Sexuality Development in Adolescence and Beyond

Commentary on Arbeit

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In her article on adolescent sexuality development, Miriam Arbeit [this issue] conceptualizes adolescent sexuality as a realm of desire, pleasure, and social development, raising issues of negotiation, empowerment, ethics, and identity. This is quite different from the standard approach that classifies adolescent sexuality as a type of “risk taking” and then explains it in terms of a special adolescent tendency to take irrational and pointless risks, which is, in turn, explained by alleged deficits of the immature adolescent brain. Thus, Arbeit redirects the literature in a more scientifically productive direction. Others have provided important critiques of the literature on adolescent sexuality and pregnancy [Macleod, 2011; Males, 2010], but no one to my knowledge has so insightfully integrated research and theory regarding adolescence, sexuality, and developmental processes.

In this commentary, I pursue further questions concerning just what is developmental in adolescent sexual development and how a relational developmental systems approach broadens our conception of development and enables us to identify developmental change beyond childhood. I then consider issues of promoting sexuality development in secondary and higher education.

Developmental Change

At the biological level of anatomy and physiology, children are deemed sexually mature when they become capable of reproduction, which marks the transition to adolescence. The mature stage emerges after a succession of earlier stages of sexual development. Developmental changes are age-related and endogenous due to strong direction by the human genome. Such changes are construed as a universal series of anatomical structures and physiological competencies leading to a universal state of

biological maturity – with due consideration of sex differences, need for nutritional and other environmental support, and individual variations. This is the standard stage model.

At the psychological level of behavior and cognition, standard stage models fit child development to a substantial degree, especially in the early years. In domains ranging from language to reasoning to social cognition, we can identify universal sequences leading to universally achieved states of maturity and can readily supply typical ages of achievement. Development beyond childhood, however, is quite different. There are no biological or psychological milestones universally achieved over the course of the teen years, nor is there biological or psychological evidence for a state of maturity universal among individuals in their twenties but rarely seen among those in their early teens [Moshman, 2011, 2013, 2015]. People continue to change beyond childhood, but they do not change in ways that fit the standard stage model. If that model defines what we mean by development, then development is a phenomenon of childhood.

Psychological changes beyond childhood, however, often seem developmental in some broad sense, even if not in the stringent sense of stage progression to maturity. Changes in cognition, morality, and identity over the course of adolescence and early adulthood often have a developmental flavor even if they are far from universal, occur at widely varying ages, and are more associated with experience than with genes. In sexuality, as in other matters, the changes that strike us as developmental are those that are extended (even if not tied to age), self-regulated (even if not directed by genes), qualitative (even if not broadly structural), and progressive (even if not culminating in a universal state of maturity). A broader definition of development seems to be required to recognize the developmental potential of adolescence and adulthood.

With that in mind, development may be defined as change that is extended, self-regulated, qualitative, and progressive [Moshman, 2011]. To say development is *extended* is to say that it takes place over time. This is less stringent than the standard expectation that developmental milestones are achieved at specifiable ages or at least within relatively narrow age ranges. To say development is *self-regulated* is to say that it is not simply caused by the environment. This is less stringent than a maturational conception of development as largely directed by genes (at least within any normal human environment) in a universal and predictable direction. To say development is *qualitative* is to require some sort of novelty, rather than more of the same. This is less stringent than to insist on broad-ranging structural transformation. Finally, to say development is *progressive* is to reserve the term for changes that represent progress. This is less stringent than a requirement that change leads inexorably to a universal state of maturity in order to qualify as developmental. Sexuality development in adolescence does not fit the standard stage model but is, nonetheless, developmental in the broader sense of meeting all four of these criteria.

Relational Developmental Systems

Relational developmental systems, the basis for Arbeit's approach, is a metatheory intended to enrich and broaden our conception of development. Its focus on self-regulation in social context means that it generally sees genes as part of a much larg-

er context, rather than as directors of development, and sees development as highly variable and flexible, rather than a succession of stages leading to a universal outcome. Such a perspective reminds us that, even in childhood, a focus on universal age-related stages of development is a substantial simplification of a complex and subtle process. For understanding development beyond childhood, a relational developmental systems perspective seems particularly crucial.

But is such a perspective really developmental? Relational systems may change over extended periods of time in ways that are self-regulated and qualitative – part of what it means to be developmental. For a relational systems theory to be genuinely developmental, however, also requires some specification of progress.

Dynamic skill theory, it appears to me, adds precisely this focus on progress to Arbeit's analysis. Having a skill is importantly different from just having a tendency to behave in some way under some circumstance. Getting a new behavioral tendency, which changes us for better or worse (or both), is not necessarily development. Dynamic skill theory, however, construes skills as capacities and enables us to recognize developmental progress in the coordinated deployment of various sexual skills. Thus, it enables us to identify genuine development in adolescence and beyond, even if there is no such thing as a universally shared mature sexuality that emerges in adulthood.

Development beyond childhood is most commonly seen in adolescence and early adulthood. There is no endpoint, however, and no reason to doubt that development remains possible through most or all of adulthood. This is true in general and true for sexuality. But even as we acknowledge the potential for developmental change beyond childhood, we must keep in mind the difference between child development and later development. Development beyond childhood extends over years but is not tied to age; it is self-regulated by selves that interact with other selves within complex social systems, not directed by the shared human genome; it is qualitative but not necessarily structural; and it makes progress without achieving any universal final state. Development in this broad sense is common in adolescents and young adults and remains possible throughout adulthood.

Promoting Adolescent Sexuality Development

Not many adults think we should promote adolescent sexuality. Isn't there already more than enough teen sex? If anything, the standard approach is to expect adolescents to suppress their sexuality as much as possible until as close to adulthood as possible. The current panic over teen sexuality and pregnancy, however, is deeply ideological [Macleod, 2011; Males, 2010]. It is also contrary to psychological and historical evidence that teenagers are capable of functioning at adult levels and have been expected to do so in most societies for most of human history [Moshman, 2011, 2013]. Even in their early teens, youth have traditionally and justifiably been considered young adults. Romeo's Juliet, for example, was just 13 years old. And in Shakespeare's time, there was nothing unusual about that.

Without making an issue of all this, Arbeit simply takes it for granted that adolescents are no less sexual than adults, that they can develop sexual skills, and that we can promote the development of such skills. One obvious place for promoting adolescent sexuality development, one might expect, would be secondary education. Sex

education in the United States, however, is subject to ongoing political pressures and, as a consequence, is very limited in scope [Moshman, 2009]. Often it consists of little more than advocacy for sexual abstinence until marriage. Many school districts, following the advice of sexuality educators, provide “comprehensive” sex education, which explains the virtues of abstinence but also includes information about contraception. But even so-called “comprehensive” sex education, notes Arbeit, “almost invariably omits the negotiation of pleasure.”

Curriculum in all areas, including sexuality, would ideally be determined by teachers and other experts, not by administrators, school board members, legislators, or the public at large. This should include experts on adolescent sexuality development; in addition to imparting information, secondary schools can and should contribute to sexuality development. At the very least, schools need an environment of intellectual freedom for teachers and students where administrators see it as their role to protect teaching, learning, and inquiry about sexuality (and everything else) from external pressures. Such respect for intellectual freedom is generally lacking in secondary education, however, especially in connection with sexuality [Moshman, 2009].

Promoting Sexuality Development beyond Adolescence

There is no fundamental difference between adolescents and adults with regard to sexuality development. Development potentially continues long beyond adolescence and can be promoted through education regardless of age [Moshman, 2011, 2013, 2015]. Colleges and universities, however, differ in many ways from secondary schools and face challenges of their own. As I write this commentary in August 2014, there is a national outcry in the United States about sexual assault on college campuses. Both the U.S. Congress and the federal Department of Education are considering new requirements regarding campus tribunals and associated procedures.

The national debate involves issues of consent, agency, and victimhood that are central to Arbeit’s model. Arbeit defines consent as “the skill through which two people work together to determine how their collaborative intentions can inform coercion.” Consent skills enable the exercise of moral autonomy and show “recognition of and respect for the humanity and moral autonomy of others ... Giving and getting clear consent throughout a sexual encounter is an expression of mutual respect for the other’s selfhood and agency and is thus central to the concept of sexual negotiation.” Consent is a matter of ongoing negotiation between individuals developing their sexual skills.

Consistent with this, Arbeit rejects any sharp distinction between agents and victims. As she puts it, “agency signifies a skillset that can explicitly co-exist with the experience of victimization.” We are all agents, to some degree, even when our agency is unfairly restricted. Whatever our circumstances, we make choices about what to do.

For anyone concerned with promoting developmental progress in sexuality, these are important insights about sexual behavior and psychological development. Arbeit’s analysis seems much too subtle, however, to address charges of rape. In a legal context, when a person is accused of sexual assault, a clear distinction is made between the alleged perpetrator, who is charged with being the responsible agent, and

the apparent victim, who denies responsibility by virtue of not having given consent. Consent, in this context, is either present or absent. If there was consent, then no crime has been committed. If not, then there has been a sexual assault, in which case a clear distinction must be made between the perpetrator of that assault and the victim. In the case of sexual assault, subtle questions about the actual or potential agency of the victim – could she have altered the sexual dynamic by wearing different clothes or behaving differently? – are rightly dismissed as unfairly blaming the victim for the behavior of the perpetrator.

Sexual assaults are normally adjudicated in court; criminal justice includes the responsibility of determining whether the accused is guilty. The responsibility of colleges and universities, in contrast, is to educate about sexuality and promote sexuality development for all. With regard to federal law, a strong case can be made that colleges and universities should be required to assist students in reporting sexual assaults to the police and should be required to maintain and report accurate statistics concerning sexual assaults on campus. The more controversial question is whether they should also be required to address sexual assaults through their own quasijudicial processes, which more typically address plagiarism and other noncriminal offenses. The federal government insists that colleges investigate and adjudicate rapes on campus and increasingly specifies exactly how this should be done. Many have questioned the competence of colleges to do this. The present model reminds us that there is also a question of how to reconcile such responsibilities with the responsibility to educate and promote development.

Arbeit's model cannot tell us what to do. It does, however, seem indispensable in addressing questions like these. At the very least, it directs our attention to the potential developmental consequences of various educational, legal, and social policies and practices. Beyond that, it provides a framework and conceptualization within which arguments can be made and better solutions found.

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