

**Sexual Evangelism: Youth Activism and the Fight for Comprehensive Sex Education in
East Tennessee**

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DEDICATION

To all the East Tennessee kids who grow up to be radically resilient and brilliant facilitators of change.

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To all those who are fighting for reproductive justice here and beyond, I admire, respect, and thank you for your work.

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ABSTRACT

In the face of structural oppression perpetuated in part by a conservative U.S. state that limits their access to comprehensive and accurate information about sexual/reproductive health (SIECUS, 2019), each year high school students (aged 14-18) in East Tennessee are recruited by Family Futures to form a peer education/activism group promoting comprehensive sex education awareness. While youth's participation in activism is often situated in terms of individual empowerment separate from structural forces (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Bay-Cheng, 2017), our understanding of how youth negotiate their experiences with sex education activism as situated within larger systems is limited, particularly as youth's voices are often erased (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Thus, we recruited eight adolescents to participate in a year-long ethnography during which we sought to understand the motivations behind their engagement in counterculture activism and how it was impacted by and negotiated through marginalization (e.g., queer erasure, cisheterosexism) and privilege (e.g., class, Whiteness). Grounded theory coding and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) of biweekly meetings and semi-structured interviews revealed intersectional patterns of critical consciousness development linking participants' experience of privilege and oppression to their emergent activist identities, as well as the emergent concept of sexual evangelism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	4
Chapter Three: Methods.....	32
Chapter Four: Results.....	38
Chapter Five: Discussion.....	112
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	131
References.....	132
Appendices.....	151
Vita.....	170

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Youth voices are predominantly ignored, erased, and othered (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), but when youth come together, they can find social connection and reclamation of power through resistance to oppression (e.g., Wagaman, 2016). In the face of structural oppression perpetuated by a conservative state that severely limits their access to quality information about sexuality and sexual/reproductive health (SIECUS, 2019), high school students in East Tennessee choose to come together as a group called ABC's of Sex Education (ABC)¹ in partnership with nonprofit reproductive health care organization Family Futures to actively resist this oppression. Students join ABC in hopes of gaining accurate and unbiased information about sexuality and reproductive health for themselves and with the goal of educating others, as well as engaging in community advocacy related to sex education. The group rejects norms set by abstinence-only education (e.g., compulsory heterosexuality) while defining and structuring itself according to the values of comprehensive sex education (e.g., appreciation of sexual diversity).

The discourses used to negotiate sexual politics tend to focus on the power sex and sexuality allegedly have—for example, to corrupt the purity of youth. However, because we can never get outside of power since we exist within it and, indeed, take an active role in its construction and reproduction, placing an emphasis on the idea of sex itself obscures the true shape power takes in everyday dynamics; instead, focusing on how sexuality is *deployed* makes evident the form power takes (Foucault, 1978). Given that the body and its embodiment of

¹ Names have been changed for the privacy of the study participants.

sexuality cannot be defined outside of the structural forces that seek to control it (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Foucault, 1978), how can people—and marginalized youth in particular—resist these forces? Of the elements that seem important to the composition of this group—including critical consciousness development, collective identity and group belonging, sexual subjectivities, how sex education manifests, and resistance of sexuality-based oppression—power is what brings them together: how power is imposed upon the group, how they try to (re)claim it, reshape it, and empower each other and others to have it. How does ABC as a group define itself through its negotiation, (re)production, and resistance of sexual politics? Youth are generally ignored as sources of knowledge—how does this group manifest epistemic resistance? How do they make meaning of themselves as individuals and as a group through their resistance? When considering all the elements of ABC, including group identity, individual identity, and their activism, what shape does power take as a function of how these elements interact with and co-construct each other? How is power (re)produced as a function of this group’s advocacy efforts toward sexual liberation?

Scholars have long called for increased attention to (a) critical sexuality issues within counseling psychology (Grzanka & Frantell, 2017; Mollen et al., 2018) and (b) the use of intersectionality as a structural framework to understand people’s lived experiences and negotiation of power, privilege, and oppression beyond “identities” (Moradi, 2017; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Limiting one’s focus to individual level factors is insufficient to promote societal change; rather, to be effective advocates, counseling psychologists must also attend to contextual factors that impact individuals (Fassinger & O’Brien, 2000; Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014). Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore ABCers’ understanding and

negotiation of sexual politics structurally, interpersonally, and intrapersonally. Youth development research often discusses activism as a form of empowerment (e.g., Watts & Flanagan, 2007) and encouraging positive emotions (e.g., activism as fostering hope and belonging; Hagen et al., 2018) that focus on the individual without necessarily situating them in terms of structural forces (Bay-Cheng, 2017). Given that critical consciousness development necessarily entails accepting an oppressive reality, we need to understand how these youth negotiate what being critically conscious about sexual politics means for them psychologically. Because emotional discourses that are contextually situated can shape groups' activism (Gould, 2009), we need to explore ABCers' emotions as structural processes motivating their activism from a more complex, phenomenological lens. Moreover, we need to understand how they construct their own *structural intimacies*—in other words, “those more potent understandings of the self in the structural and the structural in the self” (Mackenzie, 2013, p. 15).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of Sex Education

Abstinence education, also called abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM), is defined under Title V, Section 510 of the 1996 Social Security Act as purposefully and exclusively teaching about abstinence as the sole method by which to avoid risk (e.g., unwanted pregnancy, STI transmission) and avoid harmful psychological effects from sexual activity that occurs outside of a monogamous marriage (Santelli et al., 2017). In contrast, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) comprises medically accurate, evidence-based, and age-appropriate information on a variety of sexual and reproductive health topics (e.g., contraception, consent, sexual diversity), normative reproductive development, and risk avoidance (ACOG, 2016). CSE specifically includes an emphasis on human rights through, for example, the provision of inclusive information and respect for gender and sexual diversity. Despite research consistently documenting the detrimental effects of abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) education on youth (e.g., Fox, Himmelstein, Khalid, & Howell, 2019)—including higher teen pregnancy and STI rates compared to youth receiving CSE—AOUM programs continue to thrive. States have received federal funding for AOUM programs since 1981 through the Adolescent Family Life Act and since 2016 through the Title V “Sexual Risk Avoidance Education” program (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Santelli et al., 2017). As of 2018, 37 states applied for and were awarded Title V AOUM program funding, including Tennessee (SIECUS, 2019).

Despite significant funding, AOUM programs are largely ineffective. Carr and Packham (2017) analyzed the content requirements of state-mandated abstinence-based sex education and

the effects of content differences on teen health outcomes from 2000-2011, finding that these policies had no effect on teen birth or abortion rates, while in some states STD rates actually increased. In their study analyzing data from over 1700 adolescents aged 15-19 reporting on formal (i.e., school-based) sex education they received before having sex, Kohler and colleagues (2008) found that teens who received CSE were significantly less likely to report teen pregnancies than those who received no formal sex ed. Abstinence-only education did not reduce rates of vaginal intercourse while CSE was slightly associated with lower rates, teaching about contraception was not associated with increased risk of sexual activity or STDs, and teens who received CSE had a lower risk of pregnancy than those who received AOUM or no sex education at all (Kohler et al., 2008). Moreover, Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet (2012) found that learning about both abstinence and birth control through formal sex education was associated with delayed onset of first sex, greater use of contraception or condoms at first sex, and healthier partnerships at first sex.

Stanger-Hall and Hall (2011) evaluated the effectiveness of different sex education programs, particularly testing how successful abstinence-only education is in preventing teen pregnancy (i.e., through successful promotion of abstinence). They found that abstinence-only education does not reduce teen pregnancy rates and likely increases those rates, while comprehensive sex and/or STD education was correlated with the lowest teen pregnancy rates across states. The authors analyzed states' laws and policies to determine their level of emphasis on abstinence, which the authors classified on a scale from 0 (no provision) to 3 (abstinence stressed) with level 3 being the highest emphasis. Tennessee, for example, was classified as a level 3, meaning that AOUM is the fundamental teaching standard. Results indicated that, among

the 48 states analyzed, teen pregnancy and birth rates increased on average as emphasis on abstinence increased. Stanger-Hall and Hall (2011) stress that CSE that includes information on abstinence as well as contraception works best in reducing teen pregnancies and STIs.

While public health experts advocate for comprehensive sex education (e.g., ACOG, 2016) and have expressed concern that AOUM programs include stigmatizing and medically inaccurate information (Santelli et al., 2017), sex education's increasing politicization has limited youth's access to CSE. Di Mauro and Joffe (2007) argue that the history of sex education in the U.S. has been characterized by a progressive "narrowing" (p. 78) of opportunities for sex education provision. Further, they assert that curricula are increasingly guided by intentions to teach youth a traditional, heteronormative, moral view of sexuality. In response to sex education's most progressive era in the 1960s, the New Right that emerged in the 1970s gained strength with the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, with the conservative, evangelical Christian base emphasizing the need to control sexuality, particularly among adolescents. According to Di Mauro and Joffe (2007), conservative organizations at this time were able to promote abstinence-only education as a morally responsible alternative to the comprehensive sex education that became more common in schools in response to the AIDS crisis.

Cultural debates centering on whether abstinence or contraception should be the focus of school-based sex education, which was not widely implemented until the 1970s, signal deeper gendered and moralized anxieties about sexuality (Elliott, 2010). Legislation funding abstinence-only sex education discursively ties notions of personal responsibility to teen sexuality, suggesting that any consequences following the failure to be abstinent fall solely on the sexual actor. Following in-depth interviews with 47 parents of teenagers that explored parents'

subjective understanding of teen sexuality, Elliot (2010) found that parents consistently described their own children as essentially asexual while simultaneously framing other teens as hypersexual and agentic—even sexually predatory. Through this binary thinking that is influenced by gendered, racialized, and classed stereotypes, parents reinforce the idea that teen sexuality is bad, with any consequences being the fault of the teens having sex. The idea of sexuality as a “normative” aspect of adolescence is fairly recent (Tolman & McClelland, 2011) and largely absent from AOUM culture. While proponents of CSE frame their approach to education as normalizing and destigmatizing teen sexuality, AOUM advocates describe teen sexual behavior as problematic (Kramer, 2019). Though advocates of both abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education ultimately care about optimizing teen health outcomes, their perspectives on sex itself impose extremely divergent norms on youth to varying effects.

Beyond their ineffectiveness in terms of positive health outcomes, public health scholars and advocates have long criticized AOUM programs for the detrimental psychological effects they cause. Santelli and colleagues (2017), for example, argue that AOUM programs promote health-endangering gender stereotypes, marginalize sexual minority youth, are inherently coercive, withhold information that is necessary for youth to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, and promote “questionable, inaccurate, and stigmatizing opinions” (p. 278). According to the authors, AOUM programs violate adolescents’ human rights to accessing scientifically and medically accurate information about sexuality—a belief that Miller and Schleifer (2008) echo. While Santelli et al. (2006) name abstinence as a healthy choice for teens in terms of avoiding STIs and unwanted pregnancy, they argue that abstinence-only education is “ethically problematic” (p. 83), rife with misinformation, and discriminatory

towards LGBTQ+ and other students. From a developmental perspective, sexual misinformation can have damaging effects across the lifespan (Mollen et al., 2018).

As Santelli and colleagues (2017) note, marginalized youth can be particularly negatively impacted by AOUM programs. For example, girls may receive messages of disempowerment and victimization, youth of color may be subjected to stereotypes about the danger they pose to themselves and/or others, and LGBTQ+ youth may be demonized or excluded from sex ed curricula entirely. Through analysis of 16 interviews in a southwestern state, Hoefer and Hoefer (2017) examined the impact of abstinence-only education on marginalized young adults (e.g., people of color, queer people). The authors discovered themes of lacking information and resources; inclusion of (hetero)sexist stereotypes; assumptions by teachers that students of color had more knowledge than they did, which resulted in failing to provide them information; lack of emotional safety; and reliance on fear and shame in curricula and by teachers. The authors assert that abstinence-only education does not prepare youth to engage in healthy adult relationships, particularly since curricula often include misinformation and perpetuate shame and heterosexism through messages in the “hidden curricula” (Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017, p. 259) that can impact youth’s ideas about sex and sexuality in the long-term (Pearson, 2018).

Power, Agency, and Control: Defining Youth Sexuality

School-based sexuality education (SBSE) not only serves as a guide prescribing teen sexual behavior (e.g., hoping to prevent negative outcomes such as STIs), but defines and constructs what is “normal” for adolescents through implicit messaging about values and norms (Bay-Cheng, 2003). Through analysis of sex educators’ deployment of discourses of personal responsibility in abstinence-only and comprehensive sex ed lessons using ethnographic data from

two high schools with high proportions of low-income Black and Latinx students, Elliott (2014) found that the educators' spoken and unspoken lessons in personal responsibility portrayed an ideal "responsible sexual agent" (p. 213) based upon and a source of further reproduction of social inequalities. Language used in the lessons implied compulsory heterosexuality, adherence to a White nuclear family ideal, and gendered messages about (a) male self-control and (b) female responsibility. Abbott et al. (2015) similarly found that teachers in the UK discursively perpetuated heteronormativity despite the UK's legislative advocacy of "inclusion" in sex education. Lamb and colleagues (2011) thematically analyzed four AOUM sex ed curricula in wide use at the time of writing to examine how these curricula might perpetuate heterosexist, gendered stereotypes, finding that these curricula perpetuated messages about both girls and boys as having the potential to be objectified, sexual pleasure as acceptable only in the context of heterosexual marriage, and girls as potential victims. While older AOUM curricula create a dichotomy between "good" and "bad" girls (i.e., those who say "no" and those who entice boys to have sex, respectively), contemporary curricula present the idea of the "good boy" (Lamb et al., 2011, p. 369) who is just as responsible for choosing abstinence as girls. In other words, both girls and boys are encouraged to be responsible sexual agents in an iteration of neoliberal ideology.

Relatedly, Clark and Stitzlein (2018) argue that AOUM perpetuates neoliberal ideology through its emphasis on individual choice, personal responsibility, and morality—not to mention gendered and racialized messages. According to the authors, AOUM particularly harms marginalized youth, including girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth of color; a more democratic form of sex education would foreground dialogue between youth and teachers regarding sexual

autonomy and situating youth within their community context. By defining teens as hypersexual and their sexuality as biologically determined, “our construction of adolescent sexuality justifies our efforts to control it” (Bay-Cheng, 2003, p. 63). In other words, because teens cannot be relied upon to control themselves, it is the job of SBSE to suppress their sexuality. How this power is exerted—i.e., which norms are perpetuated through sexual politics—depends on the type of sex education youth have access to as well as the implicit and explicit messages educators convey about sexuality.

Frieh and Smith (2018) analyzed the meaning adolescents made of their school-based sex education (SBSE), as well as how they negotiated SBSE’s production of normative adolescent sexuality and communication of messages that perpetuate certain stereotypes of teens (e.g., that they are hypersexual). After conducting interviews with 63 high school students, the authors identified strategies of resistance for these teens in response to their SBSE—namely, challenging adult authority and seeking experience. The authors also found, however, that the teens often expressed an internalization of stereotypes such as adolescents, particularly Black boys, being hypersexual, and girls as emotionally fragile when it comes to sex. The authors note that school contexts (e.g., socioeconomic inequity) influenced the extent to which youth were able to resist stereotypes, or in which contexts these stereotypes were reproduced. According to them, SBSE can be a “territorializing force” (Frieh & Smith, 2018, p. 187) when used as a medium through which to perpetuate stereotypes about adolescent sexuality. Through this lens, teens’ negotiation of sexual politics can include reproduction of structural oppression.

Particularly as comprehensive sex education is increasingly pushed out of schools, discourses around adolescent sexuality are limited in terms of risk avoidance. Bay-Cheng (2017)

argues that research demonstrating sexual health disparities between privileged and marginalized youth do not document sexual risk, but rather “how sex is *made* risky by unequal power, insufficient resources, and structural discrimination” (p. 344). In other words, social injustice is what makes sex risky, not necessarily sex itself. While SBSE curricula in the U.S. largely propagate neoliberal ideology that locates sexual responsibility and power in the individual, Bay-Cheng (2017) proposes that critical SBSE, rather, should situate youth sexuality in terms of social location, structural oppression, and varying circumstances that youth must negotiate along with their individual sexual decisions. Merely empowering youth to make “responsible” choices is an inadequate response to the realities of the structural barriers (e.g., access to health care, sexual and reproductive health information access) they may experience. As Mollen and colleagues (2018) note, however, counseling psychologists in particular may be unequipped to address these issues from a critical lens due to lack of knowledge and training in critical sexuality.

Towards Sexual Subjectivity

For Fields and Tolman (2006), because youth are embodied sexual subjects, sex education ought to be a site of information about health and risks, but also a space where youth can ask questions, explore their identities, and come into their own sexual subjectivities. In other words, reducing sex education to discussions of risk/harm avoidance means diminishing—and dehumanizing—youth’s *sexual subjectivities*, or “how people narrate and make meaning around their own subjective experiences of sexuality” (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 398). By focusing on eliminating risk, youth’s capacity for sexual expression is also suppressed. Rather, adults and sexuality educators in particular must stop equating risk and pleasure, and, instead, situate sexual

risk (which cannot be wholly eliminated) in social contexts to equip youth to critically negotiate their sexual decisions (Fields & Tolman, 2006).

According to Tolman and McClelland (2011), the idea of sexuality as a “normative” aspect of adolescence is fairly recent. The authors call for moving away from the problematization of adolescent sexuality (e.g., by focusing on risks and negative health outcomes) in binary terms (i.e., successful or unsuccessful risk avoidance); rather, the authors suggest that seeing adolescent sexuality as normative allows for a more nuanced take on both risk management and the spectrum of negative to positive outcomes that youth simultaneously negotiate. In other words, the authors argue for allowing youth the space to develop into complex sexual beings. Just as centering White supremacy as opposed to centering White people effectively problematizes and makes visible the ways Whiteness and racism impact all spaces (Grzanka et al., 2019), structural inequities that impact youth sexuality must be centered and problematized as opposed to identifying “problems” within youth themselves (Bay-Cheng, 2017).

In contrast to the ways in which power is exerted through traditional sex education, taking a critical approach to understanding youth’s sexuality means engaging with how “sex and power collide and, ultimately, who is asked to pay for this collision” (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 408). While we largely ignore bodies that are made “other” or “abject,” including youth, critical sexuality studies should include and even prioritize those bodies that have been rendered abject to make them visible in their sexual subjectivities. Critical work on sexual subjectivity attends to how the sexual self is socialized through systems of power, privilege, and oppression; crucially, exploring sexual subjectivities intersectionally can be a lens through which to

foreground bodies that have been marginalized/left out of research and allow for their complexity.

Fine (1988) importantly named several discourses surrounding sex education that fail to consider girls' sexual subjectivities: a discourse of sex as victimization wherein girls learn to deflect risk (e.g., of disease, of pregnancy, of being used by men), and a discourse of morality that places value upon girls' sexual decision-making, but only if they choose abstinence. For Fine (2008), the discourse of (female) desire is largely absent; when present, it is tinged with the notion of consequences for risks taken. In their examination of federally-funded AOUM programs, Fine and McClelland (2006) expand upon Fine's (1988) call for a missing discourse of desire in contemporary sex education to call, rather, for *thick desire*, wherein teen girls have publicly funded opportunities to develop intellectually/emotionally/etc., imagine themselves as sexual beings capable of pleasure and cautious of risk without bearing the brunt of the consequences, have access to information and healthcare resources, are protected from violence and abuse, and can rely on a public safety net of resources. In other words, thick desire situates girls' sexual well-being within structural contexts that enable economic, educational, social, and psychological health. AOUM curricula, meanwhile, present heterosexual marriage as the answer to safe sex, teach youth to mistrust contraception, to feel shame, and "to remain silent" (p. 312) about their developing sexuality. For Fine and McClelland (2006), both desire and risk exist as part of sexuality and, therefore, comprehensive sex education should help youth navigate the complexities of sexuality "across the dialectics of danger and pleasure" (p. 326).

Though critical sexuality scholars may advocate for nurturing youth's sexual subjectivities, contemporary discourses around adolescence imply that youth are inherently and

immutably driven by hormones and therefore out of control (Lesko, 1996), suggesting that it is the responsibility of adults to assert control over youth. Lamb et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of American sex education curricula over a decade to determine the extent to which pleasure—and particularly female pleasure—was incorporated. They found that pleasure discourse fell into three categories: health and knowing your body (i.e., anatomy and making healthy sexual choices), problematic pleasure (i.e., pleasure in the context of risk and negative consequences), and positive pleasure. While positive pleasure was mentioned in both CSE and AOUM curricula, AOUM emphasized pleasure in the context of heterosexual marriage. Further, pleasure was usually situated within a discourse of safe practice, thereby equating pleasure with potential danger (Lamb et al., 2013).

Though the effectiveness of sex education curricula is often defined in terms of risk reduction (e.g., reducing unwanted teen pregnancy, reducing STI rates), youth's conceptualization of successful sex education differs. Allen (2005) collected data from 1180 youth defining effective sexuality as empowering youth as sexual subjects through education that emphasizes positive sexuality as opposed to emphasizing risk avoidance. Teen girls, for example, are expected not to be “seen or acknowledged as sexual subjects” (Tolman et al., 2015, p. 301) and may have to negotiate limited sexual agency in addition to marginalized identities that constrain that agency. Grose and colleagues (2014) found that students endorsed less traditional gender ideology following participation in a sex education program emphasizing youth sexual empowerment through a comprehensive approach to sexuality, suggesting that sex education programs have the potential to serve as a challenge to traditional ideological structures through the fostering of youth's critical consciousness. Coll et al. (2018) conducted YPAR

(Youth Participatory Action Research) with 43 high school student co-researchers over 18 months to explore their thoughts regarding what sex education should look like. According to the authors, critical, collaborative research with youth is necessary to understand their perspectives and effect social change (e.g., making sex ed more inclusive) through the co-construction of knowledge. In other words, youth voices need to be heard, youth need to be permitted to critically engage with power and oppression, and they need to be active subjects and participants in creating their world.

According to Illes (2012), “sexual citizenship” (p. 614) is a crucial form of civic engagement for youth wherein they learn how to assert their rights as sexual citizens (e.g., autonomy to make decisions) and assert sexual self-efficacy. Thus, sex education is an essential way for youth to gain knowledge, have the freedom to ask questions, and openly discuss their desires in preparation for negotiating social interactions related to sexuality. Through this paradigm, youth are active and engaged participants in their own sexual education and decisions. The ways in which youth sexuality is defined through public discourse may not reflect youth’s actual experiences; rather, sex education as a form of youth participation is only effective inasmuch as it permits youth to explore and cultivate their own sexual subjectivity. In keeping with the scientist-practitioner-advocate model (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014), it is appropriate and necessary for counseling psychologists to (a) critically understand how sexuality is deployed and (b) hypothesize practical ways of advocating for structural changes that would permit youth to embody their own sexual subjectivities.

Youth Empowerment through Social Movements

While Bay-Cheng (2012) cautions that empowerment discourses may unwittingly instruct youth to identify problems as originating within themselves rather than forming coalitions to fight structural oppression, youth do come together to beneficial effects. In response to both the barriers limiting youth's access to quality sex education and experiences of oppression youth may face as a result of AOUM programs, youth organizing may serve as a way to resist such oppression. Youth organizing—defined as approaches that help train youth to “alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change” (Warren et al., 2008, p. 28)—is beneficial in terms of the possible effects on school reform, positive youth development outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging; Harré, 2007), and personal development (e.g., knowledge and skills) and psychological well-being (Montague & Eiroa-Orosa, 2018). In other words, youth become agents of change through organizing. Indeed, youth primarily engage in politics outside of the formal political sphere, instead channeling their activism in other areas (e.g., social movements, everyday life; Coe et al., 2015) that may be motivated by “future-oriented agendas and struggles at the grassroots” (Ting, 2017, p. 243) toward goals of social transformation, disruption of the status quo, and liberation.

Marginalized youth in particular can engage in processes of eliminating oppression and challenging power structures to enhance wellness at personal, group, and community levels (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Moreover, since marginalized groups may become mobilized as resources come together, social movement organizations (including youth organizing programs) increase the potential for collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). For example, while sexual minority youth are often conceptualized as being at increased risk for health

inequities and various negative outcomes (e.g., disconnection), social connectedness and group affiliation can foster resilience and engagement in collective action (DiFulvio, 2011). In their investigation of the intersectional experiences of minority stress among sexual and gender minority youth and the role of activism, Frost and colleagues (2019) found that engagement in activism and collective action against oppression was associated with increased well-being, particularly among multiply marginalized youth (e.g., gender non-conforming youth of color). Among 20 sexual minority women and transgender individuals, Hagen et al. (2018) found that social justice work increased participants' feelings of empowerment, social connection, and positive emotions associated with the work (e.g., pride, hope).

In his articulation of how the oppressed can liberate themselves, Freire (1970) wrote of liberation as a praxis in that we can only effectively transform our reality to one of liberation when we engage in both reflection and action, with each process informing the other. By engaging in problematization—or the externalization of oppression outside of oneself—to think critically about the world and how one's oppressive conditions came to be, marginalized people can gain critical consciousness. For Freire (1970), gaining critical consciousness is a crucial step toward liberation that entails the acceptance not only of oneself as oppressed, but seeing reality as objectively oppressive; in other words, the oppressed must come to terms with the realization that they are not the problem, but merely the dehumanized objects upon whom oppressors enact their oppression. Watts et al. (2003) articulate a theory of sociopolitical development that, for them, is a vital part of human development that should be centered in community psychology to work for social justice. It is a development of critical consciousness toward “sustained, informed, and strategic action” (p. 188) in the quest for liberation of all oppressed people. While youth are

often targeted by adults for interventions (e.g., in attempts to prevent negative outcomes for those “at-risk”), Watts and Flanagan (2007) suggest that youth organizing provides an opportunity for youth to raise their own critical consciousness, feel a sense of empowerment, and engage in praxis to address systemic issues that they face. When youth specifically engage in transformational resistance, defined as actions that are simultaneously motivated by the desire for social justice and represent a critique of social oppression (i.e., praxis), this form of resistance is most likely to enact social change (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

For marginalized youth, developing their own critical consciousness can be a means by which to resist their oppression and feel empowered. Cammarota (2011) argues that through the development of critical consciousness, youth are more able to effectively handle challenges and engage in community activism. Using an example of a school-based organization in Tucson focused on social justice, the author evaluated the social justice youth development (SJYD) model that conceptually draws from Freire’s *Pedagogy* (1970) to engage youth in critical reflection and action to counteract oppression in their communities. As youth engaged in the SJYD model developed their critical consciousness, they were able to externalize their oppression as structurally and systemically maintained and adopt a social justice perspective that empowered them to enact social change (Cammarota, 2011). Moreover, Wagaman (2016) found through multiple regression analysis of data collected from LGBTQ+ youth engaged in a community-based youth program that critical consciousness and community engagement significantly predicted youth’s sense of empowerment in the face of oppression at intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community levels.

When out of school programs are characterized by youth-adult collaboration and encourage youth to engage meaningfully with their communities, these programs are likely to act as resilient communities for youth wherein youth become critically empowered to enact social justice (McKay, 2011). For example, in response to the dismantling of a Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona, student organizers engaged in transformative resistance by creating their own liberatory School of Ethnic Studies as a way of critiquing their oppression and working against it (Cabrera et al., 2013). Their resistance provided a counter-narrative to the paradigm of youth as incapable, irresponsible, and in need of adult control. Murray and Milner IV (2015) argue that outside of school time (OST) organizations that emphasize youth development should also support the development of youth sociopolitical consciousness, particularly among Black youth, as a way to empower themselves to act toward improving the social conditions of the oppressed, including themselves.

Similarly, as a result of their case study of a South African school-based peer education program related to HIV prevention, Campbell and MacPahil (2002) argue that the opportunity for youth to develop their critical consciousness is the basis upon which youth can collectively renegotiate their social and sexual identities as well as feel empowered to enact change in relation to those renegotiated identities. Grounded in their work with Latinx and Black students, Rodríguez and Brown (2009) outline three principles that can guide the process of elevating marginalized youth voices to becoming agents of change since these youth are typically relatively powerless in their schools: (1) knowledge production that is situated and grounded in youth's experiences, (2) continuous and reflexive participation and collaboration, and (3) commitment to producing knowledge with the goal of liberation of the oppressed (i.e., youth). In

other words, centering youth's voices and nurturing their critical consciousness development can be a means by which youth can gain power.

Multiply marginalized youth may seek activist groups as a way of feeling safety and belonging. Akiva et al. (2017) investigated youth's motivation to attend eight youth organizing programs that specifically addressed marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender) and were designed to raise critical consciousness. They identified two specific motivations for youth in these programs: (a) to find a safe and affirming space that the authors term "sanctuary" (p. 21) and (b) to participate in working toward social justice for themselves and others. Notably, the authors found that sanctuary and social justice work—including critical consciousness development—went hand in hand for these youth. According to Kirshner (2009), youth's organizing shares qualities of youth development programs (i.e., safety, belonging, social support, skill building) but also includes the beneficial development of critical consciousness and encourages youth to engage in social justice work. Diemer and Li (2011) examined the antecedents and consequences of critical consciousness development (composed of critical reflection, or analysis of sociopolitical inequity, and critical action, or perceived ability to effect social change) among 665 marginalized youth ages 15-25 through structural equation modeling (SEM). Racial and ethnic minority youth were more likely than their White counterparts to report engaging in social action, regardless of social class. Further, they found that parental and peer sociopolitical support facilitated critical action and sociopolitical participation, suggesting that microlevel supports are crucial in engaging youth to develop their own critical consciousness—including, perhaps, the support provided by the group itself.

Along with the psychological benefits of social movement participation that may motivate youth to come together, both a degree of critical consciousness and need for belonging precede youth participation in social movements. For example, Swank and Fahs (2017) found in their analysis of the 2012 American National Election Survey that engagement in feminist activism among women was related to having an internalized feminist consciousness and involvement in social spaces that encouraged feminist politics, including feeling a sense of emotional connection to other feminists. Among 820 sexually diverse college students, engagement in gay and lesbian activism was associated with social connections to trusted peers who engaged in this work, an ability to recognize heterosexism, and participants' maintenance of activist identities through work intended to end heterosexist oppression (Swank & Fahs, 2012). In other words, both social belonging and critical consciousness were important predictors of gay and lesbian activism among these students.

As a core framework through which to develop critical consciousness, intersectionality is a useful way of understanding individuals' unique experiences of both privilege and oppression. However, people's understanding of how social categories such as sexuality and race are impacted by structural inequity may vary. Curtin and colleagues (2015) investigated the relationship between *intersectional awareness* (IA)—which they defined as the degree to which individuals critically view inequitable social categories as intersecting—and social change behaviors and intentions. Nurturing youth's understanding of how they may be both marginalized and oppressed is crucial to deepening their intersectional awareness and motivation for enacting social change (Curtin et al., 2015), particularly since activists use their

understanding of experiences from multiple identities to inform their awareness of oppression (Curtin et al., 2016).

Through examination of the undocuqueer movement that arose from queer people's participation in the undocumented immigrant youth movement, Terriquez (2015) notes that social movement organizations that seek to be inclusive must address structural inequalities within the group itself while balancing the maintenance of the group's *collective identity* (i.e., the dynamic and relational connection an individual has to a broader group; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Acknowledging and activating social movement participants' multiply marginalized identities at individual and intergroup levels when forming a group's collective identity can deepen these participants' engagement. Moreover, embodying an intersectional identity such as undocuqueer can be a manifestation of resistance to single-axis identity politics and a form of fellowship and visibility for a community of individuals that are often forced to choose between parts of themselves (e.g., immigration status or sexual identity; Cisneros, 2018).

At a foundational level, identification with a social movement is associated with willingness to participate in collective action (Simon et al., 1998). Examining how youth involved in social movements develop their collective identity as a group can illuminate not only group processes such as what brings a group together to act upon their similarities (Anderson-Nathe, DeFilippis, & Mehrotra, 2018), but also how this influences their conceptions of self as individuals and the ways in which they interact with the world (Futch, 2016). Sustaining members' commitment to a social movement requires continued assertion of collective identity as well as managing difference without suppressing it. Collective identity as LGBT, for example, can be helpful in unifying sexual minorities against their collective oppression and at the same

time erase the nuanced experiences people with different sexual and gender identities face (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). The strategy that social movements take in how they use identity—for example, centering it around an essential category like queer and trans POC (i.e., strategic essentialism) versus deliberately minimizing differences from dominant society while emphasizing those differences in other settings (i.e., identity deployment)—has implications for how collective identity within the group is formed, as well as the “success” that movement will have (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2018). For example, strategic essentialism might help with group cohesion by centering itself around an identity category, while identity deployment might be more palatable to dominant society but erase group members who do not conform as well (i.e., group members who are not White, middle class).

Within the context of the gay rights movement and the dilemma posed by adoption of the “queer” identity, Gamson (1995) elaborates the challenges associated with organizing around fixed identity categories versus permitting fluidity in collective identity. Collective identity is shaped by forces both within the group and structural forces outside of it; thus, the extent to which collective identity is destabilized is indicative of the progress made through collective action. Youth-driven programs can be queered by centering their voices, rejecting “at-risk” discourses so common to marginalized youth (de Vreede, 2014), and facilitating the group’s open negotiation of their individual and collective identities. Elliott (2016) took an ethnographic approach to examining how high school students participating in a Gay-Straight Alliance used queer theory to make sense of their own experiences with gender and sexuality (and oppression related to these identities), challenge dominant perspectives on gender and sexuality, and work to transform the culture of their school to be more inclusive of sexual and gender diversity (e.g.,

through establishing a gender-neutral bathroom, peer education). By foregrounding their experiences as both victims of oppression and agents of their own lives, students were motivated to enact social change at their school through resistance of hetero- and cissexism. Just as White women and people of color might support White supremacy to protect the illusion of privilege they experience within certain spaces (i.e., proxy privilege; Liu, 2017), understanding the way ABC negotiates sexual politics and identity as a group ostensibly organized around activism for comprehensive sex education can illuminate the extent to which their resistance is queered or a perpetuation of the status quo.

Local Context

Recall that Tennessee was classified as having the highest possible level of emphasis on abstinence according to analysis of state laws and policies by Stanger-Hall and Hall (2011). Tennessee law (§ 49-6-1302, 49-6-1304, and 49-6-1305) requires local education agencies in counties whose pregnancy rate exceeds 19.5 pregnancies per 1,000 females ages 15–17 to develop and implement a family life education program that is abstinence-centered. Sex education in Tennessee is required to be medically accurate, but it also is required to stress abstinence, talk about sex as happening only within the confines of marriage, and must discuss the negative consequences of sex; curricula are not required to include education on contraception, condoms, consent, or provide inclusive information about sexual orientation (SIECUS, 2019). Moreover, beginning in 2012, educators in Tennessee are prohibited by law (SB 3310) from teaching students anything that could promote “gateway sexual activity”—defined as sexual contact that could precipitate engagement in a non-abstinent behavior (Tenn.

Code Ann. § 49-6-1301)—as a further restriction within the already abstinence-centered curriculum. Educators who violate this law can be fined and sued.

East Tennessee does not currently meet the teen pregnancy rate required to mandate sex education, but middle and high schools do implement a Family Life/Wellness program. Outside educators such as Family Futures used to be regularly brought into East Tennessee public schools to teach sex education, but in 2012 parent complaints led to the then-superintendent banning all outside presenters except one—youth minister and abstinence educator James Felt (Duncan, 2016). Felt’s “Sex Talk” has received numerous complaints over the years from students, parents, and other community stakeholders for its offensive content (Landis, 2016). Two graduates of an East Tennessee high school formed local advocacy group Just the Facts in 2015 with the goal of advocating for comprehensive sex education in East Tennessee schools as a direct result of participating in Felt’s program. Until Felt’s contract was discontinued in 2020, East Tennessee middle and high school students received sex “education” that was not only abstinence-based, but misogynistic, heteronormative, homo- and transphobic, and racist.

In stark contrast, Family Futures has a peer comprehensive sex education and advocacy group specifically for high school students called ABC. Each spring, Family Futures accepts applications from high school students (sophomores and above) to become part of ABC as a peer educator. The students who are chosen to participate engage in over 40 hours of topics related to comprehensive sex education over the course of an academic year, including sexual decision-making, contraception, and gender identity. The stated purpose of gaining this knowledge is to commit to having conversations with their peers to provide accurate information on these topics, answer questions from their peers, and “debunk myths”; indeed, the logo on their Facebook page

reads, “ABC: Making the choice to be informed and educate peers.” Moreover, ABC Peer Educators actively participate in community advocacy around sexuality, including specific projects and events (e.g., hosting art exhibitions about sexual identity). In a state that legally deprives youth of the education they need to make informed sexual decisions or negotiate how they want to embody their own sexual subjectivities, ABC’s existence is a manifestation of resistance.

The Present Study

While the sociology of social movements is robust, critical psychological study of social movements is lacking. Moreover, counseling psychology has lagged behind other disciplinary efforts to critically examine reproductive justice and sexuality issues such as access to comprehensive sex education (Grzanka & Frantell, 2017; Mollen et al., 2018; Fahs & McClelland, 2016). The purpose of this study was to bridge interdisciplinary literatures through critical psychological inquiry into how a young activist group negotiates sexual politics structurally, interpersonally, and intrapersonally. Ethnography and situational analysis are particularly useful for gaining a critical understanding of a “situation of inquiry” (Clarke, 2005) and illuminating how a situation is composed of structural factors, regardless of whether they appear on the surface to be at the “macro” (e.g., the Gateway Law) or “micro” (e.g., individuals) level (Grzanka, 2021). In other words, these methods permit a thorough exploration of the role different factors play in tangibly affecting and shaping, in this case, youth’s lived experiences—even those factors that may, at first, appear irrelevant. Understanding how these youth make meaning out of such powerful limitations and grapple with sexual politics and the psychological

effects of their experiences with power, privilege, and oppression is crucial to making visible what researchers often render invisible (Stoudt, 2012).

As such, the present study sought to take a strengths-based, critical ethnographic approach to understanding a group of youth activists' lived experiences negotiating sexual politics. My work was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ABCers perform sexual politics?
2. How do ABCers negotiate their identity development as a group and as individuals?
3. What meaning do they make of this work?

In their negotiation of sexual politics, which they cannot exist outside of, ABC could possibly reproduce dynamics that they are attempting to resist—what Ahmed (2006) calls the nonperformative, or speech acts that fail to enact what they ostensibly intend. For example, how might ABC reproduce heteronormativity despite intentions of seeking inclusivity? ABCers' sexual politics is a *performance* constructed by the process of how they are “doing” things like sexuality, race, and gender (Butler, 1990). Understanding this performance required witnessing and participating in their negotiation of sexual politics through the process-oriented methods of ethnography. As they constructed and performed sexual politics, I wanted to understand their identity development in terms of how they negotiated and performed identities such as sexuality, race, and gender—in other words, their embodied intersectional subjectivities. For example, what could observation of how they wrestled with their individual identities and interacted with one another as a group illuminate about how their critical consciousness was developing? Finally, I wanted to understand why these youth were engaging in this activism and what it meant for them to be doing so, particularly given the structural constraints placed upon them.

Methodology: Critical Ethnography and Lessons from Critical Participatory Action Research

Following their critical ethnographic work examining how queer high school students challenged gender and sexuality norms in their school, McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2017) explain the role of critical ethnographers as working to “disrupt the status quo, [and] unsettle both neutrality and taken for granted assumptions” (p. 489) by unveiling the ways in which power manifests in everyday practices and resistance to systemic oppression. As a methodological approach, critical ethnography has been used to foreground the lived experiences of participants and understand a variety of complex situations of inquiry, including high school students’ negotiation of masculinity and sexuality (Pascoe, 2007) and Whiteness (Perry, 2002); intersections of race, sexuality, and immigration among queer men of color (Carrillo, 2017; Decena, 2011); and the effects of assimilation on queer life (Orne, 2017). I envisioned this project as a way of understanding ABCers’ construction of structural intimacies (Mackenzie, 2013), specifically the intersection of their interpersonal lives and social structures in terms of sexual politics. As Mackenzie (2013) put it through her exploration of people’s negotiation of the HIV epidemic, understanding these stories renders the storyteller’s life “at once vulnerable and resistant” (p. 128). I wanted to understand ABCers’ stories in their complex humanity, particularly how they developed over time as individuals, as a group, and as activists. I expected that their embodiment of critical consciousness and intersectional awareness, sexual subjectivity, and resistance of sexual oppression *would* change because these are all dynamic constructs.

While this project is not exactly participatory action research (PAR), I took a modified critical PAR approach inasmuch as I actively sought ABCers’ input throughout the research process. Further, I engaged in feminist participant observation as I was a member of the group

for the full academic year as opposed to an “objective” outsider. CPAR as a framework approaches research in a way that I find important methodologically—particularly in its reflexive attention to power and privilege, its intentions of disrupting injustice whenever possible, and its centering of the voices of those who are part of the situation of inquiry. As Fine and Torre (2019) put it, CPAR is “a feminist response to conventional research practices” (p. 433). Taking a critical, feminist ethnographic approach to understanding this group of young activists was a way of collaborating respectfully with this community while critically theorizing the ways in which privilege and oppression manifest in their lived experiences—a responsibility we must bear as academic psychologists (Fine, 2007).

In their elaboration of their CPAR work with sexual and gender minority youth, Fine and Torre (2019) note that they began the project with an analysis of power, oppression, and privilege to identify whose voices are suppressed, whose are centered, and how they can come together to produce knowledge—in other words, making the approach critical. They describe searching for *critical construct validity*, whereby constructs and assumptions psychologists place on the marginalized are troubled and disrupted to get at the more complex shape of the thing we are investigating. For the authors, participatory projects queer traditional objectivity, validity, and generalizability by aiming for strong objectivity (Harding, 1994), critical construct validity, and provocative generalizability. Crucially, involving participants in the research process allowed Fine and Torre (2019) to understand more deeply their embodied intersectional subjectivities as individuals and as a group.

For Sandwick and colleagues (2018), CPAR as a framework is beneficial in shaping policy because of the framework’s enhanced capacity for construct validity (i.e., effective clarity

of the complex shape of what is being studied) and impact validity (i.e., potential to fuel social change). The authors offer several recommendations, including (a) conceptualizing any group under study as dynamic and relational by making sure to attend to “the wide variability within groups, vibrant intersectionality within persons, and structural betrayals that accompany group membership(s)” (p. 486), (b) reflexively interrogating power and privilege throughout the research process, and (c) working to unsettle social categories and “epistemic borders” (p. 496) to work toward disrupting systemic injustice. Drawing from a PAR study with over 100 secondary students in Australia, Ollis et al. (2019) articulate the challenges of working toward more equitable frameworks of sex education for young people in contrast to frameworks that problematize teen sexuality in terms of risk and/or reinforce oppressive norms (e.g., in terms of heteronormativity, race, ability status). Because of the ethical difficulty in negotiating the inherent power differential between researchers and students (e.g., the students may not have felt it was in their power to say “no” to participating in the project), it is important to be critically and reflexively self-aware of positionality (i.e., the relative power of each group member) when working with youth so as to share power to the extent possible.

Nygreen and colleagues (2006) similarly named the importance of sharing power as an adult ally when working with youth for social change, as well as recognizing the importance of positionality in shaping interactions, the need to create safe spaces where youth can feel comfortable dialoguing, and the importance of building trust and relationships. Through PAR, researchers can not only illuminate the consequences of oppression on marginalized people but interrogate and transform privilege by making it—and the injustice that privilege perpetuates—visible (Stoudt, 2012). Through his work partnering with faculty and students to examine

bullying at an elite prep school for boys, Stoudt (2009) articulates how privileged people can interrupt privilege through methods that encourage self-reflection, such as through interrogation of language and group discourses. The purpose of this study was to explore how ABC negotiated power, including understanding how they might (re)produce it through their attempts at resistance.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year, I conducted a critical ethnography of ABC in partnership with Family Futures. I participated in the group as a fellow member by attending their biweekly meetings, with data collection consisting of my fieldwork notes and observations, individual interviews with ABC members and the adult group facilitator that were audio-recorded and transcribed, and memos I wrote throughout the research process. I took a modified grounded theory (GT; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005) approach to data analysis as well as using situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) with the aim of achieving critical construct validity (Fine & Torre, 2019). While concepts of sexual subjectivities and structural intimacies drove how I approached the group, because this was a grounded theory study, I did not want to artificially impose those constructs upon the situation of inquiry. Rather, I constructed theory based on my understanding of the situation of inquiry as a process that I both witnessed and participated in through my embeddedness in the group.

Positionality

I, the graduate student author, am a White/Hispanic, queer, cisgender woman. The faculty investigator—a White, queer, cisgender, man—is a professor in Counseling Psychology with interdisciplinary training. Because I took a critical feminist standpoint that acknowledges the effect of my values on the work (Fassinger, 2005), I was transparent about my positionality with the ABCers and reflexively analyzed how my positionality influenced the work throughout the research process.

Participants

This study consisted of a total of 9 participants (ages 16-26). Due to an established relationship with Family Futures employees who expressed support for this project, access to contacting participants was granted through them. The Family Futures employee who facilitated the peer education group that is the focus of this study acted as a go-between for the study staff and participants in the group, all of which was coordinated via email. I provided Frances with a written research statement (see Appendix A) to convey to the student participants that included the research team's contact information. The students were provided with parent/guardian permission forms (see Appendix C) to be read and consulted with their parents/guardians as well as an assent form (see Appendix B) to fill out themselves. When both the parent permission and youth assent forms were signed, the youth members emailed these forms to me directly. This study included the established pool of nine high school students involved with ABC as peer educators for the academic year 2020-2021, beginning in August 2020 and ending in May 2021, as well as the group's adult facilitator, a Family Futures employee. One youth member who had initially consented to the project later rescinded their consent, leaving data from eight youth members and the adult group facilitator included for analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between August 2020 and June 2021, during which time I became part of ABC. Primary data comprised (a) participant observation notes using a fieldwork guide as a template (see Appendix E) and (b) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ABC members and the group's adult facilitator (see Appendices F and G). Due to the continued effects

of the COVID-19 pandemic, all ABC meetings took place over private Zoom meetings. I conducted all individual interviews virtually through HIPAA-compliant Zoom, which I audio-recorded and then transcribed.

Fieldwork

I attended ABC's biweekly meetings and conducted fieldwork by taking notes on my observations of the participants and group dynamics. My observations were guided by my research questions and personal fieldwork guide (see Appendix E), with particular attention paid to how structural dynamics of sexual politics were negotiated within the group, how group members negotiated their own critical consciousness development in relation to others, and the emotional landscape of the group's interpersonal dynamics. Following meetings, I wrote memos reflecting on my observations.

Individual Interviews

I conducted two interviews with ABC members over the course of the academic year, the first lasting approximately 20 minutes to serve as an informal introduction during the fall semester and the second an in-depth, semi-structured individual interview lasting about an hour. Because I took a modified grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005), I approached interviews with questions that had been guided by my research (see Appendix F). After obtaining consent, the interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed. The purpose of the interview was to explore ABCers' understanding and negotiation of sexual politics structurally and intrapersonally, with an emphasis on exploring individual critical consciousness development, intersectional awareness of self and others, emotions, and sexual subjectivity. At

the individual level, interviews essentially permitted exploration of how ABCers constructed their own structural intimacies (Mackenzie, 2013).

I also conducted an in-depth, semi-structured interview lasting approximately an hour with the Family Futures employee who facilitated the group to explore her role, her perspective on the group, and her own intersectional awareness. As with ABC members, I approached this interview using questions that were guided by my research (see Appendix G). The interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach (GT; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005) wherein data are grounded in the lived experiences of participants and concepts emerge inductively from analysis of the data. GT is fluid, process-oriented, and dynamic in that theory was not generated post-hoc; rather, I conceptualized and changed my theory in reflexive response to how I interpreted what I saw and heard through my observations, interviews, and memo-writing. As a participant involved in the group, I was able to bear witness to how the group dynamics unfolded *and* was an influencing part of group dynamics through my involvement. For example, the positionality I brought to the group influenced how I analyzed my observations and was evident in the memos I wrote. The theory I generated in collaboration with this group was a narrative construction of how I interpreted what is going on—i.e., the situation of inquiry—through this dynamic process.

Situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), which is a method by which the positions of GT-generated data are visually mapped out to identify discursive elements that are otherwise

obscured by transcripts and codes, was also used. When data analysis was underway, I used positional maps, which are essentially graphs that help us visualize qualitative data along at least two axes, to visually represent how key concepts that emerged from the data related to one another. Here, situational analysis made visible how the group negotiated sexual politics according to important theoretical concepts that emerged from the data. By physically mapping out participants' experiences on different continua, salient patterns as well as sites of silence across participants' experiences were identified. In other words, situational analysis made evident how non-explicit factors constructed the situation of inquiry (Clarke, 2006). For examples of messy positional maps I created during the data analysis process, see Appendix H.

I applied critical feminist and intersectional lenses to data analysis in order to generate a theoretical basis upon which to better understand the group's negotiation of sexual politics in relationship with their identity development as individuals, as a group, and as activists. I analyzed data through multiple rounds of coding to engage in a reflexive process of comparison of emerging concepts. To conduct this psychological research while using intersectionality responsibly (Moradi, 2017; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017), I approached data analysis at both the personal and systemic levels.

Following the end of the academic year, I engaged in a coding process that lasted from November 2021 to February 2022 using NVivo. I first inductively generated a list of codes through open coding of all interview transcriptions, resulting in a list of 116 inductively generated codes. When the open coding list was complete, I condensed and organized the coding list into concept groups as well as cut out or collapsed superfluous codes, resulting in a list of 29 higher order codes. Using this list, I then engaged in axial coding to identify interrelationships

between code categories. Throughout the coding process I met with my advisor to reflect on and discuss the evolving codes, analyze themes that arose from the data, and conceptualize theory, all of which were supplemented through memo-writing.

In accordance with recommended best practices for qualitative research in psychology (Levitt et al., 2017), I maintained (a) methodological integrity through consistent contextualization of the data within a grounded theoretical frame and (b) fidelity to the subject matter, which the authors define as “an intimate connection” (p. 10) to what is being studied, through centered focus on the self-definitions and lived experiences of ABCers. Situational analysis allowed us to attend to fidelity by mapping out the elements of a situation and shaping knowledge through attention to the situation’s structural dimensions (Grzanka, 2021). The data analysis process was reflexive since all researchers involved in the work made explicit their positionality as well as their thoughts on emerging theoretical ideas through team discussions.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Fieldwork, Meeting 1: 9/28/20

Tonight's agenda = continued discussion of abortion, beginning "mega unit" on consent and relationships. Trying to get a sense of what people are like... Missy² seems shy, Carlisle and River outspoken. Beth is painting and shows us a portrait she made of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who's just died. I can't see Ali because his camera is off, but I hear young children in the background. Carlisle and Rose seem to be good friends. Only Maria and River have their pronouns listed in their Zoom name. I see art on everyone's walls, and a little Pride flag sticking out of a plant on River's desk. Everyone looks light-skinned. Frances is asking questions about consent, and the ABCers respond in turn.

Embedded within a socio-politically conservative culture, ABC's of Sex Education (ABC) was established as a peer education and activist group to counteract the harmful messaging perpetuated through East Tennessee's system of abstinence-only sex "education." Though involvement in the group is theoretically inclusive to all, in practice it serves as a safe haven for mostly White (and White-adjacent), queer adolescents of relative economic privilege. This year's members joined ABC in response to their own experiences of oppression in the form of bullying, structural stigma, and lack of access to important sexual health resources (including accurate information). Their participation in ABC was a means of enacting change in their community by attempting to shift cultural norms toward what they consider to be "good" sex education—in other words, accurate, destigmatized information that is queer-inclusive.

² Participants' names have been changed to a pseudonym chosen by them to protect their privacy. Locations and other names have also been changed in order to maintain participants' privacy.

In terms of identity development, embracing their own personal queerness and rejecting East Tennessee's cultural norms led to construction of the self that was characterized by both fluidity (e.g., avoiding labels) *and* the erasure of class and race (e.g., failing to critically examine their own Whiteness). Race was further reduced to the implicit as recruitment for ABC is predominantly made through word of mouth, leaving those within ABC very insular and homogenous. Though they sought to spread their version of good sex education, ABCers' narrow social circles keep the delivery of their message limited. To what extent, then, is "good" sex ed actually disseminated in the broader community?

Despite the limits of their reach, the members of ABC believe wholeheartedly in their cause. They held fast to their ideals of what sex education *could* look like in their community, if only they could reach enough people, change enough minds to cause a large enough ripple effect to extend beyond their small group and social circles. Beyond sex education, ABCers' clear commitment to social justice advocacy was nourished by their critical consciousness development amidst the impactful events of 2020. Their desire to effect cultural change stemmed both from their own experiences and the hope they had of creating a better world. Defining themselves as activists, their participation in ABC was an act of service and love to themselves and their community.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate how ABCers' identities as activists and countercultural youth developed, particularly how they navigated being gender and sexual minorities while evading race and class; negotiated social justice advocacy as their critical consciousness grew parallel to global events of 2020; and resisted the norms of abstinence-only

“education” through peer education. Ultimately, their goal was to transform—and liberate—their community through accurate, queer-inclusive sex education.

Navigating Identity Development

Defining “Inclusivity”: Queer Affirmation and the Erasure of Race and Class

Memo: 10/17/20

Spoke with Maria today and Alaska yesterday. For both, I just felt so connected to them; the way they described themselves and their motives matched my own in life. With these mini-interviews I’m realizing how “normal” these conversations feel to me—meaning, visibly queer, nontraditional, counterculture. It makes me wonder if there are pieces that I’m missing.

My involvement with ABC as a critical feminist required both awareness of how my perspective informed my analysis of the data, as well as analysis of how my perspective was shaped by my own subjectivity. As a White, cisgender, queer woman, I found almost immediately that ABC as a space felt comfortable and affirming. Similar to what Fields (2016) described in her negotiation of proximity to her own subjects, I found myself so involved with ABC as a group that embracing my own subjectivity in relation to what I perceived seemed crucial. Starting with the first meeting, the group felt to me like a truly queered space, so much so that I began to question whether I was being blinded to undercurrents separate from the palpable hegemonic queerness. The group’s dynamics seemed akin to a reenactment of heteronormative society in reverse: rather than a failure to notice how compulsory heterosexuality pervades our culture, I was being blinded to how queerness infiltrated this space as its own norm. A consistent theme throughout meetings—and, later, during interviews—was

that ABC members were not accepted in East Tennessee in a mainstream way. Rather, they specifically went against the values and norms of this area by rejecting what I and the group see as East Tennessee's conservative, cis- and heteronormative, traditional, Christian hegemony, finding in ABC a place where they could relate to others with similar values. For example, Beth (she/her, 17, Latina) noted that she found it "pleasant"³ to be in an environment "where everyone kind of had the same thought processes as I do and the same values towards and the same respect for other people" that she believed could not be found in other areas of members' lives given East Tennessee's dominant cultural norms. Indeed, Missy (they/them, 16, mixed race) and River (they/them, 18, White) echoed the feeling they had of being respected within ABC, while Rose (she/her, 18, White) called it a "welcoming" space.

Nearly all the members described ABC as a space in which they could be their full selves, a space that was "inclusive" and safe. I soon understood this to mean that this was where they felt they could express and explore their queerness while feeling affirmed in what queerness meant to them specifically. For many, ABC was the first place in which they felt affirmed outside of, perhaps, welcoming family members. Maria (they/she, 16, Latinx) expressed that, while they felt a sense of safety at home, ABC was particularly "accepting." Moreover, they noted that "it's been one of the only spaces I've felt completely comfortable to be my authentic self and be open about my identity." In ABC meetings, members could engage in open, critical discussions about sexuality that Tennessee law literally prohibits⁴ and, moreover, be transparent about their lived experiences of not fitting into local cultural norms. River described the

³ All quotes are from participant interviews unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Recall that since 2012, educators in Tennessee are prohibited by law (SB 3310) from teaching students anything that could promote "gateway sexual activity"—defined as sexual contact that could precipitate engagement in a non-abstinent behavior (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1301).

affirmation they felt in their queerness upon entering ABC, particularly related to their evolving gender identity and expression:

I decided to basically openly come out to the first people I ever had in person, and that was respected, like, immediately.... [In ABC] people can respect you for your identity and will call you the name that you want to be called even if it's, like, not connected to your name at all, or if it doesn't even have to do with gender. There are people like me that are gonna support you and they will, like, instantly make that pronoun change because they genuinely care about you. That was definitely something that I'm going to probably carry on for the rest of my life.

Having the ability to explore their gender identity seemed especially important for ABCers.

Nearly all the members said that one of their favorite meetings was one in April where a doctor specializing in HRT was invited to speak to the group; coincidentally, Carlisle (he/him, 18, White) announced at the beginning of this meeting that he had started gender-affirming testosterone, to which everyone cheered and expressed their warm support.

Just as River used ABC as a space in which to experiment with their self-labeling, so too did others. Pronoun usages were in constant flux, and members seemed to feel encouraged in their exploration. A convenient perk of using Zoom for meetings appeared to be the facility in visibly changing one's pronouns for all to recognize, which members made plentiful use of throughout the year. In a way, this matched what Frances (she/her, 26, White), the Family Futures employee who served as the group's adult facilitator, hoped members would get out of the group:

I think my number one feelings-y answer to that is always just that it's a place where they can show up and be their full, authentic selves and feel affirmed in that. And also try out different aspects of themselves in a way that it's not safe to necessarily in other places in East Tennessee. I think I say that just because I feel like there're always so many pronoun evolutions over the course of the year and people using different names and stuff like that, and I really value that aspect of it, and it means a lot to me that people feel safe enough to do that.

Frances specifically wanted ABC to be a “space of inquiry” where it was “ok to ask questions” in service of breaking “taboos and stigma” around sexuality while affirming group members most especially in their gender and sexual identities. Related to this affirmation, many members repeated a sentiment of *inclusiveness* that they felt characterized ABC. For Carlisle, this meant “knowing that you can speak your truth and not be shut down...shame isn't present with ABC.”

Indeed, ABC appeared to be so affirming of a space that all but one of the junior members planned to return the following year. For many of the members, it was not only a place where they could be affirmed in their queerness, but they could also gain social support and community, particularly given the isolation and social challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Frances began each meeting with a unique ice breaker (e.g., What was a high and low for you this week? What is something good or new that's happened in your life since the last time we saw each other?) that showed ABCers their individuality was important. Further, Frances often made it a point to check in with members during meetings if a topic of discussion was particularly heavy or vulnerable, modeling how to offer support such that members quickly became fluent in extending empathy to one another. Maria “loved” being part of ABC as a

means of consistent social interaction throughout “so much unknown.” Unlike members’ experiences at school and in the broader community, ABC could serve as a constant, reliable source of felt security, especially when it came to navigating East Tennessee as a gender and/or sexual minority. In other words, ABC served as an inclusive queer haven. Moreover, this feeling of security was something they could pass on to others, as Rose discussed in a meeting about communication:

In East Tennessee you have a guest speaker making an environment that’s hostile for questions, immature jokes are just rattled off at you so you don’t feel comfortable talking or getting input on your own life experiences. The advantage of peer education is to provide that ear for people who are closeted or provide that safe space.

Members of ABC saw the space as a direct contrast to the experiences they had in other places in East Tennessee, including school. Per members’ report in interviews, Frances played a large role in fostering an environment in which they could feel safe to be themselves. From my own observations, she was careful, thoughtful, and gentle in her facilitation of the group. Acceptance of queerness felt intuitive but was also normalized through use of inclusive language (e.g., saying “people with uteruses” rather than “women”) and the little anecdotes members would share, like when Beth’s response to an ice breaker about your favorite media couple was the actors Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem “because I can’t decide which one I have a bigger crush on” or when Ali jokingly sent in ABC’s GroupMe an anime photo where one person is saying to the other, “Hey the rest of us are gonna do some HRT in the bathroom, wanna join?” ABC served as a miniature model of the inclusivity members were meant to enact among their peers;

what this meant beyond gender and sexual identity, however, was a question that the group largely evaded (at least explicitly).

Memo: 11/19/20

As I conduct these mini-interviews, of note is the lack of any mention of race, and to a lesser extent, class. Not a single person has mentioned what I'm reading as their Whiteness, though Maria and a couple of others read as potentially POC. As far as class, my only read has been subtextual (e.g., when Alaska talked about hoping to get scholarships and possibly living with a single mom). Do they not see their Whiteness? Gender also only gets mentioned when the embodied identity is TGNC. Generally speaking, actually, any identity piece I've noticed being mentioned is one that is marginalized (usually sexuality and gender identity). It makes me wonder the extent to which they're aware of their dominant identities and how those interact with their marginalized ones.

Alongside the queer-affirmativeness of this ostensible haven was the palpable erasure of both race and class to such an extent that the accessibility of membership in ABC came into question. After almost a decade of being involved with ABC, Frances stated her belief that the space is especially affirming for “LGBTQ young people” and “budding feminists who haven’t had those ideals reflected in their day-to-day lives before.” Though the alleged purpose of ABC is to create a space in which youth (and queer youth in particular) can feel safe to be their authentic selves, I could not help but wonder who is actually included in that space. Most members had heard of ABC through word of mouth, whether in their high school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), a near-equivalent Equality Club (i.e., a high school extracurricular club that, as

Rose put it, is “a space where we meet and talk about current events and things that are concerning for, you know, civil rights and liberties and the whole mess of social justice advocacy”), or from current members with what they admitted were limited social circles. For example, Alaska (she/they, 18, White) and River specifically joined ABC because of their leadership roles within GSA, hoping that through ABC they could gain resources and connections with other people in the community that could be helpful for GSA members (i.e., queer and queer-adjacent peers).

While “grateful” for the opportunity to be part of ABC, Ali (he/him, 18, White) simultaneously noted that his participation was a “privilege” other youth cannot access. Similarly, when asked about the impact she believed ABC has on East Tennessee, Beth lamented that it was “not a big enough one”:

I think that ABC has a big impact on the members. I think that it’s had a big impact on me, but I don’t think that we do enough outreach. And maybe that could just be because my first experience with ABC was during the pandemic and there’s not a whole lot of, like, outreach and advocacy that we could do, but I think that I would like to see ABC really trying to get in schools and get involved with the people. But the thing is that that’s so hard, and it’s easier said than done because we face so much opposition again with, like, the same people who oppose comprehensive sex education, so I don’t know.

While recognizing the structural limitations for ABC’s reach, Beth nonetheless seemed to believe that the broader community was not experiencing the same impact as ABC’s small group of members; left unsaid in Beth’s analysis was whom she meant by “the people.” Based on my own observations of the group, I could not help but hear this as an implicit judgment of what

Beth experienced as one of the only members of color. Though Frances expressed hope that ABC would be affirming for people with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, she reported being aware of the implications of what it meant for ABC to be “inclusive” given that the group has historically “skewed pretty White”:

In thinking about how to change that and how to make it a more appealing, available resource to people from all different backgrounds and races and ethnicities and stuff, I’ve really struggled with what is my place in that, and is this actually—as a White person, knowing the things I know and also knowing the things I don’t know about how to make this a safe space, like, is this actually a safe space for non-White students? And am I doing everything I can to make sure that this caters to everybody and is available to everybody? And...what’s the most responsible way to go about trying to make this a more diverse group? And when I’m advertising this group to other places, is it accurate and is it actually a safe space?

Frances’ questions, which I only heard her express at the end of the year during our individual interview but never in ABC meetings themselves, echoed my own. Although gender and sexuality were frequent topics of discussion in group meetings, it was notable that explicit inclusion of race or class in such discussions was typically avoided. This erasure was moreover visibly emphasized as the vast majority of the invited speakers for special topics were White; indeed, their Whiteness explicitly shaped how they addressed the topics on which they spoke, such as when a speaker discussing interpersonal violence vaguely referenced “dynamics” rather than explicitly naming racism or addressing how abusive relationships can be racialized. When

asked why she thought ABC was so White, Frances speculated about the reliance on recruitment via “word of mouth” and the racial segregation of East Tennessee itself:

White kids tend to recruit White kids, and from the same schools. Like, overwhelmingly for the last couple years from the STEM High School. And so I think that’s one piece of it, just people staying within their bubbles that look like them. And I think also it’s always been White women who have led ABC. And so, our networks are what they are. I think East Tennessee is still very segregated in some serious ways. And then I think also just the, you know, class differences that come along with race and inequalities around resources and who can afford to not have a job after school and who can have a ride to Family Futures, and yeah, a lot of different things.

Her attention to accessibility echoed what some members, like Ali, thought, although what Frances explicitly named related to race and class inequities was often replaced with the vague notion of “privilege” by group members.

Just as ABCers seemed reluctant—or perhaps unequipped—to discuss how race was implicated within sexual education, they appeared equally avoidant of discussing their *own* race. For all three members of color, their racial identity was a source of internal conflict and/or conflated with their ethnicity. When asked to describe aspects of her identity that felt important, Beth responded:

Being Latina, I think? But I’ve kinda had to kick and scream to make that part of my identity because I’m only half Latina on my father’s side and I look White as a sheet. So, that’s kind of more about identity crisis than it is a piece of identity.

Missy similarly commented on how they are alternately perceived as “White-passing” or directly asked whether they are “not White,” leading to feelings of ambiguity about how they present to others. They stated that they do not feel comfortable discussing race since, from their perspective, “I often feel like I don’t really count, even though I know that’s not really true. Because I don’t want to be someone who talks over issues that I haven’t experienced.” For Maria, their Latinx identity was more integrated apart from circumstances where they had to fill out paperwork and “check the little boxes.”

Even though Beth, Missy, and Maria answered my questions about race, I could not help but wonder if they were reluctant to discuss with me their experiences of racialization within ABC. As a woman who is both White and Hispanic, some of their identity conflict resonated with me, particularly my journey of coming to understand how my race and ethnicity are both connected and separate. However, in my attempt to keep the focus on their experience, I realized that I never actually shared this similarity with them—an unintentional reenactment of Missy’s reluctance to discuss race and ethnicity due to their perception of not “count[ing].” It is possible that my hesitation to share this part of myself made the ABCers less willing to be transparent. Beth initially described experiencing “times where I can feel different or isolated or have different views on matters because of my ethnicity,” but she denied having any such experience in ABC when I asked her directly. Though Missy felt conflicted about calling themselves a person of color despite “technically” being one, they noted that it was “interesting being in a position where I haven’t lived the same experience as some of the White members of the group.” They discussed the discomfort members of the group seemed to have in discussing race:

Missy: I kind of wish we did talk a bit more about kind of racial issues and how they do tend to overlap with things like health, sexual health.... It was addressed at times [in meetings]. It definitely was, and I do think that nobody really tried to avoid it. I just don't think it was something that came up maybe as much as it should have when it's, like, a very big part of these conversations.

Elena: Why do you think it didn't come up as much?

Missy: I think it can be a really difficult issue to address, especially when a lot of the people in there were White, and I'm not saying that they don't want to talk about it, but I think they probably, in some cases, felt like it wasn't really their place to, or that it would have felt awkward to. Because it is sometimes...It is actually usually uncomfortable to be kind of a room full of White people talking about racial issues.

As Missy observed, for the White members, race was something they seemed to ignore, forget about, or intentionally avoid discussing. (Indeed, in a parallel process I demonstrated my own evasion of thorough discussion of race and racial identity.)

When asked to describe their social identities in interviews, most White group members did not mention their racial or ethnic identity unless probed further. Each group member mentioned feeling the most comfortable with discussing topics that seemed to relate to them personally (e.g., Carlisle with trans issues, others with queer issues). They seemed to pay attention to how much space they took up, holding themselves accountable to their particular knowledge base, and trying to negotiate what they were responsible for—but it made wonder whether any of it related to discomfort about saying the wrong thing. Were they avoiding talking about a certain topic because they genuinely felt that they did not have the expertise to bring it

up, or because it made them uncomfortable? These questions felt most relevant concerning race specifically, such as when Rose deflected the salience of her race, stating, “I’m just White.”

Alaska emphasized her queerness as the most salient piece of her identity, but when I asked whether there were times she thought about her race specifically, she responded:

Honestly, probably not. The only time I really think about it is like when I see how I have privilege that other people of different races don’t have and how I’ve been trying to hold myself accountable more and call my friends out for dumb jokes they make that are offensive but they don’t realize it is. They’ve never been in a position where they would be the target of those jokes and just things like that, but for me, I don’t really feel like it’s a big identifier because I don’t really have any culture to call on when it comes to that.

Here, Alaska seemed to relegate Whiteness to a liminal space, rendered absent until contrasted with what could be deemed “other” (i.e., non-White). Similarly, for Ali, grappling with his Whiteness meant “I just kind of try to unwind the defaultness that we’re kind of trained to think of, and be a good advocate and promote people’s voices.” When I asked Carlisle when he thinks about his race, he seemed to exhibit shame about his Whiteness:

Like, just a blanket statement—I’m just, I’m a White guy. I’m not proud of being White or anything. So I’ve only really thought of race in, like, cognizant of the space I’m taking up or anything like that. Like, when we have a lot of conversations especially with what happened at North High School⁵, there are a lot of conversations on how to help and what to do and if we should protest, and my thought is like, “well, as a White person, I should

⁵ In the spring of 2021, a 17-year-old Black student was shot and killed by a police officer at an East Tennessee high school.

not be the frontrunner of anything like that.” Like, I am not the face of the movement, nor should I be, nor do I want to be. So that’s really the only capacity where I’ve thought about my race and being cognizant of what can I do as a White person to uplift other people from behind the scenes.

Similarly to Alaska and Rose, this positioning seemed to allow Carlisle to disengage from critical analysis of what his Whiteness actually means by removing himself from the conversation entirely. His apparent discomfort was indicative of color-evasion (Neville et al., 2013) that other White ABCers likewise engaged in. Alaska’s lack of ease in talking about race indicated an awareness of their inability to fully understand BIPOC experiences while still illuminating how her Whiteness prevented her from engaging in difficult conversations with peers:

If I’m uninformed about a topic, like if it is a POC issue that I’m not super educated on, I would probably be like, “I don’t know for sure, let me look into it and send you some resources where I can talk to you about that,” but that wouldn’t be uncomfortable. I would just feel like, not “not qualified,” but like, you know, not good to just give my opinion, and we went with that. I would need to do a little more, you know, hold myself accountable, do some homework, research into that.

Alaska’s response to her discomfort with talking about race seemed positioned somewhere between maintaining accountability as a White person and deflecting personal responsibility for engaging with race. As a notable exception to their White counterparts, River explicitly named their race in an interview and reflected on what Whiteness meant to them:

So, I mean, as far as race—White. So like, unpacking and learning a lot of my own privileges in White saviorism and colonization and traveling different places and that kind of stuff and just, like, consumption, and try not to step over other cultures and try to learn what those things are as far as that part.

River’s understanding and analysis of their Whiteness was fostered through their experiences in interracial relationships, wherein they came to realize how situations could be “racially charged” and gained awareness of how racism continues to be perpetuated. For River, this was a critical piece of awareness that led them to question how Whiteness pervades power structures in ways that are harmful.

While race appeared to be a source of discomfort for ABCers that was largely avoided but sometimes alluded to, class was an explicit site of silence that group members completely ignored. The absence of discussion about class or socioeconomic status left only implicit markers for me to interpret, such as when Beth mentioned her AirPods or shopping at Whole Foods; several members talked about having a parent who was a professor at a nearby university; or when Rose described her family as a “fairly standard suburban family,” the implication perhaps being that she was middle class. My perception was that most, if not all, of the group members were fairly socioeconomically privileged. All of the senior members of the group spoke with certainty about their future plans to attend undergraduate institutions, and many ABCers attended the same magnet school that was more “liberal” than the school they were zoned for, a choice they were able to make through knowledge of the school’s lottery system. Indeed, access to ABC required knowledge of its very existence, the awareness of which seemed limited to students in certain schools in certain areas. In a March meeting, Frances brought up recruitment for the

following year and noted that she anticipated it being even more “difficult” because of ABC’s meetings occurring over Zoom. When she asked ABCers what ideas they had to “pass on a legacy in the form of new ABCers in the fall [of 2021],” it was evident that the teens were focused on their immediate social networks. Alaska, for example, mentioned potential recruits through GSA, which they led as president; Carlisle and Rose said they would bring up ABC in their magnet school’s Equality Club; and Maria said that they would mention ABC to their friends.

Fieldwork, Meeting 10: 3/8/21

Interesting that recruitment is basically going to have to be snowball sampling, which makes sense but also means that these counterculture kids are just going to be pulling new recruits from their same (largely White?) counterculture spaces.

Beyond the outreach limitations, as Frances noted, having access to ABC as a teenager was indicative of privilege that other youth may not hold since it necessitated having both transportation to Family Futures (this year being an exception given that meetings were held via Zoom) and time after school for extracurricular activities that might otherwise be taken up by a job.

As I considered the erasure of class within the group in addition to the way Whiteness pervaded it, I was left wondering about the degree to which ABCers experienced relative power outside of the group despite the oppression they faced as gender and sexual minorities. Though they undoubtedly experienced heterosexism and transphobia at school (e.g., Carlisle mentioning that a peer had essentially told him trans people do not exist), their very access to these schools suggested they were protected from the educational inequities produced by East Tennessee’s

racial (and class-based) segregation. Critical engagement with their own race and class, then, was evaded and instead reduced to a surface-level acknowledgement of identity. What was certain was that ABC was a space in which members' target identities were affirmed in ways that contrasted outgroup members' treatment of them, *and* there appeared to be room for more critical reflection of how privilege shaped their lived experience.

Memo: 3/9/21

Themes I've been reflecting on: race as a major site of silence, class made implicit and therefore rendered nearly invisible, and counterculture as hegemony. Of course race is always playing a role regardless of whether it is mentioned explicitly, but it's notable how infrequently it is talked about. Similarly, I've noticed that—although the kids are so incredibly thoughtful, caring, and intelligent—their responses almost seem to come from within a vacuum; they don't really shape their answers to questions through an intersectional lens, and if they include any consideration of identity it's usually to merely name or use inclusive language about gender identity and sexuality—but even then not really talking about how those pieces might influence their answer.

Identity Fluidity and Discovery: Construction of the Self

Because ABC was seen as a safe space in which to express parts of themselves that were not as readily accepted or affirmed outside of the group, ABCers were able to experiment with their self-expression. Indicative of the queer-affirmativeness of ABC, members' negotiation of being gender and/or sexual minorities was the most explicit aspect of their identity development. It was clear that they were engaging in self-reflection outside of ABC, but at the same time used meetings as a space to workshop their evolving self-concept (e.g., visibly changing their

pronouns on Zoom, situating their queerness within the context of pop culture references or readings they engaged with). From my frame of reference, ABCers' identity development was an iterative process in which personal introspection affected the thoughts they shared during meetings, leading to further discussion that would affect their introspection, and so forth. For some members, identity labels were tried on and either discarded or integrated into their self-concept, or the idea of labels was rejected altogether. Consistent for each member was a degree of fluidity and attempts to discover who they were as people, but also allowing space for that to flex and change. In other words, ABCers seemed to queer their very identities through fluidity of self-definition, particularly related to their sexuality and/or gender. Partially this seemed to be an aspect of their age, such as when Alaska was asked to describe some of their social identities and noted, "You know, I think the whole thing about being a teenager is we're still figuring that out." Unlike Beth and Maria, who seemed to exhibit more certainty about naming their targeted racial/ethnic identities as unchanging, Missy felt a degree of uncertainty about their identity in all aspects:

It's kind of hard for me to have labels because everything about me is kinda like...ambiguous, I guess? Like, I'm mixed race, but I'm also pale enough to be White-passing? And then I'm nonbinary, but most people don't really see me that way when they first look at me. And then with sexuality, I like women, but it's hard to find a word that specifically describes that, so it's just kind of complicated.

In naming themselves as "ambiguous," Missy demonstrated an awareness of the sociocultural impact of Whiteness and how cisnormative expectations can affect the way one's gender is perceived and, perhaps, psychologically experienced. At the same time, Missy seemed to have

the same difficulty in finding a label to adequately capture their lived experience that many other ABC members had. Beth, on the other hand, emphasized the certainty of her ethnic background and gender while appearing reluctant to concretely identify other aspects of herself:

I first and foremost identify as a Mexican-American woman, but most of the other boxes in terms of sexual identity or, I think specifically sexual identity, I don't really feel like it's necessary to conform to a certain box. So, I identify as a woman, I identify with my ethnicity and my having been raised in America and the States, and I think that those are probably the only boxes that I strictly fit myself into.... I think a lot of who I am is still up for debate, or up for discovery. But I'm not mad about that.

In rejecting sexuality labels altogether, Beth was unique among her peers who seemed to favor "queer" as an "umbrella term" (e.g., Ali, Alaska). Here she seemed to both emphasize and assert her right to evolve without conforming to external pressures to identity in certain ways, possibly in response to what she perceived to be the predominantly White "culture shock" of East Tennessee as compared to her more "diverse" hometown of Atlanta.

Similarly, River described themselves as "flamboyant" in the context of an environment that is "copy-paste," saying, "I don't stick out like a sore thumb, however, my finger's just a little bit different than everyone else's kind of a thing." Alaska discussed the conflict she felt growing up in East Tennessee as a burgeoning queer person, noting that "it's just so odd growing up...they're like, 'be yourself. If you want to talk to somebody, talk to somebody,' but then you're realizing that your definition of yourself doesn't fit into what they think you should be." An aspect of Alaska's experience of queerness, as for others, seemed to be a feeling of otherness. River spoke of the salience of their queerness not so much because of it being a target identity in

and of itself, but because of contextual factors (e.g., experiencing queer oppression, growing up in East Tennessee) *making* it salient:

A lot of times in my town it's not been a great place to have that identity and be open about it, and I think that has led for it to be a more significant part of my life than I ever anticipated my sexuality being. Because in my brain it doesn't have a ton of power in my own, like, individual self. I feel more so just connected to the community and less so, like, "I'm attracted to people of the same gender and generally feminine-presenting people and that attraction itself is a huge part of who I am," it's more so a, "I have this and I'm a part of this community and we have all these shared experiences and I have this support group through it and different events and sharing stories and that kind of stuff."

River reported experiencing bullying for presenting as queer starting in childhood, but also felt they were not given the space to really consider what that queerness meant. From River's perspective, their upbringing and imposed cultural limitations (e.g., heteronormativity) restricted their capacity to "figure out" some of their social identities:

I identify as gender and sexually queer and still kind of figuring out the gender stuff, but I definitely am under the trans umbrella and still kind of battling exactly what that means, and, like, finding myself in the community. But I still align myself with being a woman because of my upbringing and how I'm perceived and that kind of stuff.... Gender is weird, gender is confusing....I kind of feel like I'm woman-lite, you know? I understand how that's very, very offensive to people and it's like very fucked up, but I feel like I'm woman-lite. (laughs)

Despite what “people on the Internet” might consider “offensive,” River clearly sought to make sense of themselves in any way they could. They were not alone in feeling that their gender identity in particular was a source of confusion, as Maria also used ABC as a space in which to specifically explore their gender identity through dialogue with fellow ABCers and personal reflection in response to Frances’ questions:

I’m still in the process of figuring out my own gender identity. And also talking to other people about it, I think about my gender a lot, mostly because I’m questioning it right now and trying to figure that part of myself out.

Throughout the year, Maria frequently changed their pronouns as part of this exploration, which for them went beyond the individual. Talking about “gender, sexuality, queer identities, gender diversity” excited them above all else precisely because of how they envisioned the possibilities for queering these aspects of self:

I think it’s also really important to be more open-minded and just to expand your thinking to better be able to understand different people’s identities and situations with all parts of sex ed, whether it’s teen parents or different gender identities, the way that it is different and has been different throughout history and in different cultures. And being progressive and open-minded. I think in the U.S. and in our culture, while it’s definitely getting better, it’s still very, of course, Westernized. And I think that it is beneficial for everybody to kind of, you know, go back and question that and kind of get out of that colonizer mindset and all of the misogyny and not so great things that have come with colonization.

Maria seemed to suggest that truly considering one's gender and sexuality required questioning its very nature, and, moreover, deconstructing its origins in favor of something outside of the current norms given that those norms were established through structurally oppressive lenses. Through their participation in ABC, they were able to reflect on these questions for themselves, even going so far as to give a presentation during the final meeting of the year on the fluidity of genders around the world.

For many members, the weight of a label seemed to feel like a heavy—and constricting—burden. Ali vacillated between identifying as nonbinary and transmasculine in his efforts to “find a label that makes the most sense for where I want to be.” Some, like Carlisle, intentionally chose to identify as “queer” for its inherent ambiguity of definition:

With being queer—and that's how I've chosen to define it, I haven't really specified—that feels like the best for me, specifically because it's not as specified. It feels like...that's the best way I know how to define myself in that sphere.

Carlisle's use of “queer” in this way was queer in itself: by rejecting the confines of a specific label, he allowed himself the possibility of creating his own self-definition. It also suggested a way of signaling in-group membership of a community shared by seemingly all of his fellow ABCers. For Alaska, choosing to identify as “queer” was a way of exiting the semantic conflicts that she said arise among Gen Zers when discussing aspects of identity and queerness in social media and other online spaces:

I think that's part of the reason why I just say, “yeah, I'm queer” and just move on with it because I exhausted so much time and energy and effort in a useless debate that, honestly, I don't really, like, agree with or care for anymore. So, I would say that pushing

myself towards a label has actually made me more likely to *not* identify with one and more likely to give myself one.

Having “queer” as a label after trying on a “multitude” of labels that never seemed to fit gave Alaska more space to be themselves, particularly in the context of growing up in a culture that did not nurture her self-exploration:

I didn’t have anybody to help me, because my mom doesn’t know any of that, and you can’t really go to a counselor to talk about that in Tennessee, you just can’t. So I googled (laughs) and I was just like, “alright, well, this sounds kinda like me, so we’ll be this thing now.” But now I kind of like to avoid labels? I think because I tried to shove myself in so many boxes when I was younger because I thought that was what you were supposed to do, and now I’m just like, “who cares, man.” (laughs)

Like Carlisle, Alaska embraced the lack of specificity being “queer” afforded them while still signaling how they were related to their ABC peers.

Meanwhile, Ali chose to identify as queer since it seemed like the “easiest thing” in that it ostensibly covers a spectrum of identities like an “umbrella.” In his exploration of both gender and sexuality, Ali realized how compulsory sexuality forces people to, as he put it, live in a heteronormative culture wherein “queer people do not get to grow up as themselves.” Within ABC as well as outside of it, Ali was attempting to figure out who he actually was without feeling “boxed in” by a label. Rose, too, initially tried to fit herself into the labels she saw popularized through social media, only to realize that terms like “queer or sapphic” would allow her the freedom to not “necessarily have to adhere to anything strict and terms that don’t really

have a right way of being that.” She spoke of diving into queer theory as part of her self-exploration, finding resonance with Judith Butler:

The idea of gender being a performance, that’s something that has been speaking to me a lot recently, because I’ve, you know, I feel like some things that I associate with my gender identity aren’t as intrinsic to my understanding of myself and my identity, but rather just a show in how I express it to the outward world, right. And so I’m like, “Okay, how much of this is just me being conditioned for approval,” right, and wanting people to, you know, think I’m attractive or think I’m, you know, traditionally acceptable, and how much of it is me genuinely feeling affirmed and validated in my identity and something that’s intrinsic to me and not something for the outside world, you know.

Something that’s mine and mine alone.

Rose, like other members, sought to define herself by her own terms outside of the confines of cis- and heteronormativity. Indeed, ABC’s very curriculum modeled rejection of these norms. While members certainly took time outside of meetings to reflect on their identity as it evolved, in ABC they received validation from their peers (e.g., when pronoun changes were announced or queer relationships were discussed) and the tools to help them navigate who they were (e.g., queer-affirming and inclusive language, dialogue with similarly motivated peers). The questioning and self-exploration ABCers engaged in as they searched for the most authentic version of themselves demonstrated exactly what Frances hoped for the group, highlighting ABC’s role as a safe, queer haven. However, the extent to which ABCers engaged with their positionality beyond gender and sexual identity was limited by ABC’s curriculum. Rather, their

capacity for intersectional awareness was nurtured more by the addition of timely analysis of the events of 2020 than participation in ABC alone.

Youth Development Amid the Events of 2020

Fieldwork, Meeting 7: 1/11/21

Frances takes a moment to acknowledge the difficulty of current time, saying they're "scary" because of the "attempted coup" and inauguration next week, plus being "still in the midst of a pandemic." She says, "Just wanted to open it up to any thoughts or reflections about what's going on right now." Maria: "Seems so unreal it's not even comprehending in my mind." Rose agrees and notes that being stuck at home "makes it feel even less real, more alien." Frances validates how it's a unique stress to not even be able to discuss current events with people outside our homes, being in a "weird space" right now.

Fieldwork, Meeting 13: 4/19/21

Mallory Smith from an organization working to promote sexual and reproductive freedom in Tennessee has been invited to speak to us about reproductive justice. Her timeline is thorough, and the kids seem shocked by what they're learning. We get to 2020: global pandemic and global uprisings ("a big year") → She asks, "How do you all think these things relate to reproductive oppression? How has reproductive oppression come to the forefront as a result of the pandemic or these uprisings?"

- *River: "Other than people being very performative and wanting to feel like a good person. People had time to take a moment from the constant exhaustion of capitalism, all of that was put on pause, so people had time to learn about racism"*

and get angry...things that had not been taught in the classroom. More exposure (from watching the news). People actually starting to give a shit.”

- *Carlisle: “For a lot of White, cis, able-bodied people, experiencing something brushing with, ‘the government can’t tell me what to do with my body! The government isn’t telling us everything to do with this disease!’ A lot of disabled people, LGBTQI people, were familiar with that concept. They don’t relate frankly, but with mask mandates they thought, ‘this is people trying to control my body.’”*

For ABCers and myself alike, 2020 was a heavy year. Many have called that time “unprecedented,” often in specific reference to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its tragic effects on so much of the world, which disproportionately affected BIPOC, disabled people, and the economically marginalized. Likewise, the uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd seemed to awaken many in the U.S. to how the perpetuation of racism, White supremacy, and other social inequities continue to affect people’s lives. While choosing to join ABC seemed indicative to me of an inherent interest in social justice—and, indeed, a major component of ABCers’ identity as queer and countercultural youth—this interest was only heightened by their analysis of what happened in 2020. As they processed and reflected on these major events, as their critical consciousness further developed, ABCers had to figure out how they saw themselves fitting in. What should their role in social justice advocacy be? What does it look like to navigate balancing one’s own mental health with the demands of activism and community care? To what extent are they personally responsible for effecting change? Bolstered by their growing awareness of systemic inequities, ABCers were empowered through their participation

in the group to feel knowledgeable and capable of spreading the message of comprehensive sex education to their peers, but it also forced them to negotiate their identities as budding activists.

Critical Consciousness Development, Structural Awareness, and Activism

Fieldwork, Meeting 3: 10/26/20

Today the ABCers are phone banking using the Family Futures supporters list for the upcoming election. This whole vibe has such camaraderie; everyone is writing in the chat about their experiences, and when people leave their video on I feel like it's very intimate being able to watch them talk with people (and attempt to call). Carlisle was accidentally unmuted, so we all got to hear a successful call—everyone was cheering him on. Alaska called the process a “serotonin rush.”

Along with ABCers' engagement in critical analysis of their individual subjectivity, for many members, their critical consciousness development through participation in ABC seemed further enhanced by their analysis of events going on in the world around them. One of the frequently reported effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was having time to reflect, leading to more critical analysis of broader systems and structures and how they affect individuals and communities. As Missy put it:

I basically only had my own thoughts...so it made it a lot more easy for me to really think about things in a very honest way, just because I was kind of thinking about things constantly...especially with, like, activism and stuff, it helped me to be more reflective on important issues and how they interact with the world around us.

River, too, found that the pandemic gave them time to reflect in ways they had not been previously able, “to learn and hear people and actually listen to people and their experiences and

different kinds of systematic and individually charged things in place that harm people.” What I am calling “critical consciousness” could also, then, be equated to a sort of *structural awareness* whereby ABCers’ understanding of the impact of systems of power (e.g., experiences of oppression or privilege) developed. I noticed that many of the group members described a sort of political awakening in which they discussed a sense of waking up to reality or letting go of a naïve viewpoint. Frances, for example, described how the pandemic impacted her worldview:

I feel like it’s been one of the more radicalizing years of my life for sure. Yeah, just like, “oh, the government will just let so many of us die,” and like, how many ways this could have been made so much less destructive. And I think it just shed light on all of the varying levels at which our system is not humane or designed to keep us safe.

Carlisle expressed how he came to terms with people’s mistrust of the medical community and larger systems:

With [the pandemic], and before it as well, [you] kind of *have* to realize it's not all amicable, it's not all altruistic. Like, of course these people are trying to make a profit, *and* of course they’re trying to promote public health, but I can fully understand why people of color or why queer people wouldn’t necessarily trust the government’s intentions with all of this. Like, that’s just a history that exists. And a thing that I became kind of increasingly bitter about was the COVID vaccine. It’s great it exists and there’s, like, four of them. But it was produced in about a year and HIV has been very operable and not exactly going away anytime soon for decades and there’s no vaccine. And I think in that similar vein, when the George Floyd protests started going on, only then did businesses start closing. It wasn’t in response to COVID. So with that, a lot of it kind of

pulled me out of my own head of like, “oh, no wonder people don't trust anything big.”

Which, I guess that's shorthand way of saying I became a socialist this year. (laughs) But

I can totally get why you wouldn't put 100% of your faith in a scientist or 100% of your faith in a corporation.

For Carlisle, witnessing the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matters (BLM) protests facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the contexts of people's, and the government's, responses. Similar to what Carlisle came to realize, Missy shared their thought in a meeting focused on reproductive justice that “a lot of people of color are skeptical of the vaccines because of past issues of people being sterilized without their consent.” Ali also noted the “parallels” between the government's treatment of the 1980s AIDS pandemic as compared with COVID-19.

While Alaska entered ABC thinking that it was “strictly sex ed and LGBTQ+ advocacy,” their burgeoning structural awareness was nurtured through the ideas and actions (e.g., phone banking to lobby against an anti-trans bill) brought up in meetings. Over time, she came to associate the presence of systemic “biases” with the awareness that “certain people in power, they look for people they can exploit.” She discussed how her racialized awareness grew as a result of the pandemic and 2020 BLM protests:

I think before ABC I was kind of blind to how much negativity was in the world and how much the system was just, like, not great. And now that I've been involved, plus with all the things that did spike up over quarantine like Black Lives Matter—I didn't really know anything about police brutality before quarantine happened because there wasn't a lot of education about it and that wasn't a hot topic to me.

Gaining this sort of awareness seemed to be particularly meaningful for Alaska given their family background consisting of Trump supporters. As she engaged in critical reflection by herself, ABC provided an additional avenue through which to learn and engage in dialogue about how systems of power, privilege, and oppression intersect with sex education.

Despite appearing to have an existing awareness of reproductive justice issues through their direct reference to Family Futures' eugenicist history, River nonetheless grew in their structural awareness through ABC. In particular, River emphasized the impact one meeting focused on reproductive justice had on them:

As far as, like, the actual sex ed, it's given me a lot of understanding of reproductive justice and reproductive rights and the history of that and the change that still needs to happen, as well as an understanding of what the current system is in place, and why it's like that and who's controlling it. And the phrase of, like, "if you can control the reproductive health and rights of a community, then you have full control over them"—I definitely didn't realize how impactful that is. If controlling any community, trying to see from a viewpoint of an oppressor, like, a single oppressor over a group is just such a horrible mindset that my brain is like, "don't even think like that." But I didn't realize how important it was.

Rose similarly grew a more nuanced understanding of how the sex education topics she was learning about and discussing in ABC were applicable beyond the surface level:

If I explain something about how menstruation works or something like that, obviously I recognize that as a contact, but then sometimes if I'm talking to people about, like, how our healthcare system is biased and often neglects the treatment of Black women,

sometimes I don't recognize that kind of conversation as a contact, because that's something I would've had regardless of whether I was in ABC or not. But I think being in ABC has helped me, like, recognize that and be able to talk about it in a more sophisticated way.

Part of what made ABC's comprehensive sex education *comprehensive*, therefore, was its attention to how sex education topics intersect with larger systems—in other words, attending to these issues from a frame of reproductive *justice* rather than *rights*. While discussing their identity as a democratic socialist with the values of “making things more equal” and providing “basic needs to everyone who needs them” through the elimination of “barriers” (e.g., economic, education, healthcare), Maria stated their belief that Family Futures is a facilitator of reproductive justice through its provision of healthcare.

However, some, like Missy, felt that more attention to intersectionality would be beneficial, citing the example of hearing about a Black woman's difficulty getting a screening for ovarian cancer. They spoke of their reflective analysis of how various issues intersect:

Whenever I learn something new, especially with the kinds of topics that ABC covers, I try to really think about it and the way it has to play in a lot of other issues, like, you know, we have reproductive issues go hand in hand with race issues, LGBT issues. It's all kind of connected in a lot of ways... Women's rights are very connected to racial issues, racial issues are very connected to sexual health issues. Sexual health issues are connected to LGBT issues... Acknowledging how those things interact with each other, I think, helps a lot with understanding these issues as a whole.

For Missy, treating issues singularly was a less effective method of correcting systemic injustice since “a lot of these kinds of things really kind of work together to just kind of hurt other people.” Rather, they believed that focusing on single-axis issues would “harm” people’s activism “overall” as they would not be addressing the “multiple factors” influencing people’s experiences of oppression. Relatedly, Carlisle framed his definition of social justice in terms of “responsibility and accountability” such that people’s actions should be in accordance with their subjective positionality:

It’s important to realize how your particulars perhaps impede empathizing or, like, assist with empathizing, and where you should be on the stage, so to put it. Like with [an anti-trans] Bathroom Bill, it directly affected or would have directly affected trans people, so it made sense for trans people to be the frontrunners of that. Behind them could be allies who would be responsible for uplifting trans voices, wouldn’t be speaking over anyone. And within that, the lived experience of a disabled trans person or a trans person of color, specifically trans women of color—so different. And all of that needs to be highlighted in a way that, like, I can only speak to the lived experience of a White trans guy, and even then me. So I wouldn’t even attempt to generalize the lived experience of a trans woman of color, that’s not my place.

For many members, considerations of positionality extended to what they were comfortable discussing with contacts. Rose, for example, felt hesitant about engaging in dialogue around trans issues given her identity as a cisgender woman:

As a general rule to someone who knows nothing about the topic, I feel fairly comfortable talking about why it’s important that people access bathrooms and that kind

of thing, and why it's important that people have access to health care, but, you know, someone who was trans needed assistance from me, right, or had an in depth question about something that goes beyond what I think I feel comfortable being an authority on because I don't want to, like, mansplain it to someone, or give them something that may not reflect these subjective feelings that they have about their gender identity.

Rose's negotiation of what was appropriate for her to discuss with others reminded me of White members' negotiation of the extent to which, and in what contexts, they should talk about race. One way of looking at this could be a thoughtful analysis of the impact certain actions have as a result of one's social identities; another, avoidance of critically engaging with one's positionality.

As Carlisle referenced and Rose alluded to, the concept of "accountability" often came up as a distinguishing facet of what it meant to be a "good" activist. Alaska cited the ease she has in making Instagram posts to raise awareness on social justice issues as an indication that others can (and perhaps should) do the same. At the same time, such posts require research; she believed that the issue of accountability comes up without proper research, in which case, "be willing to communicate and be open to helpful criticism and the legitimate criticism raised, or if you're in the wrong for a post or whatever, hold yourself accountable for those actions." In short, Alaska defined social justice advocacy as "taking charge but being respectful of those that you're trying to advocate for," such as listening to BIPOC rather than "inserting" themselves as a White person when told that her actions are unhelpful. Missy likewise defined social justice as "listening to the voices of other people and not speaking over them, and then fighting for them and their experiences." In the context of actions against anti-Black racism and police brutality,

Carlisle was attuned to the harm he as a White person could cause by choosing actions that went against what BIPOC leadership expressed:

I remember people I knew ended up getting arrested at those because they just literally were vandalizing public property. Like, people's cars. I think that may have been when I became especially cognizant of making sure you're following who you're supposed to follow when you're in a high stakes situation like that. Because a lot of what people are seeing is that it's not people of color who are instigating the violence at these protests.

Despite their ostensible intentions, Carlisle witnessed how White people's actions could result in disproportionate consequences for BIPOC—namely, the increased risk of experiencing violence. This seemed to be an illuminating experience of historical and current racism, as well as racism's tangible impacts on BIPOC, that he had previously only abstractly thought about.

In pondering why inequities like those Carlisle referenced exist, Maria was explicit in identifying various systems of oppression and how their awareness of these systems motivated them to engage in social justice advocacy:

Because of White colonialism (laughs) and capitalism and all of these institutions that I don't like and don't believe in and don't believe are the best thing to have our society be based around and controlled by. But unfortunately that's the way that it is, and I really care about educating people and, like, if we want to move away from that to decrease these differences in opportunity and make things better for everybody and get towards a goal of social justice and real equity to do as much as we can to, like I said, unlearn those things and start moving away from them, like, person by person.

While recognizing how complex and broad in scope the causes of oppression might be, Maria appeared to suggest that the work they did as an ABC educator could still make a difference at the interpersonal level. Maria made it clear that they hoped to make a “difference in the world” through “fighting oppression,” in large part because of their own experiences as a queer Latinx person growing up in East Tennessee:

I’ve had more of an attitude of trying to look out for other people and—that’s, I think, part of being a better person, is caring about people I don’t know and different countries. And the way that this whole pandemic has played out politically and a lot of the things that have come out of it, I think there are a lot of good things, but also it’s revealed to me a lot of the, unfortunately, nationalist ideas of a lot of people.

They went on to say that though they have come to realize how “hateful” people can be, they still feel a sense of community and an indelible desire to effect change. In her reflections on the events of 2020, Rose likewise seemed to grapple with a dialectical view of people:

In some ways it’s made me think like, “okay, Hobbes was right, maybe human nature is a little evil.” But it’s also taught me there’s this duality to it, right, so while some people are responding to things in this negative way, there are so many people responding to it in positive ways, like making efforts to stay connected with one another, right. Like, people who are trying their best to be supportive, people who are sewing masks for their friends, and all of the sorts of things, so I think it’s times like this that remind me how complex and nuanced human nature is and how people respond to things in different ways.

Rose expressed her goal of becoming a lawyer focused on human rights and mass incarceration to “remedy some of the inequities seen today.” Until that point, engaging in activism, including

through participation in ABC, was her way of “focusing on manageable chunks” rather than submitting to feelings of hopelessness and consequent inaction. Her motivations to enact change remained constant despite, or perhaps because of, the ways she believed people perpetuate harm.

While some members seemed to experience political awakenings amid the events of 2020, their experience of these events also affected the ways in which ABCers defined social justice and their relationship to activism. The quarantine necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited members’ ability to participate in actions like protests, forcing them to consider what it means to be an activist given such limitations. When considering the possible lack of ability to be physically present to engage in activism, Beth defended social media advocacy as being “just as valid and valuable of a form of advocacy as any other sort of action.” Members often referenced social media platforms as activist spaces, including Instagram (Missy, Alaska, Ali), Twitter (Missy, Rose), and TikTok (River, Alaska). The way ABCers and their peers perceived pop culture through social media could also produce meaningful moments, like when Rose discussed with a devoutly Catholic peer Lil Nas’s song “Montero” and how it made this peer question the purported “immorality” of homosexuality as indoctrinated to her by the Church. However, for Alaska at least, detaching from social media was a way of taking care of her mental health. They equated the “rise” of social media with “performative activism,” a judgment she defined as “doing [actions] for the wrong reasons.” As an example, she described the Instagram trend of Blackout Tuesday wherein people posted all black squares to their Instagram feeds as a way of showing solidarity with Black people amidst BLM protests; in effect, however, the squares served to “drown out” informative posts. According to Alaska, “spreading information is great regardless of your intentions as long as it’s accurate information

and it's helpful to some people, but just hopping on a trend and not knowing or caring what it stands for" distinguished performative from "good" activism. Beth echoed the importance of intentionality where activism is concerned, stating that she learned that "the art of patience and thinking before I speak" is necessary in addition to doing "thorough research."

Ali named the value of using social media to "lift up people's voices" in the absence of possibilities for more "direct action," but also noted that social media can become an "echo chamber" wherein posting an infographic does nothing to shift someone's perspective since, according to him, the people seeing that infographic all agree with the person who posted it in the first place. Rather, Ali's perspective on appropriate activist actions was decidedly more direct:

There was this thing kind of going on in the pandemic where it was, like, a lot of people coming up with kind of roundabout ways to fix things. Like, people who were like, "no, the violent protests are bad. It's not nice to be violent," but it's like, "yeah, and now we're all paying attention to it and things are happening." A lot of legal ways to protest are legal because the government doesn't have to pay attention to it. There are a million change.org petitions or a website where you can petition to have a YouTuber dye his hair blue, and a real legal thing that people really need, it's going to take, like, a little more than just passing around a petition. You have to go out and you have to make yourself heard, and sometimes that means putting a brick through a window (laughs).

Ali's conceptualization of activism demonstrated his awareness of what it has historically taken to effect change for a social movement (i.e., a rejection of respectability politics in favor of doing whatever it takes) and, simultaneously, his privilege as a White person. He explained the

progression of his thoughts on activism from wanting everybody to be “peaceful” to feeling that “you can’t always be nice, you have to make yourself heard”:

Showing up on the door with a bunch of balloons and fuzzy bunnies isn’t going to scare a politician into thinking you’ll get his job taken away from him if he doesn’t do what you need him to so you can survive. (laughs).... It’s like, you have to accept that you might get in trouble, and you have to accept you need to gather people. I guess what I’m trying to say is, like, for making big statements about things, if you want them to change, going and getting permission isn’t really in your best interest all of the time. And it’s just better to rally up your friends around you and just do it. You just have to get in there and you’ve just got to do it, and you might get in trouble, and you just have to get to a point where it’s like, “I might get in trouble, I also might bring a lot of attention to this cause that I’m really concerned about.” So you kind of have to take it in both hands and like, “is what I’m fighting for worth the repercussions?” and, usually, yes.

His critique of playing “nice” through diplomacy showed a realistic grasp of the efficacy of social movements’ choice in actions, though his awareness of the implications the direct actions that he suggested would have on non-White activists is unclear. Whatever ABCers’ personal definitions of social justice and activism were, their motivation to engage in social justice advocacy was universally apparent. At the same time, the emotional weight of activism forced ABCers to consider the extent to which they were responsible for effecting change in their community and how to deal with the psychological consequences it might have for their mental health.

Navigating Social Justice Advocacy: Mental Health Awareness, Youth Empowerment, and Personal Responsibility

Memo: 3/23/21

Some themes I'm noticing as I wrap up transcribing the mini-interviews:

- 1. Mental health. So many of them talked about their own experiences with mental health struggles, several of them brought up being in therapy and/or struggling to find a queer affirming therapist, and most of them brought up empathy stemming from their own negative experiences as a major motivation to join FYI. Molly also makes the space "inviting" for them and emphasizes community care, empathy, and self-care.*
- 2. Searching for community. Along with this, feeling "safe" in this particular space. This seems to contrast, perhaps, with how they feel outside of the space (e.g., at school, in East TN generally).*

However ABCers defined activism for themselves, their attention to mental health in the context of social justice advocacy was consistently salient, particularly in response to the amount of time they were able to spend on self-reflection during the COVID-19 quarantine. Though in a somewhat joking tone, Alaska perhaps put it most concisely:

There's gonna be a COVID movie that comes out in a year and it's going to be about teenagers in quarantine and they're going to sound like me right now, but I think it taught me a lot about how to entertain myself without kind of letting myself go off the rails.

Senior members who had been in ABC multiple years, such as Carlisle and Rose, noticed a difference in the group dynamics such that connections were harder to form over Zoom; for many others, however, ABC was a respite from the social isolation the COVID-19 pandemic

forced them into through virtual school. Perhaps indicative of their generation's culture, group members seemed attuned to both acknowledging mental health topics and developing their own capacity for care. Beth, for example, noted how she has been taking "real time" for herself during the pandemic—i.e., engaging in "self-care" and exercise as a way of improving her mood. Meanwhile, ABC reportedly helped Alaska take a "social media detox" once she realized the negative toll it was taking on her mental health, particularly in judging her "self-worth" based on Instagram "likes" and comparisons to others. As an indication of her growth in mental health awareness and the importance of self-advocacy, Maria described how she was able to process an emotionally abusive relationship through ABC and the quarantine dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

It took me pretty much all of the COVID lockdown to kind of get back to myself again and recover from that, and I think learning through ABC about relationships and healthy relationships has helped me a lot to kind of go back and reflect on that relationship....

And also advocating on my own mental health. I over the past year have dealt with a lot of mental health issues, mental health struggles, that have really been going on my whole life but I started actually speaking up for myself about it, which I think has been a really good thing for me, definitely very valuable experience. Just, like, looking out for myself more and really, I've done a lot of, I think, work on myself as a person and self-discovery and looking out for myself, too.

For Maria, learning about healthy relationships as part of ABC's comprehensive sex education curriculum was meaningful at both the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels.

Still, some members seemed to struggle with overburdening themselves with others' needs. For example, I frequently noticed Maria discussing in meetings how difficult it could be for them to set boundaries. During one meeting focused on communication and healthy relationships, the overarching theme of the group was how difficult it is to say "no" to someone, particularly for those who, as Carlisle put it, are "socialized female." As the group leader, Frances frequently communicated and modeled for members the importance of self-care, even going so far as to frame one presenter's cancellation due to feeling mentally overscheduled in terms of appropriate self-care and boundary-setting. For Frances, it was important to make ABC a space in which members' "feelings around everything had somewhere to go," particularly in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, protests against police brutality and other social issues, and legal assaults on the rights of LGBTQ+ people. In my own observations of group meetings, whenever someone shared something vulnerable, Frances matched their vulnerability with her own disclosure in a way that came across as accepting and warm. The group members seemed to feel safe precisely because of how she facilitated the group, and in my interviews with them they confirmed my perception.

Fieldwork, Meeting 7: 1/11/21

Frances validates the idea of having different "facets" or "levels" of self-care; reflects on "how often boundaries are not respected in real life...how work and school take our time and energy for granted." She discusses being interested in a "collective shift toward prioritizing our own needs as resistance to capitalism...if we all demand better for our needs, we're setting that as a precedent for other people."

Memo: 1/11/21

What really stood out to me this evening was the care Frances takes to make the space comfortable for others. I've noticed this in other meetings, too. These kids seem to feel so safe precisely because of how she facilitates the group. I'm impressed with how these kids seem to grasp the concept of self-care in a really intimate way... Maybe it's just this generation, but I don't remember ever hearing the phrase "self-care" until grad school. College, maybe, but even then it was not something that I was specifically focused on apart from knowing that exercise and yoga in particular made me feel good. This generation is so with it in terms of acknowledging mental health and developing their own capacity for care.

Defining what self-care should actually look like, however, appeared challenging for ABCers. As a collective, group members were universally driven by their desire to help others, and their actions reflected this motivation. However, as their structural awareness increased and they consequently realized the scope of social justice advocacy needed to effect the changes they wanted to see in the world, the burden of responsibility they seemed to feel sometimes clashed with their personal limitations. In the context of what makes someone a "good" activist, Missy described the guilt they felt in response to being unable to participate in direct actions such as protests. They have autism and are prone to "sensory overload" as well as anxiety attacks, leading to "a conflict of feeling like, just because I can't go out and go to protests, it feels like I'm not doing enough." For Missy, their own mental health needs seemed to conflict directly with what they saw as appropriate actions for an activist, forcing them to reconcile their sense of guilt with their unique subjectivity. Carlisle, too, had to contend with his desire to help others

while making sure to take care of himself. His way of negotiating these apparently competing forces was to set boundaries in consideration of his own mental health. Carlisle described the evolution he experienced from feeling like he had to be the “quintessential trans person” providing information on trans issues to peers outside of ABC meetings to the perspective of “it is great to give people information, but absolutely don’t do it at the cost of yourself.” In practice, this manifested as an increased ability to “just interact with people” and connect despite possible differences, which Carlisle believed would lead to increased change in the long run.

Like Missy and Carlisle, River discussed the difficulty of grappling with their sense of responsibility as an activist compared to their personal needs. Just as others named their desire to make a difference in the world and effect change in their community, a large motivator for River was the desire to be a “good person.” However, efforts to take care of themselves amidst their actions for others made them feel “selfish.” For River, negotiating the weight of their responsibility as an ABC peer educator sometimes conflicted with the burden that weight placed on them as an individual:

I feel bad because so many people don’t educate themselves and so like, I feel like I need to educate them? But like, they’re not going to listen to me, and also that shouldn’t be put on me, and also so many people just want to argue and it’s—it’s so much.

Thinking beyond themselves, River spoke about self-care as a necessary component of activism and community care:

You have to take care of yourself before you can take on something greater than yourself. So sometimes you have to stop even though the opportunity is there. It’s better to take a moment, be able to recharge yourself, take care of yourself, so that way you can better

take on the next thing because, yes, you can, like, move on, even if you have some energy or not, you can still try to advocate and lift up other voices, but you won't be able to do it as well. And you won't be able to give the attention that it really needs or that it deserves if you yourself cannot hold up yourself. And the individuality is very important and so is a community, so you have to take care of yourself to better take care of your own community because it's just not possible.

Though River willingly took on the responsibility of engaging in social justice advocacy, they acknowledged how this work can be psychologically draining. This awareness was perhaps influenced by their own experiences with mental health treatment, which also directly impacted River's motivation to care and advocate for others. As they put it, "all that really matters is that you help people, you help yourself, you help others, and you try to make it better for those after you," because "you need to do something that will actually create change in at least someone's life." Similarly, Alaska's personal struggles in finding queer-affirming mental health care influenced her desire to help queer youth. After having considerable difficulty finding a therapist, they reported wanting to fill the "gap" of education and mental health care for LGBTQ youth in conservative areas like the one she grew up in:

I want people to be able to grow up and have a better experience than I had in an area like this. So anything I can do to just create some type of support system or network or just something to help people, that's what I want to do.

Put simply, for River and Alaska (among others), the personal was made political.

Part of members' increased mental health awareness came from a more nuanced understanding of sex education topics that directly affected their lives. For example, several

members spoke of the influence ABC had on their awareness of what constitutes a healthy relationship. Beth spoke of choosing “warmth” in her relationships after spending a lot of time reflecting on “cold interactions,” while Maria reported that ABC helped them reflect on and understand how prior relationships were unhealthy. For Maria, their growth in self-awareness was matched by an increased capacity to advocate for themselves—in other words, a sense of empowerment. During an activity one meeting that was focused on healthy relationships, Frances posed reflection questions for members to consider (e.g., “You know a person is a good partner when...”) and, as echoed in my interviews with the group members later in the year, the results showed how much they valued communication, care, trust, and vulnerability in their relationships with others. Moreover, as an illustration of the empathy members exhibited, Missy contextualized their Framing Choice photos as representing the importance of not only continued growth and development, but “making the active choice to care about other people.”

Along with their increased attention to mental health, group members seemed to feel empowered by their participation in ABC. This included feeling more confident about their ability to communicate effectively and an increased belief in their capability for self-advocacy. Missy, for example, reported feeling increased self-efficacy of communication skills related to the ability to discuss sex education topics with others, while Maria said ABC taught them how to be a “better advocate” for themselves and others. As Carlisle succinctly put it, “I know sex ed now,” while River reported that ABC gave them “a lot of knowledge on how to talk to people who don’t necessarily know anything about [sex ed] or don’t necessarily agree with you whatsoever,” which they saw as an important component of helping their community. Beth described the shift she saw in herself following her year in ABC:

Where maybe coming into ABC I didn't ever feel qualified to tell someone about an STD, now I kind of have that, like, "oh, I'm a Family Futures sex educator, like yes, I can tell you with confidence about such and such aspect of sexual health," where without ABC I might be like, "oh I don't know, you can Google it." Like, it's kind of helped me feel confident in my knowledge on sexual topics, and with that confidence comes increased ability to help my peers.

Ali was already a "resource" for his friends to come to, making the decision to join ABC all the easier so that he could have actual "training" and be an even better resource for others. Receiving proper training was especially important to Ali because of the challenge present in taking into account people's feelings about sexual health while providing accurate information:

I think the harder things were, like, when people were scared they were pregnant and it was just this delicate balance of having to calm them down and, like, "you're probably not pregnant from the information you've given me about what you were doing," but it's just like this fine line of trying to calm someone down, not dismissing their fears entirely, and giving them kind of a balanced, "you're probably fine but here's what you need to know" kind of deal.

Above and beyond the information group members offered to others, Ali demonstrated the empathy required of ABCers' role as peer educators.

Like so many others, Alaska felt that the power of ABC directly correlated to her capacity to act as a resource for others. Before joining ABC she had never seen a condom or known what dental dams were, and then they were able to establish themselves as somebody who people could come to if they had questions with the "same kind of GSA principles as, 'this

is a no judgment zone, this is a safe space unless you're, like, abusing it for whatever reason.”

Given their experience growing up queer in East Tennessee, it was important for Alaska to feel “helpful,” and she saw ABC as a way of empowering herself to be helpful for others. Moreover, their time in ABC explicitly increased their ability to communicate and feel like a “more confident speaker.” She described the transition from interviewing for ABC and being so nervous she had to use multiple fidgets to focus, compared to her current sense of confidence. Being educated on sexual health topics was “super impactful” because they in turn felt able to educate others and give them the information she felt they need, especially when considering her own conservative upbringing:

With that education that I was given, I was pretty uninformed and I was, you know, I didn't want to talk about those topics because they were just, like, alien to me and I didn't feel comfortable about them, but this year has changed me as a person, and I feel so much better about myself and where I'm at. Like, everything just kind of feels like it's falling into place for once in my life.

Alaska's experience of empowerment reflected what Frances primarily envisioned for ABC's mission. While she believed it was important that ABC be a space in which members could learn correct information about sex ed to “keep themselves safe” and make decisions that feel “good and empowering” through alignment with their values, ABCers' personal development was at the forefront of Frances' intentions as the group's facilitator:

I think behavior change is hard and it's still, at the end of the day, not enough sex ed and so, not to downplay the sex ed piece, but I think maybe even more important to me is that it's a place where ABCers can grow and flex their leadership skills and kind of the youth

development piece of it just feels really, like, this is how we raise a new generation of leaders and people who are kind and thoughtful and know how to think and trust themselves.

Reflecting on her own experience beginning in ABC as a teenage group member, Frances saw ABC as a means by which members could learn how to “talk about hard things” and “effect change” in the community through teaching others. She believed that saying “I trust you with this and this information and to make good decisions” was important for youth empowerment, but also to increase ABCers’ sense of “agency and responsibility in the world.” Frances seemed to suggest that with the knowledge (and therefore empowerment) members gained came significant responsibility—namely, spreading comprehensive sex education as defined by ABC.

Yet, I also wondered what shape responsibility was meant to take in this context, particularly whether the responsibility Frances (and group members) implied as their own was taking on a neoliberal form. ABCers seemed to acknowledge how mental health might constrain their engagement with social justice advocacy broadly and sex education activism specifically, but to what extent did they realize how external factors might shape people’s capacity for action? Further, what did it mean to make “informed decisions” and what role did personal responsibility play therein? While holding ABCers responsible for particular actions, Frances considered herself equally responsible as the group facilitator. She described taking her role very seriously, saying, “I spend a lot of mental energy preparing to do it and then processing it afterwards and thinking like, ‘did I do that in the most responsible and kind way possible?’” For Beth, the accountability she held for herself extended to others she came into contact with. As she described a conversation with a friend who had recently come out to her as lesbian, Beth noted

that she had to explain that the risk of STDs was still present between two AFAB partners and “you still probably should take some sort of mode of protection” since “same-sex relationships were not completely absolved of any sort of health risks.” This seemed to imply that once her friend had the correct information about sexual health, Beth expected them to make better choices as a reflection of personal responsibility.

However, holding others accountable and engaging in nuanced dialogues with peers became significantly more challenging when the topic of discussion went beyond talking about sexual health in the strictest sense. Beth explained how complicated it was to explain to a friend that her boyfriend’s intentional mimicking of the murder of George Floyd on her own body (i.e., by pinning her neck down) was “disrespectful.” While this was objectively a racist action, some conversations were difficult for ABCers because of their very lack of objectivity—rather, they involved people’s subjective values. Rose described the challenge inherent to helping people both figure out their own values and understand that they are not “objectively correct and that their values are not for everyone.” She named her awareness that changing people’s minds was not always going to be possible, but part of what comprehensive sex education meant to Rose was allowing people to discover their values for themselves in the context of having a “more firm understanding of their sexuality.” For Rose, as for the other ABCers, it was her responsibility as an ABC peer educator to navigate these complications:

I’m not going to be able to solve everything. But it’s something that I want to at least work on, and to at least try to do this because I feel that this is what I owe to people, right, and I think I owe out of my own desire to better this world and my own desire to be there for people who are suffering and who have been abandoned by so many other

people. To provide some sort of outlet and some sort of escape from the system and even just changing it slightly so that way future generations can further change things. Given the massive amounts of change they believed necessary to enact social justice, ABCers did not seem to consider doing nothing an option. Rather than give in to feelings of hopelessness, their responsibility was to persevere in their actions in service of the greater good. They felt an almost evangelical belief in the power of comprehensive sex education to liberate their community from cisheteropatriarchy, accepting that spreading this knowledge was a necessary correction to the sex ed available to their peers outside of ABC.

Queered Resistance: How “Bad” Sex Ed and Structural Oppression Motivated ABCers
Shame, Control, and Power: The Nature and Legacy of Sex “Education” in East Tennessee
Memo: 12/1/20

I’m so disheartened by these kids’ experiences with sex ed in Tennessee. It reminds me so much of what I heard from the undergrad women who participated in my thesis—the same descriptions of the awful sex educator they had to experience, the same overarching themes (lack of accurate information, stigma, fear-mongering and shame, queer erasure, feeling uncomfortable). It makes sense why they feel so passionately about ABC and this work—it’s like they’re missionaries for a cause.

There would be no ABC without its original counterpart—namely, abstinence-only education as mandated by East Tennessee. As a whole, ABCers shared the belief that abstinence-only sex ed was inaccurate and harmful, particularly in its perpetuation of shame and stigma related to sexuality as well as its erasure of queerness. The importance of ABC, then, was in presenting an alternative to the harm caused by abstinence-only education. Carlisle believed that

learning accurate sexual health information removed the “taboo luster” of what has typically been stigmatized and “systematically taught to be kept more private.” By removing shame and stigma from sexual health information, Carlisle posited that people could recognize that things associated with sexuality (e.g., birth control, oral sex) have no inherent value; rather, *people* attach values to them. Through comprehensive sex education, people could first receive the correct information and thereafter decide for themselves what their values were in the context of having the facts. Frances believed that a lack of accurate information along with the shame and stigma attached to things like STIs and unplanned pregnancies result in more chances of harm occurring. From Carlisle’s perspective, “when you have kids who don’t know how to manage an STI or avoid an STI or avoid/manage a pregnancy, you create a culture of fear and panic around things that are easily brought to the open.” Rose discussed how while “there’s no doubt that abstinence is the best way to prevent pregnancy and STIs,” only teaching abstinence leaves youth uninformed and, moreover, “fuels the misconception that sex ed and sexuality is just about the mechanics itself and just about the action itself” rather than a broad and complex spectrum of topics that include gender identity and consent.

Despite ABC’s intention to destigmatize topics related to sex education, shame and stigma nonetheless seemed to infiltrate the space. Rose spoke of her wish for more discussion of the “mechanics” of sex and sexuality, which she believed was largely missing from meetings. She speculated that Frances did not often bring up this topic in consideration of school-based sex ed’s legacy of instilling shame and discomfort:

A lot of times in other sex ed classes, like in the school ones, it’s not a comfortable environment at all. And people don’t feel comfortable being vulnerable, asking questions,

anything like that. And so I think we want to do away with that as much as possible, right, and I think the center for that is creating an environment in which people feel comfortable and people feel okay with being vulnerable, because a lot of this and a lot of themes, you know, around sexuality and sex ed, they require a lot of vulnerability to talk about them and to be personal.

Frances' hyper-attunement to members' comfort by focusing on other topics was, perhaps, a means of providing a corrective experience to the discomfort and prejudice they experienced in school-based sex education. In a research project for school assessing students' perceptions of sex education, one of Rose's big "takeaways" was that "overwhelmingly everyone, regardless of their sexuality, felt negatively towards their sex ed course. Because they all reflected some sort of distrust in their instructor, discomfort in their environment, and a refusal to be vulnerable in that environment." Part of this discomfort for queer students, Rose found, was related to their personal experience of stigmatization through the abstinence-only education they received.

Having experienced East Tennessee sex education herself, Alaska considered her involvement with ABC to teach others paramount because, as she put it, "if I'm operating on just Tennessee's sex ed, I don't know anything." They speculated that abstinence-only education avoided teaching children about sex or LGBT people because "then they won't be sexually active, they won't be LGBT." However, Alaska believed that this only led to children seeking out information from alternate resources, or even doing something "uneducated" and getting "hurt" as a result. In support of this belief, Maria reported that they learned things from their peers that were "not accurate or completely convoluted views of everything." Similar to Alaska's

perspective, Maria believed abstinence-only education's avoidance of certain topics was out of fear of the consequences:

I think that people are really, really scared of their kids, like, with sex ed and also the same thing I think with queer issues, it's like, "oh, if my kid sees queer representation, then they're going to be gay" or "oh, if my child knows that there's ways to have sex safely, then they're going to be promiscuous and be in danger." And I would like to think that it stems from a sense of wanting to protect children, but I think a lot of that is really misguided between how parents were raised and just not really knowing how else to go about that.

Ali expressed a similar hope that using fear in an attempt to control teenage sexuality came from a place of "concern" rather than "evil":

Like, "absolutely we don't want you to get pregnant and then you have a baby and then you're stuck raising a child instead of going to school or other things," but it comes from this place of like, "we just need to scare them. If we scare them, we just scare them completely and totally, they won't do it," but that doesn't work (laughs).

Beth was unaware of where adults' fear came from but pondered whether it stemmed from "childhood trauma or religious ideologies, or maybe their own internalized homophobia." Regardless of the source, ABCers consistently named how ineffective this strategy was in controlling teens.

Along with fear, members wondered about the role discomfort played. Ali thought that the idea of teenage sexuality made people, and parents in particular, "uncomfortable." Frances likewise discussed how adults "don't want to think of young people as sexual beings in the first

place,” instead framing teenage sexuality as taboo and something that “causes harm” rather than something “life-affirming”:

I think people are really scared of acknowledging that teenagers are capable of pleasure and connection and that those things can be positive forces in people’s lives. I think they’re just afraid of the outcomes of teenage sexuality in general so they just want to sweep it under the rug as much as possible, and then I think there’s a lot of weird moralistic outrage and taboo.

Part of the “moralistic outrage” France referenced seemed tied in with, as Ali put it, “heavy religious aspects,” or what Alaska called “tradition.” When asked why they believe people in East Tennessee are so opposed to comprehensive sex education, several members referenced the cultural influence of religion, and Christianity specifically (a “Biblical thing,” per Carlisle’s report). Missy spoke about the role of Christianity in perpetuating shame and stigma:

East Tennessee is in a part of the U.S. that is very religious and, obviously religion isn’t inherently bad and there are religious people who are sex positive. But the intensity of it here in Tennessee is a lot more extreme than a lot of places, and so I think a lot of them view it as something that needs to be hidden or shamed. There’s a big issue of purity culture, especially here in Tennessee. And I think that’s probably a major reason of why [comprehensive sex ed is] so looked down upon.

Maria also discussed how they believed stigma and shame originated from people’s use of “faith and religion to preach hateful things,” citing a mistranslation of the Bible for Christianity’s historical demonization of homosexuality as an example. For Maria, “unlearning” shame-based

messaging would be an important step to “having more acceptance,” but on a cultural level this change would be challenging to enact.

Beyond the shame and stigma abstinence-only education produces, ABCers discussed how it serves as a means by which people in power can exert control. As Carlisle noted, “in America, there is a consistent effort to control expression and means of existing from birth to death.” According to Alaska, this control was most targeted at certain types of people:

Abstinence-based sex ed is pretty much based entirely on the fact that AFAB people can produce offspring, and that they shouldn’t at a young age, and if they do, then they should be shamed for it. And it’s just sexist... There are old White men who control what we learn, and they want us to think like they do, so they’re gonna instate curriculums that they believe in.

Rose associated the sexism Alaska referenced with Tennessee’s “cultural hang-ups,” which she saw as inextricably interwoven with people’s religious beliefs. Moreover, she discussed how religious and cultural influences intersected with larger structures, leading to the restriction of comprehensive sex education. She believed that people making laws related to sex education largely do so to “vie for their political gain and power” by catering to their conservative constituents:

Politicians listen to these people who reflect the majority in their area, so it’s in their best interest politically to make that a staunch issue that they care about, right, to politicize it even further so that way they can have this party system of control so everyone of this party is staunchly against this, and they frame it as something even more negative and

vile when in reality it's not, it's just something that they have demonized and villainized in order to have an easy way to divide people and thus support themselves.

As River stated, “if you can control reproductive health, you can control people, so if you don't give people comprehensive sex ed, they don't understand their own health, so they can't take care of themselves—they have to rely on someone else to.” From this perspective, controlling what kind of information youth receive could also serve to restrict their agency and autonomy. ABC can be seen as a disruption to the cycle of shame and misinformation, serving as a method of harm reduction for its members and all the peers they come into contact with. Unlike abstinence-only education, group members clearly endorsed ABC's curriculum. This made evident what ABCers considered to be quality information.

Defining “Good” Sex Education

Fieldwork, Meeting 2: 10/12/20

Frances is leading a discussion of sexual boundaries in the context of consent and communication. The members have placed different sexual acts on a spectrum of “least intimate” to “most intimate,” and the nuances seem important to them. Frances asks how our different answers on this spectrum might affect how we speak to people in sexual situations; River responds, “because everyone's is different, you have to communicate that—What is considered emotionally vulnerable? What is considered cheating? What is sex to a person? Things that surround the acts themselves, stuff like that.” I'm struck by how clearly they recognize the individuality, the subjectivity inherent to sexuality.

Through their participation in ABC, members appeared to unite around a common idea of what it means for sex education to be “good.” Most participated in sex “education” through East

Tennessee public schools and spoke poorly of their experiences, which shaped their subsequent perspectives on how sex education *should* be. Though some group members learned about sex education from their families—such as Missy, who was taught a “broad spectrum” from their mother including information on STIs, how to have sex that “isn’t just very basic heterosexual,” and healthy relationships—other ABCers who grew up in East Tennessee were less fortunate. Rather, they echoed a common description of the sex education they received in local schools as unpleasant at best and homophobic at worst. Maria’s parents were open with them about “a lot,” so by the time they had sex ed in middle school they knew enough to have “higher expectations than I came out of it having...I’ve had a couple experiences with it that I was less than happy with.” According to Maria, the youth pastor, James Felt, who was formerly contracted to teach sex education in East Tennessee schools⁶ “didn’t actually give us any information” and mainly made jokes about sexuality (e.g., comparing girls’ and women’s body parts and men’s desire for them to a bucket of KFC). Maria recognized the privilege they were afforded in having a family who was open with them about sexual and reproductive health topics, empathizing with what their peers had to deal with in comparison:

Thinking about it from the perspective from a lot of my peers who maybe have *not* been as fortunate to have that exposure to sex ed at home or, like, from other sources, it would’ve just been completely unhelpful. And a lot of the things that he says in those presentations makes me uncomfortable—like, a lot of people feel uncomfortable with it? Personally, it was really, like—it was weird. It was not pleasant to listen to him talk about it. And it was also, like, there was nothing at all in there for LGBTQ+ people.

⁶ James Felt’s contract was discontinued in 2020 largely in part due to grassroots efforts led by a local activist group.

Around this time, Maria was actively trying to figure out their sexuality and “gender expression,” which proved challenging when their ostensible sex educator merely told them “over and over again” not to have sex without sharing substantive information.

While Maria learned nothing about queerness from their experience in school, River experienced direct targeting for being visibly queer that made them uncomfortable:

Whenever I was in the East Tennessee public school system and we had sex ed and the instructor was talking about different STIs that you can get, and whenever he brought up AIDS he stared at me and then everyone else in the class stared at me.

This, along with the overt bullying they experienced from their peers at school, made coming to terms with their queerness all the more difficult. Whether ABCers experienced Felt’s lessons directly or through word-of-mouth, the damage he caused was universal and indelible. In her experiences with Felt, Rose was instructed to sign an abstinence card in addition to receiving sexist messages about girls’ sexuality:

He put a piece of Scotch tape on his arm and would pull it off and put it back on again, and he’s like, “now girls are like pieces of tape, you know, if she goes sticking to everyone in town then once it’s your turn she just doesn’t stick.”

Felt’s lessons appeared to frame sexuality in heteronormative (and misogynistic) terms, defining sex as something within the confines of heterosexual marriage to the extent that Alaska’s sister in 7th grade interpreted what he said to mean that “women are only good for producing children.” In their own experience with Felt, Alaska was told to repetitively yell “sex makes babies,” presumably as a way of divorcing sex and sexuality from pleasure discourse, not to mention erasing the possibility of queerness:

It's all totally framed in this heteronormative, you know, "you're going to meet a guy. He's going to woo you. And then you're going to have kids." Which is just not really realistic, you know? And one time somebody asked a question about—it was something to do with LGBTQ topics, but I don't remember what it was exactly—and she was told by the teacher that she wasn't allowed to answer the question... Sex isn't inherently to procreate and make children, it can be for pleasure, you can have organs that don't come together to make children and just, you know, they don't talk about that, and they should.

Like Rose, Ali was told to sign an abstinence card or his life would "go down the garbage drain." He recalled that Felt gave each person in his class either a chocolate or laxative (wrapped up so as to disguise the true contents), made everyone unwrap their object, and said that "if you got laxatives, you got pregnant." The ostensible message here was to scare the youth away from having (heterosexual) sex lest they reap the presumably negative consequences. Further, according to Ali, Felt was openly homophobic and presented statistical misinformation that Ali knew was incorrect given his own explorations of sexual education through YouTube videos such as "Sexplanations" by sexologist Dr. Doe:

I kind of have this unique of experience of just sitting there and knowing I was being lied to and knowing that the man in front of me was extremely just off-base in a lot of what he was saying. I think he made a gay joke on his first day there and it was homophobic, something about—he was talking about what we would be covering, and he was like, "oh, we'll be covering all the basics, that means penis-in-vagina and none of that gay stuff," and it was like, "whoa, okay buddy." And he went on this rant about like, "if you have premarital sex, your life is going to go in the trash. It's going to be horrible." Like,

“it’s just going to be this one thing you do and then somehow you’re not going to be able to get a job or get accepted into college.”

Carlisle spoke of abstinence-only education as a method of “fear mongering” wherein kids are not given the information they need to “protect” themselves. As an alternative, he argued in favor of neutralizing any value associated with sexual education topics and treating such information for what it is—in other words, knowledge. Relatedly, he suggested the importance of detaching any shame or stigma from sexual and reproductive health:

None of these make you a bad or good person, like, the act of refraining from sex or engaging in a lot of sex or having an STI or becoming pregnant—none of those make you a good or bad person, they are just things that happen to people. Like, putting that into young people would also be beneficial, along with telling them how things actually work in a way that they can utilize and hold on to.

Here Carlisle seemed to suggest a direct contrast between the messaging of abstinence-only education and what he saw as “good,” or comprehensive, sex education—namely, attributing shame and stigma to sexuality versus an ostensibly value-free positioning of sexuality. Beth’s definition of comprehensive sex education likewise emphasized freedom of choice by recognizing that people’s sex lives are “subjective and nuanced”:

No matter what choices people make in their sex lives or their personal lives and in their gender or sexual identity, that does not mean that they’re less deserving of any respect. I think I would really emphasize that everyone deserves respect no matter what choices that they make. Because I don’t think that in my educational experience anyone sat me down and was like, “you are deserving of respect.”

The implied comparison here is that, within an abstinence-only frame, certain choices are deemed less or more worthy of respect based upon a particular set of values. In contrast, comprehensive sex education is allegedly devoid of shame and permissive of people determining their own values.

Memo: 2/15/22

Axial coding: I'm realizing I never explicitly coded for "empowerment" during open coding because I implicitly associate everything about "good sex ed" with empowerment (e.g., to make informed decisions; to be able to help others; to feel confident in one's sexuality, boundaries, and communication skills). I experience ABC as a means of empowering youth, who are then able to empower their peers through knowledge and destigmatization (and thus the removal of shame).

Having such detrimental experiences with abstinence-only education very much seemed to affect how ABCers defined quality sex education thereafter. To put it succinctly, according to River, comprehensive sex education is the "exact opposite of abstinence-only." Despite never having experienced Felt's lessons themselves, Missy evoked his messaging by defining "bad" sex ed as "trying to force just one way of doing things on to a person and then not really allowing them to try to ask questions about other means of engaging in a sexual lifestyle." For them, sex education should cover everything from reproductive rights to sexual protection to healthy relationships and beyond:

Comprehensive sex ed is understanding the nuances of certain topics and being able to inform other people in a way that doesn't assume things about their life and kind of gives them a full view of human experiences when it comes to things like sexual education...I

think good sex ed would be a curriculum that informs its students and doesn't shame or judge them for how they want to live their life.

Missy repeated the importance of destigmatizing sex education and emphasizing people's freedom of choice. Beth also believed that the sharing of accurate information should not be "fear-centered" or "biased," perhaps another way of saying value-neutral. As a possible solution to East Tennessee's current form of sex education, Ali suggested a "Sexuality 101" course that schools could implement "covering all of the bases from STDs to sexuality to relationship health to, you know, just make sure everybody has an understanding of what their body does and what to do with their body" while also destigmatizing sexual and reproductive health information. Indeed, a common theme across members was that sex education should at minimum provide *correct information* that could help teens, as Maria put it, "make informed decisions for themselves and be able to have a say in what their future is going to look like and the choices that they make."

Beyond providing accurate information, good sex education for ABCers would be *inclusive*—in other words, transparent about, considerate of, and fully integrating queerness. In stark contrast to their experience with sex education in East Tennessee, Alaska specifically defined comprehensive sex education as "queer-inclusive sex ed." For Carlisle, it was important that sex education be queer-inclusive so that children are taught the full spectrum of possibilities rather than a singular, constrained view of humans as sexual beings:

That's just not how it is, that's not the only type of person that exists, this heteronormative, cisnormative model of someone who will abstain from sex until marriage and won't make any mistakes, and even then is perfectly able-bodied. That's

just not how people always are. And we shouldn't prepare kids for one scenario. So many other classes are like, "this isn't the only way to do this," that's how a lot of it's taught. We're taught that with English, we're taught that with math, or even, in another angle, with history we're taught, like, "take note that the perspective will change depending on who's telling the story." Yet we're taught with health, "Okay, here it is, these two things." And that's just not accurate, it's not preparing us for what the world will look like or potentially how we will have to take care of our bodies or a spouse or a sibling or a parent or a partner—it's a failure.

River, too, emphasized how important it would be to cover "all genders, all orientations of sexuality, all forms of sex" as a way of teaching youth that "sex means something different to everyone." Like Missy and Beth, River placed value in detaching shame from sexual health information and allowing individuals the freedom to create a meaningful life for themselves:

Relationships don't have to look one way, relationships can look like lots of different things, and your sex life doesn't have to follow the life of like, "graduate, get your education, immediately get married, have sex for the purpose of having kids, and that's what sex is." Sex can have multiple different meanings.

Rejecting heteronormativity appeared to be a method of queering sex education as ABCers understood it. At its most basic, Carlisle proposed that good sex education could avoid being cis- or heteronormative by speaking in "gender neutral" terms (e.g., "people with labias"), which was similar to the language I observed being modeled by Frances and subsequently used by ABCers in meetings. Finally, for Ali, good sex education would "stop presenting White and cis and hetero as the standard and the norm" with "better representation for LGBT and people of

color all around,” emphasizing that such voices should be “elevated and not spoken over or misconstrued.” Each member discussed their vision for ideal comprehensive sex education in similar terms, showing the consistent messaging they internalized through ABC, their beliefs about what their peers deserved from sex education, and their shared values. Put simply, ABCers wanted more for their community than they received themselves: sex education that was informative and accurate, absent of shame and stigma, and representative of the wide variety of possible lived experiences. Their actions as peer educators were driven by the goal of transforming, and liberating peers from, their community’s current, harmful norms.

Disrupting Sex Ed’s Status Quo: Practicing Empathy, Building Bridges, and Shifting Perspectives to Transform Culture

Memo: 2/15/21

A theme I’ve noticed as I transcribe these mini-interviews: counterculture. I’m trying to think of a better way to say this, but basically these kids are not accepted in a mainstream way. They specifically go against the values and norms of this area (i.e., conservative, heteronormative, cisnormative, traditional, Christian). They perceive gaps in their peers’ knowledge, gaps that they themselves may have had before joining ABC, and they’re trying to fill these gaps.

Indelibly shaped by their individual subjectivity as situated within the context of East Tennessee, ABCers made clear their motivations to transform culture in terms of how sex education is disseminated and received. Their discourse demonstrated their desire to disrupt the status quo of sex education by creating a new hegemony centered on what they defined as “comprehensive,” in large part as a response to the microaggressions they experienced and/or a

reflection of their personal values. Maria, for example, shared how their own experiences with “a lot of homophobia” and the sex education they received in East Tennessee schools were key motivators for their engagement with ABC and their desire to help “balance it out a little bit”:

Ever since middle school, being queer especially, I’ve had a lot of experiences, negative and positive, with people. Like in eighth grade when I first came out, one of the worst experiences I had was, the day that I came out to my closest friends, I was by the end of the day outed to my entire grade.

Beth, who grew up in Atlanta, described experiencing a “huge culture shock” once she moved to East Tennessee. Her engagement with activism by getting involved with Family Futures, and ABC in particular, was driven by the impulse to “push back...to the most extreme that I could” against the “big red wall” of this area by “doing activism really heavily just in the face of all the adversity that East Tennessee just kind of throws in everyone’s face.” Frances’ nearly decade-long involvement with ABC and sex education was directly tied to her knowledge of how harmful sex education in the area can be, both from her personal experience growing up queer in East Tennessee and hearing about others’ experiences:

I grew up feeling very alienated because of how I was read and just being involved in queer activism and stuff and not going to the churches that everybody else in my grade went to and things like that. And then I found ABC and that was very much a safe space for me and one that allowed me to really grow as a person in some serious ways.... I think what brings me back to it and brings me back to remembering why this is really important is just hearing over and over again how angry the ABCers are and how angry their friends are about having to sit in this these classrooms and, up until this year, listen

to James Felt say just, like, really gross stuff about a really intimate and personal part of their lives. I think that's enough to traumatize somebody, I feel like, combined with, you know, all of the other stuff around sex in our culture in general.

For Frances, ABC exists as an admittedly small but potentially powerful counterforce against the direct harm caused by abstinence-only education in her community, as well as a space in which to correct the shame and stigma associated with sexuality more broadly.

Memo: 11/13/21

Open coding: Sticking out so far is the consistent desire to help, be of use to others, act as a resource to others, and all this usually in response to personal experiences with sex ed in East Tennessee and/or personal experiences with queer oppression/erasure.

Indeed, from the group's perspective as a collective, ABC's role was to provide accurate information related to sexuality and sexual health and thereby reduce shame and stigma associated with those topics—in other words, normalizing comprehensive sex education. Missy expressed hope that, over time, as more people participate in ABC there could be change in how people view sex education and how “government officials” implement sex education in schools. Further, they expressed the belief that ABC helps participants feel more comfortable with their sexuality and sexual health, that “they can be more open about it.” In practice, the belief seemed to be that change was possible starting at the individual level: first ABC members learn about comprehensive sex ed, then they share that information interpersonally, and, over enough time, informed individuals could effect a cultural shift. Frances' goal of normalizing and disseminating comprehensive sex education was apparent:

All we do is open up a space for people to think about their own values and we encourage parents to talk to their young people about their family's values. I think just more conversations like that in general are important. Getting across that facts aren't dangerous, you get the facts in sex ed and you also get the space to determine what you want to do with those facts and what your own values are around sex.

Members seemed to hope that with sex education's normalization would come a reduction in people's fear around these topics, which would allow them to make informed decisions, raise awareness to others, and create a ripple effect of knowledge that directly contrasts the current landscape. Carlisle certainly implied that the impact of ABC itself was to disrupt the status quo of sex education in East Tennessee, saying, "It's a counterforce to sort of everything that—and I can only speak from my own perspective—but what we're taught in schools, it's not that [ABC] directly contradicts, but it's not painting the whole picture." Rose spoke of the role of ABC in sex education in similarly disruptive terms:

I think ABC really provides, more than anything, someone who's there to listen and someone who's there to engage in open dialogue. The goal is not to enforce this liberal agenda, this baby-killing, Family Futures kind of thing, right, this promiscuity—we're not trying to do any of that, but we're trying to say there is more than an authoritarian understanding of the world. Like, there is more than an authoritarian understanding of someone's sexuality and gender. You have to understand that there is not only one way to understand oneself, one's gender, one's sexuality. And the way that people do understand it stems from their values, which are influenced by the place they grow up, the family they're raised in, their religion, their peers, all of these other things.

For Rose, critical analysis of one's values around sex education was both a desired outcome in and of itself, *and* the means by which the message of comprehensive sex education could be further spread. At the same time, while she emphasized the importance of recognizing how people's values shape their perspective on sexuality, Rose also recognized the need to distinguish between the impossibility of having "objectively correct" opinions and beliefs that are harmful to others:

I'm better at identifying at what point someone's beliefs are not harmful and someone's beliefs are just a result of their values, and at what point, like, there's something fundamentally prejudiced and harmful about the way they're presenting their beliefs or the way that they're advocating for policy that represents their values.

As an ABC peer educator, Rose understood that her role was to act as a resource for information and open dialogue to critically examine one's values, but also potentially to act as a challenger of the harmful messaging communicated by abstinence-only education.

Similarly, Carlisle spoke of learning how important it is to "meet people where they are" and "contextualize where they're coming from" so that conversations about difficult topics could be approached with empathy, no matter their stance on a topic. He believed that people's intentions are not to "phrase this in the worst way I can think of and see where we go from here, but just naturally people don't have all the language to say what they mean in a more nicely packaged way." By giving others grace, Carlisle believed that he could get information across, help them see where he was "coming from," and break down the differences between himself and those who were vastly different from him:

I'd have continued conversations with these people, and it wasn't necessarily that, like, "I'm changing people's minds entirely," but it became like, "Okay, so we can disagree on certain fronts but understand where the other is coming from, and neither of us feel threatened or made fun of or anything like that," which opens the way for continued conversation to the point where one of the more known conservative people at my high school corrected someone on my pronouns.

In service of his larger goal, Carlisle intentionally marketed himself as "approachable" so that his peers would come to him with any questions they had with the goal of spreading knowledge since "everyone deserves to feel healthy and comfortable." River also felt it crucial to emphasize the "community" over the individual by intentionally practicing empathy and nurturing relationships above all else despite the challenges this created for them personally. In addition to the way ABC "destigmatized" sex education, River described their capacity to "give someone so much information and know that it's coming from good resources" as a positive aspect of ABC. However, they simultaneously noted the challenge of being "brushed off" on certain subjects, especially considering their goal of broader cultural change.

As an intermediate step between the eventual goal of comprehensive sex education being normalized and widespread, ABCers saw their role as acting as a resource for others to learn from and pose questions to. None of the ABCers had any illusions about the challenges they faced in service of their larger goal but held fast to their faith in the positive consequences their actions would have. Missy discussed how ABC has been helpful in informing others, while Alaska spoke about creating a "cycle of helpfulness" to counteract the unhelpful sex education she received in public schools:

The impact that I've seen is the education I'm getting helps me to go in and run a GSA meeting with 25 sophomores sitting in a classroom waiting for me to talk to them. Like, I have new information and new resources for mental health or new events for that that I can bring up with people, and I assume out of 20-something sophomores, one of them's gonna bring up what I talked about with someone else, you know. So just, like, setting off a chain reaction in schools to kind of help with positive change.

Similarly, Ali found it helpful to have ABC and Frances as the group leader as a resource in his "back pocket" for both himself and others:

It's kind of like a game of telephone where hopefully things don't get misinterpreted down the line, but it's like, I have this information and then I give it to someone else who needs it, and then they have that information and they are in turn either able to give that information to the other person directly or just send them my way.

Likewise, though River lamented that ABC could not "fix all of abstinence-only sex ed" given the limitations of the group's numbers, they also expressed the hope they had in the "echo effect" of peers educating peers. Maria, too, believed that providing accurate information and acting as a "helpful resource" for their peers who did not have access to comprehensive sex education was "meaningful." In particular, they considered ABC to be useful as a temporary balm given the current culture around sex education:

The goal is to make that information available to people so that they know it and don't have to ask their peers and hopefully would be able to already have that information through sex ed. But the way that it is right now in Tennessee with sex education, this is the best thing I think we can do right now.

This perspective, echoed by so many others, seemed to define ABC's actions in terms of harm reduction, with the implication being that the sex education currently available in East Tennessee is harmful. Certainly this is congruent with what research shows regarding the effects of abstinence-only education, as well as ABCers' personal experiences.

When thinking about broader cultural change, Frances openly named how “slow” it can be. She discussed the need for grassroots coalitions (i.e., Just the Facts, who successfully lobbied for the removal of former sex “educator” James Felt) and “one-on-one values conversations” as being especially important given the local culture and people having more trust in hearing from those in their own communities. Part of what made the desired cultural shift so important for Frances, as for so many others, was how comprehensive sex education was inextricably tied up with inclusivity—and queer-affirming inclusivity specifically. From her perspective growing up queer in East Tennessee, the culture had indeed shifted, even if there was continued room for growth:

LGBTQ stuff has shifted since I was in high school. There are way more resources for queer people in East Tennessee than there were when I was growing up. And yeah, still not as many as there should be, still there's a lot more work to do, but I think that has shifted. Carlisle was in a CNN article about Diversity Prom and it's this huge thing now...I remember being in high school and there was a rich gay veterinarian who moved to town, and we had Diversity Prom in his lobby at the veterinary clinic and it was just this, like, very ramshackle thing that was just very scrappy and there were so few of us. So it makes me really happy to see how resources and opportunities for queer kids in East Tennessee have grown.

From this anecdote, perhaps the implication is that ABC *has* had its intended impact. Carlisle reflected, “I don’t think I’ve done anything huge on the global scale. But I think in the East Tennessee community I’ve had an impact, which I think is the first step to something bigger.” Regardless of identifiable outcomes, what was clear in ABCers’ consistent report was the growth they themselves experienced, like when Beth discussed learning a lot about herself during this “formative” year and Alaska openly acknowledged the pride they felt in their efforts to “work” on themselves. Frances’ description of what ABC has meant to her as an Appalachian perhaps best encapsulates who this group is:

I think it’s meant feeling like I’m part of a legacy and tradition of kind of like resistance in hard places and a legacy of carving out affirming spaces for people who don’t fit the norm around here. And yeah, it’s meant a place to do my part in busting stigma around sexuality and abortion also, specifically and in general.

Over the course of my year with ABC, I came to understand just how much the personal was made political for the group. Rather than conforming to the expectations and mandates of abstinence-only education, ABCers embraced their queerness in resistance to East Tennessee’s cultural norms. From their experiences of being othered they learned that engaging with their peers with empathy would be a more effective way of transforming their community, the motivation for which was further heightened by the critical consciousness they developed in response to the BLM uprisings and COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. At ABC’s core is a mission of spreading a gospel of comprehensive sex education for the purpose of liberating those who are oppressed by abstinence-only education. In the following section, I will discuss how ABC’s *sexual evangelism* represented the group’s way of negotiating sexual politics. Through this

queered evangelism, they resisted cisheteropatriarchy under the belief that the information comprehensive sex education provides is a way of creating liberation for their peers. However, this framework effaces the significance of race and class in the context of social justice advocacy. I will also discuss the implications of ABC's sexual evangelism for both clinical work and social justice advocacy.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Beginning in the fall of 2020, I began documenting the lives and activities of a group of local youth engaged in sex education activism and peer education. Over the course of 9 months, I conducted approximately 60 hours of fieldwork in the form of participant observations, memo-writing, and individual interviews driven by the following questions:

1. How do ABCers perform sexual politics?
2. How do ABCers negotiate their identity development as a group and as individuals?
3. What meaning do they make of this work?

Through this study, I hoped to understand the motivations behind ABCers' activism as situated within conservative East Tennessee, but also to learn their stories. Consistent with extant research showing how youth organizing can be a means by which to resist experiences of marginalization and oppression (e.g., Warren et al., 2008), I found that ABCers' personal experiences being harmed by cisheteropatriarchy and abstinence-only education (AOUM) was central to their motivation for engaging in sex education activism. The critical consciousness they developed both through their participation in ABC and in response to their analysis of events of 2020 allowed ABCers to critically reflect on how sex education can be either a method of continuing the perpetuation of oppression *or* a means through which to liberate those who are oppressed by East Tennessee's hegemonic cultural norms. I propose the theoretical concept of *sexual evangelism* (see Figure 1) as a defining characteristic (or critical construct; Fine & Torre, 2019) of the group, comprising ABC's core belief (i.e., that comprehensive sex ed is liberatory) and mission (i.e., to spread the message of comprehensive sex ed).

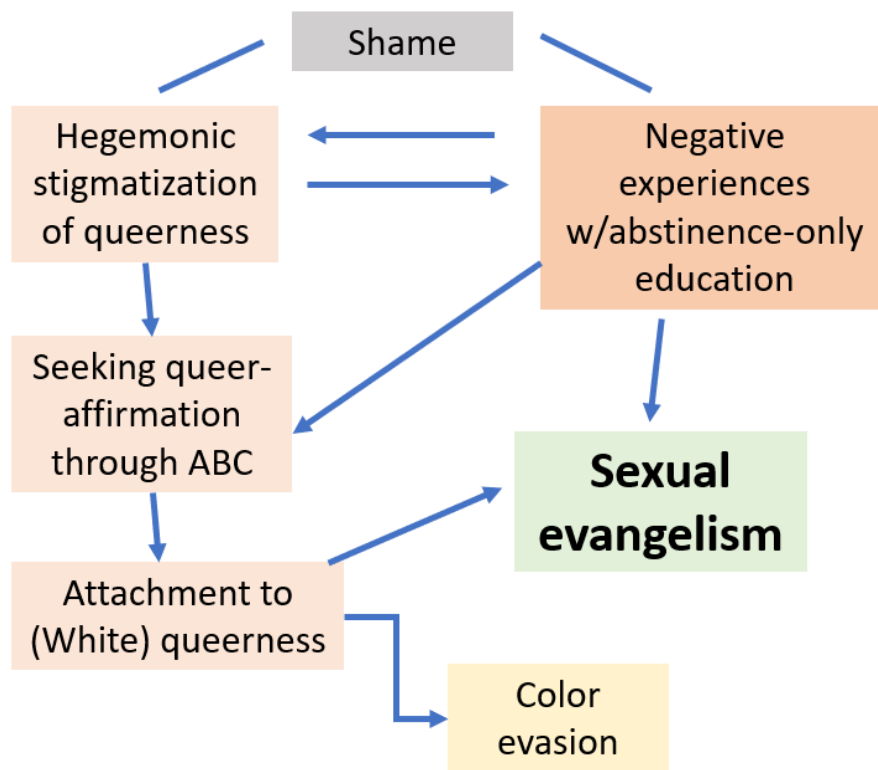


Figure 1. Sexual evangelism can be operationalized as ABC's fervent belief in, valuing of, and commitment to the dissemination of comprehensive sex education with the intent of liberating their peers from the harms of abstinence-only education. ABCers' evangelism was shaped by their own largely negative experiences with abstinence-only education, through which they experienced shame primarily because of how their queerness was stigmatized. Because of the stigmatization they experienced at school and in the broader culture, members sought queer-affirmation through ABC, where queer-affirmation was filtered through the lens of comprehensive sex education, which was presented as a corrective to abstinence-only education both because of the accurate sexual and reproductive health information they received, but also because of how ABCers saw comprehensive sex education as being "inclusive" to all (especially queer youth). Their collective identity concentrated around their shared queerness and Whiteness, which led to color evasion (e.g., implicitly defining "inclusivity" as relating to queerness given their personal experiences being excluded as queer youth) given the primacy they were lending to their target identities, but also this driving force of sexual evangelism that affected how they thought and behaved as activists and peer educators.

At its core, ABC was used by Frances and the youth members as a tool of countercultural resistance. Spreading the message of “good” (i.e., comprehensive) sex ed was a way of counteracting what ABCers saw as the harmful structural forces that affected their own development as queer youth. Members’ reports of their experiences with school-based sex education were in line with researchers’ depictions, particularly AOUM’s perpetuation of heterosexism (Lamb et al., 2011) and the moralization of girls’ sexuality (Fine, 1988), which in this case directly motivated members’ engagement with ABC. Moreover, consistent with research showing how marginalized youth can increase their sense of empowerment in response to experiences of identity-based oppression through social justice organizing and critical consciousness development (e.g., Hagen et al., 2018; Frost et al., 2019; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Cammarota, 2011), ABCers’ engagement with sex education activism proved to be a personally meaningful way of resisting oppression.

Although a primary goal for Frances was to nurture members’ sense of empowerment, and they in turn expressed feeling that this intention had its requisite effect, an emergent discourse of personal responsibility recalled Elliott’s (2014) finding that both abstinence-only *and* comprehensive sex ed courses can inadvertently signal an ideal “responsible sexual agent” that does not fully consider the effects of social inequalities. Through this neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility, sex educators signal to youth that they should be exerting individual agency and free choice rather than depending on others, thereby decontextualizing youth from the complexity of their lived experience and absolving those with more power (i.e., adults, schools, governing bodies) of the responsibility of interdependence (Elliott, 2014). For ABCers, this was reflected when they lamented that AOUM negated the possibility of making “informed”

decisions, which they believed could be corrected through comprehensive sex ed. Their discussion of how good sex ed could be a positive change in their community included the belief that their peers' sexual choices would be altered in turn, leading to increased safety and autonomy but also an implied responsibility on the part of the agentic actor.

Although ABCers' intentions were to help their community as a means of harm reduction given the state's lack of cooperation in providing quality sex education, the group to some extent reflected Bay-Cheng's (2015) framework of sexual agency wherein neoliberal principles of personal responsibility are used against girls to blame them for their choices without considering their situated context. Within this framework, individuals are portrayed as either autonomous agents in control of their own sexuality *or* victims of systemic vulnerability—but not both; as Bay-Cheng (2015) put it, being forced to navigate this neoliberal binary results in the deepening of “discursive tracks that degrade and dehumanize others on the basis of race, class, and other marginalized statuses” (p. 287). ABCers were aware of the structural barriers to receiving comprehensive sex education having experienced some of these barriers themselves (e.g., participating in school-based AOUM), but nonetheless seemed naïve to the differences between themselves and their peers. Namely, their access to high quality sex ed was a result of, first, knowing of ABC's existence, having the resources to apply to it as an extracurricular activity, being accepted to a group with very few open spots, and, finally, having the privilege of a year-long (or multiple years, in the case of returning ABCers) space in which to engage in meaningful sexuality discourse rather than an occasional conversation. Despite seeking to remove the norms and values typically attached to AOUM (e.g., shame, heteronormativity), ABCers replaced these norms with their own ostensibly value-neutral ideals—including the expectation that their peers

would make smart decisions regarding their sexuality once they had the appropriate information, making the proselytization of comprehensive sex ed necessary from the group's standpoint.

Considering how homogenous the group was, it perhaps makes sense that ABCers would both reject predominant cultural norms and, in so doing, create their own group hegemony that was highly invested in the power of comprehensive sex ed. They adhered to a norm of queer-affirmation wherein members' sexual and gender minority identities were respected and nurtured while evading critical discussion or analysis of the ways in which their relatively privileged experiences of race and class were implicated. In thinking of the group's homogeneity, the principle of *homophily* (i.e., how we are more likely to interact and connect with similar others; McPherson et al., 2001) may be a helpful lens. Indeed, ABCers' interpersonal connections and idea of ABC as a "safe" and "inclusive" space was indicative of the impact *status* (i.e., being queer, White or White-adjacent, and economically privileged) and *value* (i.e., the shared goal of disseminating comprehensive sex ed) *homophily* had. McPherson et al. (2001) note that value homophily often tends to be derivative of status homophily, suggesting that ABC's homogeneity in some part contributed to their shared mission. Members' target identities as sexual and gender minorities were at the forefront of any discourse they engaged in, while they ignored critical engagement with their dominant identities (i.e., race, class). By putting White queerness at the center of the group's imagination, ABC limited themselves to discussions and actions framed through that White, queer lens. Members' individual homogeneity was likely similarly reflected in their social networks, as evidenced by their recruitment strategies that relied on connecting with peers who were involved in queer-affirming extracurricular activities and attended specific schools.

While not calling themselves queer activists explicitly, ABCers embodied what Ghaziani et al. (2013) described as a definitive characteristic of individuals who come together to engage in queer activism—namely, those who “feel perverse, odd, deviant, and different while affirming a common identity on the fringes of the mainstream” (p. 171). ABC as a collective acted and expressed thoughts on the basis of having a non-conformist foundation with a specific mission, which was all the more concretized because of the group’s homogeneity. I consistently heard from ABCers how their queerness was nurtured by and through participation in the group, reflecting previous findings that through identity-based programs marginalized youth (a) seek sanctuary affirming their marginalized identities and (b) are motivated to engage in social justice advocacy for themselves and others (Akiva et al., 2017; Kirshner, 2009). While it remains unclear whether ABC’s characterization as a queer safe haven was inherent to the program’s model and curriculum or a direct reflection of Frances’ leadership, ABCers consistently reported that their motivation to join the group and the reason they found it so meaningful was related to queer-affirmation. Future work might address this unanswered question through a multi-year longitudinal study of ABC investigating the impact of different cohorts and group facilitators. Moreover, gathering data from previous cohort members and facilitators could offer insight into how the group has changed over time. Finally, including data from external stakeholders (e.g., Family Futures employees not directly involved with ABC, parents of ABCers) and AOUM proponents could offer more substantial understanding of how ABC as a group is situated.

For this cohort in particular, what this study made clear is that ABCers made meaning of their personal experiences being harmed by East Tennessee’s dominant culture by pouring their faith into the power of comprehensive sex ed. Access to a queer-inclusive set of values and

accurate information about sexual health liberated them from the norms enforced culturally and structurally by the state's cisheteropatriarchy, convincing them that spreading "good" sex ed could have just as transformative effect on their community as it did for them personally. In other words, analysis of their lived experiences, development of their critical consciousness, and the decision to engage in action resisting the oppression of AOUM led to liberatory praxis in the form of *sexual evangelism*. Like other evangelical proponents, of which ABC enacts a queered version, ABCers seemed to fervently believe it their duty to disseminate their particular gospel (i.e., comprehensive sex ed). Their sense of personal responsibility appears indicative of the empowerment social justice advocacy can engender (e.g., Wagaman, 2016; Hagen et al., 2018), but also how the weight of feeling responsible can lead to personal costs.

Going against that which traditional Christian evangelicalism espouses (i.e., cisheteronormativity, shame, and control), ABC positioned itself as an opposition movement with the goal of (primarily) queer liberation. I borrow this terminology intentionally because ABC's sexual evangelism as a process in pursuit of specific goals plays out similarly to its religious counterpart; their commitment to disseminating comprehensive sex ed in the belief that it will positively transform the dominant culture is functionally no different than Christians' conviction. Indeed, both Christian evangelicals and LGBT activists have historically separated themselves ideologically from the dominant culture, albeit for very different reasons (Fetner, 2008). From the nascence of their social movements, both shared a fervent belief in the correctness of their missions, placing themselves at polarized ends of a culture war that continues today. I would argue that ABC's sexual evangelism is but an extension of queer social movements, using a disguised strategy of identity deployment through the mechanism of

comprehensive sex ed. In her analysis of identity politics, Bernstein (1997; 2005) discusses how status identities can be strategically deployed to challenge power structures through activists' emphasis on how they are different from the norm. In the case of ABC, members used their queerness to transform culture by positioning themselves and their mission as counter to East Tennessee's cultural norms, almost as if at opposite ends of a values-based binary.

Part of the worth ABCers attached to comprehensive sex ed was its conceptualization of the fluidity, if not complete erasure, of identity categories in favor of "inclusivity," while at the same time attaching significant meaning to their collective identity as queer activists. According to Terriquez (2015), social movements seeking to be inclusive must balance how their collective identity is formed by attending to how a group's members are differentially impacted by structures of oppression. However, because of ABC's relative homogeneity, members were able to avoid interrogating structural inequalities within ABC itself; in other words, the group's collective identity reflected a sort of single-axis identity politics despite their ostensible mission of being inclusive to all. In contrast to their lived experiences with queerness in East Tennessee (i.e., as a target identity), within ABC queerness was given a sort of power that fostered interpersonal connection between members and was the lens through which ABCers defined "good" sex education. Placing queerness at the forefront was a way for members to feel belonging through shared experiences, but this positioning seemed to come at the expense of integrating more nuance to their group's mission.

Recalling Gamson's (1995) "queer dilemma," whereby a movement's focus on a fixed identity necessarily becomes disrupted the more progress is made, ABC's sexual evangelism simultaneously seeks to trouble dominant cultural norms *and* becomes all the more reified by

East Tennessee's resistance to change. In order for sexual evangelism to exist in this form, queerness must be stigmatized. Like hegemonic Christian evangelicals, ABCers seemed to believe that their particular ideology (i.e., comprehensive sex ed) was the answer to society's ills. They paradoxically sought to queer hegemonic norms in the sense of problematizing how identities are socially constructed (Grzanka, 2019) while merely creating a new set of norms within which they could see themselves as queer youth. Thus, their version of evangelism is both queered and not, since the accomplishment of their mission would mean the establishment of a new hegemony directly contrasting East Tennessee's current cisheteropatriarchy. Despite their goals being centered around queer-affirmation and inclusivity, ABCers nonetheless defined themselves in terms of in-group and out-group members—i.e., those who have been “saved” by comprehensive sex ed versus those who have yet to be enlightened.

If ABC's sexual evangelism reflects a mirror image of hegemonic evangelicalism, one way to make sense of (and, perhaps, take advantage of) the former as a theoretical process is to consider how the latter has been used to gain political power. Evangelicals' consolidation into Christian nationalism has successfully weaponized their religious ideology and cultural dominance to influence institutional power structures (Whitehead et al., 2018; Whitehead & Perry, 2021); what, then, could sexual evangelism accomplish? How might other social movements be motivated by an evangelical faith in the rightness of their causes? To what extent can this level of faith be inspired in others in order to propel change forward? Though perhaps not generalizable in terms of explaining how other youth activist and peer education groups operate, there is a certain logical generalizability (Luker, 2008) to this concept inasmuch as it

provides a blueprint for conceptualizing how and why activists remain steadfast in their commitment to a cause in spite of the magnitude of the task before them.

While universally acknowledging how meaningful this work was to them, ABCers simultaneously struggled with deciding how to negotiate a balance between community-oriented actions and self-care. They recognized how much work there was to be done and felt pressured to act yet knew that they would be unable to effect all the change they hoped to see. To what extent did this awareness affect their theory of social change? I cannot help but think that, at the risk of losing hope entirely, they purposefully pivoted away from apathy and instead directed their faith into the potential success of the actions they *were* able to take. ABC's highly interpersonal (and diplomatic) model of social justice advocacy, defined by empathic dialogue and acting as a resource for others, evoked an idealism and, perhaps, an expression of naiveté that was indicative of their relative privilege and lack of awareness regarding the efficacy of social movements. Despite the group recognizing the need for structural change and engaging in some structural advocacy (e.g., phone banking, lobbying activities), individual members differed in what they considered to be appropriate actions for effecting broader change. The degree to which ABCers were willing to endorse and personally engage in civil disobedience, an ethical practice for seeking justice for marginalized groups, indicated varying understandings of how adhering to respectability politics or civility functionally upholds the power of privileged groups to maintain the status quo (Flynn et al., 2021).

Thinking back to the homogeneity of this White and White-adjacent cohort of mostly queer, economically privileged youth, I cannot help but wonder how the presence of more diverse perspectives would have changed both the group's overarching theory of social change

and identity development. What remains unanswered for this group is the extent to which increased diversity among ABC's members would alter the form (or even presence) of their sexual evangelism. If queerness was no longer centered, how would their collective identity, and thereby the shape of their mission, change? I recall one of my driving questions at the onset of this study: How is power (re)produced as a function of this group's advocacy efforts toward sexual liberation? Gender and sexuality were clearly at the forefront of their awareness and engagement, while race and class were mostly erased as *sites of silence* (Clarke, 2005), a structural concept that conceptualizes absence as a productive way to visualize a particular situation of inquiry. Here, the absence of race and class in ABCers' explicit discussions gave insight into the meaning and method of ABC's negotiation of power. Specifically, their avoidance of critical engagement with race and class showed how the boundaries of their queerness, as well as the form their sexual evangelism took, were shaped by Whiteness.

In that regard, one question that remains only partially answered is the extent to which ABCers' critical consciousness development was indicative of intersectional awareness (i.e., the degree to which individuals critically view inequitable social categories as intersecting; Curtin et al., 2015). While group members discussed with a degree of fluency their analysis of how larger systems like capitalism and heterosexism are used to inflict power and control through, for example, the method of AOUM, their reluctance to openly dialogue about other influences such as classism and White supremacy showed the limits of their intersectional awareness. Certainly, ABCers showed room for growth in terms of developing an antiracist identity, which necessitates (a) deep, meaningful exploration of one's Whiteness and (b) a willingness to sit with and confront any feelings that arise in response to such exploration (Grzanka et al., 2019). Members'

discomfort with outwardly reflecting on their racial identity was evident, but was this a display of guilt, shame, or something else? This question, left unanswered, points to ABCers' potential for movement toward antiracist identity development and action, for which White guilt can be a powerful motivator (Grzanka et al., 2019). Future work might address this question by including a richer assessment of the emotions underlying and shaping these young activists' relationship to Whiteness.

In addition to the limited perspectives offered by living deeply segregated along race and class lines, East Tennessee's stringent laws making sexual and reproductive health information inaccessible further limited these youth from engaging in the sort of dialogue that can only really be fostered by divergent perspectives (i.e., as could be had in a classroom with diverse peers). It is no wonder, then, that this ABC cohort was formed as a homogenous group of like-minded individuals whose positionalities were highly similar. This observation is intended not to excuse a lack of critical engagement with their dominant identities (i.e., race, class), but rather to lodge a critique of how the state's literal censorship of sex education and perpetuation of structural inequities (e.g., making certain schools inaccessible to youth based on their background) made it easier to engage in a process of color-evasion, which Neville et al. (2013) define as the process by which White individuals minimize the significance of race in social interactions and problems; further, color-evasion, along with *power*-evasion, are the two constitutive elements of color-blind racial ideology.

I must also acknowledge how my own parallel process of color-evasion likely prevented me from digging deeper when White ABCers talked around their Whiteness in interviews.

Despite observing how discussion of race was being avoided or rendered implicit early on in the

study, I failed to put aside my discomfort. As I came to know the ABCers over time, I felt myself becoming protective of them and our built rapport in a way that made it challenging for me to push them beyond their apparent comfort zones. Looking back at the interviews I conducted, I can see how my attunement to members' discomfort with discussing race in particular made me reluctant to probe. With members of color, who all consistently discussed their internal conflict around negotiating their Latinx (or undefined "mixed race" in the case of Missy) ethnicity with their Whiteness, I avoided disclosing my own conflict around being White and Hispanic.

Although in the moment I thought my avoidance was related to fear of taking the focus away from my interviewee, upon further reflection I recognize how I contributed to ABC's culture of race erasure. If I could extend this work, I would include more intentional data-gathering to better understand individual members' racialized awareness. Given the group's avoidance of racialized discussions in meetings themselves, this data-gathering could take the form of targeted focus groups or semi-structured interviews specifically emphasizing race. Considering how other youth sex education activism groups might be less racially homogenous (e.g., in West Tennessee), conducting an ethnography of different groups and/or having other groups engage in a sort of intergroup dialogue with ABCers could offer insight into how groups operate within their particular context.

In terms of methodology, my intent for this project was to search for critical construct validity (Fine & Torre, 2019) in my investigation of ABC as a situation of inquiry through the disruption of the status quo and "taken for granted assumptions," as is the role of critical ethnographers per McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2017, p. 489). While ethnography as a qualitative method is used in many fields, it is underrepresented if not entirely absent within counseling

psychology. Following Grzanka and Moradi's (2021) recommendations for expanding the qualitative imagination of our field, this project was (a) designed as, rather than about, social justice; (b) emphasized my own positionality as part of the analytical process; and (c) deepened the context of my subjects through data-gathering across multiple time-points. Moreover, in accordance with Levitt et al.'s (2021) principles for methodological integrity of critical qualitative research, I maintained fidelity to the subject matter through various practices such as perspective management through memo-writing and field notes, as well as grounding the findings through an iterative analytical process that was made clearer through the supplemental use of situational analysis.

My intention from the beginning of this project was to ground data collection and analysis through the lens of my personal feminist standpoint, maintaining awareness of how my positionality was affecting the analytic process and even the situation of inquiry itself. Clarke (2006) notes that situational analysis is a feminist practice inasmuch as the researcher acknowledges their own "embodiment and situatedness," grounds data analysis in the "lived material" and symbolic situation of inquiry, and conceptually maps all actors in a given situation no matter their level of power in that situation (p. 398). Using situational analysis as a complementary practice to standard grounded theory (GT) procedures (i.e., coding, memoing, and auditing; Fassinger, 2005) helped me avoid the kind of positivistic, reductive theory generation that often characterizes traditional GT investigations (Grzanka, 2021). More specifically, I was able to avoid Clarke's (2005) methodological recalcitrancies by approaching the analytic process reflexively; constantly reflecting on and interrogating how the meaning I and

my participants made was a co-constituted dynamic; and constructing knowledge without oversimplification, reduction, or the intent to find an objective, generalizable “truth.”

Logistically speaking, this project’s occurrence as a digital ethnography was an unforeseen circumstance that led to both challenges and benefits for the study. Because of the sensitivity required to work with youth as a vulnerable population, one benefit of conducting the study digitally was the layer of protection digital meetings offered. Having this extra barrier seemed to facilitate ABCers’ sense of safety by allowing members to be comfortable in their own space (usually their bedrooms) during the sensitive discussions that occurred in meetings. It is possible that being physically distant from their peers allowed ABCers to be more open in sharing and more willing to take risks while participating in discussions. Further, I imagine that being interviewed by an adult graduate student in person would have been more intimidating compared to the emotional distancing Zoom allows. It was difficult to gauge the emotional flavor of my interactions with individual ABCers because of our communication through a screen, but I would characterize the way they spoke as very stream-of consciousness and unstructured, suggesting that the digital format was comfortable for them.

However, a challenge of conducting this study digitally was the effect on ABCers’ group dynamics. The nature of Zoom (e.g., participants having to unmute themselves to speak, which could lead to accidental interruptions) reduced the group’s crosstalk such that they responded to Frances’ questions as if they were in a formal classroom more so than engaging in fluid dialogue. Moreover, because ABCers were in their own homes during meetings, they were sometimes more distracted (e.g., painting, attending to younger siblings) than they would have been if they met in-person at Family Futures. While they came to know me better over the course of the year

and my embeddedness eventually allowed me a quasi-insider status, I could not help but wonder if my presence as an outsider initially made members nervous. Further, I wondered if ABCers felt more self-conscious given their awareness that I was observing them and taking notes throughout meetings. To what extent, if at all, did my presence in the group change their behavior? How did my presence alter the group's dynamics? Did they censor themselves or increase their self-monitoring in cognizance of my analysis of them? These questions were largely left unresolved, but future work might address them by (a) directly questioning participants about their experience of the group process or (b) including measures of either interpersonal process (e.g., Interpersonal Relations Scale; Shadish, 1984) or group dynamics (e.g., Group Climate Questionnaire; Mackenzie, 1983).

Though several limitations to this study are present, its guiding questions were in large part answered. The proposed theoretical concept of sexual evangelism is explanatory of the group's ideology, motivations, and functions, at least for this cohort in particular. ABC's commitment to spreading comprehensive sex ed is a testament to their unshakeable belief in its power to liberate those who are currently oppressed by AOUM in their community, as well as the meaning they choose to make of their own experiences of queer erasure and rejection.

Clinical and Advocacy Implications

In light of counseling psychology's continued lack of critical engagement with sexuality issues (Mollen et al., 2018; Grzanka & Frantell, 2017), training in sexuality competencies (Mosher, 2017), or a sex-positive focus (Hargons et al., 2017), this work perhaps illuminates just how significant of an impact sex education can have on the psychological well-being of youth. For ABCers and likely other youth, comprehensive sex ed can be compared to the interpersonal

psychotherapy (IPT) concept of a *corrective emotional experience* (i.e., a reparative experience that resolves as opposed to repeats an unhelpful interpersonal pattern; Teyber & Teyber, 2016) after the harms caused by AOUM. The long-term effects of AOUM may show up in psychotherapy sessions as enduring shame around sex, unhealthy communication in romantic relationships, or internalized stigma related to being a sexual and/or gender minority, among many other things. In therapy, we can provide clients with a corrective experience by helping them to process the impact AOUM has had on them with unconditional positive regard and empathy.

Along with helping clients engage in analysis of their social location as a part of feminist therapy (Brown, 2009), we can empower clients who have experienced unsatisfactory sex ed by challenging the perspective they learned to have more fulfilling relationships, healthier communication, and an increased understanding of their sexual identity as contextualized by their unique positionality. Moreover, while experiences of marginalization due to identity-based forms oppression can lead to psychological distress (Jordan, 2018), this study shows how critical consciousness development, particularly in terms of sexuality, can act as a protective factor against such distress. This is consistent with other research demonstrating the benefits of gaining such awareness (e.g., French et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2021). As clinicians, we must be prepared to offer support and psychoeducation on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) topics (Mosher, 2017), which makes having a thorough understanding of comprehensive sex education ourselves—including introspection and awareness of the impact our own sexuality may have on us and our interactions with clients—a necessary ethical practice. Outside of therapy, we can

encourage clients who experience identity-based oppression and associated distress find empowerment, healing, and community through activist spaces.

Beyond these individual-level interventions, if our field truly intends to adhere to its ostensible social justice values we must engage in systems-level actions for our collective well-being (DeBlaere et al., 2019). Arguing for the need for critical sexuality studies, Fahs and McClelland (2016) posed a crucial question: How can we fight against structural forces that oppress our bodies if we cannot choose how those forces define us? From a reproductive justice perspective, lack of access to and funding for sex education is yet another form of reproductive oppression that keeps abject (e.g., racialized, queer) bodies mired in systemic marginalization (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). In support of the extensively documented harms of AOUM (e.g., Fox et al., 2019), especially for marginalized youth (e.g., Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017), I would argue that the state's censorship of SRH information is a form of epistemic violence (Grzanka, 2018) that has tangible consequences. This study shows how advocating for access to comprehensive sex education is a crucial social (and reproductive) justice goal. In their largely unanswered call for the incorporation of reproductive justice into counseling psychology, Grzanka and Frantell (2017) recommend several ways to address our field's inadequate attention to SRH, including advocating against policies that serve to further reify SRH-related stigma.

Moreover, as Avery and Stanton (2020) argue, integrating a reproductive justice approach into psychology is a necessary step toward dismantling the impact of White supremacy in our field, which, along with misogyny and neoliberalism, detrimentally impact individuals' reproductive rights and experiences of reproductive oppression (Ross, 2017). While choice in the context of sexual and reproductive health has long been an illusory concept for all but the most

privileged (i.e., wealthy White women; Zucker, 2014; Luna & Luker, 2013), the overturn of Roe v. Wade in June, 2022 highlights the need for critical and feminist psychologists to advocate for accessible SRH at the institutional level. ABC's sexual evangelism demonstrates how experiences of marginalization and development of critical consciousness can be used to fuel movements for structural change; therefore, developing our and others' critical consciousness is an important step toward engaging in tangible action. Part of working toward liberation is first imagining the possibilities of a different kind of world, and then building it (Singh, 2020). In the case of comprehensive sex ed, the model and curriculum has already been created. What remains is to continue ABC's efforts to transform our culture's cisheteropatriarchy, allowing our own experiences and critical consciousness to propel us forward.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

I conducted this critical ethnography of a youth peer education and activist group for comprehensive sex education using participant observations of biweekly meetings, individual interviews with participants, and memos I wrote throughout the process as data. Through my modified GT approach that was supplemented by situational analysis, I posit that the concept of *sexual evangelism*—defined by the belief that comprehensive sex ed is liberatory and the subsequent mission to spread the message of comprehensive sex ed—characterizes this group. While this study gives insight into how this cohort of youth activists operates, it also demonstrates how much more engagement with critical sexuality studies is needed within counseling psychology.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Statement

Research Statement

Hey everyone! My name is Elena Schuch and I'm a 3rd year in the Counseling Psychology doctoral program at UT. I'm from Florida originally, went into the Peace Corps after college with an emphasis on gender equality and teaching sex education to teens, then moved here to start my program. I've always been really passionate about gender and sexuality issues, as well as fighting for reproductive justice. My Masters thesis involved talking with groups of undergrad women at UT about their relationships and experiences with birth control, particularly IUDs and implants.

The project I'm hoping you will want to be a part of would be for my dissertation, which is like the "capstone" of my program. I'm interested in exploring and understanding what motivates you to be part of ABC, how this relates to your intersecting identities, and the meaning you make of this work and yourselves (including your sexuality!). I wouldn't be there to judge or measure anything—basically I would be a part of your group for the 2020-2021 academic year, and I would get to know each of you personally through conversations and interviews. I would want your input throughout the entire process because your opinions and voices are what matter to me. It's also important to mention that any identifying information will be changed, including your names and the name of the group.

I think it's so important to do qualitative research like this that gives people—especially those who are marginalized—the chance to have their voices heard. I've been part of Just the Facts since last year and was horrified to learn about James Felt, not to mention the state of sex ed and shame surrounding sexuality in TN generally; at the same time, I was so impressed to learn about ABC and how you all are trying to subvert the system.

I'm excited about the potential for this project and getting to know all of you better, but I only want to move forward if this is something you would all be comfortable with and interested in. I look forward to hearing your thoughts!

I've included at the end of this statement a permission form to go over with your parent(s) and/or guardian(s). If you choose to be a part of this project, **please email me your signed permission form**. Please feel free to contact me or my advisor (Dr. Grzanka) for any questions, comments, concerns, or if you want more information.

Contact information:

Elena Schuch – eschuch@vols.utk.edu

Patrick Grzanka, Ph.D. – prgrzanka@utk.edu

Appendix B: Youth Assent Form

ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Negotiating Sexual Politics: A Critical Ethnography of Youth Sex Education Activism

1. My name is Elena Schuch and I'm a Counseling Psychology graduate student from the University of Tennessee, East Tennessee.
2. We are asking you to take part in this research study because we are trying to learn more about youth advocacy related to sex education.
3. If you agree to be in this study, I'll be a member of ABC for the 2020-2021 academic year and attending every meeting. At meetings, I will be observing and taking notes on the verbal and nonverbal interactions between you and other group members as well as general discussion of meeting topics. I'll also ask you to have 2 interviews with me during the year that will be audio-recorded.

I will be writing a portrait of you using a pseudonym of your choice that includes information about you and your identity that you share with me, as well as quotes that you have said, but you will have the final say in what I write about you. When I write anything about you, I will share the draft with you and give you 6 weeks to read it and give me feedback or ask that I remove something from the written draft. Once my dissertation has been fully written, you will also have the chance to read it. This will be a collaborative process so that your identity is protected as much as possible and your story is represented in a way that feels fair for you. While I'll protect your confidentiality as much as possible, I can't promise complete confidentiality about my observations because I can't control what others might share outside of the group.
4. About 30 people will take part in this study. Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected from you.
5. There are no benefits related to your participation in this research.
6. Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. But even if your parents say "yes" you can still decide not to do this.
7. If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. If you decide that you want to stop participating in the study, you can email me at eschuch@vols.utk.edu to let me know and you will be immediately withdrawn. No one except me will know that you

have decided to stop participating in the study. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with Family Futures.

8. You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at (561) 810-7076 or email me at eschuch@vols.utk.edu. You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Patrick Grzanka, at prgrzanka@utk.edu.
9. Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

Name of Participant

Date

Permission for Research Participation of a Minor

Research Study Title: “Negotiating Sexual Politics: A Critical Ethnography of Youth Sex Education Activism”

Researcher(s): Elena Schuch, M.A. University of Tennessee, East Tennessee

Patrick R. Grzanka, Ph.D. University of Tennessee, East Tennessee

Why is my child being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking your child to be in this research study because they are participating in the peer education program (ABC) organized through Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi (PPTNM).

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to understand how this group operates, explore what motivates this group of students to engage in peer education and sex education activism, and to tell these students’ stories.

How long will my child be in the research study?

If you give permission for your child to be in the study, and your child agrees, their participation will last for 10 months. By agreeing to participate in the study, your child is agreeing to the graduate student researcher’s presence and involvement in ABC meetings for the 2020-2021 academic year as well as participating in 2 individual interviews and 2 phone calls for scheduling interviews.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want my child to be in this research study”?

If you give permission for your child to be in this study, we will ask your child to participate in 2 individual interviews with the graduate student researcher over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year. Additionally, the graduate student researcher will become a member of ABC for the 2020-2021 academic year and attend each meeting to observe how the group operates. The graduate student researcher will be observing and taking notes on the verbal and nonverbal interactions between group members as well as their discussion of meeting topics. Notes will only be taken on participants who have agreed to participate in the study. We will be writing an individual portrait of your child that includes information

about their identity that they are willing to share with us and quotes that they have said. Your child will have the final say in what information we share about them, how we tell their story, and what pseudonym we will use for them. All materials describing your child will be shared with them once a draft has been written, and your child will have 6 weeks to provide feedback or request that something be removed from the draft. While we will protect your child's confidentiality as much as possible, we cannot promise complete confidentiality about our observations because we cannot control what others might share outside of the group. Depending on what descriptive information your child shares with us, there is the risk of them being indirectly identified given the small number of students in the group.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want my child to be in this research study"?

Your child's being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your child's relationship with the researchers, the University of Tennessee, or Family Futures.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to allow your child to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, you may contact Dr. Patrick Grzanka at prgrzanka@utk.edu and all information related to your child will be removed from the research.

Are there any possible risks to my child?

Because of the small number of students in the group, it is possible that someone could find out your child was in this study or see their study information. However, we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. Depending on what information your child chooses to share with us about their identity, there is an additional risk of your child being indirectly identified.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect your child to benefit from being in this study. Your child's participation may help us to learn more about youth advocacy and sex education activism. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your child's information by using a pseudonym for your child and modifying any identifying information. Only members of the research team will have access to your child's information for data analysis purposes. All study information and research records will be kept confidential and secure by the research team. Any physical records (e.g., consent forms) will be kept in a locked office on the UT campus, and electronic data will be kept on secure, password-protected devices.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your child's name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that your child gave us information or what information came from your child. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about your child. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, East Tennessee who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.
- Undergraduate research assistants who will help with data analysis.

What will happen to my child's information after this study is over?

We will keep your child's information to use for the purposes of this research. Your child's name and other information that can directly identify them will be kept secure and stored separately from their research data collected as part of the study.

We will not share your child's research data with other researchers.

What else do I need to know?

About 30 people will take part in this study. Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify your child based on the information we collected from them.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Patrick R. Grzanka, Ph.D. (pgrzanka@utk.edu) and Elena Schuch (eschuch@vols.utk.edu).

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, East Tennessee
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
East Tennessee, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am giving permission for my child to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Child's Name (printed) _____

Parent's Name (printed) _____

Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

Permission for use of audio recordings

I agree that audio recordings of my child may be created and analyzed for research purposes.

Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: “Negotiating Sexual Politics: A Critical Ethnography of Youth Sex Education Activism”

Researcher(s): Elena Schuch, M.A. University of Tennessee, East Tennessee
Patrick R. Grzanka, Ph.D. University of Tennessee, East Tennessee

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a group leader of the ABC Peer Education program conducted through Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi (PPTNM) for the 2020-2021 academic year.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to understand how ABC operates, explore what motivates this group of students to engage in peer education and sex education activism, and to tell the stories of those involved with ABC.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for 1 hour.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in 1 individual interview with the graduate student researcher over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year. This interview will be audio-recorded.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your relationship with the researchers, the University of Tennessee, or Family Futures of Tennessee and North Mississippi.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, you may contact Dr. Patrick Grzanka at prgrzanka@utk.edu and all information related to you will be removed from the research.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about youth sex education activism and the ABC peer education group. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by using a pseudonym for you and modifying any identifying information. Only members of the research team will have access to your information for data analysis purposes. All study information and research records will be kept confidential and secure by the research team. Any physical records (e.g., consent forms) will be kept in a locked office on the UT campus, and electronic data will be kept on secure, password-protected devices.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, East Tennessee who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.
- Undergraduate research assistants who will help with data analysis.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for the purposes of this research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

What else do I need to know?

About 30 people will take part in this study. Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected from you.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Patrick R. Grzanka, Ph.D. (pgrzanka@utk.edu) and Elena Schuch (eschuch@vols.utk.edu).

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

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Blount Hall, Room 408
East Tennessee, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Appendix E: Personal Fieldwork Guide

Date:

Meeting #:

Guiding Questions:

1. How do ABCers perform sexual politics?
2. How do ABCers negotiate their identity development as a group and as individuals?
3. What meaning do they make of this work?
4. How are power, privilege, and oppression manifesting in this group?
5. How is the group's critical consciousness developing intersectionally?
6. What is the emotional flavor of the group's dynamics?

Field Notes and Observations:

Appendix F: Interview Protocol for ABC Members

Overall Research Questions

1. How do ABCers perform sexual politics?
2. How do ABCers negotiate their identity development as a group and as individuals?
3. What meaning do they make of this work?

Materials Needed

- Interview recording equipment (Zoom recording plus iPhone)

How Today's Interview Will Work (2-3 minutes)

As you might already know, I'm really interested in getting to know you all not only as a group but as individuals. I'm going to be asking you a lot of questions about yourself, including who you are as a person and what your participation in ABC means to you.

I want you to feel comfortable, so please know that I won't be making any assumptions about you based on what we talk about. I'm going to be asking you about your thoughts and experiences and hope you feel comfortable sharing. Any feelings that come up are welcome and normal in my eyes. I won't judge you for anything that you share today.

No "Right" or "Wrong" Answers and Participation

I'll be asking you some questions for the next hour or so. There's no "right" or "wrong" answer to these questions—I really want to hear about your thoughts and experiences so I can understand where you're coming from. If I ask a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to let me know you don't want to answer.

Recording and Confidentiality

I'll be recording the session because I want to make sure that I catch everything you say. I'll be using your chosen pseudonym today and will not use your actual name in my report. No one will be able to link your identity back to what you said and only I will listen to this recording.

Tell the subject that you will be starting the recorder and do so.

[Begin recording]

Interview Questions

A. Your Story [20 minutes]

1. To get us started, how old are you currently?
2. What three words would you use to describe yourself?
 - a. What made you choose those words?
3. Social identities are one way of describing ourselves. This can include things like our race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. How would you describe your own social identities?

4. When do you think about your race and why? (*in which contexts*) Tell me about a time your race felt important to you.
 - a. What about your sexual identity?
 - b. Gender identity?
5. What made you want to be part of ABC?
6. What was it like being in the group for you?
Probe: What was the experience like?
Probe: I noticed you were ____ (e.g., quiet, talkative). Would you agree?
Probe: How did you feel about your fellow group members?
Probe: How do you feel about the dynamics of the group?

B. Critical Consciousness [20 minutes]

1. What does comprehensive sex ed mean to you?
Probe: What would the curriculum include?
Probe: What is “good” sex ed? What is “bad” sex ed?
2. Why do you think there is no comprehensive sex ed in East Tennessee?
3. What makes people in East Tennessee opposed to comprehensive sex ed?
4. What does social justice mean to you? What does it mean to be “woke”?
5. I’ve often heard y’all describe ABC as an inclusive space. What does it mean to have an inclusive space?
Probe: Who is included in ABC?
6. What does activism mean to you?
 - a. Do you identify as an activist? *If yes:* How would you describe your journey as an activist?
7. What impact does ABC have on East Tennessee?
Probe: How is ABC changing East Tennessee?
8. How would you answer the question, “why is there so much inequality in the United States?” What causes all this inequality?

C. Reflecting on Growth and Change [20 minutes]

1. What’s an experience that changed your perspective on an issue this year?
Probe: For example:
 - a. An issue related to sex ed?
 - b. COVID?
 - c. Racial injustice/protests?
2. How has the pandemic impacted your worldview?
3. What are some things you’ve learned about yourself this year? About social justice?
4. How were you changed by ABC?
5. Which topics most excited you?
6. Did you notice any topics being avoided in the group?
Probe: Were there topics you wanted to discuss but weren’t?
7. Tell me about a meaningful contact you had this year, both positive and negative.
Probe: What did you learn?
8. What topics have you discussed with contacts?

Probe: Are there certain topics you feel more comfortable with?

Probe: Which topics related to sex ed make you uncomfortable?

9. How do you think your work with ABC impacts your peers?

Probe: Do your conversations with peers change their attitudes about issues related to sex ed?

10. Tell me about your Framing Choice photos.

11. Is there anything I didn't ask about that feels important to bring up? Anything that feels left unsaid?

Wrap Up [2-3 minutes]

Thanks for sharing your thoughts today!

1. What would you like your pseudonym to be?
2. What is a permanent email address to reach you at? (*remind them that I will send them anything I write about them for feedback*)

Appendix G: Interview Protocol for Group Facilitator

Overall Research Questions

1. How do ABCers perform sexual politics?
2. How do ABCers negotiate their identity development as a group and as individuals?
3. What meaning do they make of this work?

Materials Needed

- Interview recording equipment (Zoom recording plus iPhone)

How Today's Interview Will Work (2-3 minutes)

As part of understanding the group, I'm really interested in getting to know you and understanding your role. I'm going to be asking you a lot of questions about yourself, including who you are as a person and what your participation in ABC means to you.

I want you to feel comfortable, so please know that I won't be making any assumptions about you based on what we talk about. I'm going to be asking you about your thoughts and experiences and hope you feel comfortable sharing. Any feelings that come up are welcome and normal in my eyes. I won't judge you for anything that you share today.

No "Right" or "Wrong" Answers and Participation

I'll be asking you some questions for the next hour or so. There's no "right" or "wrong" answer to these questions—I really want to hear about your thoughts and experiences so I can understand where you're coming from. If I ask a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to let me know you don't want to answer.

Recording and Confidentiality

I'll be recording the session because I want to make sure that I catch everything you say. I'll be using your chosen pseudonym today and will not use your actual name in my report. No one will be able to link your identity back to what you said and only project staff like myself will listen to this recording.

Tell the subject that you will be starting the recorder and do so.
[Begin recording]

Interview Questions

A. Your Story [30-60 minutes]

1. To get us started, what three words would you use to describe yourself?
2. Social identities are one way of describing ourselves. This can include things like our race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. How would you describe your own social identities?

3. When do you think about your race and why? (*in which contexts*) Tell me about a time your race felt important to you.
 - a. What about your sexuality?
 - b. Gender identity?
4. How would you describe your role in ABC?
5. What motivated you to be part of Family Futures?
 - a. ABC?
6. What is it like leading this group?
Probe: What does facilitating this group mean to you?
7. What do you hope ABCers will get out of this group?
8. What are you most proud of regarding ABC this year? Disappointed by?
9. How did you feel about the dynamics of the group?
Probe: What do you think made some members more talkative than others?
10. What does activism mean to you?
 - a. Do you identify as an activist? *If yes:* How would you describe your journey as an activist?
11. What purpose does ABC serve for youth?
12. How do you think being a part of ABC impacts youth?
13. What does it mean to have an inclusive space?
Probe: Who is included in ABC? Is anyone excluded?
14. What impact does ABC have on East Tennessee?
Probe: To what extent does ABC have an impact?
Probe: How do ABCers change their peers' attitudes? Which peers do they have access to, and which are left out?
Probe: How do you think social change is effected?
15. What's an experience that changed your perspective on an issue this year? For example:
 - a. An issue related to sex ed?
 - b. COVID?
 - c. Racial injustice/protests?
16. How has the pandemic impacted your perspective on social justice?
17. What are some things you've learned about yourself this year? About social justice?
18. How were you changed by ABC?
19. Did you notice any topics being avoided in the group?
Probe: Were there topics you wanted to discuss but weren't?
Probe: Is there anything you wish had gone differently?

Wrap Up [2-3 minutes]

Thanks again for sharing your insights today!

3. What would you like your pseudonym to be?

Appendix H: Situational Analysis Map Examples



VITA

Elena Schuch was born in Delray Beach, FL, to the parents of Dr. Rosa Romigosa and Mr. Christoph Schuch. She received her Bachelor's in psychology with a minor in French from the University of Florida in 2014. During her undergraduate years, Elena studied abroad in Paris, France for a semester at the Sorbonne. After graduating, she served for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso, West Africa, with a focus on health education. Since 2017 she has been enrolled in the Counseling Psychology doctoral program at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, working with Dr. Patrick Grzanka.