman, N. E. (2013). Effects of overweight on risky sexual behavior of adolescent girls. *Economic Inquiry*, 51, 605–619. doi:10.1111/j.1465-7295.2011.00396.x.
- Baker, J. (2010). Claiming volition and evading victimhood: Post-feminist obligations for young women. *Feminism and Psychology*, 20, 186–204. doi:10.1177/0959353509359142.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, 44, 1175–1184. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175.
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2012). Recovering empowerment: De-personalizing and re-politicizing adolescent female sexuality. *Sex Roles*, 66, 713–717. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0070-x.
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y., & Eliseo-Arras, R. K. (2008). The making of unwanted sex: Gendered and neoliberal norms in college women's unwanted sexual experiences. *Journal of Sex Research*, 45, 386–397. doi:10.1080/00224490802398381.
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y., & Fava, N. M. (2014). What puts “at-risk girls” at risk? Sexual vulnerability and social inequality in the lives of girls in the child welfare system. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 11, 116–125. doi:10.1007/s13178-013-0142-5.
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y., Livingston, J. A., & Fava, N. M. (2011). Adolescent girls' assessment and management of sexual risks: Insights from focus group research. *Youth and Society*, 43, 1167–1193. doi:10.1177/0044118X10384475.
- Bernstein, J. (2013). The pro-Miley backlash. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/fashion/the-pro-miley-backlash.html>.
- Bettie, J. (2003). *Women without class: Girls, race, and identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bozymowski, P. (2013). *Miley: The movement [Television broadcast]*. New York: MTV.
- Brown, W. (2003). Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event*, 7. doi:10.1353/tae.2003.0020.
- Brown, W. (2006). American nightmare: Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and de-democratization. *Political Theory*, 34, 690–714. doi:10.1177/0090591706293016.
- Brumberg, J. J. (1997). *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*. New York: Random House.
- Burns, A., & Torre, M. E. (2004). Shifting desires: Discourses of accountability in abstinence-only education in the United States. In A. Harris (Ed.), *All about the girl: Culture, power, and identity* (pp. 127–137). New York: Routledge.
- Carpenter, L. M. (2005). *Virginity lost: An intimate portrait of first sexual experiences*. New York: NYU Press.
- Cawley, J., Joyner, K., & Sobal, J. (2006). Size matters: The influence of adolescents' weight and height on dating and sex. *Rationality and Society*, 18, 67–94. doi:10.1177/1043463106060153.
- Charles, C. E. (2010). Complicating hetero-femininities: Young women, sexualities and “girl power” at school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23, 33–47. doi:10.1080/09518390903447135.
- Cheng, A. Y., & Landale, N. S. (2011). Adolescent overweight, social relationships and the transition to first sex: Gender and racial variations. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 43, 6–15. doi:10.1363/4300611.
- Claxton, S. E., & van Dulmen, M. H. M. (2013). Casual sexual relationships and experiences in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1, 138–150. doi:10.1177/2167696813487181.
- Collins, S. (2014). I shouldn't need an excuse to be a virgin [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.xojane.com/sex/i-shouldnt-need-an-excuse-to-be-a-virgin>.
- D'Emilio, J., & Freedman, E. B. (1988). *Intimate matters: A history of sexuality in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Does feminism have a problem with virginity? [Blog post]. (2014). Retrieved from <http://vagendmagazine.com/2014/01/does-feminism-have-a-problem-with-virginity/>.
- Donnelly, D., Burgess, E., Anderson, S., Davis, R., & Dillard, J. (2001). Involuntary celibacy: A life course analysis. *Journal of Sex Research*, 38, 159–169. doi:10.1080/00224490109552083.
- Duggan, L. (2003). *The twilight of equality?: Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy*. Boston: Beacon.
- Edwards, K. M., Turchik, J. A., Dardis, C. M., Reynolds, N., & Gidycz, C. A. (2011). Rape myths: History, individual and institutional-level presence, and implications for change. *Sex Roles*, 65, 761–773. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9943-2.
- Evans, A., & Riley, S. (2014). *Technologies of sexiness: Sex, identity, and consumer culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, M., & McClelland, S. I. (2007). The politics of teen women's sexuality: Public policy and the adolescent female body. *Emory Law Journal*, 56, 993–1038.
- Fiske, S. T. (2013). Varieties of (de)humanization: Divided by competition and status. In S. J. Gervais (Ed.), *Objectification and (de)humanization* (pp. 53–71). New York: Springer.
- Fortenberry, J. D. (2014). Sexual learning, sexual experience, and healthy adolescent sex. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2014, 71–86. doi:10.1002/cad.20061.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173–206. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x.
- Friedman, J., & Valenti, J. (2008). *Yes means yes: Visions of sexual power and a world without rape*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Froyum, C. M. (2010). Making “good girls”: Sexual agency in the sexuality education of low-income black girls. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12, 59–72. doi:10.1080/13691050903272583.
- Gavey, N. (2005). *Just sex?: The cultural scaffolding of rape*. New York: Routledge.
- Gavey, N. (2012). Beyond “empowerment”? Sexuality in a sexist world. *Sex Roles*, 66, 718–724. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0069-3.
- Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity*, 25, 432–445. doi:10.1057/sub.2008.28.
- Gonick, M. (2006). Between “girl power” and “Reviving Ophelia”: Constituting the neoliberal girl subject. *NWSA Journal*, 18, 1–23. doi:10.1353/nwsa.2006.0031.
- Goodkind, S. (2009). “You can be anything you want, but you have to believe it”: Commercialized feminism in gender-specific programs for girls. *Signs*, 34, 397–422. doi:10.1086/591086.
- Gutiérrez, L. M. (1994). Beyond coping: An empowerment perspective on stressful life events. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 21, 201.
- Hamilton, L., & Armstrong, E. A. (2009). Gendered sexuality in young adulthood: Double binds and flawed options. *Gender and Society*, 23, 589–616. doi:10.1177/0891243209345829.
- Harris, A. (2004). *Future girl: Young women in the twenty-first century*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haydon, A. A., Cheng, M. M., Herring, A. H., McRee, A., & Halpern, C. T. (2014). Prevalence and predictors of sexual inexperience in adulthood. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43, 221–230. doi:10.1007/s10508-013-0164-3.
- Hensel, D. J., Fortenberry, J. D., O'Sullivan, L. F., & Orr, D. P. (2011). The developmental association of sexual self-concept with sexual behavior among adolescent women. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34, 675–684. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2010.09.005.
- Herbenick, D., Reece, M., Schick, V., Sanders, S. A., Dodge, B., & Fortenberry, J. D. (2010). Sexual behavior in the United States: Results from a national probability sample of men and women ages 14–94. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 7, 255–265. doi:10.1111/j.1743-6109.2010.02012.x.

- Hlavka, H. R. (2014). Normalizing sexual violence: Young women account for harassment and abuse. *Gender and Society*, 28, 337–358. doi:10.1177/0891243214526468.
- Humphreys, T. P. (2013). Cognitive frameworks of virginity and first intercourse. *Journal of Sex Research*, 50, 664–675. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.677868.
- Jackson, S. M., & Cram, F. (2003). Disrupting the sexual double standard: Young women's talk about heterosexuality. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42, 113–127. doi:10.1348/014466603763276153.
- Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (2006). Growth following adversity: Theoretical perspectives and implications for clinical practice. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26, 1041–1053. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2005.12.006.
- Kagel, T. S. (2013). In defense of Miley Cyrus' VMA performance. Huffington Post. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamara-shayne-kagel/defense-of-miley-cyrus-vm-as_b_3824923.html.
- Kahn, A. S., & Mathie, V. A. (2000). Understanding the unacknowledged rape victim. In C. B. Travis & J. W. White (Eds.), *Sexuality, society, and feminism* (pp. 377–403). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Kelly, P. (2001). Youth at risk: Processes of individualisation and responsabilisation in the risk society. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 22, 23–33. doi:10.1080/01596300120039731.
- Kindlon, D. (2006). *Alpha girls: Understanding the new American girl and how she is changing the world*. New York: Rodale.
- Lamb, S. (1999). *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept*. New York: NYU Press.
- Lamb, S. (2010). Feminist ideals for a healthy female adolescent sexuality: A critique. *Sex Roles*, 62, 294–306. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9698-1.
- Lamb, S., & Peterson, Z. D. (2012). Adolescent girls' sexual empowerment: Two feminists explore the concept. *Sex Roles*, 66, 703–712. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9995-3.
- Lamb, S., Graling, K., & Wheeler, E. E. (2013). "Pole-arized" discourse: An analysis of responses to Miley Cyrus's teen choice awards pole dance. *Feminism and Psychology*, 23, 163–183. doi:10.1177/0959353512472482.
- Lerum, K., & Dworkin, S. L. (2009). "Bad girls rule": An interdisciplinary feminist commentary on the report of the APA task force on the Sexualization of girls. *Journal of Sex Research*, 46, 250–263. doi:10.1080/00224490903079542.
- Levy, A. (2005). *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York: Free Press.
- Lindholm, E. (2013). Emily is a virgin [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://surgegettyburg.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/emily-is-a-virgin/>.
- Littleton, H., Axsom, D., & Grills-Taquechel, A. (2009). Sexual assault victims' acknowledgment status and revictimization risk. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 33, 34–42. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2008.01472.x.
- Livingston, J. A., Bay-Cheng, L. Y., Hequembourg, A. L., Testa, M., & Downs, J. S. (2013). Mixed drinks and mixed messages: Adolescent girls' perspectives on alcohol and sexuality. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37, 38–50. doi:10.1177/0361684312464202.
- Luker, K. (1996). *Dubious conceptions: The politics of teenage pregnancy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lyons, H., Giordano, P. C., Manning, W. D., & Longmore, M. A. (2011). Identity, peer relationships, and adolescent girls' sexual behavior: An exploration of the contemporary double standard. *Journal of Sex Research*, 48, 437–449. doi:10.1080/00224499.2010.506679.
- Malone, M. M. (2013). The virgin feminist [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://feministsatlarge.wordpress.com/2013/03/31/the-virgin-feminist/>.
- Mardorossian, C. M. (2002). Toward a new feminist theory of rape. *Signs*, 27, 743–775. doi:10.1086/337938.
- Marks, M. J., & Fraley, R. C. (2005). The sexual double standard: Fact or fiction? *Sex Roles*, 52, 175–186. doi:10.1007/s11199-005-1293-5.
- Martin, K. A. (1996). *Puberty, sexuality, and the self: Girls and boys at adolescence*. New York: Routledge.
- Martin, S. (2013). Evette Holyfield talks abstinence and empowerment. *Ebony*. Retrieved from <http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/evette-holyfield-talks-abstinence-and-empowerment-103#axzz346Lp20aH>.
- Martin, K. A., & Luke, K. (2010). Gender differences in the ABC's of the birds and the bees: What mothers teach young children about sexuality and reproduction. *Sex Roles*, 62, 278–291. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9731-4.
- Maxwell, C. (2006). Understanding young women's sexual relationship experiences: The nature and role of vulnerability. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9, 141–158. doi:10.1080/13676260600635615.
- McRobbie, A. (2008). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture, and social change*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Miller, A. K., Canales, E. J., Amacker, A. M., Backstrom, T. L., & Gidycz, C. A. (2011). Stigma-threat motivated nondisclosure of sexual assault and sexual revictimization: A prospective analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35, 119–128. doi:10.1177/0361684310384104.
- Morokoff, P. J. (2000). A cultural context for sexual assertiveness in women. In C. B. Travis & J. W. White (Eds.), *Sexuality, society, and feminism* (pp. 299–319). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Murnen, S. K., & Smolak, L. (2013). "I'd rather be a famous fashion model than a famous scientist": The rewards and costs of internalizing sexualization. In E. L. Zurbriggen & T. Roberts (Eds.), *The sexualization of girls and girlhood: Causes, consequences, and resistance* (pp. 235–256). New York: Oxford.
- Noland, V. J., Daley, E. M., Drolet, J. C., Fetro, J. V., Brown, K. R. M., Hassell, C. D., & McDermott, R. J. (2004). Connotative interpretations of sexuality-related terms. *Sex Roles*, 51, 523–534. doi:10.1007/s11199-004-5462-8.
- Odem, M. E. (1995). *Delinquent daughters: Protecting and policing adolescent female sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Patrick, M. E., Maggs, J. L., & Abar, C. C. (2007). Reasons to have sex, personal goals, and sexual behavior during the transition to college. *Journal of Sex Research*, 44, 240–249. doi:10.1080/00224490701443759.
- Patterson, R. (2008). Students of virginity. *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/30/magazine/30Chastity-t.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0.
- Petersen, J. L., & Hyde, J. S. (2010). A meta-analytic review of research on gender differences in sexuality, 1993–2007. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136, 21–38. doi:10.1037/a0017504.
- Peterson, Z. D., & Muehlenhard, C. L. (2004). Was it rape? The function of women's rape myth acceptance and definitions of sex in labeling their own experiences. *Sex Roles*, 51, 129–144. doi:10.1023/B:SERS.0000037758.95376.00.
- Phillips, L. M. (2000). *Flirting with danger: Young women's reflections on sexuality and domination*. New York: NYU Press.
- Reid, P. T., & Bing, V. M. (2000). Sexual roles of girls and women: An ethnocultural lifespan perspective. In C. B. Travis & J. W. White (Eds.), *Sexuality, society, and feminism* (pp. 141–166). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Ringrose, J., & Renold, E. (2012). Slut-shaming, girl power and "sexualisation": Thinking through the politics of the international SlutWalks with teen girls. *Gender and Education*, 24, 333–343. doi:10.1080/09540253.2011.645023.
- Rubin, G. S. (2011). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In G. S. Rubin (Ed.), *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin reader* (pp. 137–181). Durham: Duke University Press. (Original work published 1984).

- Sanday, P. R. (2007). *Fraternity gang rape: Sex, brotherhood, and privilege on campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Savani, K., Stephens, N. M., & Markus, H. R. (2011). The unanticipated interpersonal and societal consequences of choice: Victim blaming and reduced support for the public good. *Psychological Science*, 22, 795–802. doi:10.1177/0956797611407928.
- Schalet, A., Hunt, G., & Joe-Laidler, K. (2003). Respectability and autonomy: The articulation and meaning of sexuality among the girls in the gang. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32, 108–143. doi:10.1177/0891241602238940.
- Sharper, B. (2009). Bed, bitch, and beyond: Is no sex still sex-positive? [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/is-no-sex-still-sex-positive-2>.
- Smith, H. (2009). Abstinence, the “sexy” way. *Jezebel*. Retrieved from <http://jezebel.com/5333434/abstinence-the-sexy-way>.
- Stephens, D. P., & Phillips, L. D. (2003). Freaks, gold diggers, divas, and dykes: The sociohistorical development of adolescent African American women’s sexual scripts. *Sexuality and Culture*, 7, 3–49. doi:10.1007/BF03159848.
- Stringer, R. (2014). *Knowing victims: Feminism, agency and victim politics in neoliberal times*. New York: Routledge.
- Thomson, R. (2000). Dream on: The logic of sexual practice. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 3, 407–427. doi:10.1080/713684385.
- Thrift, S. C. (2014). #YesAllWomen as feminist meme event. *Feminist Media Studies*, 14, doi: 10.1080/14680777.2014.975421.
- Tiefer, L. (2004). *Sex is not a natural act and other essays* (2nd ed.). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Tolman, D. L. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tolman, D. L., & McClelland, S. I. (2011). Normative sexuality development in adolescence: A decade in review, 2000–2009. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21, 242–255. doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00726.x.
- Travis, C. B., Meginnis, K. L., & Bardari, K. M. (2000). Beauty, sexuality, and identity: The social control of women. In C. B. Travis & J. W. White (Eds.), *Sexuality, society, and feminism* (pp. 237–272). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Valenti, J. (2010). *The purity myth: How America’s obsession with virginity is hurting young women*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Wilke, J., & Saad, L. (2013). Older Americans’ moral attitudes changing: Moral acceptance of teenage sex among the biggest generational divides. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162881/older-americans-moral-attitudes-changing.aspx>.