

# **Phenomenological Research and Adolescent Female Sexuality: Discoveries and Applications**

**Gabrielle Morrissey**

Bond University, Queensland, Australia

**Joy Higgs**

The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

---

*This paper presents research in female first sexual intercourse in Australia. Previous research in adolescent sexual behavior, particularly issues around first sexual intercourse behavior, has mainly utilized quantitative methodology. Our research adopted a qualitative approach to provide unique insight into adolescent sexual behavior, attitudes, and development. We used phenomenology to investigate adolescent female sexual experiences. The findings can inform national and international sexuality education. Key Words: Phenomenology, Sexuality Research, and Sexuality Education*

---

## **Introduction**

Female first sexual intercourse is an important life transition to which many cultures, including those present in multicultural Australia today, attribute gravity and consequence (Crooks & Bauer, 1980). In sexuality research there is a lack of research regarding the perceptions, personal meaning, affect, and experience surrounding first coitus. Aside from statistical data such as rates of contraceptive use (Coker, Richter, Valois, McKeown, Garrison, & Vincent, 1994; Dorius, Heaton, & Steffan, 1993; Evans, 2000; Jessor, Costa, Jessor, & Donovan, 1983; Meschke & Silbereisen, 1997; Miller, Norton, Curtin, Hill, Schvaneveldt, & Young, 1997; Sawyer & Smith, 1996; Sieving, McNeely, & Blum, 2000; Traeen & Kvaem, 1996; Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff, & Aneshensel, 1998; Whitbeck Yoder, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999; Wyatt Durvasula, Guthrie, LeFranc, & Forge, 1999), there has been little examination of the affective reactions, emotional health, and sexual function of young women as a result of their first sexual intercourse, or the personal meaning or developmental and educational concerns this experience may hold. The aim of this research study was to describe and understand the experience of female first sexual intercourse using the method of phenomenology. Female first sexual intercourse (FSI) is explored phenomenologically and the expectation, physical experience, affective reaction, personal preparedness, meaning and development, educational implications and effect of the experience of first sexual intercourse of a sample of Australian women are described. Rather than reporting on quantitative findings of previous studies (Bajracharya, Sarvela, & Isberner, 1995; Darling, Davidson, & Passarello, 1992), this research has explored areas beyond the reach of statistics. The focus is on areas such as the affect and meaning surrounding first

sexual intercourse, and the subsequent effects on self-concept, sexual functioning, and expression using the methodology of phenomenology.

Qualitative research plays an important role in illuminating the meaning of lived experience. Phenomenology is a valuable qualitative approach to studying human experience. "Learning and understanding people's subjective experiences has an obvious and multi-faceted importance, as well as very practical applications" (Crotty, 1996, p. 24). A key application is education: For instance, in the case of phenomenological research in human sexuality, findings can be used to inform school sex education programs.

The richness of information gathered through the interviews in this study (with twenty Australian women) and the understanding of the personal stories of female FSI experiences, complement the findings from quantitative sexual research. Each story had its unique aspects, but in the collective analysis of the stories essential components surfaced that deconstructed this life passage as never before, with all the intricate, private, and intimate feelings and details formerly reserved for discussion only with the closest of girlfriends. This study provides a foundation of information, as there has been limited study in Australia of the experience of female FSI, especially using qualitative methods. There has also been limited research focusing on female FSI specifically within Australia, with the exception of one study which identified the lack of research in this area in Australia. It found that individuals with no religious affiliation were more likely to initiate "early sexual intercourse," followed by those of the Christian religion, and those of the Muslim religion who were most likely to delay FSI (Evans, 2000).

### **Choosing Phenomenology as the Research Approach**

To research is "to search again or in a new way" (Becker, 1992, p. 31). This is particularly true of phenomenology, which is the study of human phenomena, of things or events in the everyday world. Phenomenologists take an experiential view toward understanding such phenomena, highlighting human experience as not only valid, but of great importance to understanding human existence. Phenomenologists investigate people's experiences of life events and the meanings these events have to them; as such it is particularly relevant to the exploration of women's experiences of FSI.

Phenomenological research is based on two premises. The first is that experience is a valid, rich, and rewarding source of knowledge. Experience is

the source of all knowing and the basis of behavior. Experience, what we are aware of at any point in time, is the foundation of our knowledge of ourselves, of other people, and the world in general. Without human experience there would be no human world. (Becker, 1992, p. 11)

Phenomenologists do not view human experience as an unreliable source of data, rather they see it as the cornerstone of knowledge about human phenomena. The assumption in this study is that participants' experience of FSI richly illuminates the nature of the phenomenon, and thus it is this experience that serves as the primary source of knowledge on the subject of FSI.

The second premise of phenomenological research lies in the view that the everyday world is a valuable and productive source of knowledge, and that we can learn much about ourselves and reap key insights into the nature of an event by analyzing how it occurs in our daily lives (Becker, 1992). Similarly, Schutz (1967) argued that the focus of phenomenological inquiry should be on the ways in which the “taken for granted” in the life world is produced and experienced by humans. This research is consistent with this second premise, reflecting the belief that studying the specific and individual details of the FSI experience, rather than theories or trends of sexual behavior, reveals knowledge about FSI that is not possible to know in any other way. Participants’ descriptions of their experience, with their perceptions and understandings of how they experienced it in their world, were essential to uncovering the nature of FSI. Participants in this study described their FSI, which was for each of them, a life event that was both experienced and able to be expressed. All the participants in this study were able and willing to discuss such a private event, most were eager to be part of social and educational research, and all allowed their stories to be made public in this project (while having assurance of a confidential identity) for the purposes of in-depth research in the experience of FSI. .

It is acknowledged that FSI is an important life event for individuals within their life journey (Guggino & Ponzetti, 1997; Koch, 1988; Weis, 1983). It is an emotionally charged event that holds particular meaning, often different meanings, for individuals. The participants’ accounts of their FSI experiences in this research are invaluable for revealing the essential nature of this life event. Such understandings can help young people face this important event in their lives, by informing public and health education, and it can educate those who provide advice to young people about sexuality (e.g., parents, counselors, teachers, sex educators).

By emphasizing experience in the lived world over traditional empirico-analytical research, phenomenologists depart from the philosophical assumptions inherent in the natural science model of research (for example the laboratory experiment). The premises of the natural sciences that scientific methods of measuring behavior ensure objectivity and that researchers do not influence their findings are in conflict with the phenomenological view of meaning being co-created by researchers and those who experience the events or lived phenomena being investigated (Becker, 1992). The aim of phenomenologists is to uncover the nature of experience, while maintaining the integrity of the perception of the individual. Using a phenomenological approach, this research examined, in greater depth than had previously been achieved, the nature of adolescent sexual expression and initiation through coitus. This approach enabled the research to reveal the paths and experiences of adolescents as they navigate the passion and angst related to FSI.

Phenomenologists’ interests are in “addressing, identifying, describing, understanding and interpreting the experiences people have in their day-to-day lives ... precisely *as* those people have the experiences and understand them” (Crotty, 1996, p. 14). As human sexual experience is highly charged with emotion and personal meaning, comprehensive and rich research is required to illuminate these perceptions to gain a deeper understanding of sexual behavior and attitudes. Female FSI is an important life transition to which many cultures attribute gravity and consequence, including those present in multicultural Australia today (Crooks & Bauer, 1980).

Researching the question of the subjective experience and personal meaning of female first sexual intercourse lends itself to the method of phenomenology. Past quantitative studies in this area have pointed to the need for further research in the qualitative domain. For example, Koch (1988) stated

Other aspects of first intercourse experiences that were not adequately addressed in this study ... should be included in future research endeavors ... To do this, other research designs and methodologies could be employed ... the affective issues, such as reasons for becoming involved in intercourse and aspects of the experience that can make it more positive and negative, should be discussed more honestly and openly with young people. People need to be better prepared for the experience of sexual intercourse, at whatever age, in order to prevent immediate or long-term harmful effects. (p. 359)

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on the importance of subjective experience, is the most appropriate method for understanding this phenomenon of female FSI, and providing new and valuable foundation knowledge in Australia, and elsewhere, for sexuality education. According to Streubert and Carpenter (1999, p. 56), topics “appropriate to phenomenological research method include those central to humans’ life experiences.” Sexuality, sexual self-concept, and sexual behavior are all subjects that are central to human life experiences. Sexuality is an integral part of our existence and identity. Specifically, FSI is experienced by many females. It has a substantial impact on one’s self-concept as an experience of personal importance and transition, and affects one’s later sexual function (Gagnon, 1977; Koch, 1988).

As past literature and research indicate, female adolescent sexuality is wrought with complexity and contradiction (Darling et al., 1992). The more that is known and uncovered, the more new questions arise. Why do some girls say they chose to have sex when they actually didn’t desire it? What accounts for a negative reaction to first intercourse even when it is planned, desired, and with a partner with whom they are in love? How can girls who make a million plans and dream a thousand dreams about their first time, overlook contraception? How do girls explain these apparent paradoxes? According to Thompson (1995), a writer and researcher of female sexuality, there is “no getting beyond complications like these by simply analyzing the statistical data. To really understand what motivates the actions of girls, we have to consider the phenomenon from their perspective by beginning with the issues that absorb girls themselves, rather than adult preoccupations” (pp. 10-11). There have been many calls for research into the questions raised by quantitative research, especially in areas such as the effect of the nature of FSI on later sexual function, the cultural mythology of pain, and the unanswered questions of motivation and affect surrounding female FSI (Crockett, Bingham, Chopak, & Vicary, 1996; Jessor et al., 1983; Weis, 1985). Participant accounts and perceptions of FSI in this research provide insight into these areas in a useful and helpful way. They provide information on affect, circumstances, and situational factors, as well as descriptions of the difficulties and desires young people face in negotiating sexual encounters (Mitchell & Wellings, 1998).

## **The Research Strategy**

Phenomenology is widely regarded as a set of methods where “there is more than one legitimate way to proceed with a phenomenological investigation” (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999, p. 48). We designed the method of phenomenology in this research to elicit rich texts as well as thematic and structural understandings (models) of the experience of female FSI (Morrissey, 2002).

This study utilized phenomenological strategies developed by Giorgi (1985) because the nature of the research lends itself to Giorgi’s approach to phenomenological analysis of gathering both thematic and structural understandings of experience or phenomena. Giorgi’s approach to analysis contains steps of reduction (reducing large quantities of data to smaller, essential elements) and structural description (describing major themes and arguments within the data) that were useful to follow to analyze the life event of female FSI. Similarly, as each participant told different stories of her experience, the development of individual participant portraits, as one of the analytical steps, suited to Giorgi’s approach, was useful in structural analysis, reduction, and theoretical model development. Giorgi’s phenomenological approach facilitated analysis of the individual reports and descriptions of experience to identify essential structural components, and extract developmental and educational understandings not previously gleaned from studies of female FSI.

Data collection and analysis occurred in three stages.

### **Stage One: Description of the Phenomenon of Interest by the Researchers**

This involved exploration of the literature to examine previous research and teachings about FSI, and to define and describe this phenomenon in the light of that literature. As with all phenomenological inquiries, the investigation focused on the lived experience of the participants. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to add to our understanding and description of the experience of female first sexual intercourse. After initial interest into the topic was piqued through teaching adolescent females, further inquiry into the literature revealed a dearth of research, thus stimulating this research.

### **Stage Two: Collection of Participants’ Descriptions of the Phenomenon**

Through purposive sampling, twenty Australian-born and educated Caucasian women between the ages of 18 and 30, mainly women in their late teens and early twenties, were recruited. At the time of interview the date of their FSI varied from less than a few months to over ten years, providing a vast perspective and wealth of knowledge on FSI to draw upon. They were interviewed to illuminate in greater depth the phenomenon of female FSI (defined as penile-vaginal penetrative intercourse, however brief, irrespective of orgasm for either partner). All interviews were voluntary and confidential. To explore the phenomenon of FSI during the interviews a semi-structured format was adopted involving:

1. A broad opening prompt: “Tell me about your experience of your first sexual intercourse.” As phenomenologist Becker stated, a good research question “evokes memories of events that have been lived through rather than thoughts about the phenomenon” (1992, p. 38). The broad question asked did indeed elicit stories, feelings, and memories rather than personal theories and thoughts of first coitus in general.

2. A series of follow up prompts or topics to frame and focus the interview conversation. These topics (see Table 1) were prepared in advance, typical of semi-structured interviews, by investigation of past research and consideration of the phenomenon and research questions to be explored. The interviewer (Gabrielle) used no set ordering or wording of questions to explore these topics; rather, the topics served as an aide-mémoire for the interviewer to cover similar topics with the interviewee. Sometimes the participants’ answers covered several topics, and further questions (see Table 2) probed or clarified points made. This approach is reflective of the aims of the phenomenological method, to understand deeply, perceptions of experience (Becker, 1992). These questions were thematic only. Often the wording changed to reflect the story and experience of the participant being interviewed. The interviewer frequently asked cross-referencing questions. This was done for two reasons: to make sure that the interviewer’s understanding of what was said was the intended meaning and to check that aspects of the story were clear. This research dealt with subjective experience and perception, and it was not intended to catch a participant in an untruth or exaggeration. Instead, cross-checking was employed to ensure rigor in interviewing and for clarification of the experiences recounted.

Table 1

*Interview Topics*

• Expectation of FSI
• Hopes/wishes/ideal FSI experience and how personal was the experience?
• Preparation for FSI
• Sexuality Education – formal and informal resources and experience
• Prior sexual experience (lead up to FSI)
• Physical experience of FSI (pleasure/pain/etcetera)
• Emotional experience – including thoughts, feelings, perceptions, affect (pressure, regret, role of partner, contraception, other emotions)
• Power
• Choice
• Communication (friends, family, partner – before, during, after)
• Peer group pressure, role in group, status of “virgin” or “non-virgin”
• Situational factors of FSI
• Decision-making influences on FSI
• Contraception/fear of pregnancy? STIs?

• Personal meaning of FSI, if any. Feelings, perceptions about that?
• Transition? Did it feel like? Or no? How/how not?
• Importance of experience in context of adolescent life
• Effect of FSI on self, life, sex life, reflections

Table 2

*Probing Interview Questions*

• How would you describe your experience of first sexual intercourse?
• Did you have any expectations of your first sexual intercourse? (If so), can you describe them?
• Did you have any thoughts or feelings during the experience? (If so), can you describe them/tell me about them?
• What did you think of your first sexual intercourse experience?
• Did you have any emotional reactions? (If so), what were they?
• What did your first sexual intercourse experience mean for/to you, if it held any meaning at all?
• What was your FSI experience like physically?
• What led/contributed to your decision to engage in your FSI?
• Did you feel prepared for your FSI? (If so or not) what made you feel prepared, or what made you feel like you weren't prepared?
• What sort of education, formal or informal, however you want to describe it, did you feel you received before, and after your FSI experience?
• What kind of effect do you think your FSI experience had or has on your sex life, self-concept, or life in any way?

3. A focus on the individual story of the participant. In each interview the conversation sought to draw out the personal story and meaning of each participant's FSI.

4. The use of open-ended, clarifying questions to facilitate the interview, and to ascertain the meaning and dimensions of each participant's experience of their FSI. Phenomenological researchers should help participants describe lived experience without leading the discussion (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

### **Stage Three: Reading and Analysis of All the Participant Descriptions of the Phenomenon**

Data analysis involved deep and repeated reading of all data (transcripts and field notes) and use of analysis procedures as described below.

## **Quality Assurance Strategies**

The customary evaluation criteria of validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity in quantitative research are not applicable to phenomenological research (Higgs, 2001). Instead, the criteria adopted in this research were credibility, soundness, and ethical conduct.

### **Credibility**

A study is credible when it presents faithful descriptions, and when readers or other researchers confronted with the experience can recognize it (Koch, 1994). Credibility of this research was achieved in several ways. Notes made in the researcher's journal and an analytical log provided detailed reflection to ensure sufficient attention to bracketing. Bracketing "(or suspending belief) makes it possible to focus on the respondents' experience," while "allowing informants to construct and give meaning to their own reality" (Crotty, 1996, p. 19). In phenomenology, bracketing is a means of ensuring the researcher presents faithful descriptions of the experience. Every effort was made to stay faithful to participants' words and descriptions throughout the analysis and development of the models, without changing the meaning or intent of descriptive passages. The credibility of this study lies in the faithful presentation of experience and resonance of the models and depiction of FSI experience. Checks were conducted with participants to verify that the transcript was a faithful depiction of their experience, and that the portrait accurately reflected the summary and essential elements of their FSI experience. Transcripts, theme notations, and reductions were sent for review to colleagues and supervisors for continued confirmation of credibility.

### **Soundness**

One of the ways research can be shown to be sound is for the research process to be clear, so that another researcher can understand the methods and process of the researcher and research (Koch, 1994). In addition, a research journal was kept throughout the data generation, collection, and analysis stages (recording procedures, reflections, and analysis of emerging themes): This became important when condensing information and developing the theoretical models. Aside from the methodological steps provided in this chapter, my research journal was written during the interview and analysis processes, and included several aspects: notes on data collection, ethical conduct, data analysis, and insights into the topic area.

### **Ethical Conduct**

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee of Curtin University of Technology. The protection of human subjects is required of all research conducted through the University. Each participant was over 18 years of age, and was provided with an informed consent form, which they were asked to sign and date once they agreed to participate in the study. The form contained information about the purpose and nature of the study, and guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of each



participant. Participants were advised that they were able to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used in reporting research to protect the anonymity of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis approach adopted in this research followed Giorgi's (1985) approach and included seven specific steps.

1. Read the entire description of the experience to get a sense of the whole  
Addressing this task involved listening to the interview tapes, transcribing these tapes and reading all the transcripts.
2. Reread the description  
Each transcript was read multiple times at ongoing stages of analysis until we considered that deep immersion in the texts had been achieved.
3. Identify the transition units of the experience  
This stage involved a number of activities including:
  - Examining each transcript for potential themes and meaning units to understand the nature of the participants' experiences; looking for the essence of these experiences. Six major dimensions of FSI were identified: physical, emotional, educational, transitional, developmental, and influential.
  - Seeking to identify significant statements or quotes to illustrate these themes and link these statements/quotes to concepts. (e.g., Physical) "Well there certainly wasn't much pleasure about it. I mean, ... (but) certainly intimacy." – Ani (e.g., Educational) "I didn't know what was expected of me in the whole deal, so there was a certain amount of trying to work out what I was supposed to be doing next." Allegra (e.g., Transitional) "I thought that it was a natural process to go through as a beginning of a new part of my life. I think I probably felt more empowered. And grown up. Developed, expanded, in my perceptions and relationship complexities. It was going to womanhood, for me. Becoming a woman." – Jessica
  - Importing the transcribed interviews and field notes into the Nud\*IST data analysis program to view these on computer. This was an extensive process of organising the data through computer analysis. It allowed a very large quantity of data to be sorted according to the identified themes listed above.
  - Identifying more than 43 nodes (Nud\*IST theme/coding categories). These nodes were in a constant state of flux as the analysis of transcripts and field notes continued. This process replaced an earlier attempt at data management, using large sheets of newsprint and coloured pens.
  - Employing Nud\*IST to cross-view similar themes and to compare these themes across transcripts/field notes using word pattern searches. What emerged from this process were two meta themes in terms of: (a) the dimensions of FSI as an experience which became the FSI model (see Figure 1) and (b) the model of the stages of FSI (see Table 3).

Figure 1. The FSI model: Themes in FSI.

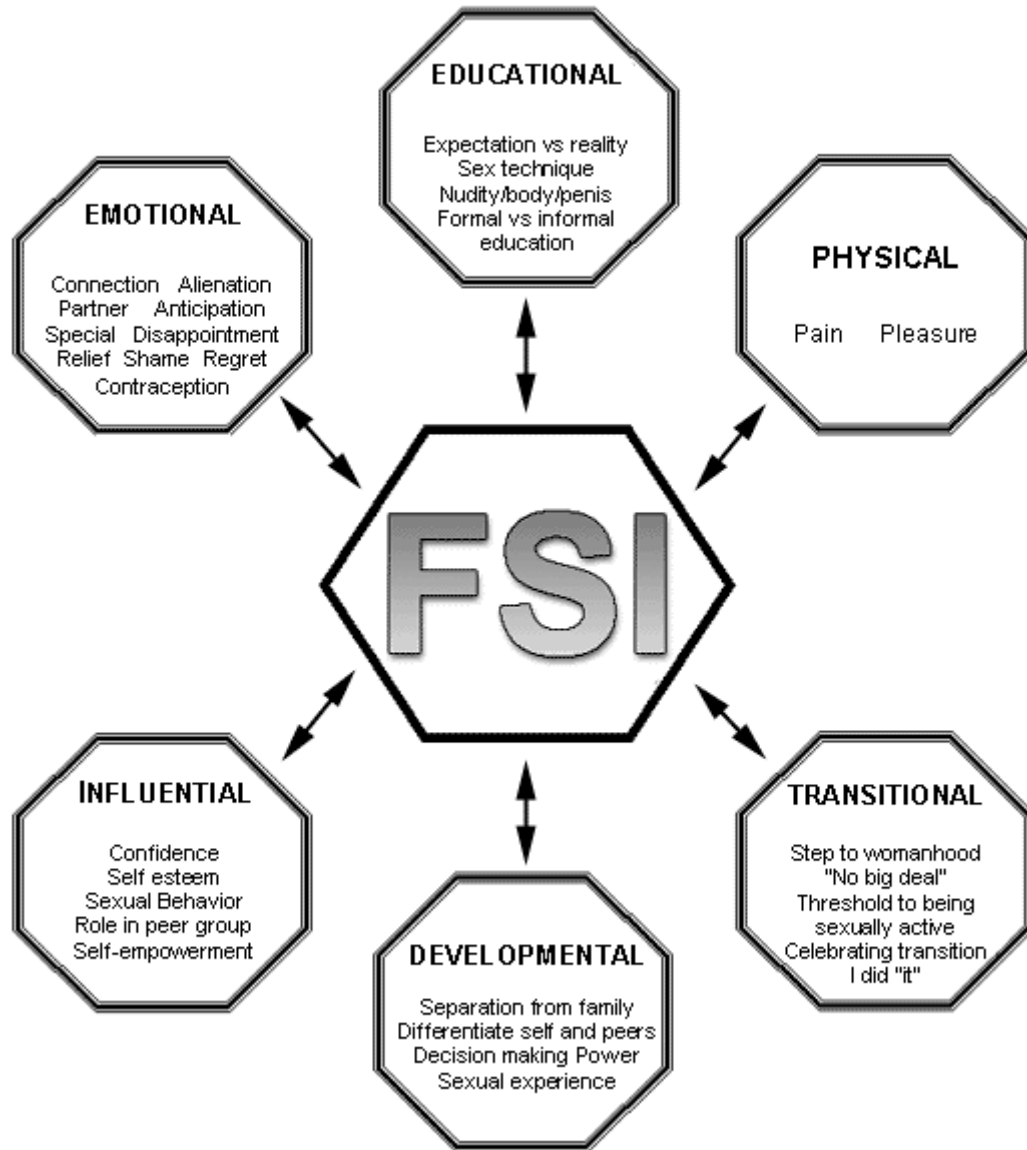


Table 3

*Outline of the E-R-E-R-E-R Model: Connection of Themes of Experience to Different Stages of FSI*

						<b>Stages within FSI</b>							
						Expectation		Rehearsal		Emotional Readiness	Experience		Reflection
Experience Dimensions	1					Educational Developmental		Physical Educational Developmental		Emotional Educational Developmental	Physical Emotional Educational Developmental		Transitional Influential Educational Developmental
						1		1		1	1		1

4. Clarify and elaborate the meaning by relating constituents to each other and to the whole This phase involved reducing the number of different highlighted portions by allocating them to themes or meaning units. Meaning units and themes became linked, related, or sometimes separate entities. Themes were compared among transcripts.

- Nud\*IST was helpful for organizing the interview data. However, detailed reflection, comparison, and analysis occurred primarily by looking at, reading, and highlighting the hard copies of interviews.
- Nud\*IST was helpful for key word searches across multiple transcripts to seek out the prevalence of themes. To tease out and illustrate themes, and relate commonalities and differences across individual experiences. Color highlighting on the hard copies of each transcript, notes, and concept “mind-mapping” drawings were used.
- Notes and highlighted sections of transcripts were reduced to a conceptual outline of possible themes.
- The themes were written on note cards to allow for visual sorting of, and reflection on, the themes and how they fitted together or collapsed into each other. This led to a condensing process in an effort to uncover the essences and essential meaning units of the experience of FSI.

5. Reflect on the constituents in the concrete language of the participant.

A participant portrait of each FSI experience was produced for all twenty participants, comprising description of each participant’s experience of FSI. These were derived and condensed from the transcriptions with the aim of reducing the entire story to the important themes and key aspects of their FSI experience. Every effort was made to stay faithful to participant descriptions of their experience. These participant portraits (see two examples below) generated further insights into the essential structural components of the experience of FSI. In addition to developing participant portraits,

thematic and illustrative quotations were extracted from the transcripts to reveal the many expressions of FSI experience. In this approach to data analysis, themes are uncovered and the steps of relating meanings to participants, and to the whole, leads to organizing a rich, evocative structural description of the phenomenon.

### **Kim**

Kim was 18 when she was interviewed and 15 when she experienced her FSI. She was on an extended trip overseas and began a romance with a boy a year older than her. Prior to this 2-3 month holiday romance, Kim's sexual experience had been limited to kissing and the "basics", such as 'petting'. She says they spent a lot of time together and the sexual side of the relationship progressed so that intercourse became a natural step. She experienced her FSI on the eve of her departure, bound back for Australia. Kim says it wasn't planned, but 'just happened' and that there had been no pressure for it to occur. She never saw him again, and describes the experience as very emotionally positive. She felt connected to her partner, saying it felt nice to feel loved, to feel his body, and to feel connected to him. She described the event as 'beautiful'. Kim had expected her FSI to be both physically painful and emotionally passionate. She says her FSI was not as painful as she expected, but neither was it as passionate as she thought it would be. Kim says she learned a lot sexually from him, and appreciated that he was a little more experienced than her when it came to her FSI. She had received some school sexuality education, consisting mainly of contraception and STI information, and she says she was glad she had it. Her other source of sexuality information was her older sister who brought boys back, and had sex without contraception and then told Kim what it was like. Kim says she knew it wasn't good that her sister wasn't using contraception. At first, Kim did not insist on a condom during her FSI, but says after the first two minutes, she mentioned it and he withdrew and put a condom on. Kim says her FSI experience made her feel more mature. She was the first in her group of girlfriends to experience FSI and this made her feel older and more experienced. She saw the experience as a step in her life, from innocent to less so, and from girl to woman. Kim says she is glad the experience was how it was, being so positive and connected, and glad it was with the boy she shared it with.

### **Daisy**

Daisy was 26 when she was interviewed and 15 when she experienced her FSI. Daisy says she wanted to lose her virginity and just get it over and done with. Her FSI experience was drunken, painful, and void of any positive emotion. It took place on the field of a footy oval, with a very drunk boy whom she had been seeing. Earlier attempts to have sex with him had failed because of pain, and this night she was determined to lose her virginity. Daisy had low expectations for her FSI, simply saying she expected it to be disappointing. She describes the event as a necessary step to take, to 'move to the next level' and her end goal was simply to lose her virginity. However, Daisy says the experience of FSI did not change her. She had expected to feel different, but maintains that she didn't feel any different. At the time, Daisy wanted to lose her virginity and fit in with her peers –to, as she put it, move from the virgin club to the non-virgin club. Daisy felt unprepared for her FSI, and did not feel school sexuality education prepared her

sufficiently for her experience. Daisy's family life was in turmoil at the time of her FSI experience, and she disclosed her experience to her mother to get attention, and to rebel. Daisy attributes her FSI experience with establishing a pattern in her sexual behavior that continues today. She describes her FSI as meaningless, unprotected sex and maintains that it set the pattern for her on-going view of sex as continuing to engage in casual, meaningless, unprotected sex. Daisy also says that as the sexual aggressor the first time, and still now, it appears that she has the power in these sexual situations, but that due to lack of contraception, lack of pleasure and lack of meaning, in the end she is disempowered. She says this is a pattern she would like to break.

6. Transform concrete language into language or concepts of science.

The final stage of description lies in gleaned a structural description of the phenomenon from the summary portraits by reading through each summary and transcript, identifying common themes, reducing the themes, and reordering them into a structural description. The process involved leaving the individual lifeworlds behind and focussing on the phenomenon to produce an inclusive statement of the essential qualities of the phenomenon's essential qualities.

The initial formation of the FSI thematic model involved uncovering and articulating themes. These themes captured and reflected the experiences of all the participants in this study. Subsequent analysis enabled the organization of the themes into six essential components, characterizing the experience of female FSI with respect to expressed sub-themes. The transformation of multiple expressions of themes into a theoretical/thematic model resulted after reading, highlighting, immersion, portrait development, mind-map drawing (i.e., a chart or drawing which maps out the writer's ideas or a set of data related to a particular topic), notes, and reflection.

7. Integrate and synthesize the insight into a descriptive structure of the meaning of the experience.

Giorgi (1985) states that "the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject's experience. This is usually referred to as the structure of the experience and can be expressed at a number of levels" (p. 10). The two models developed in this research are expressions of the participants' experiences of FSI and a reflection of adolescent female psychosexual development.

### **Development of Models of FSI from the Research**

Once the analysis and synthesis stages were reached, two models were developed: one thematic and one structural. Through analysis of the experience of female FSI the first, "the FSI model", was developed to portray a deeper, more specific understanding of the multidimensional nature and experience of female FSI. This model (See Figure 1) elucidates multiple aspects of the experience of FSI. The six critical elements contained in the FSI model are: physical, emotional, educational, developmental, transitional, and influential experiences. This research examined the "start-to-finish" stories of female FSI

experience. A more comprehensive picture of the entire experience was then developed comprising: anticipation, planning, rehearsal, and decision-making to FSI experience and reaction, coping, reflection, and influence, all categorized within six primary themes. These six fundamental elements/themes of FSI provide an overall, foundational understanding of the nature of female FSI experience and extend the knowledge of FSI to emphasize its multidimensional nature as illustrated in the following quotes

### **Physical Experiences**

#### *On pain*

He had been drinking just enough that he couldn't really work up enough pressure ... and so it was really, really hard for him to break me. He wasn't stiff enough to be able to get any force into anything ... so that was quite painful. I was a bit surprised at how painful that was. – Allegre

#### *On pleasure*

“There certainly wasn't much pleasure about it. I mean, emotionally, yeah. Emotional pleasure, certainly intimacy, but far from orgasm, that's for sure. That didn't even enter the equation.” – Ani

No pleasure at all. I felt like there might've been something wrong with me because I didn't like it. But now I realise that that's not true. But at first, I thought, “God what's wrong with me? Why aren't I enjoying this? Is this all there is? And I'm just not the type of person that enjoys it?” – Kate

### **Emotional Experiences**

“The whole experience [was] enlightening, enjoyable, fulfilling, rewarding, satisfying - sort of, I guess. I don't know, just the whole togetherness, the whole bonding” - Raven

#### *On alienation/disconnection*

It was horrible ... it was like the most unromantic thing that has ever happened to me. It was like really, really unromantic. It was just horrible. ... Afterwards I just burst into tears ... It was horrible. ... I felt really alone and lonely ... afterwards especially, I felt really unloved. - Anna

## **Educational Experiences**

### *On education*

“School doesn’t really talk about the first time [FSI] ... they didn’t really talk about performance, and what you should do and what you shouldn’t do ... school [was] more to the degree of precaution, safety, condoms.” - Elisabeth

I would have preferred to have known more, because at school is was just, “This is how you have children. This is how you make babies.” And reading Cosmo and Cleo, they only tell you what they want you to know. It would’ve helped to know what to expect and the things you do, and don’t have to do, and not to feel pressured, and that buying condoms shouldn’t be so damn embarrassing. – Raven

## **Developmental Experiences**

### *On power*

It’s as if I think I had the power, because I’m the source of pleasure for him, and that I was the one letting him have sex with me ... and in the end I walk away from it with no satisfaction, with the risk of pregnancy and STDs, with him not even remembering [it] ... Like I always think it’s important to me to think I hold the power, and the reality of the situation is that [he] does. - Daisy

## **Transitional Experiences**

### *On transition to womanhood*

I felt like I’d suddenly become a woman. That it was a new discovery, a step in life ... because I’d lost my virginity and that special moment had been done ... You remember it [FSI] forever ... so losing what’s so important in a relationship to somebody the first time, it’s like your first steps in life. Just a special moment. It’s just like that, a step in life. - Elisabeth

## **Influential Experiences**

### *On pressure*

That was really the main thing, was that I thought, ‘I’d better not be a virgin – just in case I’m the last one’. I was really worried about being different. To be different was really bad. You just wanted to be the same as everybody else, and that’s how you were cool. So that’s why: I wanted

to be the same as everybody else who'd done it, and not be left behind. So that's why I did it, even though I didn't really care either way. - Ruby

*On "virgin status"*

I just had the end goal of it being over so I wasn't a virgin anymore ... and get all this talk of virginity out of the way ... It meant going from the little girl to big girl's club ... there's the virgin and non-virgin club. ... My end goal was to lose my virginity and I got that." - Daisy

This thematic FSI model is valuable to educators and researchers in sexuality education. The findings from this research provide a strong argument for specifically incorporating an FSI component in sexuality education, which is not currently the case in private or public sexuality education in Australia or elsewhere. Most participants spoke of not receiving adequate education about sex in general: They expressed a desire for sexuality education beyond the scope of condoms, prevention of sexually transmitted infection, and clinical sexual health. Participants stated that at the crucial time in their teens, in their early to late high school years, they were not taught what to know and expect for their FSI. Most participants indicated that a greater knowledge base about issues such as the affect surrounding sex and intercourse, what to expect from FSI, performance, intercourse technique, relationship negotiation, planning, dealing with peer and partner pressure, and coping with consequences of intercourse would have helped them more than the clinical, anatomical ("penis and vaginas on blackboards") approach to sex that they described receiving in their school health education. Some participants even recommended specific teaching methods and subject matter approaches for formal sexuality education that they felt would have better prepared them for their FSI. Their suggestions revolved primarily around having a guest coming to speak besides the regular teacher, someone the girls could relate to, such as a younger female adult who would be willing to tell their experience. The essence of "real stories" held considerable power and impact for the girls. Suggestions also included peer rap sessions, analyzing media messages for positive and negative influences on sexuality, and devoting a whole class hour specifically to the topic of FSI, virginity and what it means, and dispelling myths.

The adolescent sexual world requires complex decision-making and emotional navigation. Participants indicated that a more comprehensive educational approach to sex would have helped them feel more prepared and confident in their approach to their FSI. Such education would have also helped them to adjust to their change in sexual status and other major and minor consequences of experiencing their FSI. Most participants called for further demystification and clarification of an experience that is highly anticipated yet utterly mysterious during early adolescence. The six elements of FSI outlined by the thematic model provide this demystification by expanding on the body of knowledge of FSI, and serving as a communication springboard for teens, parents, peers, and educators. These phenomenological research findings, in conjunction with quantitative data, can provide comprehensive, detailed, specific, and valuable information that can now be incorporated in both formal and informal sexuality education (i.e., in schools and homes).

The second model generated by this research, "the E-R-E-R-E-R model," was an outcome of the structural analysis of both the elements and the process of the female FSI experience. Five areas were identified as crucial developmental stages for females around



the time of their FSI. These stages are Expectation, Rehearsal, Emotional Readiness, Experience and Reflection. This model, based on phenomenological texts, has strong applicability for sexuality education in theory and in practice. The model provides a context and springboard for teaching FSI in the classroom, enabling adolescent girls to plan, reflect, and make value-clarifying choices about the experience they wish for and to anticipate, decide, and act upon for their FSI.

The E-R-E-R-E-R model was generated from analysis of the interviews and findings from this research in terms of adolescent female psychosexual development. Focus was applied to FSI, specifically as a developmental experience and a deeper understanding of FSI within female psychosocial and sexual development was extracted, analyzed, and developed.

During analysis of the data we identified connections between the E-R-E-R-E-R stages and the six FSI experience dimensions (educational, developmental, physical, emotional, transitional, and influential experiences). These dimensions were experienced by the participants at varying times across the psychosexual development phases around the time of FSI, leading up to the physical experience of FSI and occurring in the reflection and influence phases afterwards (see Table 3). The developmental and educational dimensions of FSI are experienced across all five E-R-E-R-E-R stages: The physical dimension is experienced in both the rehearsal and experience stages; the emotional dimension is experienced across the FSI stages, but particularly in the emotional readiness and experience stages; and the transitional and influential dimensions are experienced in the reflection stage. Detailed portrayal of this model is beyond the scope of this paper and is provided elsewhere (Morrissey, 2002) and in forthcoming publications.

### **Conclusion**

The prevalence of quantitative research on female FSI over the past decades, and continuing currently, reflects public desire to understand the motives behind girls' sexuality choices. Educators, researchers, parents, health activists, and scientists have been searching for answers to questions about what prompts girls to engage in "early" sexual intercourse, how they choose whether or not to use birth control, and why the experience is filled with such negative affect. Wanting adolescent females to make healthy sexuality choices and wanting to understand their sexual worlds are noble motives for sexuality education. However, gaining a firm grasp on the development and experience leading to FSI is also essential. The FSI and E-R-E-R-E-R models provide educators with insight into these matters, and also provide them with an educational tool to work with adolescent females prior to and around the time of FSI experiences. Sexuality education often has curriculum goals of helping girls understand sexual response, relationships, choices, decision-making, and sometimes includes goals of postponing sexual intercourse. The E-R-E-R-E-R model can be used as a teaching tool specifically to discuss FSI experience, preparation, values, and reflection with students. It is a model of psychosexual development for use by educators and researchers. It is also a teaching tool to enlighten girls about their development and to generate thinking about preparation for their FSI. It is hoped that the understandings incorporated in this model will contribute to decreasing the numbers of girls who enter into their experience

“accidentally” (i.e., “it just happened”) and increasing the numbers who enter into the experience preparedly.

This study used the qualitative methodology of phenomenology to garner rich texts on the complex topic of adolescent female sexual expression. The contribution of the qualitative findings of this study complements the existing quantitative data on female adolescent sexual decision-making and behavior. The goal of this research was to contribute to the field of knowledge in sexuality education and adolescent psychosexual development by providing an understanding of the experience of FSI for females, including preparation, decision-making, affect, meaning, and influence. This understanding is relevant not only to sexuality researchers but also to sexuality educators, adolescent girls, parents, public health and education curricula designers, and policy-makers. The quality of the findings from this research lies in the resulting comprehensive picture of female FSI as described through the thematic and structural models produced, which illuminate areas of affect, development, preparation, and influence that are useful particularly for sexuality educators and researchers.

As a qualitative study, the research is limited in its ability to be generalized. This research and the two theoretical models were based on the qualitative investigation of twenty participants in a particular context. The findings are enriching to the field of sexuality research. Broader application would require testing of the models and replication of the research in various contexts.

The findings, models, and conclusions generated are of potential value to parents and sexuality educators. This research has provided current and new information about key experiential, educational, and developmental issues surrounding female FSI. Educators, parents, schools, and public health programs can use the findings from this research to design, test, and measure sexuality education components and methods that include FSI within sexuality education.

It is recommended that further research on female FSI be conducted, building on this study. For example, it would be desirable to further explore and also quantify the trends and themes found in the FSI model, across other geographic, ethnic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic groups. Another logical step in further research would be to replicate this study for males. Although affective reactions to first coitus in males have been investigated, research into the educational implications for boys in particular is limited (Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995).

Participants in this study criticized the formal education they received prior to their FSI experience. Further exploration of sexuality education, including the value of applying the models generated from this research, is warranted. This study has demonstrated that the answers educators, health researchers, parents, and policy makers seek when it comes to adolescent sexuality, specifically female sexual expression, require more information than can be gleaned through quantitative research alone. The value of qualitative research lies not only in the rich texts produced but also in the comprehensive storytelling that facilitates thematic and structural understanding of human phenomena. From the phenomenological approach used here, we can derive valuable insights that can support comprehensive and effective sexuality education.

## References

- Bajracharya, S. M., Sarvela, P. D., & Isberner, F. R. (1995, January). A retrospective study of first sexual intercourse experiences among undergraduates. *College Health, 43*, 169-177.
- Becker, C. (1992). *Living and relating: An introduction to phenomenology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coker, A. L., Richter, D. L., Valois, R. F., McKeown, R. E., Garrison, C. Z., & Vincent, M. L. (1994). Correlates and consequences of early initiation of sexual intercourse. *Journal of School Health, 64*(9), 372-376.
- Crockett, L. J., Bingham, C. R., Chopak, J. S., & Vicary, J. R. (1996). Timing of first sexual intercourse: The role of social control, social learning, and problem behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 25*(1), 89-111.
- Crooks, R., & Bauer, K. (1980). *Our sexuality* (5th ed.). Redwood City, CA: Benjamin Cummings.
- Crotty, M. (1996). *Phenomenology and nursing research*. South Melbourne, Australia: Pearson Professional.
- Darling, C. A., Davidson, J. K., & Passarello, L. C. (1992). The mystique of first intercourse among college youth: The role of partners, contraceptive practices, and psychological reactions. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 1*, 97-117.
- Dorius, G. L., Heaton, T. B., & Steffan, P. (1993). Adolescent life events and their association with the onset of sexual intercourse. *Youth and Society, 25*(1), 3-23.
- Evans, A. (2000). Power and negotiation: Young women's choices about sex and contraception. *Journal of Population Research, 17*(2), 143-162.
- Gagnon, J. H. (1977). *Human sexualities*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Giorgi, A. (Ed.). (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Guggino, J. M., & Ponzetti, J. J., Jr. (1997). Gender differences in affective reactions to first coitus. *Journal of Adolescence, 20*, 189-200.
- Higgs, J. (2001). Charting standpoints in qualitative research. In H. Byrne-Armstrong, J. Higgs, & D. Horsfall (Eds.), *Critical moments in qualitative research* (pp. 44-67). Oxford, UK, Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Jessor, R., Costa, F., Jessor, L., & Donovan, J. E. (1983). Time of first intercourse: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44*(3), 608-626.
- Koch, P. B. (1988). The relationship of first sexual intercourse to later sexual functioning concerns of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 3*(3), 345-362.
- Koch, T. (1994). Establishing rigour in qualitative research: The decision trail. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 19*, 976-986.
- Meschke, L. L., & Silbereisen, R. K. (1997). The influence of puberty, family processes, and leisure activities on the timing of first sexual experience. *Journal of Adolescence, 20*, 403-418.
- Miller, B. C., Norton, M. C., Curtin, T. E., Hill, J., Schvaneveldt, P., & Young, M. H. (1997). The timing of sexual intercourse among adolescents: Family, peer, and other antecedents. *Youth and Society, 29*(1), 1-12.

- Mitchell, K., & Wellings, K. (1998). First sexual intercourse: Anticipation and communication. Interviews with young people. *Journal of Adolescence, 21*, 717-726.
- Morrissey, G. N. (2002). *The experience of first sexual intercourse of Australian women*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia.
- Sawyer, R. G., & Smith, N. G. (1996). A survey of situational factors at first intercourse among college students. *American Journal of Health Behavior, 20*(4), 208-217.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Sieving, R. E., McNeely, C. S., & Blum, R. W. (2000). Maternal expectations, mother-child connectedness, and adolescent sexual debut. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 154*(8), 809-816.
- Sprecher, S., Barbee, A., & Schwartz, P. (1995). "Was it good for you too?": Gender differences in first sexual intercourse experiences. *The Journal of Sex Research, 32*(1), 3-15.
- Streubert, H., & Carpenter, D. (1999). *Qualitative research in nursing: Advancing the humanistic perspective* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Thompson, S. (1995). *Going all the way*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Traeen, B., & Kvale, I. L. (1996). Sexual socialization and motives for intercourse among Norwegian adolescents. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 25*(3), 289-302.
- Upchurch, D., Levy-Storms, L., Sucoff, C. A., & Aneshensel, C. S. (1998). Gender and ethnic differences in the timing of first sexual intercourse. *Family Planning Perspectives, 30*(3), 121-127.
- Weis, D. L. (1983). Affective reactions of women to their initial experience of coitus. *The Journal of Sex Research, 19*(3), 209-237.
- Weis, D. L. (1985). The experience of pain during women's first sexual intercourse: Cultural mythology about sexual initiation. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 14*(5), 421-438.
- Whitbeck, L. B., Yoder, K. A., Hoyt, D. R., & Conger, R. D. (1999). Early adolescent sexual activity: A developmental study. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61*(4), 934-946.
- Wyatt, G., Durvasula, R. S., Guthrie, D., LeFranc, E., & Forge, N. (1999). Correlates of first sexual intercourse among women in Jamaica. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 28*(2), 139-157.

---

### Author Note

Dr. Gabrielle Morrissey PhD is currently based at Bond University as Assistant Professor, Gabrielle Morrissey teaches a stream of four human sexuality subjects across two academic programs. Gabrielle received her PhD in Sexology/Health Science from Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia, where she headed the Sexology Program for three years, from 2002 to 2004. Dr Gabrielle also serves as Adjunct Associate Professor in the Division of Health and Applied Sciences at Southern Cross University. Gabrielle Morrissey is the author of the successful sexuality book for

teens and young adults, *Sex in the Time of Generation X*, and her second sex book, *Urge* (also known as *Hot Secrets for Great Sex, Satisfaction, Tirami Su* and *Jak Na To* overseas) was released in Australia in June 2002, and has been sold to the US, UK, Canada, and Europe. Gabrielle's third book, *Spicy Sex*, published by HarperCollins, is due for release on February 2006. Dr Gabrielle directs her own sexology consulting company, which offers a range of events, services and workshops for individuals and couples, and also small and large groups as well as educational institutions and corporations. Contact information: <http://www.bananasandmelons.com.au>; Email: [drgabrielle@bananasandmelons.com.au](mailto:drgabrielle@bananasandmelons.com.au)

Professor Joy Higgs, AM is the Director, Collaborations in Practice and Education Advancement and Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at The University of Sydney. For over 25 years she has worked in health sciences education and research, and has published extensively in a number of areas including health sciences education, practice knowledge, clinical reasoning, and professional practice. Book titles include: *Clinical Reasoning in the Health Professions*; *Educating Beginning Practitioners*; *Critical Moments in Qualitative Research*; *Professional Practice in Health*; *Education and the Creative Arts*; *Practice Knowledge and Expertise in the Health Professions*; *Developing Practice Knowledge for Health Professionals*; and *Communicating in the Health and Social Sciences*. Contact information: Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Sydney, PO Box 170 Lidcombe NSW 1825, Australia, Email [j.higgs@fhs.usyd.edu.au](mailto:j.higgs@fhs.usyd.edu.au), <http://ptwww.fhs.usyd.edu.au/CPEA/>.

Please address correspondence to Professor Joy Higgs AM PhD, Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Sydney, PO Box 170 Lidcombe NSW 1825; Fax: 61-2-9351-9323; Telephone: 61-2-9351-9070; Email: [j.higgs@fhs.usyd.edu.au](mailto:j.higgs@fhs.usyd.edu.au)

Copyright 2006: Gabrielle Morrissey, Joy Higgs, and Nova Southeastern University

#### Article Citation

Morrissey, G., & Higgs, J. (2006). Phenomenological research and adolescent female sexuality: Discoveries and applications. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(1), 161-181. Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-1/morrissey.pdf>

---