The Role of Masturbation in Healthy Sexual Development: Perceptions of Young Adults

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Abstract
Despite efforts to identify masturbation as a strategy to improve sexual health, promote relational intimacy, and reduce unwanted pregnancy, STIs, and HIV transmission, masturbation as a context for healthy sexual development has been met with silence or trepidation in the scientific and educational communities. Relegated to the realm of commercial media, rather than rational discourse in families, schools, and the general public, young people receive mixed messages about this non-reproductive sexual behavior. In order to explore how young adults have learned about masturbation and currently perceive masturbation, we conducted a grounded theory study of 72 college students (56 females; 16 males) enrolled in a human sexuality class. Findings revealed that a young adult’s perceptions of and feelings toward masturbation were the result of a developmental process that included: (1) learning about the act of masturbation and how to do it, (2) learning and internalizing the social contradiction of stigma and taboo surrounding this pleasurable act, and (3) coming to terms with this tension between stigma and pleasure. Although nearly all participants learned about masturbation through the media and peers (not parents or teachers), gender was salient in coming to terms with this contradiction. Most of the women reported either still struggling with the contradiction or accepting it as normal. Most of the men recognized the beneficial aspects for healthy sexual development that result from masturbation. Both male and female participants identified differential sexual scripts as contributing to the double standard.

Keywords
Health · Masturbation · Sexual development · Sexual health · Young adults

Introduction

Sexual health research generally focuses on high-risk sexual behaviors for pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (Gavin et al., 2009; Monasterio, Hwang, & Shafer, 2007), but research examining other common sexual activities, such as masturbation, is rare. We have yet to determine the influence of masturbation on early sexual development and on one’s capacity for healthy sexual relationships later in life (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009). Furthermore, major changes in gender relations and a more sexualized media may be altering how young adults view masturbation. The current study examined how young men and women were socialized to understand masturbation, how that socialization differed by gender, and how that has influenced their attitudes and sexual development.

Young people today develop an understanding of masturbation during a unique time in history. There is a tug of war to control the meaning of masturbation, causing a potential disruption in the historical stigma surrounding it. Certainly, many of the severe “medical therapies” of the past have been abandoned (Laqueur, 2003). However, masturbation is still a dangerous topic for politicians and researchers to address, as the general public still considers masturbation to be a sensitive and uncomfortable topic to discuss (Tiefer, 1998). The topic has even cost people their careers, as illustrated by the U.S. Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders being asked to step down after a 1994 speech in which she suggested that masturbation might be something that we should teach in sexual education (Coleman, 2002; Greenberg, 1994; Money, 1995). Because masturbation has no reproductive goal, it can be seen as unnatural, and the stigma that surrounds masturbation continues to prevent rational...
discourse, which supports the continuation of silence and myths (Lidster & Horsburgh, 1994; Money, 1995). This silence may have a profound impact on the sexual health and development of young people.

Sexual Health, Development, and Masturbation

Health professionals have had a substantial role in shaping public opinion about masturbation. In the Eighteenth century, masturbation was medicalized as a disease that could lead to insanity and other serious health consequences (Laquèr, 2003; Christensen, 1995). The myths regarding the destructive consequences of masturbation to mental and physical health were well-entrenched in developmental research and theory up through the early 1900s (Arnett, 2006). More recently, sexual health researchers have retreated from this blunt condemnation of masturbation and some have even examined whether masturbation might have beneficial outcomes (Coleman, 2002; McCormick, 1994).

Sex positive theorists have hoped to find evidence that masturbation could be a tool in reducing unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. However, the role of masturbation in sexual health appears to be more complex than a simple substitute for risky sexual activity. Evidence indicates that people who report masturbating actually report increased engagement with other sexual activities, including risky activities, such as having multiple partners (Gerressu, Mercer, Graham, Wellings, & Johnson, 2008; Robinson, Bockting, & Harrell, 2003). In contrast, among virgins, mutual masturbation is more common than, and may substitute for, other more risky non-vaginal sexual acts, such as fellatio or anal intercourse (Schuster, Bell, & Kanou, 1996). So, although sexual risk takers may be more likely or more willing to report masturbation, less experienced couples may also be using masturbation in ways that are hard to detect in large-scale surveys that treat masturbation as a main effect predictor without considering possible moderation by context. Furthermore, it is difficult to predict whether masturbation might serve as a more effective substitute for risky behavior if the associated stigma was reduced.

Beyond acting as a substitute for riskier sex acts, masturba
tion may have other positive impacts on healthy sexual development. For example, masturbation may promote a positive body image for some women (Shulman & Horne, 2003). Conversely, masturbation guilt is associated with negative contraceptive attitudes and may inhibit a woman’s comfort in dealing with her own genitals (Mosher & Vonderheide, 1985).

Although masturbation is often a solitary act, it has the power to influence intimacy with others (Coleman, 2002). If stigma has produced intense feelings of shame or guilt, it can cause feelings of alienation from the community and conflicts in relationships as well as problems with self-esteem and sexual identity. Alternatively, masturbation may lead not only to a person learning about their own sexual response and pleasure but also to a sense of autonomy and bodily integrity that may improve a person’s self-esteem and sense of identity. In this way, masturbation might contribute to positive intimacy experiences and improved sexual satisfaction and health (Coleman, 2002).

Some sexologists have called for efforts to actively promote masturbation as an important component of an overall strategy to improve sexual health (Coleman, 2002). Masturbation has been recommended by sexologists as a way for women to learn about their bodies and preferences, improve their body image, and improve their familiarity with their genitalia (McCormick, 1994). While large-scale promotion of masturbation has certainly not entered the mainstream of sexuality education, the use of prescribed masturbation in sexual therapy is not uncommon (Christensen, 1995). Sexual therapists have used masturbation to increase a person’s understanding of their own sexual response. Masturbation has been used with some success in the treatment of various sexual dysfunctions (Coleman, 2002) and masturbation has also been recommended for treating premature ejaculation among men (Tiefer, 1998). Psychologists have argued that, despite the controversy, masturbation is such a common and formative part of the sexual experiences of most adults that it should not be ignored in research and practice (Coleman, 2002).

Sexologists have tried to “normalize” masturbation by disputing myths or negative attitudes. More recently, sexologists have also tried to promote the pleasure and joy people feel during masturbation (Coleman, 2002). However, despite the rhetoric of normalcy that characterizes more recent sex research, sexologists should not be complacent about the lack of understanding of masturbation and the lack of support for research about masturbation, both within the sexual health fields and the general public (Tiefer, 1998). It can be difficult, even in in-depth research, to avoid oversimplifying masturbation and to recognize it as a complex set of sexual behaviors and social constructs (Tiefer, 1998).

Establishing Prevalence

Masturbation is difficult to study because of the extreme sensitivity of participants to questions on the topic. Masturbation makes potential study participants very uneasy, and polygraph tests have indicated that masturbation is one of the least accurately reported sexual behaviors (Bradburn, Sudman, Blair, & Stocking, 1978; Clark & Tifft, 1966; Halpern, Udry, Suchindran, & Campbell, 2000). Feelings of guilt about masturbation are common (Gagnon, Simon, & Berger, 1970; Halpern et al., 2000) and reports are influenced by perceived social norms (Pinkerton, Bogart, Cecil, & Abramson, 2002). Although exact prevalence numbers are hard to establish, we do know that masturbation is an extremely widespread human experience. Recent findings from the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior indicate that, among 20 to 24-year-olds, 92% of men and 77% of women have masturbated (Herbenick et al., 2010).
Young adults may be more willing to report masturbation retrospectively compared to teenagers who are asked to report whether they currently masturbate (Coles & Stokes, 1985; Halpern et al., 2000). This makes masturbation fundamentally different from other types of sexual activity, which often exhibit the opposite characteristic of being reported more by teenagers than retrospectively by adults (Halpern et al., 2000). It may be that masturbation elicits greater feelings of anxiety and guilt among adolescents (Coles & Stokes, 1985). Further research is needed regarding how masturbation fits into the developmental tasks of establishing healthy sexual autonomy and sexual intimacy (Coleman, 2002).

Gender Differences

Men are more likely to have ever masturbated and masturbate more frequently compared to women (Gerressu et al., 2008; Janus & Janus, 1993; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Leitenberg, Detzer, & Srebnik, 1993; Pinkerton et al., 2002). Although small gender differences in reports of various sexual behaviors is common, a meta-analysis found that, compared to 30 other sexual activities and attitudes, the largest gender differences were found in the incidences of masturbation and pornography use (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). These gender differences in masturbation have been attributed to anatomy to some extent, but there is a social aspect as well (Coleman, 2002).

Men have greater allowances to pursue pleasure and tend to have more permissive attitudes toward sex in general (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Traditional gendered sexuality scripts usually leave initiation and pleasure seeking to men, while women tend to have more passive or gate-keeping roles (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Such sexual scripts and gender ideologies emerge from a culture in which vaginal intercourse is emphasized, women are taught to be caretakers, women’s pleasure is considered incidental, women’s genitalia are often considered dirty or unclean compared to men’s, and women tend to lack substantial knowledge about their own body (Breen, 1993; Douglas, 1966; Schwartz, 2007; Wade, Kremer, & Brown, 2005). Such views and tendencies can have consequences for women’s body image, feeling comfortable with one’s own body, and experiencing sexual pleasure (Wade et al., 2005). These scripts may contribute to women holding more ambivalent attitudes toward masturbation. One study of interviews with 20 girls found that many held negative views not only of masturbation itself but also of women who masturbated (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009).

The gender of a child also appears to shape parental attitudes toward masturbation. For example, one study asked parents whether they wanted their child to have a positive attitude toward masturbation and found that, of mothers and fathers of sons, just under half said they did. However, only a third of parents of daughters wanted their daughters to have a positive attitude towards masturbation (Gagnon, 1985). Very few parents had discussed masturbation with their children and it was more common for parents to discuss the topic with boys. It was noted that because it was not talked about much, even if the parents did approve of their child masturbating, the child was not likely to know about it (Gagnon, 1985). Additional research is needed to more fully understand how gender, family, and social context may influence sexual development and attitudes towards masturbation.

Research Questions

In order to explore how young adults have learned about masturbation and how they currently perceive masturbation, this study was guided by three research questions: (1) From whom, and in what ways, did participants learn about masturbation? (2) What perceptions did participants report knowing and feeling about masturbation? and (3) How did participants perceive that their ideas have changed over time?

Method

Participants

The data for this study consisted of 72 narratives from 56 female and 16 male undergraduate students at a public university in the Southeastern United States. Participants were 18–24 year olds enrolled in a human sexuality class with a focus on global issues. To preserve anonymity, students were only asked to identify themselves by gender and age.

The narratives were gathered from three classes taught by the two authors enrolling an average of 160 students per semester (range of 75–250 per class), over a 2-year duration. On average, 65% of the students in the classes were women and 35% were men. With the exception of gender, course enrollment patterns coincided with undergraduate university enrollment as a whole, where students’ self-identification of race/ethnicity is reported to be 72% White, 7% Asian, 4% African American, 2% Hispanic, 2% international, less than 1% Native American, and 12% unknown.

Procedure

The data consisted of written narratives completed as a voluntary extra credit assignment designed to give students an opportunity to reflect on a class topic. Extra credit was given to each student who chose to submit a one-page, single-spaced (approximately 650 word) narrative reflecting upon their choice of topic, regardless of whether they agreed to include their narrative in the study pool. Their opinions were not graded. Students were asked to write in the first person and draw from their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in relation to the topic. In this analysis, we examined narrative responses to the question, “What were you taught about masturbation as a child, and from
whom?” Students were also asked to describe how their knowledge, experience, and feelings about masturbation have changed over time.

After the narratives were collected, the papers were separated by gender, and identifying information was removed by a research assistant. Participant quotations reported in the Results section are identified by pseudonyms. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the university Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis Process

We conducted a grounded theory analysis through multiple readings of the 72 written narratives using sensitizing concepts from a behavioral health perspective. Through the comparative process, we sought to identify general patterns and specific themes evident in the students’ perceptions of their own lives and to make analytic distinctions in the data through three levels of analytic process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

During open coding, our first level of analysis, both authors read the narratives multiple times, conceptualizing the language and content of each line of every narrative. We attended to specific words, sentences, and paragraphs, and the nature of the narrative as a whole text (Charmaz, 2006). We shared analytic accounts of our own perceptions of what and from whom the young men and women learned about masturbation, how they learned it, how they described their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in relation to what they learned, and how they reported their attitudes about masturbation changing as they became young adults. We noted both commonalities (e.g., families did not directly discuss masturbation) and unique histories (e.g., access to a mother’s medical books). After all of the independent codings and analytic memos were reviewed, we compared and discussed our preliminary findings and iteratively returned to the data to check our findings to merge and refine codes and emergent categories until we agreed upon our initial coding scheme.

During axial coding, the second level of analysis, we examined each of the emergent categories and the subcodes that comprised each primary category. We repeatedly returned to the axial coding process as we applied the coding scheme to the original data, and we continued to develop the categories and revise the coding. We ultimately converged on three major categories and a series of subcodes that provided the framework for our “Results” section. We produced extensive memos on theoretical and operational issues as we applied codes, reorganized major themes, and discussed inconsistencies. Through this constant comparative and reflective analysis, we reached full consensus on the final coding scheme (Charmaz, 2006).

During selective coding, the final phase of the grounded theory procedure, we determined the central story line underlying the new synthesis of the data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this story line, a young adult’s perceptions of and feelings toward masturbation were the result of a developmental process that included: (1) learning about the act of masturbation and how to do it, (2) learning and internalizing the social contradiction of stigma and taboo surrounding this pleasurable act, and (3) coming to terms with this tension between stigma and pleasure. Some individuals did not come to terms with this contradiction. For others, this last component involved normalizing and accepting masturbation and, for a third group, the process went a step further to recognizing the beneficial aspects for healthy sexual development that resulted from masturbation. The progress of an individual through this developmental process was influenced by learning contexts (family, school, peers, etc.). Gender also had a strong influence over the pace and manner through which an individual progressed through this process. Gender, learning contexts, and the developmental process all interacted to form the participant’s overall discourse and perceptions toward masturbation.

Results

Our results are presented using the framework of the three major themes that were elaborated in the coding scheme: (1) Social contexts for learning about masturbation; (2) The process of learning the contradiction that masturbation is a “bad pleasure”; and (3) Current discourses about masturbation.

Social Contexts for Learning About Masturbation

Social contexts at every level, from partnerships and families to schools and the national media, have been examined as predictors of a wide variety of sexual behaviors in the social science literature and deserve specific attention for us to better understand socialization contexts for masturbation. While most participants discussed their families, the family context was considered a place of silence or implied stigma. After noting the lack of information on masturbation coming from families, participants went on to describe a variety of other contexts and sources of information, including peers, schools, romantic partners, the media, and sex toys.

Silent Families

Nearly every participant reported that they had not talked to parents about masturbation. For example, Curtis stated: “When I was growing up, I was taught nothing about masturbation. My parents didn’t mention anything about it.” Even participants who had very open relationships with their parents expressed surprise when, upon reflection, they realized the topic of masturbation had never come up.

When it comes to sexuality, my mom was open to discussing anything I had questions about…. However, for some
reason, I missed ever learning about masturbation, hearing about masturbation, or being in any discussions about masturbation. (Nancy)

The silence on this topic communicated without words a sense of disapproval to the participants, as Ally’s comment revealed: “The facial expressions my mother used to make in relation to the concept of masturbation was all I needed to see to make me believe that masturbation was not ok.” Henry stated it this way:

As a child, I was never taught about masturbation by my parents. I do not think they would have been very open to the subject matter. Sex education when I lived with my parents dealt more with not having sex more than anything else. And I would assume that they would think that masturbation should not be done as well.

Family religion was referred to explicitly by many participants (4 of the 16 males and 21 of the 56 females) when they discussed family influences. Religion often served as a framework for family instruction about sexuality in general. Lara explained that Christianity shaped her views on sexuality overall: “I grew up in a very Christian household, and I thought sex and sexual play was shameful before marriage. I thought all forms of sexual experience was dirty and frowned upon.” Barb also described religious influences on her approach to sexuality and therefore to masturbation, saying:

Sexuality in any sense was considered a very inappropriate subject in the Mormon religion so nobody ever wanted to talk about it…. Masturbation a lot of the times made me feel guilty, because I was taught to associate sex with sin until you are married.

Only a few participants explicitly mentioned their family’s ethnic background to help explain family dynamics and silence on masturbation topics. Jared said, “I was not taught anything by my parents about masturbation, as we never really talked about anything to do with sex, which is typical for Asian families.” However, it was not only minority groups who explained their family’s silence based on their racial or ethnic identification. Mary stated, “I think my family was like most white, middle-class families in the area concerning sexual communication or lack thereof.” Overall, families did not discuss masturbation regardless of how they identified ethnically, and participants thought that was typical for their respective groups.

Participants who described how they might handle being parents endorsed a more open approach to communication about masturbation than what they experienced in their families of origin. Lester predicted, “When I grow up, I will definitely have discussions with my children about it and make them well-rounded on the topic. It will be a very relaxed household and open to discussion about anything.” Cindy agreed with this sentiment: “I think that when, and if, I have any children, I will try to talk to them about sexuality and masturbation.

Also, I will definitely not punish it or imply that it is something bad or wrong.”

**Peers (Teaching and Being Taught)**

Many participants whose parents would not discuss masturbation turned to peers for information. For example, Bert stated “As a child, very little is ever explained with respect to masturbating; in no sex ed class is it ever so much as mentioned, rarely is it brought up in the parental birds and the bees speech, so all learning comes from peers.” In contrast to families, peer networks did not seem to stay silent on the topic of masturbation:

Masturbation is something many come to learn on their own or through word of mouth. I myself learned about it through friends. There were always rumors floating around as a kid about how stuff should work and what you can and can’t do. (Derek)

Despite the relative abundance of talk among peers, feelings were mixed and some participants still felt awkward discussing masturbation in this context. Marco stated: “Even though my teenage friends and I became more open with the topic, there was still a negative stigma attached to it.” In contrast, some women described comfortable and honest connections with other women, even taking on a teaching role with their peers:

My senior year in high school I had one friend ask me how to masturbate. She had never tried anything like that and was very hesitant about the whole thing. I told her what I did and encouraged her to just try some things. (Mary)

**School Settings**

Although it was rare, a few participants did discuss learning about masturbation in school classes. Lara explained, “I was taught about masturbation in seventh grade from a video in health education. The video briefly explained what masturbation was, but it did not go into detail.” However, for most participants, classroom instruction about masturbation never occurred, although some wished it had. For example, Kathy said, “Although I realize the gym teachers won’t be discussing how normal and healthy masturbation actually is to students anytime soon, it would still be nice for adolescents to hear some comforting words.”

Usually when school settings were referred to, participants were not talking about a specific class. Rather, they used schools to designate time periods in their lives and the general attitude towards masturbation during those time periods. For example, Bert explained, “In middle school, it was only jokingly referred to, similarly in high school. Now, in college, it’s more openly talked about.” Frank agreed that college environments were more open to discussions of masturbation: “The college atmosphere makes masturbation and sexual experimentation acceptable.”
Partners

One way to learn about masturbation was unique to female participants, who often talked about how romantic partners first introduced them to masturbation:

It wasn’t until my first sexual encounter, which was at the end of my sophomore year of high school, that I began really learning about female masturbation. The boy I was with told me about the clitoris and how it was supposed to be the most sensitive part for a girl. I was fascinated and wanted to learn more about that. (Ila)

Anna also emphasized the importance of her first partner in teaching her not only how to masturbate but to feel comfortable doing so: “Had he not shown me that touching myself could feel good and had he not have been so accepting of it, I don’t think I ever would have started masturbating.” Many women clearly appreciated not only the specific instructions that boyfriends provided, but also their explicit approval and encouragement. Oma stated, “When I asked my boyfriend about female masturbation he said, ‘all girls do it, I think it is sexy.’ He even offered to buy me a vibrator!”

Female participants did not only rely on male partners for instruction. Barb wrote about the benefits of being with a same sex partner: “Being with another woman has really opened my eyes to certain techniques and spots of the genitalia that are great for masturbation.” However, no male participants listed sexual partners as a primary source of education and learning about masturbation.

Media

Participants often described the media as a substitute source of information on sexuality that made up for the deficiencies of parents and schools:

When my generation was younger, I feel like parents were still afraid to talk to their kids about sexual topics…and girls my age grew up with the women of “Sex and the City” as our role models instead…. With the increase in sexual images found on television, radio, and the Internet, parents and maybe teachers need to be more open so students can get the right information on safety and protection. (Kathy)

Unfortunately, the information from the media was often incomplete and left young people confused. For example, Jae related: “The first time I ever heard the word ‘masturbation’ was on a television show…. I was so confused by this idea that I looked it up in the dictionary. However, this definition had me even more confused.” In addition to being unsatisfied with the knowledge communicated by media, young people often had embarrassing experiences involving media and parents. Evan remembered, “My dad caught me watching porn in our house one time in high school, but not masturbating, and he said he didn’t want me to have it in the house so I hid it.” Participants indicated that explicit media was something they learned to hide, and that if it was exposed it would be very awkward. In fact, escape from parental oversight changed how young people interacted with media, as demonstrated by Nevid: “I learned a lot… from Internet sites after I got to college where my computer wasn’t monitored by my mother for ‘obscenities’.”

Erotic Aids

Several women also had opportunities for learning about masturbation at sex toy parties in college. Whitney said that the $50 she spent on “a vibrator, stimulating cream, and other fun sexy things, was probably the best purchase I had ever made.” The college dormitories, free from parental oversight, appear to provide new opportunities for sex toy exploration and parties:

Last year I was a Resident Advisor and I actually had a program all about masturbation. We had a lady come in from Tasteful Treasurers and she showed all the girls (everyone was above the age of 18) different gadgets, creams, toys, sprays, and fun games that they could play with themselves or with a partner. This program got the largest turnout and it was interesting to see how such a hidden topic can be turned around and become a topic of celebration. (Ila)

It Felt So Good But I Felt So Horrible: Learning the Contradiction

The second category to emerge from the data focused on developmental issues and involved descriptions of experiencing the process of learning the contradiction that masturbation was both pleasurable and shameful or stigmatized. Overall, narratives revealed that this process was highly organized around gender.

Discovering Masturbation

Female participants in particular reported a profound ignorance about masturbation when they were young. oma said, “I had no idea that ‘down there’ was used for anything else rather than using the bathroom.” Many participants described a process of figuring masturbation out for themselves through personal experimentation (e.g., Lester reported, “I believe I started experimenting with myself early on in age…it was all trial and error.”). Sometimes, these episodes elicited feelings of shame and awkwardness. Heather remembered, “I think I tried it twice as a teenager. But during the experience, I felt awkward so I stopped and stopped for almost 4 years.” Even now, recalling these early experiments embarrassed some:
Just pressing against myself outside of my underwear soothed the urge I had to touch myself. This is very embarrassing to admit that sometimes I would develop holes in my underwear from rubbing myself. (Dara)

I didn’t start masturbating till the age of 18 and that was by accident. It just happened, up till that moment I have never done this jerking motion that would induce the orgasm. But it felt so good to do and it felt so relaxing. The only problem was the mess that was left afterwards. And since I had done it by accident I tried it again with the same results. But this time, I felt really horrible afterwards. I felt ashamed and disgusted with myself. (Curtis)

However, some participants succeeded in gaining pleasure from these early experiments:

In fifth grade, I remember lying on my back, lifting my legs up, and thrusting them in the air. That made my genital area tight and it felt good. This was nothing like an orgasm, but I can remember trying to reproduce the motions to get that unexpected pleasure. (Art)

Shaming Strategies

At the same time that many participants were discovering the physical pleasure of masturbation, they were also absorbing the shame associated with masturbation culturally. Strategies such as derisive humor, stereotypes, and humiliation were witnessed, teaching participants that masturbation was taboo. Some participants were told extreme stories about dire consequences of masturbation: Jared said, “What my friend told me about masturbation was that if you do it, it will make your palms hairy.” Bev learned in middle school that “if I masturbated that must mean that I was a lesbian.”

Many participants recognized that belittling humor was a successful way to discourage masturbation through the threat of shame. Curtis reported that “friends at school cracked [masturbation] jokes all the time.” Anna stated, “I regarded masturbation the same way one regards nose picking, it is something to be made fun of for.” She went on to relate an example:

When I was a fourth grader, I heard stories…about a middle school girl caught masturbating in the bathroom—they were definitely making fun of her in a tattle tale, “listen to what this girl did” manner. Therefore, I correlated masturbation with being scandalous and overall a “bad girl.”

Acceptance of negative stereotypes of masturbators was much more prevalent than old fashioned myths about hairy palms. Masturbation was often seen as a lesser substitute for sex used by people with no partner. Jared said, “I felt like if you masturbate alone, it’s kind of pathetic since you aren’t actually having sex.” Velma wrote that “I’d heard plenty of people say that individuals only masturbate if they can’t get a real boyfriend or girlfriend, and since I’ve yet to have a boyfriend, I felt that applied directly to me.”

Trying Not to Do It

Shame led many participants to make concerted efforts to control their urges to masturbate. Frank recalled, “I would make pacts with myself to not masturbate for a certain duration of time. I go through mental conflicts with myself and the moral decision always would win.” Curtis also tried to prohibit himself from masturbating but eventually started again: “I made up the idea that I wasn’t going to do it again. For some time my idea worked.”

Other participants tried to hide their masturbation so that it would seem like they did not do it. Secrecy and lying were common strategies used by participants to hide masturbation:

If I was talking to my friends and the topic of masturbation came up, I would deny it and express how bad I thought the act was, even though I participated in it regularly. When I would masturbate, I would have to sneak around or do it late at night. (Ken)

In these ways, participants expended substantial effort to balance the conflict that masturbation was both shameful and pleasurable.

Masturbation Is a Gendered Subject

Most participants commented on their perception that masturbation was far more acceptable for men than for women. The double standard was addressed directly in the narratives, even though the original question did not ask for participants to comment specifically on gender. The issue is so compelling, Oma even stated, “I know that this question did not examine the differences between male and female masturbation, but I find it hard to discuss this topic without raising these questions.” Other participants explored the implications of these gendered standards with disapproval but felt helpless to do anything about it. Evie reflected:

As it seems with many issues in this country, there is a double standard against women. Women of all ages and backgrounds seem to be more hush-hush than men do when discussing sexuality, masturbation in particular. Hopefully, in future decades and generations—this will breakdown and communication will open up.

Several theories were posed about how the double standard had come about or why it persisted. Most blamed some mixture of silence about women’s pleasure plus anatomy making masturbation seem more mysterious or dirty for women:
I do not think women are encouraged to explore their bodies. I was never taught that masturbation could be fun and enjoyable for women or that it was normal behavior. Sexual pleasure is encouraged for men, but I do not feel that women are empowered to push for their orgasm. (Lara)

Women, in general, seem less open to discussion of masturbation than men, and sometimes even seem disgusted that anyone would openly talk about such things. Purely speculative, but my guess to the reason is men may feel more comfortable with their genitalia (touching it, talking about it) than women do with theirs, as a result of day-to-day interaction with it (the penis is much more easily seen, handled daily, etc.). (Bert)

Current Discourses About Masturbation

Each narrative was also examined for its overall tone and conclusions and categorized into a type of discourse (Table 1). We identified three major discourses employed by the participants that represented their current attitudes and beliefs about masturbation. The smallest group included participants who maintained strong attitudes that masturbation is wrong or stigmatized. Those who saw it as stigmatized displayed conflicted approaches to masturbation in which they tried to accept masturbation as normal but were aware of continuing strong feelings of shame. The second group included participants who used language of normalization, indicating that masturbation is natural or comfortable but nothing out of the ordinary. The last group incorporated a discourse of sexual health into their discussions of masturbation, emphasizing its potential positive roles and embracing it as a critical part of healthy sexuality. Sexual health here is conceptualized as not just the absence of disease but also the ability to understand and integrate sexuality into one’s life and derive pleasure from it (Edwards & Coleman, 2004).

I Will Never Accept It or I Am Still Conflicted

Just over one-tenth of the men and one-third of the women never fully went through the process of confronting the social contradictions surrounding masturbation (Table 1). Disproportionately female, this group used discourses indicating that they will never accept masturbation or that despite trying to accept masturbation they still have strong conflicting feelings about it. Concerns about masturbation mainly surrounded issues of sin, shame, mental illness, and unnaturalness. Polly described a strongly held belief system that rejected masturbation and was consistent throughout her life:

Masturbation as I have always been taught is an absolute no no… I still believe masturbation is wrong. I still believe that masturbation is sinful and no one should be involved in this act of masturbation.

Other narratives revealed inner conflict in how some participants continued to approach the issue of masturbation, indicating that in some part of themselves they wanted to accept masturbation, but fears or shame still dominated their personal reaction to masturbation. Anna described her conflicting thoughts: “In some ways I’m grossed out by it, in other ways, I look at it as sexual exploration.”

Normalized

Of the participants, one-quarter of men and just under half of women incorporated a discourse of normalized masturbation in which masturbation was recognized as an acceptable behavior (Table 1). It was very common for these participants to use the words “natural” or “normal,” as Nancy stated, “Masturbation is a normal thing that humans can and should do if they choose. If it is a normal bodily function then why should it be looked down upon?”

A few participants stood out as having “normalized” masturbation early in their youth, with several participants indicating that they had “always” felt comfortable and positive about masturbation. However, it was much more typical for participants to begin a process of confronting the societal contradictions of masturbation and normalizing the behavior in their late teenage or college years. Over a period of years, personal sexual experiences started to overshadow older influences and feelings of guilt:

I have noticed that my views towards sex and masturbation over the last couple of years… have become more liberal and open-minded. I feel much more comfortable trying new things and actually enjoying it rather than feeling guilt because of my religious beliefs. (Glenda)

In terms of outcomes, masturbation was thought to have some modest benefits, such as relaxation. For example, Dara reported, “I can find masturbating very relaxing.” However, unlike the third group below, these participants did not talk about benefits in terms of sexual health, relationships, or empowerment.

Masturbation Is Critical to Sexual Health

In the third group of participants, only 16% of the women, but the majority of the men, produced narratives reflecting a health
and benefits discourse of masturbation (Table 1). Masturbation was described as a vital part of sexual development, self-discovery, and good relationship development, as well as a substitute for riskier sexual activity.

Several individuals identified masturbation as a safer sex alternative or a good substitute for sleeping around. Henry recognized that masturbation, of all the sexual behaviors, was “the safest in terms of sexual health.” Barb disclosed that she used to “sleep around” but that “now I have a couple vibrators that I enjoy using instead.” Participants also noted the benefits in terms of achieving pleasure without risking sexually transmitted infections:

Masturbation is also a great alternative to other sexual activities. Should you decide to refrain from sex, masturbation is a healthy option. It keeps you safe and clear from the many harmful sexually transmitted infections that can be caught through sexual activity without sacrificing any pleasure. (Derek)

Another important theme within this discourse was the idea of masturbation as a critical part of developing familiarity with, and the ability to elicit pleasure from one’s own body. This ability was associated with liberation and empowerment for some women, as described by Heather: “Masturbation actually gets me in tune with myself and I get a better idea of what I enjoy…it is very liberating to know that I can fulfill what I want, when I want, how I want.” Barb elaborated on the importance of masturbation for healthy sexual development:

I have come to learn and accept that I must learn to pleasure myself before I can have anyone else truly pleasure me while having sex….I feel that masturbation is an important part in exploring your own sexuality so you can know what you like and what you don’t like….Masturbation is really very important to having a healthy sexual life.

This knowledge of self was also described by many participants as a critical first step in being able to communicate successfully with partners and establish healthy and satisfying sexual relationships. Derek expressed a common perception among the men: “It is very important not only for yourself, but for future sexual partners….How can you tell someone else what you like and don’t if you don’t know yourself?” Although fewer women were in this third group, Glenda’s view was common: “It is a great way of discovering your likes and dislikes….Masturbation is a much safer method of sexual expression and I have found that it has become much easier to communicate with both my partner and my girlfriends about sex.”

These examples indicate the value of masturbation to these participants in developing healthy sexuality within relationships. In fact, some participants described a role of masturbation in relationships that went beyond simple self-knowledge and communication. Art described mutual masturbation as a way to enhance sexual experience and lessen an unhealthy focus on penetration:

During sex, I learned to not just focus on penetration, but to use my hands to pleasure her as I do to myself (obviously not in the same fashion). Masturbation is not just a lame substitute for sex, but a whole other category which when shared can reveal another facet of the sexual relationship to be explored.

Mutual masturbation was also described as a step in relationship formation:

I think it is good for a couple if they use foreplay before having sex. From personal experience it is definitely better to try and get in the mood beforehand instead of jumping straight into it. I feel that mutual masturbation is one of the first concepts a couple tries out when they are in the first steps in their relationship. (Lester)

In contrast with societal taboos against masturbation, these young adults have embraced the potential multiple benefits of masturbation in terms of sexual health, individual development, and relationship development.

Discussion

This study revealed profound conflicts, and striking gender differences, within the masturbation ideologies and beliefs of many young adults. This research demonstrated that many young adults held strong scripts outlining the appropriateness of masturbation that were specific to gender and reflected traditional double standards. However, this study also illustrated multiple discourses, showing masturbation as a site of ideological conflict. The cultural scenarios and social contexts that inform these scripts and ideologies appeared to pivot on the silence of families and draw heavily on peers and the media.

Theories of discourse and ideology can provide a helpful lens to interpret these findings. Although ideology has traditionally been seen as a tool to facilitate hegemony, non-dominant groups can also put forward ideologies as a form of resistance (Connell, 1995; Rose, 2007; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). However, responding to social trends does not necessarily signify reversals or upheavals in hegemony. Rather, these gradual and small changes can still maintain the bulk of the dominant ideology (hegemonic accommodation) (Hall, 1982). Ideologies
concerning sexuality and gender are increasingly recognized as in motion and fractured in ways that may present today’s young adults with more choices about how to behave and may open new possibilities for movement towards equality (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schwartz, 2007). These shifting ideologies and approaches to gender and relationships may also result in confusion or uncertainty among young adults about sexual experiences (Banker, Kaestle, & Allen, 2010).

Many of the young adults in this study cited the media, peers, and partners as important contexts to their developing understanding of masturbation. These influences reflected a range of traditional and disruptive discourses on gender and masturbation. Traditional gendered scripts of sexual aggressiveness for men and of passiveness, gate-keeping, and relationship prioritizing and maintenance for women are common in media (Kim et al., 2007). Even the show named in several of our study narratives as particularly informative, Sex and the City, has been found to ultimately conform to the traditionally gendered script of women as relationship maintainers (Markle, 2008). Women also mentioned sex toy parties with peers as an important context for peer interactions about masturbation. Such parties may reflect a radical shift in attitudes toward masturbation and female sexuality by promoting products traditionally not available to most women and by assuming that a woman deserves pleasure. However, some parties may leave the impression that women are responsible not only for their partner’s orgasm but for their own orgasm as well (McCaughey & French, 2001), and thus may not necessarily disrupt the view of women as relationship caretakers. In contrast, reports in this study that male partners were instrumental in teaching some women how to masturbate show a dramatic shift in traditional gendered relationship caretaking roles, indicating that the connection men may feel with their female partners and their desire for those women to have better lives may outweigh traditional masculine ideologies (Connell, 1987).

Although a mix of peer and media influences on masturbation ideologies and beliefs were abundant in our study narratives, silence about masturbation at home was near universal, and schools rarely addressed the topic. Previous studies have documented the influence of parents in shaping sexual scripts, not just in what they say directly but in their reactions to behaviors and their use of language and symbols (Crouter & Booth, 2006; Kimmel, 2007). Perceived parental disapproval is also a consistent predictor of sexual behaviors (Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, & Hallfors, 2006), which is pertinent as our study narratives consistently described not only the pervasive silence of families on the topic of masturbation but also reflected the assumption by participants that this silence implied disapproval.

Given the paucity of reputable sources of information on masturbation, young adults were left to cobble together their own interpretations and understandings of the topic. Some adopted traditional stigmatized discourses, while others slowly modified their views to see masturbation as natural. It has been theorized that masturbation normalization is a developmental landmark of adolescence (Shapiro, 2008). However, our narratives illustrated that this conceptualization may be too limiting in terms of timing and scope. Normalizing masturbation, and possibly going one step further to appreciating the positive aspects of masturbation, appeared to be developmental tasks that continued into young adulthood and at which only some succeed. Even in the absence of overt learning about any positive aspects of masturbation, some young adults in our study eventually redefined sexual health for themselves in a way that included a strong positive view of masturbation.

These participants not only rejected stigma but developed a discourse embracing masturbation as a critical part of sexual development and self-discovery that was necessary for safe and satisfying sexual lives. Not only did positive healthy and beneficial outcomes of masturbation permeate these narratives, but many of these young adults described masturbation as a fulfilling substitute for riskier sexual activities. This idea only appeared in narratives that embraced masturbation without stigma, raising the provocative question of whether efforts to replace the shaming discourse on masturbation during development with one that was more accepting of its role in healthy sexuality could increase the use of masturbation as an effective substitute for risky behavior.

These young adults realized that masturbation can be relational. Many women in our study wrote about the profound influence their sexual partners had in helping them learn how to masturbate. Further, these narratives indicated that it was not just relationships that influenced masturbation, but that masturbation can advance and may be critical for the development of healthy sexual relationships. Masturbation was seen as an important way to explore one’s own preferences and communicate those preferences to partners, especially for women.

Most strikingly, our study highlighted the continued gendered nature of masturbation. Although our original question did not ask about or even mention gender, participants consistently felt compelled to discuss gender issues at length and with great passion. They described male and female masturbation as having very different scripts and levels of stigma. Furthermore, male and female participants differed substantially in their own discourse development, with nearly two-thirds of the men in our study using a health and benefits discourse, compared to only 16% of the women using this discourse. This demonstrates that discourses continue to reflect men feeling a greater allowance to pursue pleasure as a positive goal (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Despite the influence of what some saw as radical or progressive factors, such as Sex and the City or sex toy parties, women still used more conservative or ambivalent masturbation discourses compared to men. More research is needed to determine if such discourses...
have lasting effects on their sexual and relational development by limiting their repertoire of safe, satisfying, and empowering sexual options when they are making sexual decisions.

The narratives reflected a wistfulness on the part of the young adults for better sources of information about masturbation from schools and parents. In particular, young adults described how differently they would approach talking to their own children in the future to create a more open and accepting family environment. This stated goal may open opportunities for sexual health educators to address masturbation. Past research indicates that including masturbation in sexuality education can improve attitudes toward masturbation and debunk myths or false beliefs (Lo Presto, Sherman, & Sherman, 1985). Perhaps because of the prevalence of sex-negative approaches in sex education (Russell, 2005), many young adults felt that it was not until college that they had access to more accurate information about masturbation and entered a more accepting atmosphere to explore its role in their sexual development. However, about 90% of young adults are already sexually active (Halpern et al., 2006), so college is a relatively late time to be learning basic facts about masturbation. Also, young adults who are not college bound may not obtain access to the information nor the environment that a college student has available.

One of the primary limitations of this research was that it did not include young adults who were not in college so we could not compare their development. This will be an important next step in research on the development of masturbation discourses. College students may differ in important ways from non-collegiate young adults, and students who choose to register in a human sexuality course and agree to participate in related research may also be more curious or less inhibited (Wiederman, 1999). Contextual cues from interactions with the instructors may have produced demand characteristics that influenced the essays submitted, with students attempting to conform to what they perceived as instructor expectations. Our sample had more women than men and was primarily white; both of these characteristics may have profound effects on the sexual scripts that guide young adults (Mahay, Laumann, & Micheals, 2000). More research is needed into the influence of race, ethnicity, and gender on masturbation issues.

However, our study had a relatively large sample size and the inclusion of both men and women enabled us to uncover a pattern of gender iniquity that was both observed by participants in their narratives and observed by the researchers in comparing the discourses of men and women. The use of qualitative methods and grounded theory allowed us to give voice to the lived experiences of young adults and explore themes that emerged organically from the data. Demographic survey methods have advantages in terms of generalizability and influence on the field of sex research, but existing studies tend to focus on risk as conceptualized by researchers rather than on experiences of positive sexual development (Russell, 2005). Future research would benefit from a mixed methods approach, using the nuances uncovered through qualitative inquiry to inform larger-scale surveys.

References
