

6-2009

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### Repository Citation

Boryczka, Jocelyn M., "Whose Responsibility? The Politics of Sex Education Policy in the United States" (2009). *Politics Faculty Publications*. 13.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/politics-facultypubs/13>

### Published Citation

Boryczka, Jocelyn. (June 2009) "Whose Responsibility? The Politics of Sex Education Policy in the United States," *Politics & Gender*, Cambridge University Press, 5 (2), pp. 185-210.

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# Whose Responsibility? The Politics of Sex Education Policy in the United States

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Whose responsibility is it — that of the individual, society, or both — to meet the needs of citizens and to what degree, how, when, and why? This article investigates this set of inquiries by examining the ongoing debate over sex education in the United States between advocates for the abstinence-only and the comprehensive approaches, conveyed here through their curricula. The debate reflects a broader ideological struggle over how a democratic political community distributes moral responsibility. Personal responsibility is illustrated by abstinence-only curricula, whereas social responsibility is made evident in the comprehensive approach. These approaches establish a dualistic framework for understanding morality that marginalizes politics, deflecting attention away from the moral assumptions behind the gendered distribution of resources in a political community. Collective responsibility, this article argues, provides an alternative moral groundwork and inclusive conceptual perspective that brings politics and the power dynamics of the distributive function within a community into focus. From a collective perspective, the answer to the question “whose responsibility?” then shifts from either the individual or society to both at the same time.

**T**he ongoing debate over American sex education policy centers around the fact that the U.S. teen birth, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease (STD) rates rank among the highest in the developed world (Luker 2006; Singh and Darroch 2000; Ventura et al. 2006). Advocates

I gratefully acknowledge the helpful input and comments of the editors and anonymous reviewers, Joan Tronto, Traci Levy, and Julie Ann White on earlier drafts; Beth Boquet for support at a crucial juncture; and the assistance of Maxwell Ciardullo, Information Associate, and the staff at SIECUS for granting access to their sex education curricula collection.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/09 \$20.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X09000154

for abstinence-only and comprehensive approaches disagree as to whether teaching only abstinence from all sexual activity until marriage or including abstinence, reproduction, and contraception in sex education curricula represent the best way to address this problem. These opposing positions reflect a broader ideological struggle over how to answer the question: Whose responsibility is it primarily, the individual's or society's, to meet which citizens' needs and to what degree, how, when, and why? This set of inquiries, summed up here as the "whose responsibility" question, directs attention to the gendered dynamics of power and the political significance of assumptions behind the ways a community distributes moral responsibility among its members, which, I argue, indicates the need for a feminist revisioning of responsibility.

The abstinence-only approach currently defines U.S. sex education policy at home and abroad.<sup>1</sup> Over the past decade, 48 states received nearly \$1 billion in federal funding to support abstinence-only programs, and 86% of America's public school districts currently mandate that sex education curricula promote abstinence (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2006). President George W. Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, modeled on Uganda's "ABC" (Abstain, Be Careful, Use Condoms) program, extended the Bush administration's commitment to abstinence across the globe.<sup>2</sup>

Supporters of abstinence only, identifying the individual as the answer to the whose responsibility question, advance an ideological commitment to personal responsibility. President Bush in his 2004 State of the Union Address, for instance, highlighted the success of abstinence-only programs by attributing declines in abortion and teen pregnancy to "a revolution of conscience, in which a rising generation is finding that a life of personal responsibility is a life of fulfillment." Conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Medical Institute, and Focus on the Family emphasize the importance of personal responsibility in sex education. *Heritage Keepers*, an abstinence-only teachers manual, conveys this perspective when stating its overall purpose as empowering "individuals and families to pursue the characteristics of personal responsibility, honor, and integrity, through education and personal relationship building" (Badgley et al. 2004, 1).

1. Three federal funding streams support abstinence-only education: the Adolescent Family Life Act, Section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act, and the Community-Based Abstinence Education Program established in 2001 (Advocates for Youth and SIECUS 2001, 7–11; SIECUS "The Federal Government & Abstinence-Only-Until Marriage Programs" Factsheet).

2. Brown, David. 2006. "GAO Criticizes Bush's AIDS Plan" *Washington Post*. 5 April, A03. <http://www.washingtonpost.com> (Accessed July 1, 2008).

This path to moral character development aims to empower each young person to stand against societal forces and abstain from all sexual activity as the only way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies, STDs, and a range of health problems. The abstinence-only approach to personal responsibility then aligns with liberalism by portraying individuals as independently determining their destinies by struggling against and overcoming the negative forces of economic challenges, societal pressures, and political barriers.

Proponents for comprehensive sex education focus on society to a greater degree in their response to the whose responsibility question. This approach, while emphasizing abstinence, teaches young people factual information about many aspects of sex and sexuality to help them navigate within, not stand against, societal forces by developing relationship, decision-making, and communication skills. Personal responsibility does remain part of this discourse. President Bill Clinton, for instance, declared that “we have to work to instill within every young man and woman a sense of personal responsibility, a sense of self-respect, and a sense of possibility” when announcing the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy in 1996 (McClain 2006, 263).

Organizations advancing the comprehensive approach, however, highlight the social dimension of responsibility by clearly locating the individual within relationships and a broader structural context. Advocates for Youth, for example, states in its mission that “society has the *responsibility* to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves from too-early child-bearing and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV” (“What We Believe”). Society should provide the structural support that young people need to make responsible decisions about their sexual behavior. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) *Guidelines*, used to develop comprehensive curricula, highlight relationships, social forces such as the media, and the role of educators, doctors, friends, and families as essential in teaching young people to assume responsibility for themselves and others. Social responsibility then characterizes the ideological orientation of the comprehensive approach since it identifies relationships and society as integral to, not separate from, how young people make moral decisions about sex and sexuality.

Responsibility acts as the ethical tipping point in determining which direction each educational approach takes, linking this debate to

concerns central to feminist ethics and political theory. Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) is a primary point of departure for feminist analysis of this moral and political concept. Gilligan demarcates the separate moral sphere of men's ethic of rights associated with public life from women's ethic of responsibility related to care and compassion in the private sphere. Two related feminist ethical approaches — responsibility and care — emanate from Gilligan's work. This present study brings elements of both approaches together in focusing on the distributive function of responsibility that reveals this moral concept as a site of gendered political power.

Joan Tronto's ethics of care and Margaret Urban Walker's ethics of responsibility explore this distributive function from political and moral perspectives and are helpful in answering the whose responsibility question. Tronto develops the political dimension of responsibility in her argument for care as both a moral value and "a basis for the political achievement of a good society" (1993, 9). Responsibility represents the ethical counterpart to "taking care of," the second phase of care when we decide for whom, when, how, and why we assume responsibility for meeting our own and others' needs (1993, 106–7, 131–33). This flexible, often ambiguous, moral decision-making process integrates responsibility into the cultural practices and social contexts that influence the distribution of resources on a personal and political level (1993, 131–33). Tronto shows how women's primary responsibility for caregiving in the private sphere transfers to the public sphere, where women dominate lower-paying jobs such as nurses, maids, teachers, and day-care providers. This results in gender inequality, highlighting the structural context and political implications of this distributive process.

Walker looks at the gendered distribution of care from a different angle. Her ethics of responsibility, by backgrounding the political and foregrounding the personal, targets moral assumptions that often appear as natural or given in the distributive process in order to track exercises of domination and oppression. Society from this perspective operates according to the gendered assumption that women in their natural role as caregivers will fulfill the responsibility to meet their family's basic needs in the private sphere. Walker charts such "*geographies of responsibility*" in order to map "the structure of standing assumptions that guides the distribution of responsibilities — how they are assigned, negotiated, deflected — in particular forms of moral life" (1998, 99). I expand on these three standing moral assumptions by linking them

explicitly to the political arena through the distributive function of responsibility in order to identify shifting gendered power dynamics across and within boundaries of a political community. Responsibility in this study, reflecting Tronto and Walker's work, is defined as the geography of moral decision making that involves interrogating the standing assumptions that determine how to distribute personal, social, economic, and political resources to whom, when, and why to meet the needs, wants, and desires of the self and others in a community.

This study charts the geographies of personal and social responsibility by comparing how abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education curricula teach teens about the moral decision-making process related to sexual behavior. This site proves rich for feminist analysis. Gender, sex, and sexuality intersect with responsibility in sex education curricula, providing a space for examining the range of moral assumptions behind the public debates among parents, educators, health-care providers, and politicians over how schools teach young men and women about their bodies, sex roles, sexuality, and appropriate morals and behaviors. This study investigates the gendered power dynamics involved in these assumptions by first outlining how internal and external boundaries establish a dualistic framework between and around personal and social responsibility. Then I focus on the political implications of this framework by examining how the three standing assumptions — deflection, assignment, and negotiation — operate in three aspects of abstinence-only and comprehensive curricula: sex and sexuality, the sexual division of labor, and moral decision making.

These geographies together illustrate how the dualistic logic of personal responsibility, conveyed by abstinence-only curricula, counters the feminist and democratic goals of inclusion, equality, and freedom. The inclusive logic of social responsibility, made evident through comprehensive curricula, advances these goals to a greater degree. However, it also involves limitations arising from certain gendered operations and an external dualistic framework. Personal and social responsibility, when seen as working in tandem, I argue, marginalize politics to the extent that it becomes a moral assumption instead of a responsibility, preventing a full understanding of the gendered power dynamics involved in determining the distribution of resources in a political community.

I propose a feminist revisioning of responsibility, informed by Hannah Arendt, that addresses these limitations. Collective responsibility, I argue, moves from the dualistic framework of either personal or social responsibility to an inclusive moral groundwork. It moves politics from

the margins to the center of analysis in order to chart the gendered power operating in the assumptions behind a community's moral decision-making process. Politics here refers to the dominant and subordinate relationships constructed within and between categories of people that determine the distribution of resources and the way in which people engage in formal and informal activities, ranging from voting to social protest, that shapes their membership in the community. Collective responsibility brings politics and the power dynamics of distribution within a community into focus, shifting the answer to the whose responsibility question from either the individual or society to both at the same time.

### **THE DUALISTIC FRAMEWORK OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Feminist political theorists and ethicists identify dualisms such as public man and private woman as establishing an epistemological framework exclusive of women and their way of knowing the world that perpetuates gender oppression in the social, political, and economic spheres (Elshtain 1981; Jaggar 1991; Pateman 1988). Applying this feminist understanding of dualisms, defined as oppositional categories that never overlap, to personal and social responsibility uncovers two boundaries that create a moral framework antithetical to democratic politics (Plumwood 1993). The first boundary internally separates pairs of relatively fixed categories of knowledge, action, values, beliefs, and people according to varying levels of permeability that determine the exclusive logic of personal responsibility and the inclusive logic of social responsibility. The second, relatively impermeable, boundary establishes an external framework, literally conceived of as two vertical and two horizontal sides that create a frame around the oppositional pair, which excludes those categories outside the personal-social dualism. These internal and external boundaries form the dualistic framework for personal and social responsibility that results in a way of understanding morality that marginalizes politics.

Abstinence-only curricula illustrate the exclusive logic of personal responsibility by establishing a clear internal boundary between the self and society in order to protect against external, intervening societal forces beyond the individual's control. Young people learn in these curricula that the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s transformed

America into a highly sexualized culture against which they must defend themselves. According to Focus on the Family, *Heritage Keepers*, and *Why kNOw?* curricula, abstinence, which is the new sexual revolution, empowers young people to resist the negative societal forces that promote promiscuity — particularly the media — in order to cultivate a responsible moral character. The *Heritage Keepers* manual, for instance, instructs teachers to explain that “it is the struggle itself that creates character, personal responsibility, and an ethical foundation for the rest of your life. Have faith in yourself and always keep your future spouse in mind!” (Badgley 2004, 66). Commitment ceremonies, a hallmark of abstinence-only programs, strengthen teens’ resolve to resist the corrosive influence of society. A pastor or priest often presides over these ceremonies in which teens first take a virginity pledge. Parents then give their child a purity ring to symbolize each teen’s commitment to chastity until marriage. The purpose of these ceremonies is to hold young people accountable for their actions before their parents, congregation, and God. Abstinence-only programs, while recognizing the role of family, religion, and community, shift the onus of responsibility to the individual teen by building such an impermeable boundary around them that society essentially becomes a negative, intrusive force.

This emphasis on the individual highlights certain strengths and weaknesses of the exclusive logic of personal responsibility in terms of democratic politics. Individualism promotes the capacity to stand up for one’s beliefs in the face of societal, economic, and political forces. It also represents the privacy and private sphere that protect personal rights and freedoms against unwarranted government intervention. Together, these two elements help to secure the autonomy and independence needed for people to engage freely and equally as full citizens in a democracy. The exclusive logic of personal responsibility, however, also moves the structural dimensions of society so far to the margins that these factors appear tangential to the ways in which people actually live in society and navigate complex relationships. The relatively impermeable boundary between the individual self and society further prevents critical analysis of the norms, attitudes, and beliefs that shape how young men and women understand sex and sexuality. The exclusive logic of personal responsibility then moves the politics associated with public life and its gendered power relationships to the periphery.

Comprehensive curricula, alternatively, draw a more permeable boundary between the individual teen and society, reflecting its more inclusive logic of social responsibility. The SIECUS *Guidelines*, for



instance, present a teen's individual attitudes and values as developing in relation to "family members, individuals of all genders, sexual partners, and society at large" that help "young people understand their obligations and responsibilities to their families and society" (National Guidelines Task Force 2004, 19). Race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, the *Guidelines* also emphasize, play a critical role in teaching healthy sexuality. Engaging with, instead of resisting, societal forces and relationships characterizes the comprehensive approach to moral development. Teens, then, learn how to critically assess the positive and negative messages about sex and sexuality communicated by the media. Students in a Planned Parenthood lesson, for example, work in groups to gather images and messages about sexuality from magazine advertisements (2004–2005, "Creating Positive Adolescent Sexuality Messages Workshop"). They sort them into negative and positive categories, explain their reasons for doing so to the entire class, and finally create a positive advertisement about sexuality.

Such lessons convey how comprehensive curricula's inclusion of the complex contexts and structural forces that influence moral decisions aim to empower young people by teaching them how to engage effectively in society. The SIECUS *Guidelines* speak directly to the importance of political engagement by identifying the ability to "exercise democratic responsibility to influence legislation dealing with sexual issues" as a life behavior of a sexually healthy adult (National Guidelines Task Force 2004, 16–17). The inclusive logic of social responsibility informing the comprehensive approach then suggests its greater capacity to address politics.

The relatively impermeable external boundary framing personal and social responsibility, however, ultimately limits both approaches by pushing politics to the margins. Personal responsibility, consistent with its dualistic logic of exclusion, erects such a high barrier between the individual and society that the gendered power dynamics involved in resisting societal pressures, which function differently for young men and women, escape consideration. The external boundary around the personal-social dualism further excludes politics, which moves into the category of negative social forces, in this case, associated with government intervention into private life. Social responsibility also functions within this external dualistic framework, which, by excluding politics, works against its internal inclusive logic. Focusing on the social at the expense of the personal deflects attention away from the political importance of empowering individuals to stand up against societal

norms, beliefs, values, and forces. A range of gendered power dynamics operating in society that perpetuate assumptions, moral and otherwise, about male and female sex and sexuality also moves to the margins. Comprehensive curricula, as a result, fail to teach young people to recognize, much less interrogate, certain dominant masculine constructions, particularly about female sexual desire, that leave conventional gendered power relationships in place.

This dualistic framework also shifts attention away from political solutions to social problems, as indicated by the limited scope of proposed sex education legislation in the U.S. Senate and House. The American commitment to personal responsibility builds such a high boundary between the people and the state that the epistemological understanding of the broader community narrows into social relationships, which prevents the people and politicians from seriously considering the structural and economic factors that impact teen sexual behavior (Darroch et al. 2001, 7–8).

Most European nations locate comprehensive sex education within a set of government policies designed to transition young people into the job market and higher education, provide easy access to medical services, and guarantee universal health insurance, three factors that contribute to their lower teen pregnancy and STD rates (Darroch 2001, 89–90). The Responsible Education for Life Act introduced in the U.S. Senate and House in 2007, in stark contrast, adds contraception *only* to the information about abstinence provided in family life education. This legislation's failure to incorporate broader structural factors illustrates how the external boundary framing personal and social responsibility blocks positive government intervention into the social arena of sex and sexuality. Politics, due to the dualistic dynamics of personal and social responsibility, becomes an arena abandoned to moral assumptions instead of one engaging democratic citizens with the government as a necessary component in addressing the structural aspect of social problems.

### **DEFLECTION AND EXCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF THE RELATIONAL APPROACH**

Deflection, the first geography of responsibility examined here, tracks how differing views on human relationships determine the way in which abstinence-only and comprehensive curricula define sex and sexuality, which establishes who assumes responsibility for teaching, what

information is provided to teens, when, how, and why. The deflection process emphasizes one category instead of another, which becomes a default for moral assumptions and justifies the exclusion of categories of information and groups. Attention to the link between relationships and responsibility in this context affords the opportunity to assess how well the relational approach developed in feminist political theory and ethics succeeds in solving the problem of exclusion.

Abstinence-only curricula confine sexuality to male–female relationships and exclude the physical aspect of sex by defining it in terms of the emotional, moral, and psychological bonds found in faithful heterosexual marriages. Secondary virginity, commonly taught in these programs, illustrates how these curricula deny the physical reality of sexual intercourse. Teens learn that they can recover their sexual purity simply by recommitting emotionally and mentally to abstinence. Abstinence-only curricula must, according to the Heritage Foundation, exclude *all* information about human reproduction and contraceptives in order to qualify as authentic (Martin, Rector, and Pardue 2004, 15). Excluding the physical dimension then justifies deflecting responsibility for teaching about it from sex education to health and biology courses.

Additionally, abstinence-only curricula narrowly categorize sexuality as heterosexuality and portray homosexuality as a choice — the wrong choice, leading only to negative sexual outcomes, particularly HIV/AIDS and STDs (Kempner 2001, 46–47). Zero percent of *authentic* abstinence-only curricula, a Heritage Foundation study finds, include the subject of homosexuality (Martin, Rector, and Pardue 2004, 15). These programs then deflect responsibility for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and questioning (GLBTQ) teens, 80% of whom report severe problems resulting from intense feelings of isolation (Campos 2002, 160). Information about and relevant to an entire category of vulnerable teens remains excluded. The framing of sexuality only as heterosexuality, sex as emotional and not physical, and in, not outside, faithful heterosexual marriage illustrates how the exclusive logic of personal responsibility facilitates the deflection process that shifts responsibility to a default category in order to justify denying access to certain information and groups.

Comprehensive programs, in contrast, decouple sex and sexuality from heterosexual marriage, which expands the scope of information and groups covered in these curricula to include the physical, in addition to emotional, mental, sociocultural, and spiritual aspects of sex. The *Be Proud! Be Responsible!* manual, for instance, explicitly instructs teens

about contraception by, among other things, having them practice condom use with their fingers, cucumbers, bananas, or plastic phalluses (Jemmott et al. 1996). A variety of physical sexual activities ranging from vaginal intercourse and oral and anal sex to masturbation, as well as forms of sexual play, also receive coverage in these programs. This approach, though more inclusive, overlooks the different ways that young men and women experience sexual pleasure. The *SIECUS Guidelines*, for instance, while identifying women's need for some clitoral stimulation, emphasizes variation in sexual response among individuals without specifying the differences between young men and women. Failure to address the specific issue of female sexual desire and pleasure leaves the masculine constructions of sexual norms and practices in place, which, as feminist theorists contend, sustains male domination at this critical site of political power (Fine 1988; Millett 2000). Attention, instead of turning to standing moral assumptions about female chastity and modesty, deflects away from the sexual politics of female desire.

Comprehensive curricula directly engage with the heterosexism evident in abstinence-only curricula. Sexuality, accordingly, includes the full spectrum of orientations, from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian to transsexual, bisexual, and questioning that, as the *SIECUS Guidelines* explains, represent a part of human development, not a choice (National Guidelines Task Force 2004, 29–31). A Planned Parenthood lesson on sexuality stereotypes then has students first identify and then challenge stereotypes and myths about gays and lesbians, such as their appearance, sexual promiscuity, and AIDS as a “gay” disease (2004–2005, “#7: Sexuality Stereotypes”). Lessons in these curricula also integrate different sexual orientations into various topic areas. Comprehensive curricula then assume, instead of deflect, responsibility for the nearly 2.6 million GLBTQ teens by educating about sexual orientation and for teaching accurate information about the physical dimension of sex (Campos 2002, 156). The inclusive logic of social responsibility informing this approach counters the deflection process by addressing various categories of information and groups and encouraging young people to challenge certain moral assumptions about sexuality. Focus on the social, however, deflects attention away from the sexual politics of female desire.

Relationships that determine either an emphasis on personal or social responsibility in both curricula connect this part of the analysis to a central aspect of feminist political theory and ethics. The relational approach offers an alternative perspective to liberal individualism by building from the complex, overlapping relationships that form the social

contexts in which people actually live. Identifying the link between the self and others as inherent allows the relational approach to challenge a dualistic way of knowing the world by bridging the space between oppositional categories in order to make boundaries more permeable, facilitating greater inclusion. Martha Minow and Mary Shanley (1996) use this approach, for instance, to argue for relational rights and responsibilities as a way to reconfigure family law by bringing the relational practices of care often associated with the family from the private into public life in order to escape the limits of the liberal justice paradigm's individualistic perspective. Here, I assess the extent to which the relational approach can address the intertwined problems of deflection and exclusion within the dualistic framework of personal and social responsibility.

Linda McClain's analysis of American sex education policy, which supports the comprehensive approach, illustrates how the deflection process works within a liberal feminist argument that uses the relational approach to try to overcome the boundary between public and personal responsibility. Relational autonomy functions to bridge these dualistic categories by accounting for the public's role in shaping a person's identity and capacity for self-governance (McClain 2006, 18). McClain asserts that the government should assume *public* responsibility for ensuring that citizens can self-govern by fostering their capacity to assume *personal* responsibility for decisions related to their families, whether it involves marriage, abortion, or sex education (2006, 8–9). The relational approach aims to close the gap between the public and private that characterizes liberalism by making the boundary between the government's public and the people's personal responsibility more permeable. McClain, however, goes on to argue that "personal responsibility with respect to forming families and parenting is an important value that government may properly foster" through "the allocation of responsibility to individuals, rather than to government, to make personal decisions about sexual intimacy, marriage, reproduction, and parenting" (2006, 8). Despite an initial move toward integrating the two, she foregrounds the individual's capacity for exercising personal responsibility and backgrounds the government's public responsibility to its citizens. This shift deflects attention away from exploring the possibilities of positive government intervention to support decisions made in the private sphere. The dualistic relationship between the public and personal channels the flow of responsibility in McClain's argument to one direction — from the government to the

citizens — without inversely accounting for the citizens' responsibility to their government.

The unidirectional nature of relationships within dualistic frameworks, I argue, limits the relational approach by directing movement from one category to the other instead of between both simultaneously. This deflection process clearly operates in the dualistic logic of personal responsibility that, as illustrated by abstinence-only curricula, severs the link between the individual and society, undermining the relational approach and excluding categories of knowledge and people. McClain's argument, also functioning according to this logic, similarly deflects attention away from the government and to the personal. The inclusive logic of social responsibility, as conveyed by comprehensive curricula, alternatively, counters deflection and exclusion by assuming responsibility for teaching about a range of information, behaviors, and sexual identities. A focus on the social, however, deflects attention away from the individual and the political, which leaves assumptions about male and female sexual pleasure and the masculine exercise of power unchallenged. The dualistic framework around personal and social responsibility then reveals certain limits of the relational approach arising from this unidirectional motion that prevents the dynamic flow among the personal, social, and political that is necessary for identifying multiple categories simultaneously and navigating the boundaries between them in order to overcome the problem of exclusion.

#### **ASSIGNMENT AND INEQUALITY: THE GENDERED DISTRIBUTION OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Assignment, the second geography of responsibility, charts the distribution of moral responsibility among different categories of people according to standing assumptions about identity that define social roles. Here, we examine how sex, gender, and sexuality operate in the way that abstinence-only and comprehensive curricula approach the traditional sexual division of labor between the male breadwinner and female caregiver. Gender identity, Walker contends, establishes the degree to which we recognize others as full moral subjects and the extent of our responsibility for them (1998, Chapters 7, 8). Tronto extends this position to broader issues of structural gender equality. She argues that men as caregivers exercise privileged irresponsibility, referring to "the opportunity simply to ignore certain forms of hardships that they do not

face,” granted to them by assigning to women as caregivers what I call the double burden of moral responsibility for taking care of themselves, their families, and their husbands, *and* their own sexuality and that of men (Boryczka 2009; Tronto 1993, 120–21). Focusing on gender identity tracks the degree to which each curriculum challenges the assumptions behind the distribution of moral responsibility that uphold the traditional sexual division of labor and determine the level of gender equality advanced by each.

Abstinence-only curricula portray the moral subject in the static terms of biologically determined sex roles that support an unequal gendered distribution of moral responsibility for sexual behavior. A *Heritage Keepers* lesson in which students learn about the traits assigned to men and women illustrates the implications of maintaining standing assumptions about gender identity. Female students discuss a “Be a Man!” handout that lists the four traits of a “real man” as strong, respectful, courageous, and protective, which supports stereotypes of male independence and power as grounded in their physical strength (Badgley 2004, 68). Male students review a “Be a Real Woman!” handout that positively addresses self-esteem and image by describing a “real woman” as knowing who and what she wants to become and as confident in this self-identity. The handout then states that “A Real Woman sends a clear message” through her speech, dress, and behavior that, rightly or wrongly, leads people to assume who she is based on how she looks (Badgley 2004, 66). A Real Woman must also “remember that most guys are more visually stimulated than girls, and they might mistake your fashion statement for a sexual statement. Make sure your sexual messages match your sexual values” (Badgley 2004, 66). The “Be a Man” handout, in contrast, lacks any reference to males’ responsibility for controlling their sexual behavior. Together, these traits reinforce the assumption, often used to justify sexual objectification, that women’s physical appearance can stimulate uncontrollable male desire. This failure to interrogate such standing assumptions defines women and men in terms that perpetuate the sexual double standard by assigning women the double burden of moral responsibility for their sexual behavior and that of men, who can continue to exercise the privileged irresponsibility that sustains gender inequality.

This static view of gender identity translates into the assignment of moral responsibility by the abstinence-only curricula along the traditional sexual division of labor’s gendered lines in order to maintain the male and female sex roles necessary for heterosexual marriage. A *Why kNOW?* lesson, for

example, instructs sixth graders first to write down on token chips the household responsibilities of their mothers and fathers, such as cleaning, cooking meals, employment outside the home, and bill paying, and then to place each token in one of two jars marked “Mother” and “Father” (Frainie 2002, 4). If confusion arises, the manual directs teachers to explain the “right” jar into which students should drop the token in order to educate them that men and women possess unique and different abilities. The teacher then removes one jar to show that only two heterosexual parents can meet a family’s gendered responsibilities. The previous *Heritage Keepers* lesson also conveys how the sexual division of labor creates the unequal distribution of responsibility for care in families. The “Be a Man!” handout, focused on traits that uphold the male breadwinner model, lacks any reference to male responsibility for care, indicating the privileged irresponsibility attributed to men as care receivers. The “Be a Real Woman!” handout, in contrast, spotlights women’s caregiving role by identifying “caring” as defining female character (Badgley 2004, 66).

This traditional sexual division of labor, grounded in the moral assumptions behind biologically determined sex roles, assigns women the double burden of moral responsibility for taking care of themselves, their husbands, and families, *and* for their own sexuality and that of men. Men then reserve the privilege to exercise irresponsibility for their sexual behavior and the care of others. This unequal distribution of moral responsibility derives from the static view of the moral subject consistent with the dualistic logic of personal responsibility that erects a high barrier around each individual who, seen as separate from society, acquires his or her identity from biology and tradition instead of social contexts and relationships.

Comprehensive curricula, in contrast, offer a more dynamic view of identity that focuses on how society constructs masculinity and femininity, which promotes a greater degree of gender equality by challenging the moral assumptions behind sex roles and the traditional sexual division of labor. An *Advocates for Youth* lesson, for instance, engages students in interrogating assumed gender roles by having them list the most damaging gender stereotypes associated with “male” and “female.” Same-gender groups then discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being a member of the other gender, and finally the entire class reflects on exceptions to traits such as male strength and female caring (Hunter-Geboy 1995, 266–67). These curricula convey how traditional sex roles diminish full human expression and



opportunities in life and encourage students to analyze them critically. The SIECUS *Guidelines*, for instance, rejects the sexual double standard, such as that found in the “Be a Real Woman!” handout, by stating that “in a sexual relationship, both partners, regardless of gender, have equal rights and responsibilities” (National Guidelines Task Force 2004, 73). This position, instead of assigning to women the double burden and to men privileged irresponsibility, redistributes moral responsibility for sexual behavior to men and women.

These curricula also show young people that the traditional sexual division of labor no longer reflects contemporary reality. A Planned Parenthood lesson, for example, instructs the facilitator to invite male nurses, female construction workers, and others from nontraditional jobs for men and women to come to class in order to demonstrate that most women work in the paid labor force and that men do perform “unconventional” labor (Hunter-Geboy 1995, 282–84). Such lessons convey a dynamic view of gender roles that challenges the traditional sexual division of labor in order to promote greater gender equality. Social responsibility, which informs this comprehensive approach, integrates society into the moral subject’s identity, thus destabilizing the moral assumptions behind “given” or biologically determined sex roles that support the distribution of moral responsibility according to the traditional sexual division of labor.

Tracking how gender identity determines the assignment of moral responsibility in both curricula indicates a stronger theoretical alignment between feminist political theory and ethics and social responsibility, given its dynamic view of the moral subject that advances gender equality by understanding identity as socially constructed. Here, I consider the gender dimension and political implications of the “social,” an arena traditionally assigned to women, for a feminist revisioning of responsibility. The social, broadly speaking, references an opaque set of human relationships found in the informal private sphere governed largely by norms and mores that correspond with responsibility, as opposed to the laws and rules associated with obligations in the formal political sphere (Tronto 1993, 133). Categorizing responsibility as social, I argue, sustains a strong conceptual link to women’s assigned role as moral guardians in the private sphere, which has traditionally justified their exclusion from the public arena and maintained the gendered boundary between morality and politics. Such gendered assumptions embedded in the social maintain, instead of redistribute, the double burden of moral responsibility assigned to women, which perpetuates their inequality.

The social also conceptually demarcates a sphere of life separate from the political. This arena of life remains difficult to identify precisely because it occupies a space somewhere between the political and the private often characterized, particularly in post–World War II America, in the expansive terms of mass society and mass culture. In *The Human Condition*, however, Hannah Arendt clarifies what the social means by depicting it as a realm “where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak of the natural,” which refers to the shift of labor and necessity from private into public life during the modern period (1958, 47). This organic quality differentiates the social from the political as the realm where humans assert control over the natural and often chaotic activities of social life. The demarcation of these two spheres holds important implications for responsibility. The “social,” I argue, deflects attention away from politics, understood as an arena of life characterized by citizens engaged in making decisions about distributing responsibilities and the resources to meet them. The social fails to challenge moral assumptions about who is assigned responsibility for such participation, allowing citizens to retain the power to exercise privileged irresponsibility for politics by deciding when, how, why, and to what degree they will engage in it. The heavy gendered weight and exclusion of politics in social responsibility approaches, I argue, provides a moral framework that fails to challenge sufficiently the assumptions behind gender inequality and the exercise of power by citizens in assuming responsibility for politics, thus undermining its capacity to advance a feminist revisioning of responsibility.

#### **NEGOTIATION AND CONSTRAINT: THE MORAL CHARACTER OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS**

Negotiation, the third geography of responsibility, refers to the process by which people, individually and collectively, interrogate through deliberation with the self and others the standing assumptions behind the choices involved in determining the distribution of moral responsibilities. An examination of the approach of both curricula to this negotiation illustrates how the differing logics of personal and social responsibility determine the range of choices available in this process that either expands or contracts the moral subject’s exercise of freedom and self-determination. This geography reveals that the exclusion of politics from the dualistic framework of personal or social responsibility

denies a full account of authority and its legitimacy in the negotiation process which, I argue, prevents democratic citizens from developing the moral freedom and capacity to deliberate, a component necessary for exercising the responsibility of political power.

Abstinence-only programs adopt a character-based curriculum that educates young people about the core ethical values necessary for assuming the personal responsibility to abstain from sex until marriage. This approach employs a dualistic logic that equates all teen sexual activity with the sin, evil, and vice that can only bring teens shame, guilt, and harm, a high moral barrier erected to show teens that abstinence is the *only* moral choice. Focus on the Family's *No Apologies* manual, for instance, categorizes all teen sexual activity as harmful by associating it with drugs, alcohol, violence, and smoking, the other high-risk behaviors for teens, in order to communicate the same "risk elimination" message about abstinence (1999, ii). This zero-tolerance approach aims to eliminate any information about reducing the risks of sexual activity in order to avoid sending mixed messages that might suggest any alternatives to abstinence and thus confuse teens. This absolutist position also leads these curricula to communicate scientifically inaccurate information, particularly about the risks of abortion and the effectiveness of condoms in preventing pregnancy, HIV, and STDs (U.S. House of Representatives 2004).

The True Love Waits program goes further to equate premarital sex with evil. Their Bible-based manual includes a church sermon on teen chastity that declares, "Satan's plan is for you to be sexually disoriented and confused; God's plan is to reveal His true nature through your commitment to purity" (1999–2000, 15). This apocalyptic language raises teen sex to the level of a struggle between God and Satan, good and evil in which the wrong decision condemns the teen, possibly for eternity. The portrayal of teens confused about sexuality as morally wrong and evil results from the intentional use of fear and shame to instill a commitment to abstinence (Kempner 2001; Rose 2005). This approach to moral decision making narrows into the choice either to abstain from sex or endure steep moral, social, and even religious consequences. This dualistic logic starkly identifies right from wrong to influence the teen's decision as much as possible by limiting the freedom to decide from among a range of choices.

Moral decision making further diminishes freedom and self-determination in the abstinence-only approach by advancing obedience to authority as critical to the assumption of personal responsibility that

defines moral character. Responsibility in these curricula results from a conception of freedom equated with discipline and obedience to rules. A *Why kNOw?* lesson on “What Is Freedom?” for instance, provides the formula “ $F = D + R$ ” to define freedom (F) as equaling discipline (D) plus rules (R). “True freedom,” students learn, is not doing what you want but “disciplining oneself to follow the rules to achieve self-mastery or dominance in a given situation” (Frainie 2002, 11). Traditions upholding abstinence as a moral standard dictate the rules that teens must obey in order to assume responsibility for themselves. The *Heritage Keepers* manual invokes America’s Judeo-Christian tradition; the *Why kNOw?* curriculum turns to a patriarchal tradition of marriage; and the True Love Waits program imposes the will of God.

Parents, primarily, along with certain educators and religious leaders, serve as the authority figures who communicate the normative standard of abstinence to teens and, presumably, the consequences of deviating from it. A Teen-Aid, Inc. lesson then teaches that “responsibility is built upon obeying consistently” since it “brings order to situations and prevents health and relationship problems” (Benn and Derby 1999). Consistent obedience to authority negates freedom of choice and closes off the opportunity to consider the assumptions behind religious and cultural traditions in which standards of behavior remain natural or givens. Abstinence-only curricula narrow negotiation into a process that requires young people either to accept or reject abstinence without questioning the voices of authority, which leaves in tact the assumptions about male sexual privilege and heterosexism.

Comprehensive programs, in contrast, take a value-neutral approach to making moral decisions premised on negotiating a range of choices about sex and sexuality. Abstinence, this approach emphasizes, remains the best choice for teens. Most American teens, however, have sex before their high school graduation and 95% of Americans have sex before marriage (Finer 2007). That these programs address such facts teaches teens how to make well-informed and carefully considered decisions. The *Life Planning Education* curricula, for instance, provides a decision-making model based on the “Three Cs: Identify the Challenge, Choices for addressing it, and the Consequences related to each choice” (Hunter-Geboy 1995, Chapter 8).

Personal values, instead of deriving from obedience to authority, evolve from acquiring accurate information and engaging in critical analysis, reflection, and deliberation with the self and others. Negotiation becomes an inclusive process that integrates experience, cultural

practices, and beliefs as part of the social contexts and relationships that influence moral decision making. Moral assumptions behind tradition, culture, and authority become sites of interrogation since teens learn to reach normative judgments by negotiating many factors, as opposed to accepting that given rules and traditions should determine a course of action. Responsible choices, these curricula convey, involve the consideration of social contexts. “Making responsible decisions about sexuality,” the SIECUS *Guidelines* state, “is important because those decisions affect individuals and the people around them” (National Guidelines Task Force 2004, 43). A Planned Parenthood lesson then engages students in discussing their responses to different scenarios, ranging from a young man rejecting responsibility for his girlfriend’s pregnancy to a young woman deciding to ask her health teacher about protection for oral sex with her girlfriend (2004–2005, “Healthy Sexuality”). Comprehensive curricula account for the complex moral terrain of social contexts that teens must negotiate to reach decisions. This approach corresponds with the inclusive logic of social responsibility that promotes the negotiation of many choices and engages people in deliberating about the impacts of their decisions, thus promoting the moral capacity to exercise the freedom necessary for self-determination.

A comparison of these two approaches illustrates how the dualistic framework of personal and social responsibility excludes politics, preventing a full account of the role of authority in negotiating the distribution of responsibilities in a democratic polity. Abstinence-only curricula unquestioningly accept the legitimacy of authority, failing to challenge traditional patriarchal and heterosexist views. Comprehensive programs, alternatively, reject authority as a valid aspect of the negotiation process by, for example, denying parents a legitimate role in how teens reach decisions about their sexual lives, a weakness of this approach recognized by SIECUS (Kempner 2001, 53). Greater societal pressures, in particular, also operate in relation to young women, who encounter the dominant beliefs about female modesty and chastity that still determine the standards against which American society measures women’s sexual behavior. The oppositional positions of these curricular approaches further indicate how the exclusion of politics from the dualistic moral framework of personal or social responsibility prevents an assessment of gendered power dynamics and authority’s legitimacy in negotiating moral decisions. The political dimension, I argue, represents an integral part of the moral subject who negotiates contexts, demands,

beliefs, values, and commitments, given the limited time, energy, capabilities, and resources for meeting responsibilities for themselves, others, and the broader community. Recognizing the negotiation involved in distributing moral responsibility develops in teens the capacity to exercise a greater degree of freedom, given the constraints of community, and locates politics within the moral decision-making process.

### **CONCLUSION: POLITICS AND THE PROMISE OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

Personal and social responsibility, this study finds, involve strengths and weaknesses in terms of revisioning this concept from a feminist perspective. Personal responsibility, as indicated by the abstinence-only approach, maintains the individual's politically important role and accounts for authority in moral decision making. Its exclusionary logic, however, focuses on the individual at the expense of the social, which prevents a consideration of societal forces that sustain male domination and heterosexism. It excludes categories of knowledge and people, assigns women a double burden of moral responsibility, narrows negotiation into an either-or choice, and promotes the unquestioned acceptance of authority. The inclusive logic of social responsibility, conveyed here by the comprehensive approach, attends to, instead of deflects attention away from, social factors that lead to the inclusion of categories of information and people. It redistributes moral responsibility more equally between men and women and expands the range of choices in the negotiation process. This approach advances a greater degree of equality, freedom, and inclusion for women and men, which aligns it more closely than personal responsibility with feminist and democratic goals. Nevertheless, it fails to account fully for the political importance of the individual and authority, carries a heavy gendered weight, and overlooks certain gendered dynamics of sexual politics. The external framework around social and personal responsibility, most importantly, marginalizes politics, which becomes a default category containing the standing assumptions of deflection, assignment, and negotiation that perpetuate exclusion, inequality, and constraint.

Collective responsibility, I argue, provides an alternative moral groundwork. It overcomes dualisms to establish an inclusive understanding of community in which politics represents a central responsibility of all democratic citizens and equalizes the distribution of

moral responsibility between categories of people and across personal, social, and political boundaries.

Hannah Arendt's framing of collective responsibility as explicitly political informs this feminist revisioning. In the essay "Collective Responsibility," Arendt analyzes the Germans who avoided direct participation in Hitler's regime and claimed that as nonparticipants they remained free from guilt or blame for their government's actions. Nonparticipants, she argues, assume responsibility for their government's deeds and misdeeds as members of the political community. Citizenship, then, entails collective responsibility, which Arendt defines as "always political, whether it appears in the older form, when a whole community takes it upon itself to be responsible for whatever one of its members has done, or whether a community is being held responsible for what has been done in its name" (1968, 149). The fact that people live in community with others determines the inherently political nature of collective responsibility. Arendt, while blurring the line between a community and its members in this context, ultimately draws a thick boundary between the self and politics. She states, for instance, that "in the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world" (1968, 153). Clearly separating the moral from the political, she further underscores this boundary by contrasting personal with what she calls political or collective responsibility to emphasize that individuals cannot shift blame for their actions to the system under which they live (1968, 149).

This revisioning of collective responsibility, while building on Arendt's attention to the way that politics relates to moral judgment, recasts the relationship between the self and politics from an inclusive perspective. This move prevents the dualistic operation of deflection, which transfers responsibility for a government's actions to the politicians and officials and away from the people. The boundary between morality and politics becomes more permeable. Responsibility for politics, as such, then extends to all the people, even nonparticipants, denying them the privileged irresponsibility of deciding whether or not to assume responsibility for the government and its actions.

Collective responsibility facilitates this inclusion of the individual, the social, and the political by moving from a dualistic framework to an inclusive groundwork that conveys a different epistemological perspective reflecting the dynamic and shifting web of relationships actually shaping our lives and communities. Joan Tronto captures the weblike character

of this moral geography when she defines care as “a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.* That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (1993, 103). The moral terrain of collective responsibility similarly encompasses these arenas of life and alters in response to changing needs and contexts and the shifting boundaries among people, society, and politics that shape the relationships extending from the individual to the local, national, and global levels. The collective’s moral groundwork then recasts the relational approach in terms of this weblike geography. Doing so escapes limits placed on this approach by the dualistic framework that channels movement in a unidirectional flow from one oppositional category to the other by allowing for dynamic movement within and across categories and spheres in many directions simultaneously.

The separate threads that make up a web represent the collective’s tangible aspect in terms of the relationships and material practices involved in the daily lives of people living in a community. This aspect of the moral groundwork facilitates tracking the distribution of responsibility within the collective in order to ensure relative equality. The equalization of responsibility among all categories of citizens creates the possibility of a collective action problem: If everyone is held responsible for everything, then no one is responsible for anything (Olson 1971). The cyclical approach adopted by care theorists such as Tronto (1996) allows for greater equality while preventing this free rider problem. Responsibilities shift and change depending on the different capabilities, needs, and resources of the community’s members throughout the course of their lives, which, by eliminating men’s privileged irresponsibility, relieves women of the double burden of moral responsibility. Negotiating the assignment of responsibilities then becomes a site of collective engagement, since standing moral assumptions behind who assumes responsibility when, how, for what, why, to what degree, and for how long move from a marginal set of inquiries to the center of public deliberation.

Collective responsibility, finally, draws out a utopic dimension deeply embedded in this concept. The ethical moment of decision making, when we determine the way in which we will assume responsibility for ourselves, others, and even our communities, entails an imaginative dimension. Many people, as Tronto illustrates in the second phase of “taking care of,” often reach beyond their perceived capacities and



assume responsibility for strangers, family members, and political issues in ways that they never imagined possible. Moral imagination here entails thinking, based on the immediate contextual reality, what could be possible and how to achieve it, an exercise of power that we engage in on a personal level, which can be harnessed for large-scale political change. Revisioning collective responsibility involves the political imagination to consider the possibility of how we all, as democratic citizens, assume responsibility for our politics and the promise of its ongoing transformation toward greater freedom, equality, and inclusion.

Sex education policy in the United States looks quite different from the perspective of collective responsibility, given its inclusion of the political. Legislation such as the Responsible Education for Life Act would locate sexual education within a web of governmental programs designed to provide the structural supports necessary for young people to make the best decisions about their sexual lives. Comprehensive curricula would expand to address explicitly and fully the sexual politics of male and female desire, and teach young people to identify how moral assumptions operate behind gender, sex, and sexuality in society to convey the beliefs, attitudes, and norms that maintain heterosexism and male privilege. Collective responsibility would recast sex and sexuality as integral to the relationships that form a political community, where the people all assume responsibility for distributing the resources necessary for young people to learn and make decisions about an arena of their lives critical to their development and that of the community. The answer to the “whose responsibility” question, then, is that, as individuals who live collectively in a political community, we all are responsible.

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