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Intersectional Research Methods

10 May 2017

Research Proposal

Research Question

My research interests include adolescents' experiences with sex education and sociocultural influences on sex education curricula in the American South. From previous experience with sex education and current research, I realized that while there is a lot of sex education literature on the efficacy of different kinds of curricula, there are not many "subjective" works on adolescents' whole experiences with these curricula. This led me to the question, "what are the lived experiences of recent female-identifying high school graduates in regard to sex education in the American South?" I have chosen to focus on female-identifying students because I am interested in not only how gender influences sex education experiences, but also how gender has intersected with other systems of oppression in this context; accounting for intersectionality in other parts of my project's design, such as methodology, will support this lens of analysis. Women's studies provides a critical lens for this question in that my research subverts the idea that young people's, and especially young women's, lived realities are irrelevant from practical concerns about the efficacy of curricula.

Personal Statement

I became interested in sex education through my own experiences in middle and

high school, and this interest developed alongside my awareness of gender inequity. Having no formal sex education from school at any time compounded with my parents' lack of transparency caused me to feel that adults were nothing but silent on a significant and ubiquitous part of mine and my peers' lives. When I began volunteering with reproductive health organizations, I realized that not only did I have a right to honest and comprehensive information, but that I found human sexuality extremely interesting in and of itself. As I come to this research question about others' experiences with sex education during adolescence, I know I will be curious if other people have had backgrounds similar to mine, but I will have to be careful not to assume that others' experiences align with mine, nor that others would have responded to a similar set of circumstances the way I did.

While I realized that gendered oppression and the sex education I had access to were linked to my identity as a woman, I was not really conscious of other intersecting systems of oppression until I was learning from intersectional sex educators online and at reproductive rights organizations. Because I am white, I will need to put emphasis on investigating sex education-related research by scholars of color and about intersections between race and sex education throughout the literature review process. As a straight, cisgender woman, it will also be important to draw from studies that explicitly acknowledge queer and gender nonconforming students' experiences in the context of sex education. The quality of sex education students have access to will be related to quality of education and therefore class and socioeconomic level; because I come from a middle- to upper-class family, it will be important for me to consider the potential ramifications of these factors on students' experiences with sex education (and their interaction with other axes of oppression, such as race). In each of these spheres and in other areas I will need to be attentive to the intersectionality of research in the literature review stage,

draw from that information in preparing to interview, and listen closely during interviews with that previous research in mind in order to avoid imposing my perspective on interviewees' experiences.

During my involvement with reproductive rights-focused organizations, I learned about sex education legislation in the South and nationally, the content of sex education curricula, and how to facilitate sex education, particularly in a peer-to-peer context. Because I will be interviewing people in my age group for my project, this peer-to-peer relationship will offer a valuable framework to draw from. I have also been able to learn about reproductive justice from leaders in the field during my involvement; I will be able to draw from this background in researching about intersectional identities in the context of sex education. My knowledge of women's studies as a hopeful major will generally aid my research, but previous research I have conducted about sex education in women's studies classes and in high school will also help more specifically.

Literature Review

Many researchers have investigated the impact of sex education curricula on young people; while much of the literature focuses more on how different programs or types of programs are related to teens' sexual risk behaviors, some studies have attempted to bridge the gap between concrete curricula improvements and students' lived experiences with in-depth interviews and other qualitative methods (Helmer et. al. 2015, Maxwell 2006). For example, Maxwell researched young people in central England and their broad experiences with sex and relationships by conducting focus groups and in-depth interviews with fifty young adults and teenagers. She organized the results temporally in a past, present, and future framework to

contextualize young people's experiences on a timeline that could help educators frame more age-sensitive curricula (2006). Helmer et. al. conducted interviews, group discussions, and body-mapping sessions to investigate Australian students' experiences with sexuality and sex education, finding that the young people interviewed wanted earlier and more frequent sex education in mixed-gender settings, and they requested more information about topics such as what constitutes a healthy relationship and effective condom use (2015). Both of these studies are examples of qualitative, in-depth explorations of students' "subjective" experiences that connect more directly to tangible curricula improvements.

However, while there is significant value in seeking more concrete, curricula-applicable data, other researchers have noticed the importance of giving young people space to fully express their experience with sexuality and sex education, especially in recognizing how oppressive power dynamics in education and policy have shaped these experiences (Fine 2003, Garcia 2009, Pingel et. al. 2013). In a 2004 book discussing social justice-minded education reform, Michelle Fine addressed "the missing discourse of desire" (Fine 38) in US sex education, in part through interviewing girls from a New York City public high school about their perspectives on sexuality. Instead of just delineating topics that educators should cover better, Fine investigated how "silencing a discourse of desire buttresses the icon of woman-as-victim" (56), unearthing systemic misogyny in sex education policy in arguing that curricula erases any discussion of female sexual desire, which inevitably also erases female sexual autonomy. Fine's approach in seeking students' lived experiences exemplifies the women's studies framework, as opposed to other research that leans more heavily on public health or educational studies, because Fine explicitly uses gender as an analytic.

Other researchers have investigated young people's lived experiences with sex education

through intersectional lenses. Pingel et. al. sought the perspectives of young gay, bisexual, and questioning men, revealing that interviewees desired normalized representations of gay relationships, frank discussion of anal sex, and for mental health to be addressed more thoroughly. These concrete ways to improve curricula connect to wider themes of heteronormativity in policy. Similarly, García interviewed forty Latina teens at the average age of sixteen from the Chicago area, finding that intersections of racism, heteronormativity, and sexism “construct girls as ‘at risk’” (García 2009). This representation as “at risk” is particularly striking when it is considered that white, middle- or upper-class youth are instead “perceived as in need of intervention to guide them through their ‘normally abnormal’ hormone-besieged adolescence” (García 2009). Explicit analysis of class, race, gender, and sexuality help García move away from making surface improvements to curricula to identifying structures that systemically hold students back, and importantly, detrimentally affect the teens’ lived experiences with sex education.

Although studies such as these often avoid simultaneously considering both students’ formal sex education and their parents’ influence over sexual attitudes to focus on one variable, it is worthwhile to examine how sex educators, family, and peers can contribute to social constructs about sexuality and to young people’s knowledge of sex. For example, Wisneski et. al. investigated the role of families and friends in how young women learned about reproduction, as well as how these relationships influenced their behavior (2015). They found it was very important for parents in particular to convey a sense of “non-judgment” in these conversations, and rather than knowledge of contraception causing teens to be sexually active earlier, parents’ “expectations of their teens may become self-fulfilling prophecies” (2015) whether or not contraceptives are endorsed. While not directly related to sex education programming, Teitelman

also conducted interviews with young women about their menarche experiences, finding that girls responded more positively to menarche when the event was associated with “girls’ wider potentials” (2004) such as intelligence or beauty, instead of their sexual and reproductive maturation specifically. Sex education curricula often overlooks parental and other social influences in addressing how students learn about and conceptualize sexuality.

Such analyses are extremely important to understanding how oppressive structures in sex education and in social environments can inform students’ lived experiences with sex and sexuality. While these studies investigate young people’s experiences in an array of different locations, little research has focused on how the region in which students receive their sex education can influence their experiences. The American South is colloquially known as the “Bible Belt” due to the prevalence of socially conservative Evangelical Protestantism in this region, where most of the sex education standards stress abstinence and the “negative outcomes of teen sex” (Guttmacher 2017); they also do not require discussion of contraceptives, and of the four states that mandate negative discussion of non-heterosexual orientations, three hail from this region (2017). Many studies have investigated the effects of abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education curricula on risk behavior in teens, and statistical evidence from CDC research shows that these states have higher rates of teen pregnancy (Martin et. al. 2015) and are ranked among the highest for gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis transmission (“National Center” 2015). Because of the prevalence of social conservatism, including more conservative sexual attitudes, abstinence-centered educational policy, and high sexual risk behaviors in this region, it is important to examine how these factors could shape teens’ lived experiences with sex education.

My intervention draws from these sources in that I will also be using an in-depth

interview method. Although I did not find ethnographic or interview-based studies of sex education in this region, many of the papers still identified specific practices that have influenced how I conceptualize my own methodology. For example, García (2009) recruited participants by asking for Latina youth who were sexuality active and practicing safe sex, but she asked them to identify with these qualities as they had meaning to the girls, rather than hers or someone else's definition. I had considered only asking for participants who had specifically experienced formal sex education in schools, but in part due to reading García's research, I will instead recruit by asking for participants' self-defined perception of sex education, since learning about sex and sexuality in the South extends beyond the health classroom. While I will draw from these studies in these and other ways, my intervention is distinct from previous research in that it seeks sex education experience in the context of regional social and political norms.

Methods

When I originally posed my research question, I framed my inquiry with an intervention in mind, which was conducting in-depth, unstructured interviews in order to allow interviewee's lived experiences to emerge. To answer the question, "what is the lived experience of female-identifying recent high school graduates in regard to sex education in the American South?" through in-depth interviewing, I would first have to address how to recruit participants. If funding was not an issue, I would advertise at higher education institutions across the region for female-identifying participants age eighteen to twenty who are willing to be interviewed about their experiences with sex education and who had those experiences in the American South, defining what states include the South but not what constitutes "sex education experiences."

I would contact the sociology, education, or women's studies departments at community

colleges and public universities in each state, given that students at these types of institutions are more likely to have experienced their sex education in the region where the school is. Such schools are also more likely to be accessible to students of low economic status than private institutions. I would reach out to these departments because they would be more likely to support my research, but I would have to be careful in communicating that the whole campus should be advertised to, not just students in the departments; one way to do this would be to provide flyers with contact information to be put up in buildings such as the student center. To choose which universities and colleges I would contact, I would evaluate the demographic makeup of schools in comparison to the area around them and seek to broadly cover the state's regions. For example, in Tennessee I might contact Southwest Tennessee Community College, Middle Tennessee State University, and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, with the recognition that I would be over-recruiting in the hopes of getting more than one or two students from each state. Ideally, I would be able to travel to conduct interviews face-to-face, but I could also Skype interviewees. If I could conduct interviews in person I would ask students what space is comfortable and convenient for them, offering to pay for food or coffee for their participation. I do not know how many interviews I would need to conduct to achieve saturation, but it will be important for me to decide that I have collected a reasonable amount of data not only when interviewees repeat similar experiences but when different regions of the South are fairly represented by the participants.

To guide interviews, it would be important to avoid closed-ended questions because the goal of my research is "exploratory data gathering and in-depth understanding" (Hesse-Biber 188). As Hesse-Biber recommends, I would develop a "domains of inquiry" list, informed by the literature, but broad enough to allow the interviewee to disclose what they feel is important to

talk about. It would be particularly important to avoid developing a linear agenda of questions to be able to respond to participants fully, probing for more information where needed but not becoming preoccupied with what question to ask next; my goal would be to talk as little as possible, not only to give interviewees the floor, but because if I am not careful my own strong feelings about this topic could emerge, influencing participants' perspectives. Some of the "domains of inquiry" I would develop might include conceptualizing one's own sexuality, formal sex education, parents and sex education, or how peers talk about sex. I would try to avoid setting a specific time frame for each interview, letting participants talk until they feel satisfied with how their experiences have been conveyed, but I tentatively expect interviews will probably take between sixty and eighty minutes. I would take notes by hand as well as record interviews, transcribing each conversation soon after while it is fresh on my mind. Exchanging contact information with participants if they consent to it would allow them to contact me if they remember something else significant they feel I need to know, while I could reach out to them to clarify any questions I have about what they meant during the analysis and transcription process.

One ethical problem that I encountered is that the most accurate age group to target would be students who are still in high school, currently experiencing and responding to sex education curricula. Minors would ethically need parental permission, but only the parents who are the most open about sex education would be willing to participate, which would inevitably skew the sample. However, people who are very far out of high school might have been significantly influenced by their college experiences and remember less about being in high school. Although even students who are first years or sophomores in college will have a different perspective on sex education than high schoolers, it is my hope that aiming to interview eighteen- to twenty-year-olds will allow for students to have total decision making power

themselves over whether to participate, while still minimizing the degree to which I compromise the validity of the results.

Another potential ethical issue could be that experiences surrounding sex education could be distressing for students to reflect upon. I cannot anticipate every issue that could come up in interviews, but because the entire premise of my research is that students' sex education can affect their lived realities, narratives could include topics such as bullying, homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexual assault, mental illness, domestic abuse, intimate partner violence, or other traumatizing experiences. In anticipation of the possibility of such discussion being triggering or otherwise distressing for participants, it will be essential for me to be prepared emotionally for these topics to come up and to familiarize myself with relevant resources in the areas in which I am interviewing so I can be informed about handling such a situation with the wellbeing of the participants in mind. While I will not explicitly ask students if they have had these experiences in my domains of inquiry, I will need to put a disclaimer that such topics could come up in the consent form.

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