

# The meaning of sexuality to the adolescent generation

[Psychology](#), [Child Development](#)



## Critical Essay

We have all been through that pivotal and transformative period of our lives where not only are our physical bodies maturing, but also our minds are as well. This stage of every person's life is called adolescence; occupying the ages between 11 and the mid 20's. It is the time between childhood and adulthood where people are reaching physical maturity but still lack complete social dependence, all the while gaining autonomy and individual identity. During this crucial stage of life, one might be discovering what their political stance is, what they want to do in their life, or what religion they want to practice. They may be experimenting with friendships, dating, and their sexuality. The world of careers and religion can be very diverse with many faiths and career paths to choose, but what about sexuality?

Sexuality is a person's sexual or romantic attraction towards others, in other words, how people identify themselves in relation to their sexuality. So, along with the diverse array of careers, religions, and friendships, can't the secretive world of human sexuality be just as diverse? It can be more than just a mere attraction between a man and a woman and in fact, it can be much more. Our understanding of human diversity with respect to sexuality can be found through social science studies on the social and cultural influences on adolescent behavior. These studies, such as Michael Moffatt's ethnography, *Coming of Age in New Jersey* and Amy Shalet's publication in *Contexts* called *sex, love, and autonomy in the teenage sleepover*, provide information on what causes the suppression of adolescent sexuality in from

various point of views in different areas of the world in order to gain a better understanding of the diversity of human sexuality.

In America today, we now know that sexuality branches off from the common heterosexual relationship because of the overwhelming support from the LGBTQ community for same sex marriage to be legalized in the United States. The social science studies on adolescent behavior help give us an understanding of the little known (at least in the United States) diversity of sexuality. Adolescents face many social interactions and cultural norms in America that influence ones sense of self and identity. According to the theory of the social self, people have multiple selves, or ideas of who they are. These various selves can be based on social identity such as gender, class, and race or can be based on various social roles such as a position in a social group (G. H. Mead 1934). Nonetheless, a person's sense of self can be influenced by a variety of reasons which holds especially true to adolescents who are in the process of determining who they are. An important theory to know when discussing sexuality is Goffman's performance theory which says that someone's perceived self in social situations is influenced by how they want to be perceived. Cultural norms, the common expectations in a social group, can inhibit someone from presenting themselves as who they really are (Goffman 1959) . This can become a significant barrier for people to face who don't recognize themselves to have a heterosexual sexuality because, maybe not so much now but in the past, it wasn't exactly socially accepted to have a different sexuality.

One social science study, an ethnography called *Coming of Age in New Jersey* by Michael Moffatt, helps us understand human diversity with respect to sexuality. The author, who is an anthropologist and a professor at Rutgers, conducted his research in the 1970's and through the 1980's by living in the Rutgers dorms and immersing himself in college life of typically middle class Caucasian students. Here, he conducts surveys, has conversations and interviews, and observes the adolescents he lives with in order to harness a greater understanding about adolescent behavior in college. We find out early on in his study that Moffatt was surprised by the "generally suppressed sexuality of the coed dorms" (Moffatt 1995: 9) as he says he never experienced this in his college years and he finds that sexuality is discussed only as close friends if at all (Moffat 1995: 9). However, he also argues through his observation that sexual fun could be said to be "the very core of college life" (Moffat 1995: 48), so if it is so important in college life, why is sexuality kept under the radar?

In order to learn more about adolescent sexuality and to have "honest sex talk" (Moffatt 1995: 183) which he would have difficulty obtaining because he was an adult and could not sit down with a student and talk sexuality, he decided to give an assignment to students in his sexual anthropology class to write an anonymous sexual self-report where he could gain inside information on the sexuality of students. Right off the bat, he finds that adolescent sexuality is heavily influenced by contemporary American popular culture, as well as parental values and religious upbringing. For example, Moffatt describes how sex is displayed in popular music, movies,

and magazines is due to the British critic Steven Heaths idea of a ' new sexual orthodoxy' in which Americans must celebrate sexuality and that it " must be important to one's sense of self" (Moffatt 1995: 195). All students' ideas about sexuality were located in this mass consumer culture which relates to the performance theory. Students may not be open about their sexuality because they are afraid of not fitting in with this consumer culture, and thus create a new version of them self which would not show the diversity of sexuality.

Knowing the causes of the suppression of adolescent sexuality allowed Moffatt to determine how to communicate with the adolescents in order to better understand their sexuality. Using the sexual self-reports that Moffatt received back from his students, Moffatt was able to identify and describe the diverse sexualities that college students at Rutgers may have. He describes neotraditionalists, romantic men, experimentalist women, liberals, sexual radicals, and nonheterosexuals (Moffatt 1995: 203-229). Moffatt goes on to describe these sexualities and give examples from his reports. Using the information he gained from his preliminary observations, Moffatt was able to find out how and why adolescent sexuality wasn't a well-known topic and he was able to find a way to learn about the diversity of adolescent sexuality and help increase our understanding of it.

Another social science study called sex, love, and autonomy in the teenage sleepover by Amy Shalet also helps increase understanding of human diversity with respect to sexuality. In this article, Shalet goes about explaining the differences between the level of acceptance of adolescent

sexuality in two different countries, the U. S. and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, she finds that parents allow teenagers of the opposite sex to sleepover with each other if they approve of who it is with, while in the U. S. it is generally not in the question to have mixed sex sleepovers. With the results she concluded from interviews with families from each nation she was able to help understand the diversity of sexuality. The information she gathers shows how to combat the suppression of sexuality and how to acknowledge the verity of adolescent sexuality (Shalet 2010: 19). Shalet finds that “ American adolescent sexuality has been dramatized” (Shalet 2010: 17) and this is what suppresses the diversity of sexuality. As teens in the U. S. adolescent sexuality has been opposed because of the threat of pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Americans, Shalet describes, “ emphasize [adolescent sexualities] dangerous and conflicted elements” (Shalet 2010: 20) which could, in conjunction with the performance theory, subject adolescents to create a self that is not allowing them to show their sexuality.

The Dutch on the other hand try to normalize and downplay adolescent sexuality so that they can grow up in a more accepting environment and won't feel the need to downplay their sexuality. They talk about sexuality as emerging from relationships and it is part of the growth of an adolescent. This allows parents to more easily communicate with their children about sexuality (Shalet 2010: 21). By showing what sexuality is like in two different, yet developed countries, our understanding of the human diversity in respect to sexuality is increased.

One more social study by Mohammad R. Mohammadi et al. looks to understand sexuality in Iran, a country much different than the U. S. and the Netherlands. Here, Iran's culture and religion do not allow premarital sex, so very little on the topic of sexuality is known among adolescents in this region of the world. In order to understand adolescent sexuality here, Mohammadi and his colleagues created a questionnaire with questions about their beliefs and knowledge about sexuality and were given males between the ages of 15 and 18. With the results gained from the questionnaires, they were able to find out that sexuality plays a part in Iranian lives as well especially if they have access to the internet and television. Many of the respondents believed that homosexuality was unacceptable and "the majority of adolescents believed that unmarried young men and women should not have sex" (Mohammadi et al. 2006: 39). This article helps to understand the reasons why sexuality is suppressed due to government and culture, and helps increase our understanding of human diversity.

All three of these social science studies help shed light on adolescent sexuality and help us understand human diversity. Moffatt's ethnography does an acceptable job showing how sexuality is hidden within American culture, and Mohammadi's does the same for Iran. This allows us to understand why adolescent sexuality is hard to understand in the first place. Shalet's article provides a way to combat the suppression of adolescent sexuality and provides ways to increase the acceptance of sexual diversity. The three social science studies provide information on adolescent sexuality from three different point of views, as well as from different areas of the

world including developed and undeveloped nations, which allows for a larger scope on human diversity. However, these studies did have their limitations. There is a generational gap between Moffatt and the students he is observing as well as students today, so there is a chance he wasn't able to understand everything that was going on with the adolescents of that time, and it might not correlate to today as well. Amy Shalet is very specific in her article and only interviews a couple people from the two nations. She could have provided the point of view from other nations and included more interviews from a larger variety of families from these locations. All in all, these social science studies successfully provide an understanding on human diversity in relation with sexuality.