

**Marla J. Arvay and Patrice A. Keats**

## **Opening Pandora's Box**

### **Examining the Implications of Mothers' Adolescent Sexuality Narratives on Mother-Daughter Relationships**

Marla: *"Last summer I had the pleasure of attending my niece's wedding in Ontario. At the reception I was introduced to the Sunday Night Sex Show host's daughter—the daughter of Dr. Sue. I could not help but wonder what type of relationship she might have with her mother, a national celebrity who openly and directly displays and demonstrates every imaginable sexual gadget on national television. Could she talk to her mother about her sexuality and conversely, would her mother be willing to talk to her about her own sexual experiences? Later that fall, I met my 19-year-old daughter in Key West for a holiday. We were able to obtain tickets to the play The Vagina Monologues. Although the small playhouse was full, I noticed that my daughter and I were the only mother-daughter pair in the audience that night. I wondered how many other mother-daughter pairs had attended this play in other parts of America. What was their response? Did they feel as comfortable as I did with my daughter listening to stories about women's vaginas and yelling out as loudly as possible CUNT on cue?"*

Patrice: *"Interesting because I attended The Vagina Monologues with my 19-year-old daughter recently in Vancouver. At the part where they asked us to say cunt, hardly anyone responded. It was definitely not okay to shout it out. The play has been around for about 13 years, but just recently, they added a vagina-as-birthplace piece. This last monologue really struck me. Throughout the play, the focus was the vagina-as-sexual-organ. In this last monologue, the actor speaks about the vagina opening, stretching, and revealing the baby's head. As she narrated the vagina as birthplace, I noticed that the audience started to disconnect. It was as if introducing the*

*vagina-as-motherhood had no place in the theatre. You just can not mix the metaphors. Vaginas could not speak simultaneously from the position of women's sexual identity and mothering identity."*

In our conversation as co-authors and researchers, we struggle to understand how the discourses of mothering and women's sexuality continue to manifest in our lives in ways that silence and rupture women's identity. Popular culture stages competing discourses on mothering and women's sexual identity. Popular cultural myths and norms regarding family values continue to pathologize the integration of women as both mothers and sexual beings. We continue to struggle with a double bind discourse (Walters, 228): a woman must identify herself as either a mother or a sexual being—each identity being outside the realm of the other. In terms of mother-daughter relationships, what are the implications of maintaining this double bind discourse?

The purpose of this article is to present the findings of a recent narrative study investigating why women in mid-life would tell their adolescent daughters about their adolescent sexual experiences or chose to remain silent. This preliminary study provided insights into the influence of mothers' sexual biographies on the mother-daughter relationship. The findings of this study invite further theoretical speculation with regard to women's sexual development and the implications of this development on the mother-daughter relationship.

In this narrative study, we invited 15 middle-aged women between the ages of 38 and 57 (mean age of 50 years) to talk about their own adolescent sexual experiences.<sup>1</sup> Demographically, the women in this study were mostly heterosexual—the one lesbian and one bisexual did not have same sex relationships until later in life. Two women were of First Nations descent. Eight were born and raised in Canada. Three women immigrated to Canada as young adults—two from South Africa and one woman from Scotland. Eighty-three percent of the participants were Caucasian of European descent. The participants were engaged in a variety of professions such as business, education, the legal field, the arts, and mental health. The religious affiliations reported were Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Philosophies. In terms of marital status, seven women were married, three divorced, and two separated. Educationally, three had high-school diplomas, four obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree, three achieved a Masters level of education, and one a doctorate degree. The reported economic statuses of the participants were: two upper income, two upper-middle income, and five middle class. Upon completion of their story, we asked each of them if they would tell or remain silent about their sexual biography with their adolescent daughter(s). If they told their story, we asked how the telling of their own adolescent sexual experiences had been received by their daughter(s). If they chose to remain silent, we asked them to tell us more about their reasons for remaining silent. Three participants stated that they had shared some parts of their story with their daughters; the remaining partici-

pants had remained silent.

Once the interviews were completed, we proceeded to analyze the transcripts using a collaborative interpretive reading method (Arvey, 1998: 127). We distributed to the participants their own adolescent sexuality narrative and asked them to review it in order to make any corrections to the content. We also asked them if they would share this written account with their adolescent daughter(s). Of the 15 participants in this study, three participants decided to drop out of the study for the following reasons: "I am not comfortable with people reading my story," "The story is too raw—I am embarrassed if others read it," "I don't want anyone to read it because it is too exposing—I am not ready to show this to anyone." This left us with 12 remaining participants—seven who stated they had or would share their narrative accounts with their adolescent daughters and five who chose to remain silent.

We feel that reducing the narratives to categorical analyses does not do justice to the fullness or complexity of the research findings. Therefore, in order to contextualize the research findings for the reader, we chose to present two prototypes—two narrative accounts that reflect both sides of the debate. The first participant, Betty, stated that she would remain silent about this narrative with her daughter. Marley, the second participant, stated that she would openly tell her story with her adolescent daughter without reservation. Here are their stories.

### **Betty's Narrative**

I grew up in a small village in Scotland with my older sister. Being raised in a rural environment, I was very present in my body and in the earth. I was part sheep. I specifically remember my dad coming home from the Second World War—a blonde haired, blue-eyed god. I experienced the magic of manhood—the magic thing of male power as he and his friends gathered in our home to sing and play the bagpipes. At the age of seven, my dad started his own business—a service station. It was a big thing, owning land, moving away from the feudal system and at that time, we moved into our own place above the service station. On moving day, my mother gave me this very important task—a dish of macaroni and cheese to carry to the new house. At seven, I discovered that I could grow up and be a woman. I could carry the food.

By the age of nine my relationship with my father started to change. He told me I was too old for hugging and kissing. That was the end of the evening hug and kiss from my dad. I remember crying in my bedroom, knowing my dad heard me. I knew that he was sitting in the next room hardening his heart.

It was not until I was about eleven that I experienced anything sexual. My first great sexual experience was swinging on a rope swing in a tree. I had this great orgasmic experience, a big mystery! No one had ever told me anything and no one could possibly have experienced anything like this. Not knowing what it was that had happened, I tried to find ways to make it happen again. It made no sense and I did not speak to anyone about it; I just felt it. About the same

I started my first period and it was quite traumatic. Nobody had told me about it. I was riding home on my bike and I saw blood on my green and white checked dress. I was scared because I did not know what it was. When I saw my mom, she said she should have told me about it since she was a nurse. She showed me how to use the belts and pads. They were awful things. At school, there was one toilet and it was stone cold and dirty. I had to share it with hundreds of other children. There was no privacy to change your pad nor could you carry a pad to school. No one told me it was important to wash. In Scotland, you were lucky to get a bath once a week. It was awful, awful, and grim.

When I was 13, my sister and I had to ride our bikes to the train to get to a school in another town. There were many boys on the train and my sister told me to cover my knees and not to smile with my teeth showing. It was clear that I was not to wear anything revealing. She got the idea that sexuality was bad from my mom, who got it from my granny because my grandfather was a minister. My mom never spoke to me directly about these things. She spoke to my sister and then my sister passed it on to me. No one talked about sex. There was no sex education and girls did not talk about it with each other. We were rivals, only interested in the boys. It was so fun, the magic of boys.

The first kiss—oh happy days, happy days! It happened after a Sunday school party when a boy walked me home. It was magic and innocence—so innocent. We did not know anything. I did not know what a penis was. I could not have told a penis from a tree. I did not know that boys had them and I had never seen one. I was so innocent. I had never seen anyone naked.

There was a lot of kissing. When I was 14 there started to be fondling. I remember those intense feelings of romance and seeking relationships with boys. It really drove my whole adolescence. When I was 15, I fell for a boy really hard. I saw him everyday and there was a lot of kissing and touching, but nothing genital. It was really innocent. It was all so connected with the landscape. When he broke up with me, I was heartbroken. It really cut deep. It was such a sweet relationship. This was a beautiful first love.

After about a year, I trapped a guy. I snared the guy of my dreams. In that relationship, I had a sense of deepening my own sexuality. We went deeper into the sexual world, but still it was not intercourse. I remember intense feelings of sexual desire but I did not know what to do with it. There was a lot of touching but not in a genital way. There was never any talk of “should we have sex.” I just knew that I was not going to do that because it was just not done. I was afraid of getting pregnant. I still did not know that penises got erect although I must have known about getting pregnant. There was nothing about birth control at the time. No one talked about birth control. There was a sense of mystery about sex as something that happened when you got married. I believed that I would not have sex until I was married and whomever I had sex with was the person I would marry. That was the cultural code. When it did happen at age 22, it was a big mistake. I was not in love with him but I knew it was time to have sex. It was very disappointing. His penis penetrated me, but I was not going to feel

anything. It was not safe to feel anything. After the rope swing, there was lots of masturbating going on, but I did not make the connection between that experience and sex with a man. It was somehow separate.

### **Marley's narrative**

I was born on Vancouver Island in 1941. I was abandoned by my mother as a child and raised by my maternal grandmother. I remember my mother telling me that I was lucky to have such shiny beautiful hair because it helped to make up for the fact that I was an ugly duckling. She threatened me if I didn't behave for grandma by saying she would take me to the men's barber shop where they would cut off my hair. When I was six my grandma died and I moved next door to my grandma's kindly old friend and her husband—Granny and Grandpa M. He was a pedophile who molested me twice when I was seven. I felt confused, guilty, and ashamed of myself. Granny came home one day and caught him molesting me. She asked me "Did that dirty old bugger touch you inside your underwear?" I told her "Yes" and then she took care of me and phoned my mother to say she couldn't keep me anymore.

Then I went to live in foster care where I learned that boys were favored over girls. I wished that I were a boy. When I was 11, my mother finally rescued me from foster care and for the first time in my life I lived with my mother. She had remarried and we were going to be a family and have a home together. I felt a sense of security and stability.

I got my period at 11. I was so happy because some of my school chums had gotten theirs already. It made me feel like I belonged. I thought my mother would be happy for me but she wasn't—instead she was furious. The first thing she said to me was, "Now we have really got problems!" She meant now I had the potential to become a pregnant teenager. You see she became pregnant with me as a teenager. This incident burst my bubble; I knew that we weren't going to become magically close and have a special relationship. She didn't take the time to show me how to put the pad and belt together. She just angrily harnessed me into this strange foreign rig and left me there in the bathroom. I remember crying and not knowing how to change the pad. I developed pubic hair around the time I began my menses and I remember being aware of it especially when I was close to 16, anxiously wondering "Oh my god! When will it stop growing? Is there no end to it?"

When I was about 13 or 14 years old, I became interested in boys and I remember living a double life. By day, I was so shy and innocent and by night, I was daring and bold, stuffing my brassier with woolly gloves and heading out alone for the near-by ice rink. I wanted to have the biggest, most obvious boobs so that the older boys would notice me and ask me to skate with them. This is my first memory of wanting to be irresistibly sexy and desirable to men and wanting a man to kiss me and make love to me.

I finally got a best friend and we would go out and get into trouble together. We were the sluts of the school. We would go out streetwalking together, stroll

up and down the main street, all gussied up in linen suits and nylons, high-heeled shoes, lots of make up, and tacky paper flowers stuck in our hair. We desperately wanted the boys in the cars to pick us up. Those boys never did pick us up but we both got some sexual experience with this young cab driver. He took me out one night and we necked and petted in his car. That was my first kiss. The next night he took my friend out and they did the same thing

One night I went out street walking all by myself. I got all gussied up and snuck out of the window and went strolling down the highway. Two guys picked me up in their car and we drove around for a while just cruising and burning gas. I went back to their apartment and ended up having sexual intercourse with the driver of the car. God, I was such a tramp. When he was having sex with me it was not like being in my body. I felt so emotionally detached from the experience. I was passive and numb, like when I was molested by my Grandpa M. It was something being done to me. However, I felt older like I was progressing somehow. I was hoping the boy would want me to be his girlfriend, but I never saw him again.

When I began grade 10, I was acutely aware of my reputation among my peers. I knew that I had better tidy up my act if I was to fit in and be accepted—so I did. I ended up just hanging out with my classmates and doing normal teenage things. I went out with a boy for a month and we had sex but there was some respectability to it because he was my boyfriend. However, he dumped me after a month. It was about this same time that my stepfather started to be very cruel to me. He accused me of sleeping around when I wasn't. I wanted to have a good reputation. My mother thought I was out of control too. This made me angry and I said to myself "Well, if that is what you think, then that is what I will do." I started staying out later, drinking more and becoming more promiscuous by flirting and petting with different boys. When I was 17, I finally had one steady boyfriend for a whole year. It made me happy to have a boyfriend and be a part of the crowd. I had sex with him maybe once every ten dates which seemed to be the norm in those days.

When I graduated from high school, my stepfather gave my mother an ultimatum: either she could live with him or me. Obviously, she chose him. There was never any hope for me with my mom. I felt so much hostility and resentment toward her. I mean her obligation to take care of me was over, so she didn't need to even think twice about it.

### **Mothers who remain silent about their sexual narratives**

Five of the participants in this study (plus the three who dropped out) chose to remain silent about their early sexual experiences when speaking with their daughters. The following are their verbatim reasons for this decision:

*Gracie: No absolutely not. If they read this story they would say "ooooh Mom that is disgusting." I don't think they want to know about their mother. It is embarrassing for them and me. I'm not ashamed of my*

*adolescence but I think they would prefer not to know all the details. It is not just about me, it is also about their father since we met when we were 16.*

*Jane: No I am not willing. I feel vulnerable and insecure and worried it would alter their image of me in a negative way. I am especially concerned about the section on masturbation. I feel that my daughters wouldn't understand. I want to be a good filter of information and not tell them things that are "inappropriate." I fear being rejected for seeming to be over-sexed as I am portrayed in the story.*

*Caroline: I do not think that I have to reveal everything to be a good parent. It is important to be able to empathize with my daughter when she is going through something difficult and use my own experiences as a reference point. However, I do not want to burden my child with everything that has happened to me. I think my personal experience is private. I do not think that my privacy should be invaded because I am a parent. I do not want to give my daughter information about me that she may not want to know. It is about respect and dignity—for her and me. I think it is private because it is very fundamental in my development as a human being and my evolving as a woman. I think young women are sexualized too young. I can talk to my daughter about our personal beliefs and perspectives on sexuality, on sexual behaviours and relationships without ever referring to specific instances in my own experiences.*

*Ruby: I do not want to change her "good mother" image of me. I am ashamed of some parts of my story and it is embarrassing to me to share with her. I also don't think she wants to know these parts of my life. At the same time I wish I knew more about my own mother's life, so it is paradoxical.*

*Betty: I had a fear about having my sexuality in my relationship with her. I needed to observe a boundary with her and that was why I had to push her away. As she emerges as a sexual being, there is a fear on my part that there would be sexuality in my relationship with her. I think that it is taboo. We need to be separate and have our own lives. It feels like a true thing—not a cultural thing, but something that is of nature.*

### **Mothers who chose to tell their sexual narratives**

Three participants stated "yes," they already had shared their story with their daughter(s). The following are their responses as to why they chose to tell.

*Anne: This study has been so incredibly useful to me at a time when I was struggling with my daughter's emerging sexuality. I shared the story with her. It opened the door for me to discuss sexuality with her. It helped me get a handle on the experience of shame in my own life and how that was getting*

*played out in my approach to my daughter's budding sexuality.*

*Petra: Yes, I would give it to my eldest daughter to read who is 15 years old. I hesitated at first because of the molestation incidents and because of the detail of my first sexual experience. But I decided that the molestation story might help her awareness of the reality of sexual abuse and help think how she might set her own boundaries in the face of such a threat. I know that teens are sexually active younger now and perhaps knowing my story might encourage her to come to me when she considers having her first sexual experience.*

*Marley: Yes, I have told my daughter everything. I was as open and direct with her about my life as possible. I answered her questions about sexuality as very truthfully as I could from my heart. I made a conscious effort to teach her the difference between loving sex and empty sex, to guide her into understanding that there is a difference. My sexual history was difficult and not something to be especially proud of, and I wanted it to be better for her than it was for me.*

In addition, four participants stated that they would tell their adolescent daughter(s) about their adolescent sexuality. Two stated that they had shared some technical, non-personal information already with their daughters regarding menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and prevention techniques for sexually transmitted diseases. The reasons given for telling were: (a) "Now that my mother has died, I wish I could have known more personal things about her so I don't want my daughter to have any regrets"; (b) "It would open up the communication between myself and my daughter"; (c) "I would gain more trust between myself and my daughter"; (d) "I am no longer worried about my daughter knowing about my early sexual experiences"; (e) "I believe I would seem more human (a real person) in her eyes if I shared."

### **Leaving the box open**

The findings in this study are conflictual and paradoxical. When we compared the "telling" group to the "remaining silent" group interesting elements emerged. Generally, the "remaining silent" group narrated stories that were more naive and innocent—tales of budding sexuality. In contrast, the "telling" group narrated difficult adolescent sexual experiences that were evocative, violent, or harsh. Theirs were stories of enduring abuse and humiliation—survivor tales. These survivor stories prompted women to transform traditional parenting practices by breaking through the silence. Their willingness to tell was based on their need to educate their daughters, to protect their daughters from sexual predators, to normalize women's sexual experiences, to model openness by sharing their "real selves" with their daughters, and to support their daughters sexual development.



The mothers who chose to remain silent assumed their daughters would not want to know about their adolescent sexual experiences. They believed that “mothers” should be framed as the “good mother,” a mother whose sexuality must be kept private to prevent embarrassment, shame, or humiliation. A mother with a sexual identity will lose “respect” or “dignity” and act “inappropriately.” Even though they yearn to know about their own mothers’ lives, they believed that they must protect their daughters from this side of their own womanhood.

On the other hand, the mothers who chose to tell understood that sharing their adolescent sexual experiences was a teaching tool. There was much for daughters to learn in sharing through the provision of guidance and necessary knowledge for protection in navigating the potentially unsafe sexual terrain of womanhood. They wanted to teach their daughters to avoid feelings of shame or blame as daughters began to express their sexuality. They sought to instill their daughters with a sense of having the right to claim their own sexuality, making their own choices in defining their emerging sexual practices, and a willingness to set sexual boundaries that met their own needs. On this point, we noticed clear differences between the two groups. Those who chose to remain silent considered their role as mother primary and their sexual identity secondary. Those who chose to tell their daughters primarily valued the safety of the emerging sexual development of their daughter(s), willing to put their image as a mother aside. Further, this group of mothers created narratives of resiliency and restitution. Aware of the implications of telling their story, they took, or were willing to take, the risk of losing their privacy, embarrassing themselves, or acting outside the typical “good-mother” discourse. They wanted their daughters to see them as “more real” or “human” and, we suggest, that they understood this holistic view to be protective and essential for their daughter’s healthy development.

In our preliminary findings, the participants did not disclose whether their age or the age of their daughters, or whether their race, class, religion, level of education, marital status, or their own sexual orientation had any bearing on whether they would tell or chose to remain silent. It would be beneficial in future research to explore further these demographic variables outside of an exclusively Eurocentric cultural perspective.

This narrative study evokes many questions: What would motherhood look like if the construct was based on a maternal identity in transition—a self-in-process, which evolves and changes along with the developing children and family? How are mother’s sexual identities impacted by theorizing motherhood as a stable, or fixed construct over time? Are mothers who choose to keep their sexual identities private buying into this “bedrock” construction of motherhood identity? What effect does this have on their daughters’ sexual identities?

At the heart of the distinction between telling or remaining silent is secrecy. What power lies beneath the secrecy of a mother’s sexuality? In our opinion, the dominant discourse in popular culture is at play, setting the “good

mother” discourse against women’s sexual identity. Walters states that “Western culture has so incorporated the dichotomization of “mother” and “women” that identification with the mother will always imply for the daughter a denial of her own sexuality.” (228). At least half of the women in this study were willing to address this issue within the mother-daughter relationship. These women were struggling to step outside the parameters of the mother archetype, embodying both a sexual and maternal identity.

Every mother must struggle with the complex interplay between identity, rights to privacy, and parental responsibilities. It is important to recognize these complexities without foreclosing on any of them as the way mothers “should be.” The imperative is to move away from the either/or thinking that the dichotomy of “good-mother” versus sexual woman sets in place. By viewing identity as contingent, contextual, and evolving then the possibilities for mothers are boundless.

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<sup>1</sup>This project must be framed within the historical and political contexts in which these mid-life women experienced their adolescence—a pre-Adrienne Rich and Betty Friedan era. In general, many mothers did not work outside of the home and birth control was not widely available to women as teenagers.

## **References**

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