

Book Review

What Adolescents Ought to Know: Sexual Health Texts in Early Twentieth-Century America

Jennifer Burek Pierce

Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011

Reviewed by: Christina Hodel
University of Kansas

Sex education is a contentious topic among parents and educators, and there is currently much debate about what should and should not be included in such edification. Abstinence-only education, abstinence-only-until-marriage education, and comprehensive sex education are just some of the many programs designed to educate adolescents about their health and sexualities.¹ Causing further disagreement is that some of these programs, mainly the abstinence-only programs, have been proven ineffective, but due to tradition or rigid moral standards, are often still used in both schools and contemporary health books. Since the advent of sex education programs, these ongoing debates have plagued society: what should and should not be taught?

The 1901 publication of *Pour nos fils, quand ils auront 18 ans: quelques conseils d'un médecin* by renowned French physician and eminent syphilologist Dr. Alfred Fournier provided competing understandings of adolescent sexuality. Fournier turned a “prudent pen” (p. 19) toward youth sex education yet established crucial milestones in the creation and distribution of sexuality texts. Inspired by Fournier’s pioneering spirit, Jennifer Burek Pierce, assistant professor at the University of Iowa’s School of Library and Information Science, wrote *What Adolescents Ought to Know: Sexual Health Texts in Early Twentieth-Century America*. This engaging monograph examines important historical moments (from the late 1800s to the 1930s) of the first publications of educational health and sexuality texts written for adolescents. Realizing that there were gaps in previous research due to the focus on national, linguistic, or other barriers that prevented the sharing of health-related information, Pierce introduces new primary texts. The introduction of these new texts demonstrates how the creation of educational youth-oriented sexual health literature reveals transnational interests in shaping youth health and sexuality.

What Adolescents Ought to Know is an effective, finely written, and comprehensive examination of the French origins of sexual health texts for adolescents, their transnational intersection with and rising prominence in the United States, and the successful selling and reception of health and sexuality texts for teens. Beginning with Fournier’s simple yet revolutionary act of devising a health treatise based on his clinical work in France, Pierce examines the proliferation of reformers around the world who were encouraged to publish health texts for adolescents. Pierce’s explorations provide insight into how material was developed and how societal standards were implied, as well as how publications were made

compelling enough for young audiences in order for them to be translated and distributed worldwide.

Peirce tells a compelling story of how information about sexual health was a sensitive topic only discussed in the privacy of one's home. While publishing such material for youth may seem like a progressive move during the final years of the 19th century, much of the writing at the time focused on moral issues and sometimes omitted proven scientific information. However, the information revolution was sympathetic toward adolescents and Pierce attractively traced the resulting print culture to prove its well-meaning intentions. Forerunners like Fournier are still considered heroes for their role in the proliferation of these texts and Pierce nicely balances contemporary accounts of these various writers' heroism with more recent academic disparagements of their faithfulness to the cultural standards of their times.

Chapter 1 begins with a thorough discussion of the ever-important Fournier, whose expertise led him to play a central part in France's effort to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among youth. Pierce is careful to analyze the significance of Fournier's role and influence in France because he became the expert on syphilis and headed the movement of stopping its transmission. Pierce rightly uses Fournier's impact and ground-breaking leadership in producing health texts for youth along with his associations at the center of Progressive era hygiene campaigns as the framework for analysis. By structuring her book around Fournier's accomplishments, Pierce provides context for readers who are new to the niche world of the history of health texts.

Having established Fournier's foundation for the distribution of health texts in France, in Chapter 2, Pierce shows how Fournier's work came to be known in the United States. Due to syphilis being a major problem in many areas, Fournier's activism about the subject attracted loyal followers around the globe. The launch of Fournier's publications and the creation of the French Society for Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis, an organization that ensured adolescents had access to sexual health information, inspired other health professionals to follow in his footsteps. In 1915, playwright Eugène Brieux wrote *Les avariés*, which further promoted Fournier's messages of the dangers of STIs to audiences in the United States. Additionally, Fournier so inspired American physician Prince A. Morrow that he created his own version of reform by establishing an informational society that based its mission on providing information to doctors via publications.

Chapter 3 explains the means by which sexual and reproductive health information gained a presence in the United States and abroad by means of hygienic societies and organizations as well as various legislation. Pierce provides specific examples of the spread of publications and explores in detail one of the first state-supported texts about sexuality aimed at youth. John N. Hurty, secretary of health from the state of Indiana, was inspired to create his own campaign about the spread of syphilis and published his own pamphlet, *Social Hygiene vs. the Sexual Plagues* (1909). Controversial in nature due to its emphasis on eugenics, biased sources, and outspoken views toward disease, the pamphlet was nonetheless successful, and Pierce details its worldwide distribution and positive reception as a means for accessible sexual health information.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the efficacious marketing and selling of sex education. Pierce thoroughly reviews the popularity of publications that melded religious ideology and reproductive health information by examining the manner that books were sold in the United States and abroad. Reverend and publisher Sylvanus Stall created his own global book series from 1897 to 1936 that became a lingering cultural icon reflecting the texts' durable position in

the youth sex education marketplace. Pierce is careful to appropriately recognize that those who published during this time had to defend the decency of their works. Authors met with like-minded individuals and groups that supported their work, meaning sexual health texts were often biased in that they reflected the opinions of their creators. However, Pierce is conscious of mentioning how unreceptive markets and government regulation helped to make texts balanced and scientific rather than just a promotion of one author's personal viewpoint.

Chapter 5 continues to look at public reception of publications and their censorship. Some critics of health texts for youth, such as Anthony Comstock, a postal inspector, helped in establishing the Comstock laws and other legislation that hindered publication and distribution of material. Pierce makes keen insights into the fact that, although hindered by some, the eventual popularization of these publications, which were readily available and widely accepted by youth, contributed to the approval of adolescence as a "cultural phenomenon" (p. 180).

Collectively, these five chapters illuminate the relevancy of research about historical health publications and provide much needed insight into little known—yet essential—aspects of healthcare, publishing, and societal beliefs of the time. Pierce's research is sound in that she distinguishes that differing analytical methods need to be employed when examining historical health publications for adolescents, especially when comparing them to different eras and when looking for any continuity among the various time periods. Included here would be comparisons among early medical writing on STIs, recent scholarly work on the history of medicine, and reform activity of the late Victorian era and early Progressive era. To accomplish this, each chapter practices a different methodology, depending on the primary sources used for research. Moving beyond primary sources, Pierce also traces a publication's acceptance. While she does not directly address parental or youth acceptance of the publications, she relies on other primary sources, including marketing information, reviews, diary entries, and public cultural acceptance to assist the reader with the many ways that these publications functioned.

Pierce's innovative work is a vital contribution to help understand the connections that fostered development of transnational print culture dedicated to disseminating sexual health information for adolescent readers. Pierce identifies that the examination of such work had to involve exploring and assessing numerous publications and their venues. She does a pleasing job of this by detailing the various public, private, and commercial outlets where these publications were delivered and distributed. Rather than looking at issues of power and authority that curtailed distribution of sexual health texts, Pierce illuminates the connections that fostered the development of transnational print culture dedicated to providing youth readers with sexual health information. In so doing, Pierce rightly asserts that she "begins to bridge presumed divides in the health community at that time and shows how texts were used to reshape cultural notions of adolescent health" (p. 3).

What Adolescents Ought to Know summarizes how various phenomena were reinterpreted and then published in the interest of disease prevention and social reform. Educators, sexual health specialists, health reformers, psychologists, historians, and students interested in these fields will no doubt find this book invaluable. Those with an interest in the history of book publishing will also find this manuscript priceless for it specifically outlines the unique publication trajectory of some of the initial sexual health texts written for the youth demographic.

References

- Alford, S. (2001). Sex education programs: Definition and point-by-point comparison. *Transitions*, 12(3), 4.
- Brieux, E. (1915). *Les avariés, pièce en trois actes* (35th ed.). Paris: P. V. Stock.
- Fournier, A. (1901). *Pour nos fils, quand ils auront 18 ans: quelques conseils d'un médecin*. Paris: R. Tancrède.
- Hurty, J. N. (1909). *Social hygiene vs. the sexual plagues*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana State Board of Health.
- Pierce, J. B. (2011). *What adolescents ought to know: Sexual health texts in early twentieth-century America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Stall, S. (1897). *What a young boy ought to know*. Philadelphia: Vir Publishing.

Note

¹ Alford (2001) notes that abstinence-only education teaches abstinence as the only morally correct option of sexual expression for teenagers. This form of education averts information about contraception and condoms for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintentional pregnancy. In a similar fashion, abstinence-only-until-marriage education teaches abstinence as the only morally correct option for unmarried youth. Likewise, this form of education also censors material about contraception and condoms. Comprehensive sex education teaches about abstinence as the method of choice for avoiding STIs and unintentional pregnancy but allows for information about condoms and contraception. Additionally, comprehensive sex education also instills relational and communication skills.

Christina Hodel is a PhD student and practicing filmmaker in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of Kansas. She received her MA in Individualized Study (Dance/Film) in 2008 from New York University and her BA in Film and Electronic Arts in 2006 from California State University, Long Beach. Her current research explores issues of gender, identity, and girl power in contemporary tween television. Other areas of research include self-reflexivity and autobiography in film.