Sexting: Gender and Teens provides a close-up look into the intimate and gendered world of teens and those who live with and work with them. The author draws upon interviews with teens, parents and caregivers, and many others who work with teens from teachers and youth workers to principals and police, we learn how the new digital world is still permeated by beliefs and patterns of earlier patriarchal structures. This three state study reveals there are significant gendered differences among teens in their perspectives on sexting, and these differences have implications for how to respond to the issue of teen sexting. Adults, too, demonstrate gendered differences in their views on teen sexting, and these differences have an important impact on the shaping of youth views about gender and sexuality.

As one mother said, “Girls set the pace, and boys notch the bedpost.”

Some key findings include:

- The human curriculum of sexuality is both conserving and adapting, and these two impulses are always interacting.
- We are in the midst of social and technological changes that have vast implications for all of our cultural notions, including sexuality.
- Regarding sexting: Adults are pointing fingers in many directions and leaving adolescents to fend for themselves.

This compelling account—presented through the words of participants—provides a vivid introduction to hands-on social research that will be of interest to those in gender and women’s studies as well as the broader disciplines that touch upon these concerns, such as sociology, education, psychology, media studies, criminal justice, and other fields.

Sure to spark strong opinions and discussion, the book offers opportunities for sustained engagement with topics of critical interest to today’s digital world.

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Sexting
Teaching Gender

Volume 3

Series Editor
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Teaching Gender publishes monographs, anthologies and reference books that deal centrally with gender and/or sexuality. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate classes across the disciplines. The series aims to promote social justice with an emphasis on feminist, multicultural and critical perspectives.

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Sexting
Gender and Teens

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1. Gender, Youth, and Intimacy through the Lens of Sexting ................................................................. 1

The Human Curriculum of Sexuality ........................................................................... 2
Digital Technologies + Sex = Sexting ........................................................................... 3
The Study Behind This Study: Or Where the Data Came From ................................... 4
The Genesis and Development of This Book ................................................................. 6
Why Gender? ................................................................................................................. 6
Adolescence and Technology ....................................................................................... 8
The Media ..................................................................................................................... 10
Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 11

Chapter 2. People, Places, and Processes .................................................................. 13

People and Places ....................................................................................................... 13
Youth ............................................................................................................................. 14
Parents ......................................................................................................................... 14
Other Adults ................................................................................................................ 16
Processes ....................................................................................................................... 17
Notes to the Reader ...................................................................................................... 19

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................. 21

Youth Voices ................................................................................................................. 21

Chapter 3. Teen Girls and the Phenomenon of Sexting ............................................. 23

How Girls Define Sexting .............................................................................................. 23
Girls’ Understanding of the Motivations for Sexting .................................................... 24
Romantic Relationships ............................................................................................... 25
Peers: Social Status, Power, and Control ................................................................... 28
Sexuality ....................................................................................................................... 31
Sexting: Moral Evaluations and Dangers ..................................................................... 33
Layers of Shame: The Consequences of Sexting from Girls’ Perspectives ................. 34
Who Will Guide Girls Through These Dangerous Waters? ...................................... 36
   Adults in the Family ................................................................................................. 36
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Adults in School ................................................................. 37  
The Role of the Media ......................................................... 38  
Girls’ Lives in These Changing Times ............................. 39  

Chapter 4. Teen Boys and the Phenomenon of Sexting .......... 41  
Sexting and Boys: Diversity of Opinions and Practices ......... 41  
Motivations Propelling Boys to Sexting ............................. 42  
Sex .................................................................................. 43  
Peers, Social Relations, and Power ................................. 44  
Romantic Relationships .................................................. 45  
Media as a Motivator for Sexting ..................................... 47  
Consequences From a Boy’s Point of View ....................... 48  
Gender, Class, and Sexuality: The Case of the Flip .......... 52  
Who Will Guide Boys? ..................................................... 55  
Parents ............................................................................ 55  
Other Adults ................................................................. 56  
Boys’ Lives in These Changing Times ............................. 58  

SECTION I: CONCLUSION ................................................... 61  
Comparing the Views of Girls and Boys ......................... 61  

SECTION II: INTRODUCTION .............................................. 67  
Adult Voices ........................................................................ 67  

Chapter 5. Parenting Teens in These Digital Times .......... 69  
Gender in the Context of Sexting: Parents’ Definitions and Beliefs of Teen Sexting Practices ......................................................... 69  
Contexts of Today’s Families and the Issues Impinging on Gender ........................................................ 71  
Technology ................................................................. 71  
The Sexualized Nature of Society .................................... 72  
Parents’ Gendered Understandings of the Motivations for Teen Sexting ............................................................. 73  
Romance and Intimacy ..................................................... 73  
Peers and Social Competition ........................................... 73  
Sex ................................................................................. 75  
Girls: Have They Changed? ............................................. 76  
Teen Sexting: Parental Views of the Gendered Consequences ............................................................ 77  
From Parents’ Perspectives: Who Will Guide Teens? ........ 80  
Conclusion ................................................................. 82
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 6. Other Adults in Young People’s Lives ................................. 85

- Defining Sexting ............................................................................. 85
- Making Sense of Sexting in Today’s Digital, Sexualized World ......... 86
- Motivations for Sexting and Their Gendered Implications ............. 88
  - Romance .................................................................................... 88
  - Peer Social Hierarchy—Power and Ranking ................................. 89
  - Sex, and Not Sex, As Motivations for Sexting ............................. 89
  - Sexting as Accidental or Happenstance ...................................... 81
  - Blame the Technology .................................................................. 92

- Gender and the Characteristics of Youth Who Would or Would Not Sext .......................................................... 92
  - Boys Who Would Sext .................................................................. 93
  - Girls Who Would Sext .................................................................. 94

- Who Are the Youth Who Do Not Sext? ........................................... 95

- Who Will Guide Young People in Their Need for Information about Sexuality, Intimacy, and Gender? ......................... 95

- Conclusions ................................................................................... 97

SECTION II: CONCLUSION ..................................................................... 99

Comparing the Views of Adults .......................................................... 99

Chapter 7. Conclusions ..................................................................... 103

- Findings ......................................................................................... 103
- Recommendations for Practice ...................................................... 113
- Caveats and Considerations .......................................................... 114
- The Last Words ............................................................................... 114

- References ...................................................................................... 117

Index ............................................................................................... 123
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first thanks go to Andrew Harris, professor in the University of Massachusetts Lowell Department of Criminal Justice, who included me in the original study of teens and sexting that led to this work on gender. You have always been generous, insightful, humorous, and kind.

Thanks also to everyone who served on that research team: co-PIs Carl Paternite, Elizabeth Letourneau, and Karin Tusinski-Miofski; thanks also to those who were so helpful in the focus group work: Cricket Meeham, Amy Wilms, and Sarah Hales.

On the UMass Lowell side, we were very lucky to have many wonderful student helpers, including Maryann Ford, Lindsay Tucker, Rob Tanso, Deborah Paul, and Helen Ricci. A very special thanks to Shanna Thompson, who served as research assistant extraordinaire, working with all components of the project.

I also give thanks to the Center for Women and Work at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, from Meg Bond, Director, to all the great associates I have worked with, and students and staff who make CWW such a wonderful place at which to explore the intricacies of gender in today’s world. Sarah Kuhn, a special shout out to you for your continued encouragement.

Many UMass Lowell doctoral students have assisted through their work in my qualitative research class; your help was much appreciated.

In the background, encouraging me since my own doctoral school days, Bertram Bruce and Liora Bresler of the University of Illinois; thanks again!

It has been a pleasure to work with Patricia Leavy, Editor of the *Teaching Gender* series at Sense Publishers. Many thanks also to Lori Stone Handelman for her editorial assistance.

Bob, you know you get my thanks too for abiding with the ups and downs of my writing process—and thanks also to our extended families in Colorado and California. Thanks to Sarah (dog), Scooby and Leah (cats), for your affection and patience.
CHAPTER 1

GENDER, YOUTH, AND INTIMACY AS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF SEXTING

This is a book about gender, youth, and the search for sexual intimacy, or what I would call the human curriculum of sexuality. It is concerned with the ways adolescents learn how to become sexual beings in today’s digital world. In particular, I seek to shed light on the ways society shapes adolescent lives and futures through gendered views, expectations, and social practices.

The data for this topic came from a study examining views of teen sexting from the perspective of teens (girls and boys), caregivers and parents, and other adults—educators, lawmakers, youth workers, etc. (Harris, Davidson, Letourneau, Paternite, & Miofsky, 2013). While sexting, meaning the sharing of sexually explicit messages via digital means, is everywhere in this work, at the same time I can say that sexting is merely instrumental, a means to an end. The end, in this case, is gender and the ways gender is a force in shaping teen lives in today’s digital era.

The goal of this work is to take you deep into the perspectives of these four audiences—teen girls, teen boys, caregivers and parents, and other adults who work with and for teens—as they talk about teen sexuality and today’s digital world through the lens of sexting. Listening to these parties debate the meaning of sexting, the motivations propelling teens to engage in sexting (or not), and the ways girls and boys are perceived when they engage in such behavior gives us access to a world of information about the ways gender is embedded in the human curriculum of sexuality during the adolescent years.

While this book is not about what to do about sexting—how to promote, restrict, curtail, legislate or discipline it—the study does reveal information about gaps, problems, perceptions and misperceptions in current social and institutional practices that suggest ways to better address the human curriculum of sexuality during adolescence, and to make sense of the way it shapes gender expectations and behavior, and thus, life paths. For this reason, a discussion of the human curriculum of sexuality, as I am calling it, may be a good starting point for this study.
CHAPTER 1

THE HUMAN CURRICULUM OF SEXUALITY

The primary focus of this book is gender and the ways youth navigate the human curriculum of sexuality. When I use the term ‘human curriculum of sexuality’ I am referring to all the ways youth, meaning young people primarily of high school age, have available to them to explore issues of sexuality and make decisions about their own sexual and gendered identity and the directions it will take them. These explorations can come in the form of parental conversations, talks with peers, input from media figures, and formal education. This curriculum is carried out in all aspects of their lives as they learn to understand their sexuality, navigate sexual encounters, and gain experience about the meaning of relationships. It happens in school and out of school, at the mall, in the park, and at parties with friends. It happens at sports events, family outings, and shopping for clothing. Youth are learning and being taught about matters of gender and sexuality through a curriculum that is part personal narrative, part peer social engagement, part adult interaction, and in today’s world, part digital culture.

Three critical components of the human curriculum of sexuality are gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships. The first two terms, gender and sexuality, require special clarification. After reviewing definitions from several sources, the Wikipedia descriptions of these terms work best for my discussion as they are specific and yet nuanced compared to many I have read.

Gender is the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioral characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, the term may refer to biological sex (i.e., the state of being male, female or intersex), sex-based social structures (including gender roles and other social roles), or gender identity (“Gender,” n.d.).

Human sexuality is the capacity to have erotic experiences and responses. A person’s sexual orientation may influence their sexual interest and attraction for another person. Sexuality can have biological, physical, emotional, or spiritual aspects. The biological and physical aspects of sexuality largely concern the reproductive functions of the sexes (including the human sexual response cycle), and the basic biological drive that exists in all species. Physical, as well as emotional, aspects of sexuality also include the bond that exists between individuals, and is expressed through profound feelings or physical manifestations of emotions of love, trust, and caring.
Spiritual aspects of sexuality concern an individual’s spiritual connection with others. Sexuality additionally impacts and is impacted by cultural, political, legal, and philosophical aspects of life. It can refer to issues of morality, ethics and theology, or religion (“Human Sexuality,” n.d.).

As young people approach these three areas in their lives, the following questions emerge for them:

– Gender
  What kind of gendered person am I? How do I fit myself within gendered structures? What opportunities or challenges will my gendered identity contain? How will I perform my gender? Will my gender work for me or against me?

– Sexuality
  How is sexuality part of my gendered being? How do I express my sexuality? What’s appropriate where and when? Whose advice should I listen to about the issues of sexuality?

– Relationships
  How can I be intimate with someone? How do you start getting close to someone? How do you flirt? When do you know if it is safe to trust? What should I believe? What is sex all about? Should I have sex with this person or that?

With the advent of the Internet and other digital media, youth explorations of gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships have necessarily included technology and the recent phenomenon called sexting.

**DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES + SEX = SEXTING**

Sexting is a phenomenon of our new digital technologies. It is a term coined to explain the ways human beings have found to use these new tools to explore and express sexuality.

As with the terms gender and human sexuality, I am also using the definition of sexting provided by Wikipedia:

**Sexting** is the act of sending sexually explicit messages, primarily between mobile phones. The term was first popularized in the early 21st century, and is a portmanteau of sex and texting, where the latter is meant in the wide sense of sending a text possibly with images. In August 2012, the word sexting was listed for the first time in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (“Sexting,” n.d.).
Sexting seems to be everywhere. Celebrities such as Tiger Woods, Miley Cyrus, and Rihanna do it (Weintrub, 2011); politicians do it—witness the case of New York politician Anthony Weiner—and, to our horror, young people do it (Brunker, 2009). Where did it come from? Where is it leading us? Is it evil? Is it another form of intimacy? Is it a result of being digital? Is it the first step down a path of depravity from which one will never return?

Public imagination is captured by the ease with which casual photos can be broadcast across the world. Is this why we feel digital media is so much more lethal than an old-fashioned romantic phone call, a posted love letter, or a Playboy pin-up?

Sexting came to the fore at a time when many said our society had become noticeably more open sexually. Where should we draw the line in regard to what can be shown? What is proper attire? As Myspace emerged—only to be surpassed by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, and other digital social media tools—it became increasingly apparent that society was gravitating toward a new relationship to privacy and exposure (boyd, 2014). Adults as well as teens struggle to know what should be shared and what should not (Holson, 2012).

Those who grew up in pre-digital or early digital times (often referred to as digital immigrants) wonder if younger people, whose lives have always been fully immersed in digital culture (referred to as digital natives), would learn to read, write, and think properly in a world like this (Prensky, 2001). They could see the opportunities technology had opened up for young people in so many fields, from science to computing, graphic novels to gaming; however, they were also scared of the dangers young people faced in the wild and wholly digital landscape. Would the developmental imperatives of adolescence—to become gendered, sexual beings with the capacity for rich and meaningful intimacy with significant others—be derailed by social media and its dangers and, in particular, sexting?

THE STUDY BEHIND THIS STUDY:
OR WHERE THE DATA CAME FROM

These issues surrounding sexting led to the study undergirding this book (Harris et al., 2013). Led by Andrew Harris, faculty member in the Criminal Justice Department of the University of Massachusetts Lowell, the study asked high school-age teens, caregivers, and other educators and youth workers about their views of teen sexting. The study was conducted by research teams in three states: Massachusetts, Ohio, and South Carolina.
I was a member of the lead Massachusetts research team in charge of overall organization of the qualitative research component of the study. As this study got underway, sexting had just begun to become a significant concern within educational and law enforcement circles. Initial research into the topic had been primarily in the form of surveys (Cox Communications and National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). These first surveys focused on young people as the subjects with the aim of learning who was sexting, how much sexting was going on, under what circumstances it occurred, and how dangerous it might be. During the course of our study, surveys continued to be released providing more refined perspectives on the issue of sexting (Lenhart et al., 2011; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013; Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, & Rullo, 2012; Temple et al., 2012). In those first years, researchers scrambled to identify literature related to the topic (e.g. Ford, Tucker, Thompson, Davidson & Harris, 2012; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010).

However, at the time this study was initiated there was virtually no work that looked at the issue of sexting from the emic, or deeply insider, perspectives of young people; that is, how did they conceptualize the very meaning of the term sexting? What were the practices they identified as belonging with this term? What were the motivations, values, and concerns young people associated with sexting? Finally, what did they understand of the personal or legal dangers related to these practices? What did they think were the best ways to help young people understand and avoid dangerous behaviors in this realm? And finally, the issue of concern in this volume, how does gender affect the views and the challenges young people face in regard to the issues sexting raises for them?

We also lacked information about the ways adolescents’ significant others—caregivers, educators, youth workers and law enforcement—understood the phenomenon of sexting or knew how to address it within their organizations. An important exception was the work of David Finkelhor and his colleagues at the University of New Hampshire’s Crimes Against Children Research Center, who examined the ways sexting was coming to the attention of law enforcement (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012). Harris and colleagues provide a comprehensive table of the survey research produced as researchers turned their sights to studying this phenomenon (“Appendix 1,” 2013).
Not surprisingly, the policies for dealing with teen sexting within schools and among legal forces were a hodgepodge of under-reaction, over-reaction, and everything in between. As with teens, it wasn’t really clear how adults who were important to teens were conceptualizing the notion of sexting, nor how their beliefs and understandings converged or diverged in regard to the best ways with which to address the phenomenon (Bazelon, 2013; Palfrey, 2008).

Lacking access to other voices and sources of information, it is not surprising that many adults assumed sexting was an extremely dangerous act practiced by the most deviant types, even though we lacked knowledge of whether this was the case or not. Indeed, as we learned in conducting our own research, many people—young and old—are still unsure of what the term means, let alone the practices it encompasses.

The sexting study, as I will refer to the Harris et al (2013) work, sought to contribute knowledge that would fill in two important areas of society’s understanding of sexting: 1) youth perspectives on sexting, and 2) the views of adults engaged with youth (in and beyond the home) regarding youth and sexting. To obtain this kind of information, we elected to use a mixture of tools: surveys to provide background information on participant demographics and to lay a comparable foundation of information on digital practices within and across our groups, and structured focus group interviews to provide richer data on practice, process, and belief regarding the topic than what had been possible in earlier surveys. Data were gathered from participants in three states—Massachusetts, Ohio, and South Carolina—representing contrasting regions of the United States: the Northeast, Midwest, and South. A total of 123 teens, 92 parents or caregivers, and 117 others in teens’ lives were interviewed. (For more details on the sample and methodology see Chapter 2.)

THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THIS BOOK

This book represents the coming together of diverse strands of my own background as a scholar at a particular time and place in my academic life. These strands include a focus on gender, an understanding of adolescence, and the place of new digital technologies in our lives.

Why Gender?

With a topic like sexting, it would be impossible to ignore outright the topic of gender, but it would be fair to say that when I started work on the initial study, gender was only one of many things on my radar. In designing the
original research study, we assumed gender was important, but we wanted to come to the issues with an open mind, to discover whatever new ideas the research process might reveal. The interview questions asked youth and adults to reflect on the ways they perceived sexting to be related to gender expectations. Moreover, we arranged to interview male and female youth in separate groups in order to allow them to speak about gendered issues without pressure.

As I read and re-read the interview transcripts in all four pods of collected data, the pervasiveness of gendered perspectives could not be denied. For instance, I realized that even discussions about which technologies youth used (boys were playing more video games) or television shows they watched (girls were watching more daytime interview shows) ended up having significant gender implications. This was also true for adults, in different ways. For instance, mothers supervised issues related to youth behavior (including technology) in different ways than did fathers. Gender could not be ignored or dismissed.

Two sets of doctoral students read and analyzed portions of the adult data as part of an assignment for the qualitative research methods course I teach. The Fall 2012 class reviewed ‘other adult’ data, and the Fall 2013 class reviewed parent/caregiver data. Both groups were struck by the pervasiveness of gendered expectations in the comments made by adults. In particular, they were surprised to read how often girls were blamed in regard to sexting incidents, while boys were often seen as hapless victims. The interpretations drawn by these two classes were harbingers of what I was to learn about gender from the data as I engaged in the subsequent analysis for this book.

During the same time I was serving on the research team for this project, I was participating as a faculty associate at the Center for Women and Work on our campus, an interdisciplinary group of scholars dedicated to a better understanding of gender issues. I presented the findings of the sexting study and they were quick to notice and point out issues related to gender that were embedded in the data, offering good resources and probing questions.

Interactions with scholars outside our campus also led to more questions about the ways gender was figuring in this data about sexting. Feminist scholar Jessica Ringrose from the University of London’s Institute of Education visited our campus to discuss the qualitative research work she had recently undertaken on sexting and teens in the UK (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012). Her visit provided another opportunity to consider how gender was at work within the data we were reviewing. Her
study also flagged gender issues, and in particular mentioned that “girls [were] most adversely affected” (2012, p.7).

Presentations at conferences and published papers provided more opportunities to talk about the gendered issues emerging from the sexting study (Davidson, 2014a; Davidson, 2014c; Davidson, Harris, Thompson, Tucker, & Ford, 2012; Davidson, Thompson, & Harris, 2014).

As a result of these investigations I can now report that I approach this work with an orientation toward gender that is concerned about issues of performance (Butler, 2008), orientation (Ahmed, 2006), and restrictions or disciplining (Foucault, 1975/1977; Griffin, 2011). Gender, as I construe it, is always discursively and culturally constituted. Thus, it exists within the constraints of historical understanding and political regimes of power. By historical understanding, I refer to the prior practices by which we divide and treat those identified as male versus those identified as female (as well as other gender designations). Likewise, in regard to gender and power, I consider the ways these perceived differences are organized to support or oppress individuals and groups based upon their gendered affiliation.

As a qualitative researcher, I bear in mind the concerns regarding gender that have emerged through methodological discussions, where silencing is both a matter of study (gendered silences in a society) as well as an issue of methodological approach (the gendered blinders that a researcher might be wearing) (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Adolescence and Technology

Unlike my approach to gender—from emergent to focused—I came to my notion of adolescence and technology with more fully fleshed-out principles. In an earlier time in my life I was a staff member at the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina, heading up the Project on Adolescent Literacy (Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993). That experience did much to shape my philosophy of adolescence as a healthy period of development in the lifespan, teaching me that youth are not inherently unbalanced, no more so than at any other particular period of our lives.

Our sexting project team was well staffed with psychologists possessing deep knowledge of research on adolescents, including Cricket Meehan and Carl Paternite of Miami University in Ohio, and Elizabeth Letourneau, now at John Hopkins University. They were all advocates of a positive philosophy of adolescence that had strong resonance with mine. So too Harris, with his background in criminal justice, brought a perspective on prevention that was complementary to a positive view of adolescence.
Karin Tusinski-Miofsky, a criminal justice colleague of Harris’s with expertise in issues of teens and bullying, also brought a positive focus on youth and their capacities.

In addition to my earlier work on adolescence, I also had deep roots in the arena of technology and social practice. As a graduate student working in the field of literacy, I was drawn to perspectives of reading as a technology embedded in specific socio-cultural and historical practices (Davidson, 2014b). As a post-graduate, my first job was as research director for a study of Internet implementation in a suite of four schools (K-12) on the Hanau American Army Base in Hanau, Germany (Davidson, 2004; Davidson & Olson, 2003). When I morphed into a college professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, I found myself immersed in exploring the ways qualitative research technology not only worked, but how it was situated as a social and cultural practice within the field of qualitative research and where the technological future of this field lay, and why (Cisneros & Davidson, 2012; Davidson & diGregorio 2011a; 2011b; diGregorio & Davidson, 2008). Based upon my experience studying technology in K-12 settings, for many years I have taught an online class in the University of Massachusetts Lowell Graduate School of Education called “Planning Technology and School Improvement,” where I undertake ethnographic explorations in school technology practices with a wide variety of students from diverse geographical locations. Each of the experiences mentioned above sharpened my technology chops by providing me opportunities to think critically about technology from philosophical, methodological, and experiential perspectives. Little did I know, but I was being readied for sexting—a phenomenon that was just on the horizon.

As a group, our sexting research team felt a strong connection to the view of adolescence in a digital society presented by Ito and her colleagues in the three-year ethnographic study titled “Kids’ Informal Learning with Digital Media Project,” funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (Ito, 2010). This study laid out a perspective on youth development and a notion of media ecology that was particularly instructive for the work our team was about to undertake. Out of that research study have come a number of studies that continue to define the digital landscape in which youth now live (e.g., boyd, 2014; Lange, 2014; Watkins, 2009). The Connected Learning initiative of Mimi Ito, a leader on the earlier MacArthur study, continues to expand the insights of that ethnographic work into practical experiments with digital learning and youth (connectedlearning.tv, 2014). This body of work examining youth and digital experiences seeks to understand youth practices and perspectives in regard to the use of new digital technologies. It does not presume guilt or
innocence; rather, it examines the ways technology is used, the value it accrues and provides to youth, and the possibilities it offers for learning, both in formal and informal contexts.

Taken as a whole—my experiences researching adolescence and educational technologies, the research regarding adolescence and technology that has played an important role in the design of the original sexting study, and this subsequent work on gender—I can state that first, last, and forever I believe adolescence to be a normal stage of human development no more peculiar or deviant than infancy or old age. However, by virtue of physical development and cultural expectations, teens face unique social, emotional, and intellectual challenges. Today’s teens, growing up as they are in a world of digital technologies, are not better or worse off than teens of past generations; rather, as dana boyd describes, “… what teens are doing as they engage in networked publics makes sense. At the same time, coming to terms with life in a networked era is not necessarily easy or obvious. Rather, it’s complicated” (2014, p. 28).

THE MEDIA

By media, I refer to the vast, surrounding bubble of informational, recreational, and persuasive materials—commercial and non-commercial—that are disseminated in a vast number of forms, from ad flyers and television shows to web pages and fashion magazines. We swim in the midst of these messaging forms, their words and pronouncements, symbols and images.

Our notions of media are embedded in the temporal experience of our lives. Thus, we experience the flow of media as past and present, as this Massachusetts mother illustrates: “And even as you watch media, and TV, and movies …, things that were unacceptable to be shown or said on TV today, are just there. I mean, 20 years ago, you’d never see a Victoria’s Secret model on daytime TV. That would be on a blocked channel, but now it’s OK.”

The media is deeply implicated in discussions about sexting. It reports on incidents, comments on the meaning of these incidents, and speculates about how to address these concerns. Media attention to sexting occurs in the news and on talk shows, shows up as the story line in movies and various television series, and has even been the subject of commercials (the commercial for cell phones with the old lady shooting a photo under her dress). It would be fair to say that media attention to the sexting issue was a primary impetus for the original sexting study.
As the sexting study team read through the transcripts, we were struck by the ways this nebulous thing known as ‘the media’ rose to the fore. Teens, parents and caregivers, and other adults had all been exposed to the idea of sexting from the media, and there were many specific references to where and when they heard about sexting on TV, a music video, or another source. These references were likely to be raised when we asked, “Where did you first hear about sexting?”

Flying further under the radar, that is, not identifiable by specific events, were the generalized discussions about the media’s presentation of sexuality and gender. These references emerged in diverse sections of the text, but particularly as youth and adults considered the motivations for sexting. It also arose as youth considered adult perspectives and vice versa.

In this text, media will be a significant consideration as I explore notions of sexuality and gender as revealed through the lens of sexting.

CONCLUSIONS

From this point on you will be entering the world of teens, their caregivers, and others who care about this age group. While I have drawn conclusions and made choices about the data presented, as much as possible I have allowed their voices to speak. As a reader, I want you to hear youth and adults describing their world views, and as facilitator of this discussion, I will try to stay in the background.

Following this introduction is a brief chapter describing the characteristics of the participants in the study and more background on the methodology of the study. The volume is then arranged so each of the four communities of speakers—girls, boys, parents/caregivers, and other adults—are heard speaking from their own unique positions. Each is given its own chapter in which to hold forth on their views. The first section, youth voices, includes the chapter on girls and then one on boys, followed by a comparison of the youth perspectives. Likewise, the second section, adult voices, starts with a chapter about parental and caregiver perspectives followed by a chapter that describes the views of what I will call other adults, and this, too, is followed by a brief comparison of the two adult chapters.

The final chapter of the book draws back from the intimate world of the participants in the sexting study to the wider world of the findings and their implications. In other words, what conclusions can we draw from these conversations? What indication do they give us of what young people are...
learning about gender, and why? How do these conversations help us to better understand the human curriculum of sexuality, the role of gender within it, and the ways adults are, or are not, playing a useful role as instructors in this field?
CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE, PLACES, AND PROCESSES

This chapter introduces you to the people, places, and processes that led to this book. As described in the first chapter, the data used for this book were derived from a project on teens and sexting (Harris et al., 2013), which I refer to as the sexting study. The processes described here span the research processes of the initial study, as well as reference the subsequent research processes that were applied in this secondary study.

PEOPLE AND PLACES

The people comprised two large groups—youth and adults—that can be further subdivided into two smaller groups each. The youth group was made up of a female and a male subgroup. The adult group comprised parents and caregivers and then a group of what I term ‘other adults: ’ individuals who work with and for adolescents.

The four groups of participants were drawn from the Northeast (Massachusetts), the Midwest (Ohio), and the South (South Carolina). At each of the three locations, a research team conducted interviews with the two youth groups (males and females separately), followed in the second stage by interviews with caretakers or parents, and finally by focus group interviews with individuals in the ‘other adults’ group.

Pseudonyms for the place locations within each state are: Massachusetts: Romney, Andrews, and Gateway City; Ohio: Native, Norse, and Astro; and South Carolina: Wes, Brad, and Norton; and a fourth Make-Up group.

Research design and the informed consent process were carefully reviewed prior to undertaking on-site work. In this secondary study, I conformed to the ethical guidelines outlined in the first study. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were initially assigned a number designation in the focus group, which was used for the transcription. The number designation was later changed to a pseudonym for ease of reading.

At each site, we administered an anonymous survey before the focus group interview to collect demographic and technology-use data. In the case of youth, after the focus group interview we also conducted a second anonymous survey in which we asked questions about sexting practices.
Youth

There were 123 youth who participated in this study, with slightly more female than male participants. Youth were interviewed in 18 different focus groups, separated by gender—three female and three male focus groups each in Massachusetts and Ohio, and four female and four male groups in South Carolina, where lower attendance required a male and female make-up group. Our aim was to focus on three high school communities in each state. We achieved this goal in Ohio and South Carolina. In Massachusetts we worked with two high school communities and, to recruit our third group, one non-profit organization with close ties to a high school.

All youth were attending high school and had a median age of 17, meaning that the majority were in their junior and senior years. Looking across the participants, they not only represented a range of regions, but the students themselves attended schools that were urban and non-urban. Racially, nearly half were white (46.3%), almost a third were African-American (30.1%), and the rest was represented by other racial or cultural groups. The exception to this pattern was South Carolina, where white students were the minority (10.3%) and 79.3% were African-American students.

Although not presented in Table 1, my own review of the youth demographics shows our participants came from diverse family formations—mother and father, parent and step-parent, single mother or less frequently single father, and in some instances another form of caretaker.

Parents

Parent focus groups were recruited from the same high school communities from which we drew our youth participants. Parents were recruited several months subsequent to conducting the youth component of the study and may or may not have been parents of participants in the youth focus group.

Women far outnumbered men in the sample (82.6% women to 17.4% men). While the median income was $80-90,000, this figure is inflated by higher salaries in Massachusetts and Ohio; participants in South Carolina had significantly lower salaries.

A higher majority of parent participants were white, and again the greater number of African-American participants were located in South Carolina.
Table 1. Characteristics of Youth Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>OH</th>
<th>SC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Characteristics of Parent Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>OH</th>
<th>SC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$80K-$90K</td>
<td>$90K-$100K</td>
<td>$100K-$150K</td>
<td>&lt; $10K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 2

Other Adults

Unlike the youth and parent or caregiver groups, our ‘other adults’ groups included, but were not limited to, the three high school community areas in each state. We were quite opportunistic in seeking out these adults, overlapping with conferences, double booking with school professional development days, and any other legitimate ways we could garner participation from these very hard-working individuals. As a result, the participant numbers and groupings varied. The 53 participants in Massachusetts were members of six focus groups conducted in a single morning at a local conference. There were three focus groups in Ohio (33 participants), and three in South Carolina (31 participants).

Table 3. Characteristics of Other Adults Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>OH</th>
<th>SC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>117</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>88.7%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Wellness Educator</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law Enforcement</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 10</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 and above</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the ‘other adults’ groups, as with the parent groups, women dominated (76.9% compared to 23.1% of men). Adult participant focus group members were also primarily white (74%). Interestingly, the largest number of African-American adult members were in Ohio (39.4% compared to 5.7% in Massachusetts and 25.8% in South Carolina).

Those in the ‘other adults’ groups self-reported on their role, providing us with multiple titles for the same or only slightly different jobs. In developing the final report we consolidated these into a limited number of categories. As illustrated in the table, classroom teachers predominated in the South Carolina groups (not surprisingly because those groups were held at the schools), whereas a broader representation of different roles occurred in Massachusetts (where focus groups were held at a professional development event on the topic of sexting).

Experience on the job was about evenly divided between those with fewer than 10 years and those with 10 or more years. However, in South Carolina there were a significant number in the youngest and oldest categories, with the smallest number in the 11 to 20 years of experience group.

**PROCESSES**

The data collected and the processes employed for the initial study were primarily qualitative in nature. This means that depth of research materials and analysis took precedence over breadth or large sample size—although, for a qualitative research interview study we were definitely data-heavy.

There are those who would also ask, “Yes, but what kind of qualitative research were you doing? Is this Grounded Theory? Narrative analysis? Phenomenology? Ethnography? Case study?” In this study I took various kinds of qualitative research approaches into consideration as I tried to find the best path for the work. I will admit to the prejudice I have for an ethnographic approach, definitely leaning toward narrative analysis, and a fondness for the later versions of grounded theory. In this study, rather than subscribe to one brand like applying a statistical formula, I preferred to think of these variations as part of a large swelling river with tributaries, windings, oxbows, and re-connections. In short, the best way to describe the methodological approach is with the broadest term: qualitative research.

Because our research orientation was toward qualitative approaches, in the focus groups participants were asked open-ended questions and encouraged to reflect through narrative. The analysis of this kind of data is a words-to-words approach, rather than a statistical one. This is not to say that quantification is not at work, even in a qualitative research study. Such
terms as more, some, a lot, less, are employed in talking about qualitative data, but they are used as synthesizing statements about the narrative whole.

The focus group interview questions covered the same range of topics for all groups, with small variations depending on the role of the participant. All focus group interviews were divided into two components: 1) an opening set of questions about technology use, and 2) a core set of questions related to sexting.

Technology questions provided a safe beginning point for discussion of what could be a difficult topic: the digital side of sex, or sexting. The initial questions in our protocol sought to uncover information about the role of technology in participants’ lives, with an emphasis on what they could tell us about technology in teen lives.

In the subsequent portions of the focus group interviews, we sought information from participants on: 1) the way they defined sexting, 2) how they understood its motivations and characteristics—where, why, and with whom they imagined it took place, 3) how teens were communicating to adults and other teens about the topic, 4) what the different parties imagined the consequences to be, and finally 5) participants’ suggestions for addressing the issue of sexting.

The analysis process used in the sexting study is amply described in the final report to the United States Department of Juvenile Justice (Harris et al., 2013). That analysis process was conducted with the aid of NVivo software, a tool for storing and organizing qualitative data. At the end of that study I was in possession of a digital database with all the focus group and survey materials coded around the topical areas of the original focus group questions and containing all subsequent emergent coding.

This secondary study, however, aimed to place gender in the primary position and sexting in the ancillary position. This meant conducting another analysis of the materials to review the sexting materials from this new perspective. This also meant I had to forget much of what I thought I knew about the transcribed words, coming to them now with a new outlook.

In reviewing the materials, I wanted to amply describe each of the four views clearly and distinctly, representing their similarities, but also the important differences among them. In conducting my review, I put the youth first, grounding myself in their views before I shifted to the adults.

I also made use of the database as a teaching tool in my doctoral level qualitative research classes, killing two birds with one stone. First, it had always been my dream to have a complex qualitative research database organized in NVivo to use for class assignments. I also wanted my students
to use such a database to contribute something to a real research project, rather than just an exercise to demonstrate their skills with the technology. With the database from the sexting study I could do both.

Working individually and in small groups, my Fall 2012 qualitative research class examined the ‘other adult’ portion of the data, developing working papers on emergent themes. My Fall 2013 class examined the parent/caregiver portion of the data, also developing working papers on emergent themes. The Fall 2012 class was composed of doctoral students from the UMass Lowell Graduate School of Education, while the Fall 2013 class was composed of educational doctoral students as well as several students from other doctoral programs on campus.

Students in the two classes were asked to code and analyze broadly, seeking emergent themes. I explained I had an interest in gender, but did not say much more. They were not asked to code or seek out gender issues. To my surprise, however, in both years gender was the theme that jumped out front and center to my students. The two groups were surprised at the ways parents and fellow educators held different gendered expectations for boys and girls. In particular, they were surprised by the ways girls were held responsible and shamed for sexual acts, and boys were not. Their strong reactions in regard to gender in the data told me there was something important to follow here.

A sabbatical spring semester in 2014 provided the time I needed for a full review of all four components of the data and time to write. In conducting my re-evaluation for this secondary study, I focused primarily on focus group responses related to the questions of what is sexting, what motivates it, and what are the contexts in which it appears.

NOTES TO THE READER

There are a couple of definitions or explanations needed before you dive into the words of the participants.

First, I have made it my convention to describe the youth as girls and boys, rather than young women and young men. This felt the most natural for me. If they had been college age, I think I would have used young women and young men, but girls and boys seemed to keep them in the realm of young people who were still closely connected to the family unit. This is a personal preference.

Second, you will find that I use parents and caregivers interchangeably throughout the text. Again, this is a personal preference. Most in this category were parents, but not all. All who participated in these particular
focus groups were playing a significant parenting role to a young person, whether it was an older sibling or grandparent.

Third, going forward I will capitalize the term Other Adults to refer to the focus groups of educators, police officers, counselors, etc. When you encounter the term capitalized, you will know it refers to the focus group category.

Fourth, because this is a double-tiered study, when I speak of the researchers as ‘we,’ I am referring to the primary study, also referred to as the sexting study (Harris et al., 2013). When I speak in the first person singular, I am referring to this secondary study you are reading now.

Fifth, as you read the following sections, please note that quotations from youth and parent/caregiver groups are referenced by state first, followed by location within the state as designated by a pseudonym. Thus, “Massachusetts: Andrew” refers to a participant from the community of Andrews in Massachusetts. Those in the Other Adult chapter are referenced by state and a focus group designation.

In the following two sections (Section I: Youth, and Section II: Adults), it is my goal to give you a close-up, intense look at the ways each of the four focus groups provided insights on perspectives about gender. When you read a specific chapter you will be reading from that single viewpoint.

There is one significant exception to this rule and that comes in the chapter about boys where I discuss something known as ‘the flip.’ Here I discuss perspectives from both boys and girls. This was an exception I felt was necessary for a more coherent telling of the story.

For similar reasons, in the two sections where I focus on the viewpoints of the four participant groups, I have resisted the temptation to bring in outside experts to comment on the discussion so you can hear the voices of the participants as clearly as possible. I reserve the experts and their commentary, definitions, or perspectives for the beginning and ending of the book. The heart of the book lies, as I feel it should in a qualitative research study, with the participants.

NOTE

*Data on sample characteristics are quoted from the original study (Harris et al., 2013, pp. 22-23).