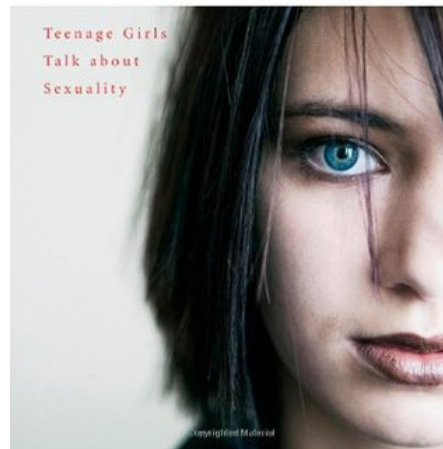


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DILEMMAS  
*of* DESIRE



# Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality

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## **Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality** Deborah L. Tolman

Be sexy but not sexual. Don't be a prude but don't be a slut. These are the cultural messages that barrage teenage girls. In movies and magazines, in music and advice columns, girls are portrayed as the object or the victim of someone else's desire--but virtually never as someone with acceptable sexual feelings of her own. What teenage girls make of these contradictory messages, and what they make of their awakening sexuality--so distant from and yet so susceptible to cultural stereotypes--emerges for the first time in frank and complex fashion in Deborah Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire*.

A unique look into the world of adolescent sexuality, this book offers an intimate and often disturbing, sometimes inspiring, picture of how teenage girls experience, understand, and respond to their sexual feelings, and of how society mediates, shapes, and distorts this experience. In extensive interviews, we listen as actual adolescent girls--both urban and suburban--speak candidly of their curiosity and confusion, their pleasure and disappointment, their fears, defiance, or capitulation in the face of a seemingly imperishable double standard that smiles upon burgeoning sexuality in boys yet frowns, even panics, at its equivalent in girls.

As a vivid evocation of girls negotiating some of the most vexing issues of adolescence, and as a thoughtful, richly informed examination of the dilemmas these girls face, this readable and revealing book begins the critical work of understanding the sexuality of young women in all its personal, social, and emotional significance.

## **Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality Details**

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# **From Reader Review Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality for online ebook**

**David W. says**

This is a very thought-provoking read for me.

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**Suzette Given says**

Interesting, but anecdotal observations. I was hoping for more advice, and not such confirming what I already assumed: all girls experience a sexual identity differently.

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**Jaidee says**

4.5 "enlightening, compassionate, important" stars !!

## **2016 Honorable Mention Read**

This book was a breath of fresh air in so many ways. Dr. Tolman develops a qualitative study and interviews a small cohort of adolescent girls from all socioeconomic strata, both urban and suburban and included girls that were black, white and latin. She also included a handful of lesbian and bisexual girls. She asked them about the nature of their desire. For many of these girls this was very foreign but in the end for many of them this interview allowed them a safe space to explore what it means to be human in all aspects without the usual constraints of patriarchy and implied heterosexuality. For some of these girls, I suspect, this one long conversation could change the direction of their intimate lives and allow themselves to see beyond the virgin vs. whore dichotomy that is still placed on many of them.

Dr. Tolman analyzes these interviews from both a psychodynamic and feminist perspective and what emerges is something rich but also worrisome, oppressive and in today's age in North America unacceptable. We find out that like boys, that girls experience very strong desire and herein lies the dilemma....what the fuck to do with it?

Dr. Tolman describes how girls are socialized to be objects that do not experience desire but are still expected to not just titillate boys but also be responsible for mediating boys desire while denying or suppressing their own. The price they pay is very high if they move beyond this dominant story and can end up in pregnancy, venereal disease, damaged reputation, social banishment and at the extreme end emotional bullying (by other girls) and sexual violence by boys.

Dr. Tolman was able to describe a number of ways that girls dealt with the dilemma of desire through these interviews and a few will be listed below:

- dissociation - not being connected to the body....leading to a host of psychological problems and these girls often had the experience of either very strict religious and cultural backgrounds and/or childhood sexual

trauma

-confusion- unable to read the signs of desire even if they are occurring in the mind and body

-suppression and sublimation- pushing it back and/or focusing solely on other life roles that limit the fullness of authenticity, pleasure and a whole life

-limiting-using a monogamous heterosexual long term relationship to partially or fully explore the gamut of sexuality and desire

-the rebels that reject societal norms and fully explore their sexuality but often pay the price of being labeled and pathologized

There are some others and variations of the above that the book goes through in some depth.

Some background in both psychodynamic and feminist theory will enrich your reading experience.

This book was also very enlightening for me in my own understanding of my experience in my own formative years as an adolescent boy coming to terms with my bisexual identity and I felt some kinship and understanding to my sisters in their experience of both patriarchy and implied heterosexuality.

We have such a long way to go in so many areas but books like these can be extremely helpful in building understanding, expressing empathy and facilitating change in our world so that all of us can love fully, safely and without repercussions or harm.

Well done Dr. Tolman and thank you for this wonderful book.

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### **Tate says**

A little dry but insightful. I just found out this woman teaches where I hope to go to grad school!

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### **Jeni VW says**

Another look at some of the hidden worlds of girls and social problems ...

Why is there this unjust double-standard between girls and boys. Boys who have girls crawling all over them are "studs" and their parents are "proud." Girls, on the other hand, are to be protected from guys lining up at the door lest they acquire a less savory reputation as "sluts." The author tells the stories of girls who have sexual desire. The societal view of girls as sweet and innocent has also denied girls the opportunity to claim their sexual heritage, the passions and pleasures that come with womanhood and sexual maturity.

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### **AJ says**

I got about a chapter in (yes, I managed to finish the introduction) plus a few pages and decided not to

continue after realizing that this book reads like a textbook. It's probably very interesting, but not something I want to spend time reading.

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### **Elysabeth says**

I used this book for my thesis and I'm glad I did. Tolman makes really interesting points about acknowledging teenage girls' desire and sexuality as valid--something that may not often come up in the discussion of sexual impulses in teenagers.

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### **Heather says**

This book made me angry at the world. It's an analysis of a collection of interviews of high school girls, which highlights all the ways in which girls are messed up by society's rejection of female sexuality. Boys can't help their urges and girls aren't supposed to have any. Girls are discouraged from discussing how they feel about sex and end up concluding that masturbation is dirty, that they are responsible for all of the negative consequences of sex, and that what it means to enjoy sex is to be sexy for their partner. Definitely worth reading, though the book contained many more problems than solutions.

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### **Jen says**

Who bears the responsibility for a teenage pregnancy? Is it possible to balance out the fear and objectification of the current ways children and adolescents learn about sexuality, including graphic slides of STD sores and music videos of strong, implicit messages about gender and sexuality? Is there room for women to have desire when the messages about being objects and gatekeepers prove to be internalized? Tolman sets out to illuminate how girls describe their sexual desires, which is neglected in research that covers more extensively the risks and dangers associated with female sexuality in adolescence. What she reports she found, however, was that young women reached barriers to their own desires, choices, behaviors, and even experiences that prevented them from being able to express these things, or even acknowledge them. This feminist work provides a starting place for asking questions about the void of authentic support, calling parents, teachers, and researchers to provide more validation for the complex process girls must navigate during their sexual development.

Recipient of the 2003 Distinguished Book Award by the American Women in Psychology, *Dilemmas of Desire* features interviews with 31 adolescent women, with research woven as context for the reports. Tolman uses qualitative methodologies – which she has established in other texts – to answer some of these questions, arguing that young women have little safe space to express or even develop their sexuality. She expands on this by explaining the Listening Guide in the final chapter. Tolman emphasizes the importance of sexual subjectivity, defined on page 11 as “the ability to know and express oneself as a sexual person with desires, rights, and boundaries...”

Tolman outlines the problem that “the dynamics underpinning pressure on girls to restrain their sexuality have become more subtle and variable than before” in the introduction, and shows that boys who express sexuality are considered healthy, while girls are seen as bad. She goes on to say that controlling female sexuality is a major component to the oppression of women on which patriarchy finds its base, citing Adrienne Rich’s use of the term “compulsory heterosexuality” as a way of maintaining gender inequity. As a developmental researcher, Tolman completed her doctoral studies with Carol Gilligan, who is known

for confronting the “morality of care” so that women’s voices can be heard among the quantitative research that can label men’s experiences normal and incorrectly pathologizing women whose experience differs. Tolman also quotes another major influence, Michelle Fine, through different parts of the book, including this on page 80: “While too few safe spaces exist for adolescent women’s exploration of sexual subjectivities, there are all too many dangerous spots for their exploitation.”

A theme through most of the interviews is the girls’ awareness that having sexual intercourse puts them at risk. The idea that it might be part of regular, healthy development to begin having desire clashes with the messages that feature more prominently for girls. Tolman argues that the roles that women are allowed by society serve to keep them subservient; for those that admit to sexual desire or behavior, they understand that disclosing this is likely to lead to “being judged,” as one girl says, often by hurting one’s reputation and being labeled a slut or a “bad girl.”

The book consists of seven chapters and then further explanation, notes, and references follow. It starts with “Getting beyond ‘It just happened’” which sets up the background and rationale for the research questions and approaches. The second chapter talks about the sample of girls that she interviewed, explaining the value of having girls from both urban and suburban schools, those that disclosed sexual abuse or rape and how she responded, and sexual orientation. This chapter also talks about the unexpected silence and lack of safety she sensed when she had the girls meet together for a simple orientation. The next five chapters offer the interview content and the information and interpretation of what the girls said. Tolman first introduces those who could not acknowledge or sense sexual desire. They “did not experience their sexual desire as posing a dilemma – they lived it.” With each chapter, she moves on to discussing girls who have greater recognition of sexual desire, illustrating the different conflicts that each experiences.

Tolman offers directions for providing safer space for girls, especially recommending that adult women normalize the dilemmas and inequality of sexual development. She briefly mentions that boys need more appropriate spaces and ways of learning about male sexuality, and pushes for both to learn about the gender inequality in relationships. This is one part of the book, however, that lacks depth and context. It may be that Tolman considers the realm of male sexual development outside of the scope of this work, but there are questions left unanswered about adolescent boys that seem crucial to improving the health and balancing power.

Tolman’s success in arguing that women and girls have few healthy choices because of society’s conflicting messages presents comes from her integration of the actual words of those she interviewed with research. Though this qualitative approach may require thinking about gathering information in a new way, Tolman presents her information articulately and thoughtfully. Some of my frustration as a reader comes more from the inability of the girls to name or claim any of the emotional or cognitive processes involved in their decisions – which is exactly how Tolman demonstrates that the dilemmas occur within adolescents. Not surprisingly, Tolman is currently conducting longitudinal studies on the role of social context of television on the abilities of boys and girls to pursue healthy relationships. I look forward to reading more from her as she illuminates such an ignored contribution to adolescent development.

I recommend this book for its clear, strong message and because it opens a topic that we desperately need to include in parenting and education. Tolman says that this project prompted her to consider – for the first time! – some of the ways that her sexual development had been impeded by societal messages of danger. If someone with an early and well-developed sense of the obstacles to female sexuality learns something from the voices of young women, then it is something that will provide readers with meaningful insight that is both personal and cultural.

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**jennifer says**

this book is AMAZING.

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## Nicola says

When researching *Dilemmas of Desire*, Deborah Tolman expected to uncover a wealth of feelings about sexuality from teenage girls who had never had the opportunity to reveal or interrogate their sexual identity. Instead, she found a number of girls who were so detached from their sexuality that they had “silent bodies” that deadened any sexual feelings. They described their sexual experiences in terms of “it just happened” and “I just went along with what he wanted”.

Tolman’s “silent bodies” theory is a really interesting one. Unfortunately, this book is as dull as dishwater.

Firstly, Tolman’s study isn’t a very in-depth one. She conducted interviews with ~30 high-school-age girls. That’s it. That’s all. She brings in some outside material, but the vast majority of the book hangs on these 30 interviews. The interview material is used exhaustively. As a PhD thesis, I’m sure this is fine. But when something is bound and I pay money for it, I expect a little more, y’know?

Tolman’s writing is unbearably dry, repetitive and filled with academiespeak clichés. *Dilemmas* is not a long book, but even the interesting parts are a misery to read. As something to dip into for a quote on female sexuality to use in an essay, it’s fine – as something to read for pleasure, well, just don’t bother.

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## Susan Edelman says

Very interesting and complicated subject. This book helped me write my book.

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## Brad says

Probably the best angle taken by any author on the subject of women's sexuality, and sexual autonomy. She does a nice job of discussing her research in a way that is both interesting and emphasizes the humanity and individuality of the girls she studies.

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## Michael says

This was an eye-opening book for me in terms of female sexuality for both teens and adults, as well as just what sexuality is. The book made me aware of some blind spots I have, even though most people would consider me to be a Sensitive New Age Guy in many respects.

Executive summary: important reading for school counselors, teachers, parents, coaches, youth workers, and anyone pursuing women's studies. There is a great deal of dysfunction in our society, and this book sheds some light on a major chunk of that dysfunctionality.

The book is not an examination of how sexually active teenage females are in America (although that is part of the discussion) or any of the related topics that have been heavily studied. It's really much more about

trying to understand how being female affects adolescence (and beyond) in our society—everything from drug and alcohol use to friendships to academics (and yes, sexual behavior, too).

One of the most thought-provoking concepts was Tolman's repeated contrast between the subjective and the objective. Being a science major, I tend to appreciate objectivity, so I was puzzled at first by her positioning the objective in a negative light. Then I realized that she was using a different meaning for this pair of words: objective, as in, seeing oneself (or seeing another person) as a sex object for others, vs. subjective, as in, seeing oneself (or another) as in control of one's own sexuality. Or, in grammatical terms, being the subject of a sentence instead of an object.

And just what is sexuality, anyway? It's not something most people think about much, and it frequently is made synonymous with sexual orientation/preference, which is a gross oversimplification. Tolman made me aware of just how large a role sexuality plays in our everyday lives. How do we allow ourselves to be perceived by others of our own gender? Of the opposite gender? How do we perceive others based on gender? How do these perceptions influence our decisions?

One of Tolman's findings that was interesting was the influence of living in urban vs. suburban surroundings on how her subjects related to other girls their own age. Related was the role that older women (and not just family members) play in shaping the sexuality of teenage girls.

The book is not light reading—it is a university-level work describing her research and methods. The text is scholarly, yet still quite readable. Tolman went a little bit over my head in a few places, as I am not a sociologist, but the confusion was minimal and I was generally able to grasp her point from context.

Tolman's extensive use of interview transcripts from her conversations with her subjects and her careful analysis of what they said (and didn't say) was excellent. I am still chewing on the content of this book, and will need at least a partial re-read in the near future, I think.

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