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Conflicts and compromises college women talk about sex and sexuality

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Lanier Francis Basenberg entitled "Conflicts and compromises college women talk about sex and sexuality." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

Lois Presser, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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We have read this thesis
And recommend its acceptance:

Dr. Harry F. Dahms

Dr. Suzanne Kurth

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Conflicts and Compromises:
College Women Talk About Sex and Sexuality

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lanier Frances Basenberg
May 2009

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the messages college women have received about sex and sexuality, and how the young women choose to act on those messages. The women in this study have been raised receiving messages regarding sexuality from their parents, their religions, their female and male friends, the media, and sexual education. When they reach college, certain sexual norms change, and it becomes more permissible for women to be more sexually open. This change in sexual norms creates a unique point in the sexual timeline of young women. In this thesis I examine interviews done with twenty-one college women to better understand how they deal with conflicting messages regarding sexuality. Their use of language and narrative are explored along with their techniques for reaching personal compromises in the face of multiple and conflicting messages.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
Childhood and adolescent sexuality	8
College sexuality	13
Chapter 3: Methods	17
Sample	17
Data collection	19
Transcribing	23
Chapter 4: Findings	25
Messages about and norms regarding proper sexual behavior	26
How young women talk about messages	54
Conflicts between messages and their resolutions.....	59
Chapter 5: Discussion	66
References	71
Appendix	77
Vita.....	82

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I examine messages young women have received concerning sexual activity and the topic of sexuality generally. Some amount of contradiction can be seen between norms of sexuality learned by young women and between the norms and their actual sexual behavior (Diamond 2006). It is that gap – and more precisely, women’s views of that gap – that the thesis ultimately probes. I interviewed twenty-one young women in a college university setting in a medium sized city in the south eastern United States. With each woman I discussed messages that she received regarding sex and sexuality, the sources of those messages, and how she resolved any conflicts she identified between the messages. Although a great deal of attention has been paid to the sexuality of young people, very little has focused on how they resolve conflicts concerning sexuality. With this research I hope to shed new light on both sexuality and social order.

The young women I interviewed told me that they received messages from such sources as their parents, their girl friends, their boyfriends, the media, religion, and sexual education in the schools. Young women are given a great deal of information as they move through adolescence, but much of it is contradictory, and in the end they must decide what they believe and on which advice they will act. This process is very difficult for young women, as many expressed to me in their interviews.

Previous literature shows that young women are raised with conflicting expectations regarding their behavior. For instance, they are supposed to be lady-like but strong, athletic but delicate, self-sufficient but able to accept a man’s help, and so on (Boike and Sanchez 2005, Milhausen and Harold 1999). Very few studies, however, have

examined how young women deal with these contradictions, and even fewer have used the words of young women themselves (Frayser 1994, Stevenson 1994). Previous studies also show that college is a time of great change for young women. While many young women become sexually active in high school, many wait until college or become active with more than one partner while in college. Being away from home and in an environment that promotes consumption of alcohol and sexual activity (Bogle 2008) can put a great strain on young women, especially if she has been raised with religious or conservative beliefs (Cochran and Beeghley 1991, Cooper 2002). With this study I hope to fill the gap in the literature regarding how young women themselves talk about the messages they are receiving, with special attention paid to the tumultuous time that is college.

Certain theories helped me to understand how the young women in my study are dealing with the conflicting messages they are receiving. One of these is attribution theory. Attribution theory suggests that people tend to attribute feelings or motivations to others in an attempt to understand the actions or statements of others, or to retell events that have already happened (Aronson 2007, Lee 1977). In my study this was exemplified in two ways: women telling me what they thought would disappoint other people in their lives, and the use of the phrase “he/she/they were like...” when how someone acted at a point in time. In later sections of this paper I will examine the answers young women gave to the questions “who do you most not want to disappoint with your sexual behavior” and “what do you think would disappoint them”. These two questions show two interesting things about the young women answering them: what influence they have most deeply internalized, and the thoughts they attribute to those they might disappoint.

Additionally, I noticed in my transcribing that young women used the phrase “was like” very often when retelling a story or telling me what someone else said or felt. As I examined instances of young women using this phrase, I came to believe that they were attributing motivations and feelings to others quite freely.

I also found theories on narrative and stories of self-change to be highly relevant. Narrative theory suggests that we all communicate in narratives, and that in fact our stories might dictate our reality – both individually and as societies (Gergen and Gergen 1988). We view ourselves within our own narrative, and we behave according to who we think we are and thus who we would like to be seen as (Schlenker et al 1991). Some go so far as to suggest that our culture and language determine the stories we can tell and thus the actions we can conceive of taking (Bruner 1987). In his exploration on story telling, Tilly (2006) points out that stories do social work – that is, they confirm or redefine social standards and norms, and this was particularly relevant to the young women who were telling me stories of their sexual activity.

Within my research, these theories proved relevant because the women with whom I spoke often placed their experiences within a timeline and surrounded by justifications. They told me about their past experiences, the setting in which they were acting, and the circumstances which led up to their big decisions. Whether these decisions were choosing to become sexually active, to come out as lesbian, or to tell their parents about something that they knew would disappoint them, the women in my study used narratives to share their stories with me. The narrative form was often used to explain the setting in which they were acting so as to excuse or justify their choices, and the actions of the other characters, as well. I found it interesting that women were intent

on making it clear to me that they were acting within a certain situation – a party or merely the college lifestyle – so as to make their stories more understandable. Bruner (1987) suggests that we can only do things for which we have the language to express, so perhaps when women come to college and are given a new set of norms and slang they are able to engage in behaviors like “hooking up” which would previously have been unacceptable.

I decided to undertake this research because of my lay experience of talking to women about the difficulty of the transition from high school to college and the expectations young women face regarding sexuality. I have had many conversations with other young women about what constitutes appropriate behavior – in ourselves and in others – and the confusion that permeated these conversations has always struck me as interesting. Even though we are raised with certain expectations, once we reach college age and get into a new environment, much seems to change. The Christian teachings that infused many of our childhoods fade into irrelevance and the experimental nature of college sexuality comes to the forefront. We are taught that college is the time to find a life partner, but once in college the casual sexual hookup becomes the norm.

Previous studies have been very informative about sexual norms in college, linguistic styles of young women, and the messages young women receive about sexuality while growing up. Some previous literature has concerned how young people think about sexuality, but most of it has been based on males, such as Holland et al (1998), who found that most of the power in sexuality lies with young men and is driven by testosterone. Others deal with sexuality and language, such as Plummer’s “Telling Sexual Stories”, but only with extreme examples of rape, coming out as gay, and

recovery from sexual abuse. This paper is unique in using the words of young women to find out what sexuality means to them. With this study I hope to fill the a gap in the literature concerning how young women deal with conflicts in the messages they are hearing and especially with conflicts between what they are hearing and what they ultimately decide to do.

The chapters to come are as follows: first I will review the previous literature, then explain my methodology, then report my findings, and finally discuss what I have found and possible policy implications for the future.

In Chapter 2 I review the literature on sexuality in adolescence and in college, as well as research on how sexual norms are taught to young women. The transition from girlhood to young womanhood is difficult, and made even more so when the norms learned in childhood seem inconsistent with those norms that young women are exposed to in college. Young women in my study were struggling to reconcile the various norms to which they were subjected, and I examine other studies that detail these precarious balancing acts. In addition, I will examine several theories that I have found relevant to this study, including those of cognitive dissonance, attribution, and narratives of self-change. These theories explain how we talk about and resolve contradictions in our lives, including those regarding sexuality.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the methods I used to do this study, and pays special attention to feminist methodology and concerns. I used a modified grounded theory approach, as advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). That is, I tried to go in as if I knew very little about what it means to be a college-aged woman, and I was curious as to what their lives might look like. However, – against their recommendation that only the data

themselves ought to guide the analyst's questions, I went in with some expectation as to what I might find, based on previous studies. I used a feminist methodology of connecting on a personal level with interviewees, including sharing some of my own experiences and trying to make the interview a safe and comfortable place (Reinharz and Chase 2001). I believe that this made the interviews more fruitful because the subjects were more likely to reveal sensitive information.

Chapter 4 reveals my findings. This chapter is broken into messages women told me they received and conflicts between those messages. Within each of those sections I will explore the linguistic devices that young women used to understand and express such messages.

The messages came from many sources, but I have highlighted those the women referred to the most: their parents, their girl friends, young men, the media, religion, sexual education, and the college atmosphere. The dominant linguistic devices with which the women discussed sex and sexual messages were "he/she/it was like" – used to either recount a story or attribute thoughts to another – and the practice of attributing norms to generalized others rather than to oneself.

In the conflicts section I will examine how young women manage conflicting sexuality messages. This conflict is evidenced in the two ways: the discomfort so many young women showed in actually using the word "sex" when talking about sexual experiences, and the fact that every woman interviewed could name someone they were afraid of disappointing with their sexual behavior. The ways in which young women resolved their conflicts – with accounts and stories of self-change – will also be detailed in this section.

In Chapter 5 I review my findings and draws some conclusions about possible policy changes, including changes to sex education programs. Certain factors that could be changed for the better, including sexual education in the schools, discussing sex and sexuality in the home, and the intersection of religion and sexuality in the lives of young women, suggested themselves to me over the course of the research. I examine what the young women had to say about each of these factors and offer my own suggestions for future studies and possible policy changes.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I review research on norms of sexual behavior. The teaching of these norms starts very early and continues throughout life. I detail these norms and the reality of how they are learned because they have a huge effect on the behavior of college-aged women (Lorber 2007). In her book Lorber suggests that gender is socially constructed and acts as a social institution, and that women nearly always act in ways they have been taught are appropriate. The research to date agrees that young women have a strong understanding of the norms with which they were raised, and that they carry these norms into their behavior as they enter college and negotiate new experiences (Bioke et al. 2005, Frydenberg 1999).

Some previous literature has concerned how young people think about sexuality, but most of it has been based on males, such as Holland et al (1998), who found that most of the power in sexuality lies with young men and is driven by testosterone. Others deal with sexuality and language, such as Plummer's (1995) book "*Telling Sexual Stories*," but only with extreme examples of rape, coming out as gay, and recovery from sexual abuse. This paper is unique in using the words of young women to find out what sexuality means to them in general.

Childhood and Adolescent Sexuality:

The Norms Young Women Learn Early in Life

This section consists of two parts: childhood/adolescent sexuality and college sexuality. I have chosen these two sections because the previous research indicates that the norms learned in these two phases of life have equal impact on young women.

In childhood young women learn the limits of permissible behavior. In adolescence they take these norms along with new information regarding puberty and sexual intercourse and apply them to sexual behavior. The average American young woman loses her virginity in her sixteenth year, although many women experiment with other sexual acts first (Carpenter 2002). During these two phases of life young women learn important lessons which they bring with them into their college-aged years (Diekman and Goodfried 2006). As my interviews show, the norms learned in childhood and adolescence carry over into young adulthood. There are serious repercussions for failing to learn and act out the norms taught to American girls, as repeatedly shown to me in interviews.

Childhood sexuality

Sexuality often grows out of gender norms. Starting almost as soon as parents learn the gender of a fetus, gender-based expectations face boys and girls. Children themselves cannot distinguish between genders until they are roughly two years old (Fagot and Leinbach 1986). Studies in which children are given pictures of a male and a female and must identify which is “boy” and which is “girl” show that the mean age at which children demonstrate understanding of gender difference is twenty-eight months (Fagot and Leinbach 1986). However, even when they learn this distinction, it takes them longer to become consistent in their labeling. Despite their own lack of distinction between the two genders, young children are held to complex gender norms. While both male and female children are exposed to gender norms, the norms are different for the two genders. From pink or blue baby clothes to separation of sports and extra-curricular activities, boys and girls are given clear messages regarding acceptable gendered behavior. (Milhausen and Herold 1999, Rossi 1994, Schwartz and Rudder 1998).

With these gender-based norms come expectations for the behavior of children. Studies have repeatedly shown that children are given similar messages about how to behave through various forms of media, their parents, and their peers. Young girls are expected to be quiet, submissive, and sweet (Richardson 1996, Schwartz and Rudder 1998). They are under immense pressure to be “proper” and “ladylike” at all times. Frayser (1994) and Rossi (1994) make the point in their work that young men are expected to be loud, rambunctious, and playful. They are allowed to get dirty and make noise. Such actions are expected of young men by most of society, in stark contrast to the behavior expected of young women.

These expectations for the gendered behavior of children carry into expectations for their sexual behavior. Young women are expected to be passive and demure whereas young men are expected to be aggressive and rowdy (Frayser 1994, Stevenson 1994). Young men are expected to make sexual advances and young women to receive them. Both men and women are uncomfortable with a young woman straying from the traditional American script of demure ladylike behavior and taking a more masculine role, such as pursuing the young man or paying for dates (Frayser 1994, Lindsey and Zakahi 1996). Youth women are taught that straying from these scripts can be detrimental to their reputation (Lorber 1994).

In a content analysis that looks at literary representations of young women, Segel points to many examples of young women acting as “tomboys” (1994). In virtually every story, the heroine starts out with the male characteristics of being loud, exuberant, physically active, and curious, but changes into a more demure and quietly loving young lady as the story progresses. Each of the stories (including “Little Women” by Louisa

May Alcott, “What Katy Did” by Susan Coolidge, and “Gypsy Breynton” by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps”) were written for young women, and each includes the moral message that young women will be happier when they abandon their youthful behavior and mature into nurturing women.

Adolescent sexuality

As young women mature, the norms they learned in childhood are confronted with physical sexual maturation and hormonal urges that suddenly make sexual interactions seem appealing. The average American young woman reaches puberty at age eleven, although it may start as early as age eight (Iannelli 2005). With puberty comes sexual education. Young women and young men are given the same sexual education in school, especially in public schools. They are primarily exposed to abstinence-only education, the details of which I will examine below.

Young women may also become sexually active during this period of their lives. According to popular media and lay perspectives, young people are more sexual than ever, yet research actually suggests that young men and women are now engaging in less sex than in recent decades (Halpern et al. 2000, Santelli et al. 2004). The rates of sexual intercourse among teenagers dropped steadily from the late 1990’s until 2001, and have plateaued since. This decline in sexual activity could be due to the messages young men and women receive regarding sexuality, because abstinence-only education is the most common option in American public schools (Collins 2002, Santelli 2006, Sather 2002, Starkman 2002).

Abstinence-only sexual education

Abstinence-only education teaches that young men and women should refrain from any sexual activity until marriage. That marriage involves one man and one woman is usual implied, and any sexual experimentation outside of marriage is frowned upon (Waxman 2005).

There is evidence that abstinence-only education delays teen sexual activity, but only for six months to a year (Sather 2002). Moreover, recent research shows that abstinence-only strategies may deter contraceptive use among sexually active teens, increasing their risk of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Kirby 2001, Bearman and Brucker 2001, Brucker and Bearman 2005). If young women are unaware of prevention methods, they are unable to use them effectively. By not teaching young men and women about disease and pregnancy prevention, abstinence-only education creates a unique situation in which young people who decide to become sexually active are less educated about their choice than ever before.

Comprehensive sexual education

Some school districts provide sexual education that acknowledges that the students might be sexually active, and endeavors to promote safer sex. These programs are geared around disease and pregnancy prevention. While the majority of federally funded programs are abstinence only, some funded programs are comprehensive. However, there is no federal program in place that promotes both abstinence and contraception (Dailard 2001). Programs that combine the two are usually designed by the school district or state.

While comprehensive sexual education is considered more effective than abstinence only, it is less common. An in-depth study done by Lindberg looked at differences in sexual education between 1995 and 2002. Lindberg found that sex education has become less detailed in regards to how to prevent pregnancy and disease, despite pregnancy and infection rates increasing (2006). When schools do teach about abstinence and birth control, teenagers have often already engaged in sexual activity (Lindberg 2006). Teachers are aware of this conundrum and overwhelmingly believe that students should be taught about contraception and prevention of disease, but as many as 25% of teachers are prohibited from teaching it (Darroch 2000). In the southern United States, where my study is based, sexual education is primarily based on abstinence, with more than half of the school districts teaching abstinence-only (Richards 1999). This type of sexual education would likely have a huge impact on the young women I interviewed.

College Sexuality: Norms in Flux

The differences between adolescent and college sexual behavior come with changes in both social situation and expectations. The situation of the average American college student changes when they move out of the house, or at least out of their high school time schedule. Those who leave home are no longer subject to their parents' watchful eyes, and have more freedom to stay out late and spend time with whomever they please. Those at home are released from the time constrictions of school and are subject only to the hours demanded by their work.

While in college, expectations for behavior change as well. Behavior that was previously not allowed becomes normative. Young men and women are allowed and

even expected – at least by peers – to experiment with drugs and alcohol. Changes in sexual behavior are also common. “Hooking up” or casual sexual relationships with no expectation of emotional intimacy (Bogle 2008), is the accepted way to engage in sexual behavior. Partying is the norm, and drinking is expected (Bon et al 2001, Davidson et al 1994). Under such conditions, sexuality becomes even more complicated than usual.

Sexuality changes for both young men and young women from ages 18-23, whether enrolled in college or not (Diamond 2006). This is, in fact, an extremely formative time in people’s sexual “careers.” Young women are still subject to the same double standard within which they were raised, but sexual experimentation is more permissible (Bogle 2008).

One important norm is that of being “sexy but not slutty.” Young women are now allowed to be sexual, at least to some degree. They are certainly expected to be “sexy” (Boike, Crocker, and Sanchez 2005, although the fine line between “sexy” and “slutty” must be maintained (Lorber 1994). Young women are allowed minor sexual encounters without gaining a negative reputation. The saving grace for women who wish to be sexual is to be in a relationship, because a committed relationship is considered the appropriate venue for sexual activity for females of all ages.

New norms develop in college, including norms of sexual conduct. A language develops with each new change in norms, and as the norm for college women has changed toward greater sexual experimentation, so has the language used to talk about sexual behavior. The current standard for college sexuality includes relationships that are non-committal and casual (Lambert, Kahn, and Apple 2003). “Hooking up” is the most common form of this relationship, and it can be defined as “engaging in sexual

encounters are that understood to be casual” (Bogel 2008). Hooking up is increasingly common on college campuses, and some literature and anecdotal evidence would suggest that it is the most common type of sexual relationship in which college men and women engage (Bogle 2008).

Whereas sexual experimentation during college is expected (Davidson 1994, Bogle 2008), expectations for the sexual behavior of young men and women are very different. Men are expected to have as many sexual partners as possible, and are rewarded for such behavior (Davidson et al. 2004, Person et al. 1989, Whitley 1988). College-aged women are expected and permitted to be sexy. However, they must not be too sexy, and they must also not be prudish (Bell 2006, Gilmartin 2006, Paul and Hayes 2002). Distinguishing between the two presentations of self is crucial, as persistent rape myths suggest (Giacopassi and Dull 1986, Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). Rape myths suggest that young women who dress too provocatively or are in suspicious circumstances are putting themselves in danger of being raped, and thus are responsible for the consequences. Here again we see the overlap between women being labeled “sexy” or “slutty”.

The “Madonna/whore complex” means that a girl may either be a “good” girl who is worthy of a committed relationship, or a “bad” girl who is worthy of a sexual relationship but nothing else (Tanzer 1985, Browyn 2006). This dichotomy becomes especially important during college, when young women who wish to find a relationship or be respected by young men cannot openly act on their sexual desires.

Risk-taking behaviors are a common yet dangerous part of the college experience. In college, many young women are exposed to a lifestyle of alcohol and parties for the

first time. Because they are living on their own and away from parental and religious influences, and because gossip and pluralistic ignorance would seem to suggest that everyone is doing it, many young women begin binge drinking and using drugs (Citations). Studies have clearly shown that there is a causal relationship between the drinking of alcohol and the decision to have sex (Bon, Hittner, and Lawandales 2001, Cooper 2002). In regards to the “everyone else is doing it” aspect, another study indicates that the effects of alcohol on the body are not as strong as the effects of expectations about alcohol – essentially, college students will act as drunkenly as they think they are expected to act, and the pharmacological action of the alcohol is not necessarily the controlling factor (Leigh 1990). This study is interesting because of the light it shines on group behavior at parties. It would seem to indicate that a young woman being exposed to the “party scene” for the first time might take her cues from those around her and behave in the manner she is led to believe is appropriate, even if it contradicts her previously received messages regarding drinking and sexuality.

Self-esteem is also a major factor contributing to risk-taking behavior. A study done in 1999 by Glindemann, Geller, and Fortney shows that women with low self-esteem drink more at parties than both their female counterparts who have high self-esteem and males who have low self-esteem. Additionally, females who are heavy drinkers are also more likely to exhibit low self-esteem (Corbin, McNair, and Carter 1996). These studies indicate that a young woman with low self-esteem is in danger of engaging in more risky behaviors than her counterparts, and this can be particularly true when she is away from home and surrounded by strangers in a college environment.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

As mentioned in the previous chapter, talking about sex and sexuality can be uncomfortable, as sexuality is still considered taboo in American culture (West 2001). The literature detailed in the literature review shows that talking about sexuality is particularly difficult for young women because of the conflicting messages they have received regarding sex and sexuality. Because so many contradictory messages exist in the minds of young women, it is difficult for them to pick and express any one message in a convincing way. In this section I will detail my efforts towards making each interview a comfortable conversation, so that my interviewees felt at ease and talked at length. Informed by literature on qualitative interviewing, interviewing women, and feminist research, I sought to create an environment conducive to creating the most informative and empowering interviews possible.

Sample

My sample consists of 21 young women from the same university in the south-eastern United States. Table 2 in the Appendix gives information on demographics of the young women, including their ages and races, as well as on their backgrounds, including the sexual education they received in school and in the home as well as their religion and sexual experience.

In order to get as wide a range of participants as possible, I recruited interviewees from several different and widely varying groups on campus. My initial efforts, in September of 2008, included an e-mail sent to the campus feminist group, three Christian youth groups, and nine different sororities. The e-mail explained my study and reassured

the readers about confidentiality. It also gave my contact information and that of my advisor, Dr. Lois Presser. My intent in recruiting from such diverse groups was to adjust for any bias toward sexual permissiveness (e.g., no principled opposition to premarital sexual intercourse) that might exist among my personal friends and acquaintances. As one of my committee members pointed out, drawing from young women I work with and know personally might skew my results, and I did everything I could to avoid that. As the study progressed I did interview young women I worked with and young women of my acquaintance, but they made up only four of my twenty interviews. I also sent e-mails to my fellow graduate students asking them to tell their undergraduate classes about my study and to pass along an e-mail with information. An acquaintance in an administrative position on campus was able to connect me with additional possible interviewees.

Finally, I thought it would be helpful to interview women outside my own social set, in an attempt to access as much language variation as possible. Research suggests that language about taboo subjects will change depending on with whom the interviewee is speaking (Clayton 1989). The interviewee will become more tacit or more clinical in their language, but are also more likely to reveal personal information. For this reason I wanted to find as much variation between participants – and my relationship with participants – as possible. Fourteen of my total interviewees were complete strangers, and I think this actually helped them to talk about sexuality, because they felt freer than they might have with someone they knew.

My sample group had certain limitations. I only interviewed women who were currently enrolled in the university or had been in recent semesters but were taking time off. The women I interviewed aged in range from eighteen to twenty-seven, which

captures the typical age range for this university, but is a fairly limited age range. My sample group also came from women who were willing to be interviewed, which suggests a certain willingness to talk about sex and sexuality. My interviewees were not given any compensation or class credit.

Additionally, my sample also had certain delimitations. I only interviewed women, although at some point I would like to replicate this study with college men. I only interviewed women who were enrolled in college, which only allowed me to explore the experience of women who were able and willing to go to college. The experience of women who went directly into the workforce or became stay-at-home mothers is not examined here.

Data Collection

I chose to use a semi-structured format for interviews. I felt that language would be an important part of their experiences regarding sexuality, and I wanted to be able to capture that language as well as possible. The ways in which young women use language to explore their options and explain their choices provide ample food for thought. The literature regarding language and sexuality suggests that there are strong connections between what we can verbalize and what we are willing to do (Cameron and Kulik 2003, Coates 2004). A semi-structured format provides interviewees the opportunity to expand on the subjects with which they are the most comfortable, which allows for a free use of language.

I carefully chose my interview questions and prompts. I structured my questions so that they concerned other people, at least initially. I would have liked to ask the

interviewees about their own lives and feelings, but one of the limitations imposed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville concerned asking young women about their personal sexual experiences. I asked young women about those close to them, but refrained from asking about their personal lives. Asking women about other women often lead to statements on the behavior of others, unfortunately making it difficult to tell if women were speaking about a generalized other because they felt more comfortable doing so or because I had asked them to.

However, as I stipulated in my IRB research proposal, I would not stop interviewees if they began to speak about their own lives. Without fail, every single interviewee did so. I was genuinely surprised by the amount and nature of the personal information the interviewees volunteered, despite the fact that I was careful to phrase every question in a non-personal way. For the most part, I opted to ask about non-threatening subjects such as sexuality on popular TV shows and movies, prior to asking about the seemingly delicate topics of sexuality in the lives of the peers and close friends of the interviewee.

Before conducting any official interviews, I conducted a pilot interview with a student at the university who is also an acquaintance. My pilot interview was very helpful in honing how I would later order and phrase the questions, as well as adjusting the substance of some of the questions. In the pilot interview I asked questions about “other women your age,” which the interviewee found too vague. She shared that being asked to discuss the wide range of women her age with whom she had no contact and about whom she had no insight was too challenging and ambiguous. I changed the phrasing to “your friends,” “your group of friends,” and “women you are close to.” I think these alternate

terms enabled the interviewees to think only about the young women with whom they are intimately familiar.

The interviews were conducted in small, private rooms on campus. For the most part I used Dr. Presser's small office in the main campus library. For a few interviews I used a private study room in the library or the larger conference room in the Sociology Department. All of these rooms were suitable because of their small size and relative soundproof-ness. None of my interviewees ever expressed or showed any discomfort about being overheard. Each signed an informed consent form allowing me to record the interview and stating that they could stop the interview at any time. A copy of the consent form is attached in the appendix.

Each interview typically began with my meeting the interviewee at a public spot in the library or the building that houses the Sociology Department and escorting them back to the location for the interview. I typically made some 'small talk' as I tried to make each interviewee feel as comfortable as possible. For example, I would initiate the conversation with comments on their day, or my day, or how cold the library always was.

A key tenet of feminist research methods is that the interviewer should identify with the interviewee as much as possible, to create a bond between the two (Oakley 1981, Reinharz and Chase 2001). This created an interesting process for me of trying to make what could be a power-based situation (interviewer versus interviewee) into a shared experience (Oakley 1981). I tried to make women feel that they were in a "safe space" in which they could share typically private thoughts regarding sexuality and their own lives. It would appear that this worked, because women told me about instances of rape and incest, of having abortions and pregnancy scares, and either when they lost their virginity

or when they were planning to do so. It would seem that, as the research suggests, talking about sex can actually be very cathartic for the interviewee (West 2001). I was honored and somewhat surprised by the amount of information women were willing to share.

In general, I received lengthy and thoughtful responses to my line of questioning. I believe this stems from the fact that young women of the generation currently in college genuinely enjoy talking about sex, and are comfortable doing so with a complete stranger: this was my lay experience prior to the research, and it was confirmed by the research.

For the sake of consistency, I asked the same set of questions of each woman, and the wording of my questions was nearly identical in each interview. As the literature on qualitative interviewing suggested (Warren 2001), however, each interview was unique. Some women were more eager to talk about certain subjects, some were more verbose in general, and some women offered short and somewhat dismissive answers. I thought it best to let each woman expand on the topics she seemed to feel most comfortable with, and thus my stock set of questions did not always come in the same order. The interviews lasted, on average, forty-five minutes. Some were as short as twenty minutes and some as long as an hour and a half.

I used a Griffin iTalk recorder to record the interviews. This device is very small and unobtrusive. It plugs directly into my iPod and records onto the iPod. After each interview I loaded the audio file from my iPod into my computer. Using iTunes to play the audio files, I transcribed each interview into a Word document.

The iTalk recorder was surprisingly helpful during my interview sessions. Interviewees often expressed their feelings on how “cool” and “cute” it was, and I think

the fact that it plugged into something as familiar as an iPod was reassuring to college-aged women. Not having bulky equipment was helpful to me and made the interviews more intimate and seemingly casual.

Transcribing

Transcribing each interview was the hardest part of the project. I decided early in the study to transcribe faithfully and with great detail, so that I could analyze linguistic aspects of the data. Schegloff (1993) has shown that fillers (e.g. “like”, “you know”, “whatever”, etc.) convey meaning. Young women in particular are prone to using many fillers and pauses (Tolman 2002) and I wanted to include these in the transcriptions. I noticed that as interviews progressed from sexuality in the media to sexuality in the lives of the interviewees and close friends, the women’s language often became more disjointed and prone to fillers. These fillers and linguistic devices turned out to be relevant later in the study.

I did not use any software for transcribing. I considered doing so but was not able to find any that worked to my satisfaction. Nor was I financially able to hire a transcriptionist. Many message boards on the subject of transcription suggest that while hiring a transcriptionist is certainly the easiest way to get the task done, doing your own transcribing provides a sense of familiarity with the data. I found this to be true, and I think that hearing, writing, and reading each of the interviews gave me a firm sense of what I had to work with.

I began transcribing while I was still interviewing, and this lent a different perspective to my later interviews. Glazer and Strauss (1967) promote the analysis of data

prior to the completion of data collection for this very reason. I became hyper-aware of my language and that of my interviewees, which was both good and bad. It helped me to be able to analyze the phrasing of my questions and the degree to which my answers could be perceived as either supportive or not. Consequently I became a more careful interviewer. However, being so careful with my speech did not always lend itself to the easy rapport I was seeking in each interview. When I noticed myself becoming too conscious of my speech, I had to remind myself to stop over-thinking the language and go back to making the interviewee comfortable, which sometimes involved using fillers or slang myself.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter reveals the findings of my research. As mentioned in the methods section, I spoke with twenty-one young women about the messages they were receiving regarding sexuality and how they dealt with conflicts in and between those messages. I found that many of the young women I spoke with were cognizant of receiving similar messages from similar sources. For example, nearly everyone had something to say on the topic of parents, girl friends, young men, and religion. On the topics of sexual education both in the home and at school some women were verbose and offered details while others could not name any memories of such education.

This chapter also considers some of the linguistic devices that young women used to express themselves in my interviews. I found these devices relevant to my research because they showed how young women dealt with discomfort and with conflicts in their messages and actions. Many of the young women with whom I spoke were experiencing a great deal of conflict about the disparity between the messages they received and the actions they chose to take. Sexuality is typically fraught with conflict, and my interviewees expressed difficulty with deciding either to be sexual or to remain abstinent and with issues that arose from those two choices. The young women used several linguistic tools to deal with said conflicts, including accounts, channeling multiple logics, and linguistic manipulation of uncomfortable terms.

My interviewees seemed to take pains to adjust their language to their comfort level with sexuality. I noticed several interesting speech patterns including not using the word “sex” when talking about sex, using the phrase “they were like” when interpreting

or relaying the messages of others, and attributing thoughts or feelings to a generalized other rather than to themselves.

Messages About and Norms of Proper Sexual Behavior

My interviewees told me about several sources of messages regarding sexual behavior. Most of my participants listed the same ones: their parents, their religion, their platonic girlfriends, young men, college life, and sexual education. The following sections detail each of those sources, including how the women interpreted the messages and the linguistic devices they used to describe those messages to me.

Parents and sexuality

Discussing the topic of sex or sexuality with one's parents would seem to be awkward. However, some of my interviewees grew up in homes where sex was an open topic, and are comfortable discussing it to this day.

Some young women told me that their parents regarded sex as a health hazard. Lydia is an example. She said: "My mom always told me, 'Well, sex is a beautiful thing, but you know, it's safer if you do it inside marriage'." Others said that they knew their parents would prefer that they remain virgins until marriage, but suspected that their parents knew that would not happen. Jenny was a good example of this. Jenny told me that her mother wanted her to wait but also "realized that in this day and age it wasn't likely." The majority of parental interaction regarding sex and sexuality, however, could be understood in terms of two categories: those families for whom sex was a closed topic of conversation, and those for whom it was an open topic.

Closed-topic households

When I asked Marie if she had ever talked with her parents about sex, she responded: “No. That’s a big no-no. We – my parents never gave me the sex talk, even still we don’t talk about it – nothing.” Rachel also become noticeably uncomfortable when asked if she had ever talked with her parents about sex. “Yeah, ‘the talk’, and then um, just going through college I kinda mentioned things to her, and we’d talk a little bit about that. You know, nothing too, I guess... (laughs uncomfortably)” She further mentioned that she would be uncomfortable talking to her mother about her current sexual relationships, especially because she knows her mother does not believe in sex before marriage. Sarah was another woman who was given “the talk” by her parents, but cannot imagine another situation in which sexuality would be a topic of conversation. “That would have been extremely uncomfortable. I think that my – I mean, they gave me the talk or whatever, but I already knew because kids talk way more, I suppose, than parents think that they talk. ... It’s not an open topic, but it’s certainly not a taboo topic. ... I mean, I don’t know that like – having a conversation with my mom about sex would be strange because like I don’t know when it would come up?” Even though Yvonne is married, she is still uncomfortable talking with her mother about sex: “It comes up every now and then, and it’s just kinda laugh it off. But we don’t actually talk about it.”

Some sex talks with parents, such as Becca’s and Debra’s, were very unhelpful: “There was a brief conversation between my dad and me that was mostly him going ‘umm... some day... um...’ until finally I said ‘Dad, I know what sex is, don’t worry. I know how to be safe about it’. (laughs) That was the extent of it.” This conversation with her father happened when Becca was seventeen or eighteen years old, so overall, she

found it rather pointless. Debra's family was also reticent about sex, but she believes that this silence was for a different reason: "Uh, my dad was kinda – I don't think that he would be comfortable talking about it because he was kind of a player himself? Like he had affairs? So he never really – and I knew about it. Like I knew about it when I was young. So I don't think he would ever bring it up. I don't know. He never told me not to have sex or asked me about sex or even brought up the words. . . . It was just kinda left out of the room." Both of these talks occurred with the fathers of the women, but uncomfortable exchanges were certainly not limited to those between father and daughter.

Tessa, whose parents are divorced and whose mother came out as a lesbian after the divorce, told me that she is uncomfortable talking with her parents about sex. When I asked if this was because her parents were religious, a fact she had just been discussing, she had this to say: "I guess – my parents are divorced, and my father really was? But my mom is a little bit more – I mean, she's religious, but she's liberal at the same time, so I felt completely comfortable talking with her about it. And that kind of thing. But completely not comfortable talking with my father about it. So. It's kind of weird, the two different sides, but." Yvonne's comfort in talking to one parent but not the other was not unusual: at least three young women in my study expressed that they felt that they could talk to one parent but not the other about sexuality.

Open-topic households

Other young women came from families in which sexuality was a relatively open and acceptable topic of conversation. Gretta spoke positively of talking about sex with her mother: "We're just really close, like she was raised in the 60's and she's always

promoted me taking care of my body. You know, like if I'm going to have sex, I should know that condoms are definitely important and stuff. Like, we never hid anything from each other."

Cassie, on the other hand, had a more unpleasant experience. When her mother found out that another girl in Cassie's Girl Scout troupe was pregnant, she reacted strongly and negatively: "And she flipped out! And comes home with this big fat book of just, women's health and a box of condoms! And was like (yelling) 'Don't get pregnant!' ... 'Cause she wanted to make sure that nobody was getting pregnant!" Cassie said that this message frightened her, and she took it to heart. However unpleasant the exchange, sex was not a taboo topic in Cassie's family.

Haley and Nicole both said that the fact of open conversation in their families helped them to make better decisions when they became sexually active. Haley was one of the only women I spoke with who felt comfortable talking with both of her parents: "I talked with both my mom, my dad, my stepdad." When asked with whom she was the most comfortable, she gave me a surprising answer: her father. Nicole is grateful for her parents' guidance and credits her parents with being the best possible source of information: "I just think your parents are smarter than you, so – well, mine are, at least (laughs). Mine are, at least! So I just think that talking with a more intelligent, higher person will - I think it's better than getting all the information from your friends or on the streets and stuff."

Dierdre is also proud of coming from an open family, and she is another young woman who feels comfortable talking to her father: "So like me and my dad have a really cool relationship where we can talk about sex and it not be a big deal. ... Cause *he's*

more apt to tell me what things are really like, because he was twenty, and he knows how to do what guys now do with girls, cause he did that, you know?” Dierdre appreciated this straightforward manner and her father’s experience as a male. Fiona was another woman for whom it was comfortable to talk to her parents, and especially her father, about sex. She remembers her parents being clear about her initial sex talk: “Um, she was like...what did my mom say to me... One, she was like ‘my body is my temple’, I have to - I mean, this is not something you give away to people. Um, she trust that I know when to make the right decision. And it was – that was pretty much it.” Fiona said she feels even more comfortable talking to her father, because he is more free with information: “It was more comfortable really to talk to my dad. Because he would just get straight to the point and say what he had to say.”

Kate, who was raised Hindu, also had a liberal upbringing regarding sexuality. She told me “I was raised in a household where my mother was really really open about sex, and constantly said – although she put a huge emphasis on being safe – ‘you test drive the car before you buy it’ . . .I mean, I just – it was never um, it was never demonized, growing up.” However, with her father, it was another matter. When I asked if she was comfortable talking with him about sex, she replied simply “Oh god no.” For some women like Kate, one parent is clearly preferred as the person with whom one discusses sex.

The media and sexuality

All of the women with whom I spoke stated that they get messages from the media. Additionally, most of the women said that the messages they were getting had a negative effect. Haley put it quite succinctly, when I asked her what kind of messages she

thought she was getting: “Probably not good ones.” Nevertheless, many of the young women shared that they were susceptible to the messages they were hearing, and found the media to be a source of pressure about how young women should look and act.

Some women were made uncomfortable by the blatant portrayals of sex and sexuality in the media. The amount of sexuality in the media made Cassie, one of the women I recruited from the Christian youth group, so uncomfortable that she had trouble expressing it to me: “No, yeah, I don’t know. I just – most of the time, when they have those kinda things, if there’s like *purpose* – but a lot of times it’s just – there’s no point, it doesn’t advance the plot. It doesn’t – it’s just to be gratuitously sexual. That’s the only reason that it’s there. And that’s just unnecessary.” Lydia, also a member of the Christian youth group, was similarly uncomfortable with sexuality in the media: “And sometimes there will be, um, there will be movies that um, there’s just so much that I think it kind of overrides the plot? And I would maybe – I would prop- I might turn it off.” She, too, has trouble expressing her discomfort.

In contrast to the aforementioned interviewees, some young women told me that they barely even notice the extensive portrayals of sex and sexuality in the media due to their frequency. The invisibility of such portrayals underscores their prevalence. Fiona considered sexuality in the media to be completely normal: “It’s normal. Just because you see it so much.” Fiona’s words are an excellent example of the ubiquity of the media in the lives of the young women I interviewed.

Rachel stated that she was nearly desensitized to images of sexuality in the media: “It’s just you hear it so much you get used to it.” Ami acknowledged that there are sex-related messages in the media, but finds herself ignoring them: “I feel like there are

messages being sent, whether I'm actually receiving them or acting on them or not, there are messages being sent about how women are supposed to look, and dress, and behave to attract a man. ... I usually don't pay attention to all that crap. I actually don't read women's magazines, for the most part. Because that seems like all they're focused on is, you know, clothes that you can't afford to get men that you're going to break up with anyway." Yvonne, the only married woman with whom I spoke, told me that she does not hear pressure from the media because she is secure in her relationship: "I used to, but since I've been married (laughs) – married for five years almost, being over-weight, none of that kind of stuff matters to me anymore." Essentially, she claims that she finds herself immune to those pressures.

Isabelle stated that she is no longer made uncomfortable by sexuality in the media, although she says that she was uncomfortable when she was younger. She cited the show "Sex in the City" as an example: "I mean like, when I first heard about the show "Sex in the City" I was like "ooh, I don't know what that is". You know, "I don't think so". But no, I mean, it's fine now."

Several of my interviewees expressed discomfort with the fact that they perceive the media to be promoting casual sex. Cassie, who was a member of the religious student club and a firm believer in abstinence until marriage, disapproved of the messages she feels that the media is sending regarding casual sex. "I guess that's the big thing in the media, this "casual sex is okay, casual sex is a normal part of life, if you're not doing that then there's something wrong with you"." Rachel found the same thing: "a lot of shows are usually like 'promiscuity is the thing to do' you know?" The fact that so many young

women are getting this message from the media could have a strong effect on the young women.

Jenny felt that the relationship between media messages and sexuality is circular. She thought that sexuality is shown so often on television that young people see it and believe it, so it becomes true, so the media depicts it more often: “But I feel like the media is helping to contribute to the fact that more people are okay with not being a virgin until marriage. And I don’t know if that’s necessarily all it has to do with, but I think the images they portray you know... further that.” Lydia agrees: “Um, I think that a lot of the media, um, I think that they like to say that everybody is doing it? When, in fact, there’s a lot of people who aren’t? But it kind of – the more they say that, the more it becomes true, I guess? And the more people are like ‘it’s a tv show, they’re doing it. Oh my goodness, I haven’t. Maybe I should go out and try to find someone’”.

Several women said that the media portrays a certain image of how women ought to look and act. Marie admits that she has a hard time with that image: “I mean, sex is everywhere, in the media. You don’t – you hardly ever see anyone around in slouchy sweatpants and their old ratty t-shirt. Everyone’s done up to the nines, of course, with like their hair and their makeup. So I think that we all see that, and then people start to think ‘oh, well then this is how women should be! They should always dress like this.’ And then, as women, we start to think ‘hey, this is how I should be’, you know, because now everyone’s expecting this of me!”

Rachel admitted to feeling the same kind of pressure. She describes the media’s image of the ideal woman: “Yeah, just the hour glass figure type thing. ... And that’s the only way to be.” She claims that she just tries to deal with the pressure and be herself at

the same time. Kate also spoke of her discomfort: “I feel like – maybe this is a very typical thing to say and you’ve heard a lot of this, but I feel a huge amount of pressure to have a different body type than I’m really built to have? Like I feel a huge amount of pressure to be super skinny and flat stomached and big boobed and made up all the time like a - I feel like as an adult I should look a certain way? And that’s frustrating.”

Religion and sexuality

Most likely because my study was done in what is commonly referred to as “the Bible Belt,” most of my interviewees had been raised with a Christian background. Out of the twenty-one women I interviewed, only three were *not* raised going to a Christian church. One of those was raised Hindu, one Jewish, and the other with no religion. While this is not unusual for the region in which this study took place, it is unusual for the country as a whole. I think it is very important to consider the role of religion in the lives of these young women. Interestingly, while the majority of them were raised Christian, only a few took their religion’s message of abstinence to heart and chose to remain virgins.

Religion and the church environment was a very important factor in the lives of many of my interviewees when they were growing up. As they grew older, many of them left the church in which they were raised and its teachings behind, but they still carry some guilt or anger. Sarah found that the messages from her church were very clear, and also somewhat harsh: “Abstinence only, and um – it was sort of unspoken. It was understood that we were not supposed to have sex. It was like – it would have been as horrific as if like... (sighs) on drugs, or something. It would have been that bad.”

As a child, Gretta heard conflicting messages from her church: “From my church, it’s like all I hear is ‘sex is sacred’ and ‘it’s a part of your body’. And that is true, like you are sharing a part of your body. Umm... but then they also try to teach us to share things.” While she was partly joking, Gretta’s confusion about whether to share herself does give her pause. Cassie believes the message from her religion (Church of Christ) about sex is perfectly clear: “It’s pretty clear about saying that sex is only to be performed in the heterosexual relationship within marriage. Before that, then it’s – it’s a sin to do it. Outside that. But inside that, it’s a great, wonderful thing. Do it as much as you like.” She appears to have no qualms regarding her religion (Church of Christ)’s message of abstinence.

Haley, who was raised Catholic, found the messages from her church to be strong and somewhat frightening, as she revealed in her sarcastic answer: “I’m going to hell if I use birth control, um, gays are going to hell. These are really good messages for a thirteen year old. So. I steered away from that.” While eventually she chose not to remain abstinent, the threatening messages stayed with her. Rachel grew up Catholic as well, and traces her messages back to her religious learnings: “Definitely one person only. And only after you’re married. That sort of thing. ... I guess they pretty much said it was a sin, and you shouldn’t do it.”

Lydia told me that the messages she hears from her church come straight from the text of the Bible: “Umm, well, I believe that it says that um, you shouldn’t have it – have sex – premaritally. ... And I believe that it, that that would be mostly it, that you shouldn’t have it premaritally. But um – and I believe – *I* think it says that in the bible.

You know? And I know a lot of people don't, but I think it does. And um, I'm pretty sure I've read it."

Some women, like Dierdre, grew up hearing abstinence messages from their religious leaders, but rejected them in the face of what they perceived as over-all hypocrisy. As Dierdre explains: "I remember sitting in church one night and the preacher being like 'If you dance like that, you will go to hell. If there's booty dancing, you will go to hell'. And that's when I was like 'this is stupid. This isn't all religion is about'."

Ami says that while the message from her Christian church is clear - "sex was for marriage only" - most people have an unrealistic view of Christian sexuality: "Um, a lot of people - it annoys me - a lot of people believe that um 'Oh, Christians say that sex is a sin!' and that's totally ludicrous. (laughs) Because, first of all, we couldn't procreate and reproduce and all that good stuff without it. So we would never be told that like the means of continuing the bloodline is sin (laughs)! It's just silly. But a lot of people believe that, for some reason, we believe that."

Some of my research participants belonged to a Christian youth group in college, and some had belonged as teenagers. In these youth groups they discussed issues of sex and sexuality, with varying levels of comfort and detail.

When I asked Cassie if they talk about sex and sexuality in her college youth group or Bible study, she acknowledged that they do. However, she still doesn't find it to be an easy topic of conversation.

When Wendy, a lesbian, tried to talk to her youth group counselor about her sexuality, she was essentially asked to leave: "I got kicked out of church. Um, kicked out of the youth group. In middle school, I didn't feel welcomed? And like the counselor or

whatever talked to me about my sexuality, and I told her that I was more attracted to women. That I always have been. That I tried to date guys and it just wasn't happening for me. I just kinda... couldn't do it. And she was like 'I think it's best for you to – to take a break' or whatever. From, from youth group. ... I never really went back to church after that." Eventually, Wendy made her peace with Christianity, with the help of her father, who called to tell her that he believed his previous prejudice was wrong, and that Jesus would love her as much as everyone else. Wendy recounts the emotional experience: "Um, but you know, like that, that sort of was - it felt really good that my dad acknowledged that Jesus actually would love me. Like, like, if he was here now, you know? That, that god would still love me."

The most striking finding concerning sexuality and religion was that so many of my interviewees had been raised in the Christian church and its message of abstinence, and yet most chose to maintain abstinence until marriage. I asked many of them how they made that decision, and was rewarded with many different answers.

Although a strong and devoted Christian, Cassie credits her decision of choosing to remain abstinent to factors outside religion: "It was just through Girl Scouts, and through STARS, and through general observations of what was going on around me. I just realized that that was a recipe for disaster."

Julie and Isabelle both grew up in Christian environments and took the abstinence message to heart. However, when both entered into more adult relationships and fell in love, both changed her mind. As Julie explained it: "I just always said that I was gonna wait until I was married because that was just the right thing to do. And I tried to keep with that. ... And that just didn't happen! So... yeah, but I did for a while. I strongly

believed that I wanted to wait until I got married. ... Like I'm not as strong a Christian as I should be. I'm not as strong a Christian as I was in high school. But... I'm just, I don't know. It's changed."

Jenny and Marie were also raised attending church, specifically Southern Baptist services. Both stated that they gradually grew disenchanted with their Christian church and chose to go against its messages. Marie grew up hearing the same abstinence messages from her Baptist church, but eventually rejected them. When talking about it, she said her sense of fun won out: "Although it did make me feel guilty, because there they are preaching that we shouldn't even be kissing, and here I am doing a lot more than that. So I'm kinda like 'oh, god'. But, whatever. It was a lot more fun doing what I was doing." Jenny also received strong messages from her Baptist upbringing, but she became so disengaged from her religion that she actually chose to go against its teachings, in defiance: "basically I was raised Southern Baptist. And waiting for marriage was a big thing. So I don't know if maybe that's what kinda pushed me towards not doing that? Just to rebel?"

Platonic girlfriends and sexuality

Talking about sexuality seems to be a common occurrence in the lives of college-aged women, and most conversations occur between platonic girl friends. When I asked if she talks to her girl friends about sex, Kate said "Often. And a lot." Hers was an exaggerated version of the most common answer, but there was some inhibition among other women about such talk. Some women were afraid of talking to certain others because it made them uncomfortable or because they did not want to become an item of gossip, while some found talking with other young women to be therapeutic. Some

admitted that other young women are a source of great pressure, while some found their friends to be a stabilizing force for their lifestyle choices.

Some interviewees found that talking about sex and sexuality with their girl friends could help strengthen bonds between them. Haley lives with other members of her sorority, and she told me that her group of friends is comfortable talking about their sexuality, although the new members become comfortable more gradually. “Um, we’re pretty open about it. Because I’ve lived in the sorority floor for – this is my second year. And so I’m – all the girls who have lived on it before with me, we’re pretty tight. And we can talk about all that stuff. And then the new girls are starting to realize that they can come to us with all that stuff.”

Some of my interviewees implied that talking about issues of sex and sexuality with their girlfriends was highly therapeutic. Said Gretta: “I mean, we won’t go into explicit details or anything. But there’s some shocks, like new things that happen during sex that you’ve never had before and you kinda want to tell someone.” Talking about new experiences can help bring young women together, as well as helping to create a shared understanding of sexual behavior and standards.

Some women had made lifestyle choices which did not necessarily reflect the norms of the other young women around them. I interviewed two lesbians and several abstinent Christians, and they expressed that having like-minded and accepting friends was a great relief to them. Cassie, a firm believer in abstinence before marriage and a strong Christian, explained that having like-minded friends helps her keep her promises to herself: “it makes it easier to say ‘No, I’m not gonna drink’, ‘No, I’m not gonna have sex’ when I have friends that I can go out with and party with and have fun and not do

those things. And who I also know have decided that they're not going to do this." Lydia, who is a member of the campus's Christian youth group, also appreciated the support of her friends: "Umm, a lot of my friends have been fairly supportive of the fact that I've chosen – mostly a lot of my friends are Christian. But a lot of them are non-Christian as well. And I've told them, really, I just don't believe in that, and most of them are very supportive of that."

Wendy, one of the lesbians I interviewed, said that being able to talk with her girl friends about sex was personally gratifying. "I mean, yeah, it definitely helps. Um, but I mean I'm very comfortable in my own sexuality. Enough to pretty much talk to anybody about it. But uh, it does – it's - it's – it's a really good feeling when you can sit around with women and just talk about sex. I don't know, there's just something really *gratifying* about that. You know, being able to do that. Um. It's just... everybody understands, you know?" In her group of friends, she had found a base of support that was very important to her.

Yet, some young women shared that they don't talk to their girl friends about issues of sex and sexuality because they're afraid of being judged, or of becoming the latest item of gossip. Julie explained that she only talks to a select number of her girlfriends about such things: "...like two of my very closest friends. Like we share everything and anything. But those are probably the only two people I talk to about it. I mean, there's other friends that I just wouldn't, you know? With these two I know that they're going to like keep it between us, and not think of me differently. You know?" With her language she simultaneously admitted her discomfort and asked me for support, which suggests her insecurity in talking about the subject.

Becca agreed, telling me that she talks to “some friends. Not all of them. Depends on how close they are.” Debra shared almost exactly the same sentiment: “Sometimes it’s [the topic] closed, sometimes it’s open. It depends on who it is. Like, the closer I am to somebody....” Tessa explained that she will choose whether or not to talk to a girl friend based on her perception of their comfort level: “Yeah, it just kinda depends upon whether you think they’ll be receptive or not, you know. I mean, I guess I kinda know which friends would be ok with that and which wouldn’t.”

Isabelle divided her friends into categories: “So it’s like... um, the friends that are... ok, when you’re friends with somebody you know how you have like different levels of friendship? ...Where some are just like people you hang out with and some are your true friends that you really can talk to? I have one or two friends that I would talk to about that kind of stuff.” I found it interesting that while so many interviewees told me that gossip was something in which they often engaged, they also found it so damaging that they took great caution in whom they spoke with and about what – in regards to their own lives and actions.

Young women can be a source of comfort, but also a source of pressure. While in college, young women are subjected to the judgment of other young women as well as competition for young men. Julie admitted to feeling pressure from other women in regard to clothing: “Girls will always point out anything wrong with any other girl in the room. And if I’m with ten girls and I’m the only one not wearing a dress, I’m gonna feel uncomfortable and I’m gonna go put a dress on, just so I can you know, fit in and look like the rest of them. Which is sad but that’s how it is. I don’t want to be the only girl not dressed up, going to a party or whatever.” Marie told me a very similar story: “But with

females, they are much – I think MUCH more quick to say ‘oh, that looks ugly, you shouldn’t wear that, that’s too big’. At least I hear it all the damn time.” Dierdre expressed the same feeling: “I feel more pressure to put on a dress and heels when I walk down to the strip than when I watch TV. Because I know all the other girls on the strip are going to have on their little tiny dresses and their heels.” She felt pressure to dress up and look like the other girls when she goes out, but is able to ignore this pressure when at home or at class. Dierdre joined a sorority her freshman year, and she cited her time in the sorority as a source of pressure on her physical appearance: “And I guess like being in a sorority does affect that too. Because like when you’re with all these girls there is a sense that you need to conform to the social standard of being that kind of girl. Like dressing up, wearing makeup, all of that stuff. That I would have like pushed aside when I was younger.” Dierdre was very honest about the pressure she feels, and fairly aware of the source. She even recognized a change in herself, in regards to how she responded to the influence of her sorority sisters.

Young men and sexuality

Young men are also a source of pressure and influence for young women. As the norms detailed in the literature review would indicate, young men are expected to do most of the pushing for sexual activity, and the young women I interviewed reinforced that expectation. There were several women willing to excuse young men and blame their physical desires, and there were also young women who believed that men were no different than themselves.

A lot of women were willing to excuse the misbehavior of men in their lives because of what they perceive as a chemical drive. As Cassie said, “yeah, guys really

wanna have sex. It's just in their DNA, in their makeup that they're just ready to have it. Like once they hit puberty they're ready to go." While Becca tried to give some of her guy friends credit for taking sexual relationships seriously, she admits that ultimately they might not: "Well, I have some guy friends who don't think it's a big deal, and just something to do. And then I have other guy friends who agree with me and think it should be something special that you do with someone you love – however, most of them are still okay with having sex that doesn't mean anything!" Isabelle said that young men secretly take sex as seriously as young women do, but put on a hyper-sexual front for other men: "I mean, I think on the surface, a lot of guys are like 'yeah, huh huh huh' and mess around and be stupid, just because they feel like they have to do that? But on a one on one situation where they're your true friend, no, I don't see a difference." My interviewees seemed to accept that young men experience a high sex drive, but at the same time, want to believe that men take sexual relationships as seriously as do women.

The commonly accepted norm seemed to be that young men are the aggressive pursuers of sex. Cassie gave me several ready examples of how young men pressure young women into sexual activity. She quoted a few lines: "you know, treating them like "Oh, you must not really like me" or "You must not really love me if you're not willing to do this", "I mean, we've been together so long, don't I deserve this?" "Look how much I've done for you, don't I deserve this little thing?" You know." Marie agreed: "I think if a guy is interested in her, he will – maybe not pressure, but maybe influence her to lean in that direction. ... Like I definitely don't think women pressure men as much as men pressure women." Rachel added: "They make it feel like it's an obligation. You know. And kind of a normal thing to do."

Even Sarah, who was an adamantly virginal Christian, had issues with her Christian boyfriend pressuring her about sex: “Like, I think that if I had given in, we probably would have.” Despite their prior agreement to not engage in sexual intercourse, Sarah had to take on the typically female role of “gate keeper” and stop her boyfriend’s sexual advances. Like many of the other women interviewed, she attributed this to hormones rather than temperament.

While some women felt that they were in competition with other women, others suggested that men are a source of pressure for looking good. Julie explained the pressure she feels when getting ready to go out: “Like a guy’s not gonna notice someone in like blue jeans and a t-shirt. . . . But if I was to come over for a party, and I have on a dress, they’re like ‘Oh my god!’ Like – yeah. So... it’s different.” Dierdre agreed: “But on the weekends when I do venture out... and I’m dressed up around all those guys, they definitely notice. They’re like ‘Wow, Dierdre!’ They make little comments.” Tessa agreed, although she was unsure of the source of the pressure: “I think there’s pressure about looking sexy, for sure. Um, I mean, I don’t know if it’s from guys, or if it’s from other girls, who are putting the standard up there that you have to meet. Which I guess originally comes from guys, I don’t know.”

Yet, some of my interviewees found that talking to young men about sex was actually easier than talking to young women, because the men are less judgmental. Marie claimed that talking to guys about hooking up is actually easier than talking to girls. “I feel like the guys are – I mean, they’re not as judgmental. I mean, because they’re out there trying to get play all the time. Whereas with my girlfriends, they’re like ‘uuuwhh’. (Noise of distaste)”

However, other young women reported that young men are also easily intimidated by a young woman who seems as eager to talk about sex as they are. Kate told me about her issues with men who didn't think it was appropriate for a woman to be interested in sex. "I think that he was actually really intimidated by how easy it is for me to talk about sex? ... Like, it was one of the downfalls of our relationship. Like, he just didn't get that it was okay....He would just sit there and be like 'you own a vibrator! Oh my god!'" Thus young men may be a source of confusion for young women, because it is unclear whether they accept and reward sexual openness, or are turned off by it.

Sexual education

Unfortunately, most of my interviewees found their sexual education classes to be unhelpful and even tedious. Some blamed this on the fact that their teachers were ill-suited, some found the methods to be patronizing, some thought that the classes were occurring too late in the sexual development of the students, and some found the lack of information presented to be harmful. Interestingly, the only two women who found their classes to be helpful had both attended private schools with comprehensive sexual education. As previously mentioned in this thesis, most public schools receive funding that dictates that sexual education must be either abstinence-only or heavily promote abstinence.

A few of the women had suggestions on how they thought sexual education could be improved. Wendy expressed that her sexual education was disappointing, and has come to believe that we, as a society, are not doing it correctly. She told me that she thinks we should teach sexual education as though sexuality is normal: "Cause everybody does it! You know? I mean, just like everybody poops. Everybody touches themselves.

You know? So I think – I think sex ed should start in the home first, and then in the school second. As a more educational part of it. And parents should be a more caring, loving, understanding part of it. I think – I think there’s definitely two - two parts. To learning about sexuality.”

Several young women used the word “pointless” when describing their experience with sexual education. As Rachel said, she remembered her sexual education class as being rather unhelpful: “It wasn’t very explicit, so... (laughs) I didn’t really learn much.” Cassie agreed, explaining: “The ones in middle school were kinda dorky. It was like assemblies, you know, and just like... yeah. I don’t remember much about it. I never took like, a *class*.” Fiona told me that her sexual education class was so brief and uninformative that she was able to sum it up in one sentence: “I don’t even think it was sex ed. I mean, in depth sex ed. It was ‘this is a condom, this prevents STDs and pregnancy, ok’. That’s pretty much the sex ed.”

Tessa and Lydia had entire classes devoted to sexual education, and still found it largely unhelpful. Lydia said that she remembered her sexual education being part of a class: “We had to have a section in biology about it. I don’t ever really remember any of it. I mean, I remember that a lot of people were kind of immature on those days. Because everybody would start giggling and stuff.” Tessa also recalls her experience as mostly useless: “Um...yeah...they were health classes. And so we talked about other things along with sex, but they weren’t very informative, I’ll tell you that. I didn’t - the most stuff I learned was either from friends, or from my mom, or something.”

Some young women found their sexual education classes unhelpful because they came too late in the sexual development of the students. Dierdre said that her sexual

education was pointless for another reason – because most of her class was already sexually active: “I mean, it definitely scared us into STDs, we were like ‘oh my gosh!’ But actually having sex? Like half the class had probably already had sex.” Debra had the same issue: “...it was all kind of a joke. Because everybody already knew what was going on. Like how to ‘do it’.” Ami reported that she found hers unhelpful largely because of the teacher: “The one that I had in high school was um, it was part of health class, and it was just um... not terribly thorough? ... Yeah, we had an athletics coach for our teacher? And he was an older guy, and he was always one of those teachers that was joking all the time? And so I think he was less likely to get into really serious conversations about what we were learning and how it actually applied to real life and all that.” According to my interviewees, classes that are largely uninformative and teachers who do not take the material seriously are both detrimental to the learning of the students.

The only two interviewees who had positive sexual education experiences were both enrolled in private schools with comprehensive sexual education. Kate went to a private school, where she found her sexual education to be helpful and informative: “And we had a month of education about birth control options, and STDs, and – I mean, they pulled a condom across the room to show you that when a guy says his penis is too big for a condom, there is no such thing as too big. ... It was very comprehensive. It was a very, very liberal school.”

Isabelle also went to a private school where the sexual education was comprehensive. She told me that she thought her sexual education was valuable, and that more schools should have such programs: “Because kids are going to have sex. I mean,

that's just – that's what our society is. So abstinence only is not – yeah, I strongly disagree with that. It's not a good education plan.”

Three young women with whom I spoke do not remember ever receiving any sexual education classes. Nicole, despite having changed schools several times, did not receive any form of sexual education: “I never had sex ed. ... I never got it. I was in public school for kindergarten through eighth grade, and we never talked about sex. ... And then I was in Catholic school for high school, and we never talked about it either. It was – it was like ‘you will not have sex until you get married’.” Both Jenny and Becca said they cannot remember a single sexual education class.

Because of funding and government regulations, the majority of public schools promote abstinence-only in their sexual education classes. Marie went to a public school that promoted abstinence: “I mean, they gave us no alternatives. Pretty much. I mean, I don't remember them at all. So I don't think that they – at least, they may have mentioned it in passing, ‘hey yeah, there's some birth control and... (trails off) But abstinence only, please’.” Sarah described a similar experience with a man who came to their school to lead a sexual education assembly: “So he was funny and he made jokes and all this stuff. But he was abstinence only. But then, they showed us all these horrific slides of like people who have STDs and all these horrible things. And I feel like if sex is such a taboo subject in school, then having a sex-ed class that does that is like throwing them off the deep end.” Yvonne said that the message in her sexual education class was strong: “Just like ‘use protection if you were gonna have sex’ but abstinence was the way to go. If you don't want to ruin your life, you know.” These very strong messages were reportedly ineffective for the young women involved.

Two of the young women I interviewed were actually offered bribes in exchange for remaining virgins. Gretta had an interesting experience in which the person leading her sexual education class offered each member of the class a piece of candy if they would pledge to remain abstinent until marriage: “And she gave us a piece of candy. And this incentive is gonna last – okay I’m gonna chew it, it’s gonna break – maybe five minutes. You know? So I thought that was bizarre and I thought that was kinda crazy.” Gretta said that in retrospect, she found this ploy disturbingly temporary. Rachel had a similar bribing experience, and also found it questionable: “I remember they had an abstinence-only person come in, and they said if we promised to remain abstinent throughout high school, they would give us a chicken sandwich? Every week? (laughing) ...And they gave us like a little card. ... I was like – I guess that kinda made me question. Like “well...okay” (laughs) ... If they’re bribing us with chicken sandwiches, I’m wondering how valid, you know... their points are.”

College life and sexuality

When young women come to college, many things in their lives change, and many new norms must be learned. These new norms include new messages about sexuality that often directly contradict the norms learned by young women in earlier years. While many young women in my study became sexually active during high school, they told me that a lot changed when they got to college. They experienced sexual relationships with more than one partner, in casual situations, and with different partners than they would have chosen in high school. Other interviewees became sexually active in college for the first time. College is a time of great change, and my research participants listed several important sources of that change.

First, when young women arrive on a college campus, they are surrounded by new people who have had different life experiences than their own. As Tessa explained, “um, I think that a lot of us started taking classes and stuff and started seeing that – just hearing a lot of viewpoints from people that we’d never heard before. We grew up in kind of our little...bubble.” Being exposed to so many new people with different life experiences can be eye-opening for young women.

A young woman can even change the things she doesn’t like about her previous social self and “reinvent.” Haley explained this process, saying, “you have friends who maybe don’t know your past, and you can talk about what’s going on with you now, and leave your past out of it. Say if you became a different person between high school and college, that would be allowed.”

Second, a major part of the college experience for many with whom I spoke was going to parties, which often involved drinking and sexual encounters. Gretta explains that parties are highly conducive to being sexual. “I think... people WANT to have sex in college. ...if they’re partyin’, they’re more likely to have sex, I think.” As she points out, young women who are going to parties and meeting as many people as possibly are more likely to “just do it.” Julie agrees: “And uh, I mean the environment’s different. You have fraternity parties, and sorority parties, and there’s a lot of drinking involved.” Marie expounds on the view that sex is normal behavior, but adds that alcohol can be a huge influence: “I mean, you know, it seems like everyone’s out to get it [sex]. And definitely with the increase in alcohol and other drugs, I guess it makes it easier.” I will return to the topic of alcohol as a factor in sexual behavior in the next section of this chapter.

Third, the lack of parental supervision is a big change for many college students. Suddenly they are experiencing an unprecedented amount of freedom. As Ami said, “you don’t have your parents looking over your shoulder all the time. Most people don’t live at home anymore when they’re in college, so you have a whole lot more um, freedom. You have more ability to do things that you’re not necessarily allowed to do. That you can’t get away with at home.” Fiona agrees, explaining the novel situation: “I think people just - they are more open to experimenting and exploring in college because they are on their own, and they don’t have to worry about church in this ear and parents in this ear and all that.” Young women in college are free from daily pressure from their parents. Cassie said “there’s more pressure to achieve here, but you’re not under the – I mean, it’s pressure you put on yourself. It’s not – you’re not constantly having your parents tell you what to do.”

Finally, several women mentioned that sexual experimentation is allowed in college, and perhaps even expected. As Rachel put it, “I guess you kinda have to define yourself and figure out who you are and what you believe. And I guess college is just a really good time to figure that out. You know?” Isabelle agreed, as she explained the transition from high school to college, in terms of people’s feelings regarding sexuality: “and then we come here – this is huge. People are just like ‘whatever’. You know, and I guess – I think it was more accepted. I mean, TV portrays college as like sleeping around and stuff like that, so.” According to the women I interviewed, young women take this message to heart. Experimenting sexually and being involved in “no strings attached” sexual encounters – or “hooking up” - seem to be considered the norm, and the college aged women with whom I spoke seem to have the idea that everyone is out being sexual.

As Marie pointed out, “you’re just – you’re immersed in it. And you’re always hearing about people having sex, and I guess it makes – it’s a much more accepting environment.” Rachel explained very succinctly: “Um, I guess I felt like, at that point, everybody else was having sex, you know? I figured ‘well, if everybody’s doing it, it must not be that bad’, you know?”

Alcohol and sexuality

A lot of young women experiment with drinking – and drinking to excess – while in college. Many of the women I interviewed named alcohol and other drugs as an influence on their sexual activity. The interviewees were almost unanimous in their opinion that drinking alcohol can cloud one’s judgment and lead her to make decisions she might not otherwise make. Nicole said it quite simply: “I mean, it just impairs you. You know. You get friendly and happy and go do stupid things.” The others were inclined to agree.

One thing upon which nearly every woman interviewed agreed is that drinking alcohol, especially to excess, can cloud young women’s judgment and cause them to make bad decisions. When asked what role she thinks alcohol plays in the college experience, Cassie snorted and answered: “Stupidity. Increases the uh – or decreases the ability to make a good decision.”

Gretta explained it in a little more detail: “When you’re drunk, you’re like “Fuck it. I’m gonna pick you, and you are going home with me. And we’re gonna have a great time,” and you’re not guilty about it the next day. Or you think you’re not going to be guilty.” Marie gave a more personal account, as well: “Oh, gosh. I think alcohol plays a HUGE, huge part. Like in people’s sex lives, I guess.” She even cited instances of losing

her own inhibitions: “I mean, I know for me it has. If alcohol wasn’t involved, would I have been with those guys? I’m not so sure. . . . You know, ah... I’m thinking no. Not that I regret those decisions, but I definitely think that alc – the presence of alcohol definitely made that happen.”

Haley had the same opinion on the clouding of judgment, but added that peer pressure is a factor, as well: “People definitely lose their inhibitions. . . . And are more likely to - if they take- drink too much, then they’ll go a lot farther sometimes than they ever wanted to. Or um, if they don’t drink they see other people drinking and view what they do as normal. And then maybe decide that that’s what they should be doing, too. Peer pressure!” In this instance, the social part of drinking alcohol plays a larger role. Lydia acknowledged the social aspect as well. Lydia suggested that alcohol makes people more comfortable in potentially awkward situations: “A lot of people drink to like, loosen the situation? Like to feel better in certain environments? And drinking can make you feel better in certain situations and that just makes you feel more comfortable to have sex.”

Several of my interviewees mentioned that a young woman will attempt to excuse her behavior by essentially claiming that whatever she did doesn’t count, because she was drunk. Becca said: “I mean, it – some people use it as an excuse? You know, like it – people know that it lowers your inhibitions. You know, but – oh, and I’ve heard a lot of people say ‘oh, but I was drunk’. Like that makes it ok, you know?” Dierdre even admitted to doing it herself: “I know how easy it is to fall into that ‘oh, I’m drunk, I can do whatever, it’s okay’.” But she did not excuse this behavior: “Well, first of all, it has to count, because otherwise how are you going to keep up with how many guys you’ve had

sex with? Cause that's like, huge. ... But I think it's more of a social pressure to say that than an actual like – they don't really feel that.” The women perceived alcohol as both chemical and rhetorical influence on sexual activity.

How the Women Talk About Messages

As discussed in my literature review, young people are more prone to using slang, fillers, and different speech patterns than most of the population (Tolman 2005). The fact that young women often become uncomfortable when talking about sex and sexuality increases these tendencies. We use language to understand the messages we receive and to resolve contradictions regarding those messages.

I noticed several linguistic patterns while transcribing the interviews. The two detailed below indicate how young women are interpreting the messages they get regarding sexuality. The first details the use of the expression “it was like” – or more commonly “he/she/they was/were like” in an attempt to either tell me how something happened or to attribute thoughts or feelings to another person. The second is attributing norms to a universal other, rather than stating that one personally believes something.

“It was like”

I noticed the way in which the phrase “it was like” was used because of the many quote marks I had to type while transcribing. Women used this phrase when relating an event, and they used it for two purposes: either recounting the words of another person (essentially an impression), or ascribing feelings and thoughts to another person.

The first usage of the phrase that I would like to explore is the usage that indicates that the user is essentially doing an impression of what happened. Nicole

explained how her parents prepared her for college: “And they were like ‘you know what, you’re going to be in college next year, you need to learn how to do stuff like, you know, on your own’”, and for picking a life partner: “Like my parents were like, you know, ‘you should have sex before you get married because what if that person’s bad and then you’re stuck married with them all your life’ and it’s like ‘oh, well, I never thought of that, mom’.” Isabelle used “like” to tell me about the experience of talking with her friends: “Freshman year it was like ‘oh my gosh, I just kissed this guy’.” Dierdre explained what happens when a woman hooks up with a strange guy at a party and must make excuses: “Your friends will be like ‘seriously, you hooked up with that guy?’ like ‘c’mon now, were you drunk?’ and so that leads to like ‘oh, well, oh, I was drunk!’” Becca used this device to explain conversations she has with herself: “And I’m like ‘man, she’s really sexy’ and that like automatically trips something in my mind and I’m like ‘why do you think that’s sexy compared to your body?’”

Some women use the phrase “it was like” to recount their experiences in discussing sexuality with their parents. Dierdre is open with her parents, but feels that others are not: “but other people are like ‘oh my god, my mom still doesn’t know I’ve had sex’ and I’m like ‘you’re twenty-three years old, you can’t tell me she doesn’t think’.” Sarah tries to relate the awkward experience of getting the sex talk from her mother: “my mom was like ‘this is how b-b-babies are made’ and my sister was like ‘[the neighbor] already told her!’”

The second usage of the phrase “it was like” is the speaker ascribing feelings or thoughts to the other actor in their story. This version is not as accurate as the previous version, as women are often giving me an interpretation. For example, Ami tells me

about her experience with sexual education, but her version is likely not verbatim: “He was like ‘ok, well this is the curriculum, so I’m basically going to gloss over all of this’.”

Some women used ‘it was like’ to explain media pressure. Gretta interprets a commercial for jeans: “And they’re like, ‘if you wear these jeans, you’ll definitely get laid!’” Lydia stated that people react to sexuality in the media as though it is a command: “People are like ‘it’s a TV show, they’re doing it. Oh my goodness, I haven’t. Maybe I should go out and find someone.’” Marie agrees: “So I think when we all see that, then people start to be like ‘oh, well, then this is how women should be!’” Rachel states the message she thinks is behind most of the media: “A lot of shows are usually like ‘promiscuity is the thing to do’, you know?” and Isabelle adds her view: “it influences your decisions like you know ‘oh, it’s all right’.” Julie tells me how she thinks other girls interpret the media’s influences: “So I feel like girls are all ‘oh, if I put on this cute dress and wear a lot of makeup and curl my hair, then he’ll notice me!’”

Debra and Wendy used this phrase in interpreting how people judge their homosexuality. Debra said: “Because everybody’s older and they’re like ‘okay, we can’t hate somebody just because they like – they’re different’.” Wendy tells me that she thinks people don’t care very much: “But you know, people see me, and they see her (her girl friend), and they’re like ‘ah, they’re cool, they’re just people’.” On the other hand, they felt that the older generations viewed them differently. According to Debra: “For the most part the generation gap is ‘oh, it’s just a phase’. It’s like ‘they don’t know what they want’, you know?” Debra used this linguistic device to discuss how she understands the feelings of others, and especially of those others that may be judging her based on her sexuality.

Other young women used the phrase “he/she/it it was like” to relate messages they had gotten regarding church and religion, young men, and partying. Dierdre described her experience at church as a teenager: “Like I remember sitting in church one night and the preacher being like ‘if you dance like that, you will go to hell.’ And that’s when I was like ‘this is stupid’.” Debra used this linguistic device in coming out to her father and his issues about religion: “And I told him, I was like ‘dad, the bible’s just a story’. I was like ‘that’s how I see it’.” Isabelle tried to express how she thinks guys really feel: “I mean, I think on the surface a lot of guys are like ‘yeah, huh huh huh’ and mess around and be stupid, just because they feel like they have to do that?” Nicole gave them even less credit: “Guys are more like – well, with my friends, they’re more like ‘it’s just a one time thing, it’s just for fun’ for right now.” In all of these examples one can see the young women trying to describe their experiences and to make sense of them using the same impressionistic language. ‘It was like’ gives a possibly desired vagueness to attitudes and lessons about sexuality, others’ and one’s own.

Attributing norms to others

Many of my interviewees attributed norms, thoughts, or behaviors to a universal other. Some used the phrase “it was like”, while some were more specific and would attribute norms to all men, all women, all parents, or institutions like the religion and the media.

A topic that elicited many examples of attribution of feelings to others was that of sexuality in college. Usually at this point in the interview I had just asked about norms of sexuality in high school, and then I would ask some variation of “what are the norms regarding sexuality now that you are in college?” Many women got straight to the point,

like Gretta: “I think people want to have sex in college”, Fiona: “I think people just – they are more open to experimenting and exploring in college”, and Haley: “people definitely have different expectations in college”. The women I interviewed did not reference themselves in such statements.

Another topic associated with attributing norms to others was that of drinking, and especially of drinking to excess and then making possibly unwise decisions. Haley put it very clearly: “people definitely lose their inhibitions...they’ll go a lot further sometimes than they ever wanted to,” as did Becca, who stated: “some people use it (alcohol) as an excuse.”

As discussed previously, some women said that they themselves were immune or resistant to media influences, but did not give the same credit to others. When asked what messages they think the media is sending or what messages they are receiving themselves, some women did not answer for themselves and instead spoke for other people. Dierdre said: “I think it definitely is hurting the younger generations.” Yvonne attributed a certain weakness to others: “it’s amazing, the things people do when they see stuff on TV.” Becca told me that she thinks the media influences others in damaging ways: “I think that’s where a lot of eating disorders come from”. She did not refer to any eating disorder of her own.

The women also attributed messages to religion and the teachings of their church. Marie interpreted Christianity’s wishes as restricting: “They would rather you do nothing...they wanted you to be in a committed relationship.” Rachel said they were definitive and simple: “Definitely one person only. And only after you’re married.” Dierdre found her Southern Baptist church to be hypocritical: “These people are like out

there doing whatever they want. But then they harp on this on Sundays and Wednesdays.” On the other side of that issue, Ami, a Christian, expressed negative feelings about the traits attributed to her faith: “A lot of people believe that um, ‘Oh, Christians say sex is a sin!’ and that’s totally ludicrous.”

Roughly half of the women attributed a feeling of dread or discomfort to their fathers or mothers regarding talking about sexuality with their children. Marie told me about lying to her parents about her virginity: “I think they would have died if they know that I was having sex so young. God, probably still!” Finally, many informants attributed feelings and motivations to young men. As Cassie told me: “I think that less honest guys who are less respectful of women will use women for sex. Whether they’ll admit that’s what they’re doing or not.” Marie agreed: “From my guy friends [I hear] ‘everybody’s doing it, with multiple people’. They’re definitely more open to getting play all the time”. Kate attributed a certain level of confusion to the men in her life: “I think there’s a huge gap between what men expect to see from women they date and what they want”. With that statement Kate is essentially attributing a certain delusional state on men in general, perhaps in an attempt to understand her own experiences. It is a bold declaration, and one that shows that young women are struggling in their attempt to make sense of their sexual encounters.

Conflicts Between Messages and Their Resolution

Some young women found conflicting messages between sources, such as the Christian church telling you to love one another and yet to remain abstinent, or the media proclaiming that women should be sexy but not slutty. They dealt with these conflicts

behaviorally. This was evidenced in several interesting ways. One is the fact that many young women had difficulty talking about sex, and in fact refrained from using the word “sex”, even if they were sexually active. The ways in which women choose to resolve these conflicts are also of interest. Many found solace in talking to others and hearing about their experiences. Many young women said that they had refrained from vaginal intercourse to preserve their virginity, but engaged in oral and sometimes anal sex with their partners.

In this section I examine how my research participants used language to resolve the conflicts they felt about discord between norms or between norms and their actions. The women commonly used two methods: accounts and stories of self-change. With accounts women could explain away an action with which they were uncomfortable or with which they feared I might be, and with stories of self-change women could use the narrative form to share a decision or action with me. The narrative form, as discussed in the literature review, helps both the teller and the listener to understand the situation in which the story is taking place, and thus to understand the actor and her behavior.

Not using the word “sex”

A few interesting linguistic patterns came to my attention while transcribing my interviews. Among them was a noted reticence among the young women to actually use the word “sex” when discussing their sexual behavior or the behavior of others. I thought this to be especially odd because every interviewee knew going into the interview that we would be discussing sex and sexuality, so it would seem that only those comfortable with the topic would agree to the interview in the first place. Additionally, I used the word “sex” liberally and without hesitation, often in the question preceding their answers. Even

women who were sexually active were not comfortable with expressing that through direct language. Tessa was an excellent example: “The norm is that – most girls are – among my friend group, um, would be doing kinda the everything but, I guess.” Here she is referring to the practice of doing “everything but” having vaginal intercourse.

Some women refrained from using direct language with me and shared how they tried to refrain from being exposed to sexuality in their everyday lives. Lydia, in describing her discomfort with sexuality in movies and television shows, told me the following: “we don’t really, unless there’s – if it’s really blatant. If it’s blatant, we’ll not watch it as much. But if it’s a movie where it’s in there, but it’s not too much, then we’ll be fine with it. . . . Um, there will be movies that um, there’s just so much that it I think it kind of overrides the plot? And I would maybe - I would prob- I might turn it off.” Throughout this entire explanation, Lydia neither used the word sex nor directly referenced sexual contact, although we both knew that that was what she was talking about.

Some girls claimed that they discuss sexual issues among their girlfriends, but even when telling me about it they did not use the word sex. As Haley said: “we can talk about all that stuff. And then the new girls are starting to realize that they can come to us with all that stuff.” Rachel made similar allusions to “stuff” when describing conversations with other young women in the dorms: “And uh, I guess they’d always go out to frat parties and stuff, and I’d hear about ‘em doing stuff with the other guys at the frat houses, and like – I don’t know, I guess I felt like I should be doing it too, or something.” Even when telling me about hearing stories about other people, Rachel hesitates to use explicit language. Jenny claimed that talking with her friends is not

uncomfortable, but still did not speak directly: “And there wasn’t really anything that wasn’t okay. I mean, some things. But for the most part it wasn’t something that anyone was concerned with talking about.”

Accounts

Scott and Lyman (1968) first introduced the concept of accounts as the ways in which people explain having done some “untoward” action. Essentially, when a person does anything that they know others may judge them for, they will account for their action to make it seem more harmless to themselves and others (justification) or to minimize their responsibility for it (excuse). My interviewees used several accounts as they sought to reconcile the anti-sex messages they had received about sexuality with their sexual conduct.

For example, in describing her decision to have sex, Rachel said: “I think it had to do with being in a new environment and not knowing what the norms were. ... I guess it’s just like when you’re pressured with anything, you know? ... Um, I guess I felt like, at that point, everybody else was having sex, you know?” Tessa used a similar account to explain her decision to become sexually active: “I think we just decided that you know – I mean, not having sex with a bunch of different partners. But if you’re in a committed relationship, then we feel that’s okay.” Her communication with her girlfriends on the subject led her to a greater level of comfort with her sexual activity. Isabelle told a different story about her decision. In her case, the choice to become sexually active was based on her feelings for her partner: “I think I just fell in love... and I was in love – I’m still, I mean, I’m still dating the same guy. ... And it was true love, you know? I felt it was ok.” For Julie, her decision was both partner-centric and influenced by her friends:

“For me, um, it was just mainly about the guy I was with at the time and then...like I was the only person in my group of friends that had not had sex”.

Marie justified her decision by saying that she was harming no one: “So I realized, or I guess I thought, there’s nothing wrong with me doing this! I’m safe. You know, I’m using protection.” Implicit in account-giving is the notion that the normative standard one has violated is generally legitimate. The trespass would need no explanation if this were not the case.

Stories of self-change

Some women recounted their decisions regarding sexual behavior via stories of self-change. As explored in the literature review, members of a society tell stories to one another to explain their choices. In so doing, norms of behavior and understandings thereof, are reinforced. While acknowledging that they heard and abided by certain messages as they were growing up, at a certain point they chose to make a different choice regarding sexuality. That choice marked a narrative turning point.

The contradiction between messages received from religion and messages from friends and the media regarding sexuality before marriage was difficult to negotiate for the women with whom I spoke. While surrounded by other young women and men who were engaging in premarital sex in the college setting, these young women had to reconcile the faith with which they were brought up and the sexual activities in which they desired to partake.

Rachel told the story of how she reconciled her faith and her desire to be sexually active: “And I thought maybe if I just look at the bible and see what in general god says we should do it’ll be okay. I kinda went and researched it myself, and I guess I kinda

validated my own feelings. ... I guess when I went and researched it, I found a reason [to not abstain from sex].” Tessa described a very similar experience: “I guess I just decided that the reasons [for abstinence] the church was giving me weren’t – just didn’t really fit? ...like I wasn’t hurting anyone else, doing it. I wasn’t hurting myself. As long as I was safe about it, I didn’t understand why I couldn’t, you know, share that with someone.” In Isabelle’s case, her desire to be sexual with her partner became stronger than her desire to hold to her religious views: “I’ve always had a really strong view of like ‘I don’t want to have sex until I get married’. And then, you know, that changes when you fall in love with somebody. And you’re like ‘well...’” These women examined their previous beliefs and effectively chose to reject them.

In some women’s stories, a sympathetic fellow protagonist shaped the plot. Tessa counted her boyfriend as an influence: “But then I came to college, and got into what I felt like was a more adult relationship, like when I was here. And I decided that the reasons I had been abstaining for just didn’t make a lot of sense to me anymore.” Other women reportedly became more comfortable with the idea of being sexual through conversations with their girl friends. As Julie told me in her story: “I just felt better about it through talking to other people about how they dealt with it. About them being a Christian and stuff like that. ... I talked to my two roommates who are my very best friends, and they would tell me about their sexual encounters, and I didn’t feel so bad. It was just – I don’t know. Like we’re all Christians in our apartment, but it’s just our boundaries are different.” Cassie voiced a similar story: “I could talk to other Christians and they’d be like – what was ok, what my boundaries were, where to draw those absolute lines. Like ok ‘this is a gray area, but this is a line you do not cross’.” Becca

told me much the same thing: “And then the more comfortable I got with my own body, and the more I talked to other people who were comfortable with their bodies, I realized it was something that you do – well, that different people do in different contexts. ... And it’s not something to be embarrassed about.”

All of these young women chose the method of telling me a story to explain their life-changing decisions. The story is a way of placing their change in time and place, and makes one’s decisions seem familiar and understandable. A narrative of personal growth through exposure to new emotional and social frontiers is furthermore characteristically American, and thus the women should expect this American interviewer to understand it.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The young women in my study reported receiving messages from multiple sources, and very often these messages were inconsistent with one another. College is a time when the norms for sexual behavior change. While in high school many of my interviewees had sexual relationships, but it was generally in the context of a monogamous relationship. In college, an atmosphere of freedom and experimentation introduced new sexual norms. The women became more comfortable – or at least more familiar – with the thought of having one or more sexual partners before marriage. The prevalence of alcohol and parties played into this new way of being sexual. Many of the women with whom I spoke told me of the pressures of the “partying” atmosphere.

Several issues came to my attention throughout this study. Many of the young women I interviewed were raised in conservative Christian homes; this is most likely due to my location in the “Bible Belt” of the Southeastern United States. However, being brought up in such an environment made sexuality a very taboo subject for many, which led to a great deal of conflict for many of my interviewees. Some issues which the young women brought up included their school-sanctioned sexual education, talking about sex and sexuality in the home, and the intersection of religion and sexuality. This final chapter reconsiders these issues and provides my suggestions for possible policy and educational reform.

My interviews have shown that sexual education is failing the young people it is supposed to help, in that less than half of the women (3 out of 8) who had received abstinence-only education have chosen to remain abstinent. Consistent with other studies, abstinence-only education does not appear to be helpful, but comprehensive sexual

education gives young women a better understanding of ways to prevent pregnancy and disease. About half of the women I interviewed were recipients of abstinence-only education, and several of them expressed their discontent with the paucity of information they were given. In fact, the only two women who were pleased with their sexual education both went to private, liberal high schools where sexual education was a detailed and lengthy undertaking. I would suggest, as have others before me (Collins et al. 2002, Santelli et al. 2006), that sexual education should be more comprehensive and should include as much detail as possible about prevention of pregnancy and disease. So-called comprehensive sexual education gives young women a better understanding of their bodies and thus an increased ability to take care of them.

Openness when speaking with the family is another issue that was brought up often in my interviews. Women who were comfortable talking with their parents about sex were more comfortable talking with their friends as well, and more thoughtful about their sexual decisions. Women who felt that sexuality was a taboo subject among these intimates were also more cautious in their choices, but were generally more fearful and regretful. These observations lead me to believe that open conversation in the household leads to young women making more thoughtful and confident decisions. There are no obvious policy implications for speaking about sex and sexuality in the home, but providing parents with this information could be beneficial.

Religion and sexuality have always been intertwined, and occasionally in ways that create a good deal of doubt and fear. Nineteen (19) of my 21 research participants had been raised Christian and given abstinence-only messages, but only three women in the sample (all of them Christian, all of them given abstinence-only messages) had

chosen to wait until marriage to have intercourse for the first time. It would appear that Christian churches are losing strength or offering a less than powerful message in regards to saving sexual intercourse for marriage. Several women mentioned becoming disenchanted with other aspects of religion as they grew older, including finding members of the church to be hypocritical and thus doubting their beliefs and teachings. I think this study can shed some light on how religion can better reach its younger members, or at least on why so many young women have rejected its message of abstinence as they have grown into adulthood. In particular, Christian churches might try a more comprehensive message that allows for certain aspects of sexuality.

My study has also revealed several linguistic devices that young women use when trying to come to terms with sexuality in their own lives. The phrase “he/she/it was like” was used both to relate a story and to attribute thoughts or feelings to another. While I have read many studies dealing with linguistics and young women, to my knowledge none have been written regarding the use of this phrase. I think the phrase “it was like” is significant, both because it shows what the listener heard and what they interpreted the speaker to mean. In the context of this research, it matches the vagueness that my research participants identified in their past sex education. The fact that so few young women were able to comfortably use the word “sex” when discussing sexual activity was worrisome. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, we cannot conceive of things we cannot express (Whorf 1956). Surely the women conceived of themselves as sexual beings, but that identity may be an unexamined one.

Finally, many of the women came to terms with their changing sexuality through the use of accounts and narratives of self-change. With both of these devices women are

able to explain their choices. When my interviewees did something with which they were uncomfortable, such as engaging in sexual intercourse despite teachings of abstinence, they were able to provide a narrative that could reassure them and me. These narratives situated their actions in a certain place and time, and thus legitimized their actions.

The fact that so many of the women in my study have chosen to engage in sexual intercourse, despite the teachings of their parents, religion, and their sexual education classes would seem to indicate that there are major changes afoot in the social order. Nearly all of the women in this study had engaged in sex before marriage. Casual sex has become more openly acceptable for women of the current generation, despite the fact that they are given much the same messages as the generations before them.

Society still teaches young women that they should not be openly sexual, but the media have increasingly promoted the opposite view. Young women are still taught to be the gatekeepers to sexuality, but they are allowing more sexual advances than previous generations, and with greater social acceptance. While it is still possible that a young woman's reputation can be damaged by a sexual encounter, the young women I interviewed seemed to suggest that it is less likely happen now than it might have been in previous generations.

Nonetheless, the change is not one towards sexual licentiousness. While the lay perception seems to be that young people are having a greater amount of sex than ever, the women with whom I spoke did not confirm this. While they were comfortable with the idea of premarital sex, they seemed to only approve of such relationships when they took place within a committed relationship. Whereas the idea of hooking up – having casual sexual encounters with no intent of pursuing a relationship – was accepted among

the young women in my study, they all spoke of it as though other women were doing it but they themselves were not. They did not wholly approve of it.

It would appear that the messages that society traditionally gives to young women regarding sexuality are no longer having the same effect on young women that they once did. My study suggests that today's young women are interpreting expectation of chastity in their own way. Their ultimate synthesis of conflicting norms is prudence.

The young women in my study negotiated the norms they were hearing about being sexually pure with the sexual culture in which they lived and their own sexual desires. In the end, the best synthesis for many of them was being sexual in a limited way. Many women told me in their interviews that they had to make compromises between their ideals and their realities, and this study would indicate that the sexual social order is moving toward limited sexuality among young women.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Do you watch any TV shows or DVDs with your friends?
 - a. What kinds of things do you watch?
 - b. What kinds of sexual interactions happen in those shows?
 - c. Do you talk to your friends about the sex lives of the characters?
2. Do you talk to your friends about your own sex lives?
 - a. Is it awkward or comfortable?
 - b. Do you mostly talk about other people's, or your own?
 - c. Do you think it's ok to talk about sex?
 - d. Do you have guy friends that you talk about sex and sexuality with?
3. Looking back at high school:
 - a. Do you remember anything about your sex ed classes?
 - i. Did you find it embarrassing/informative/useless?
 - b. What kind of sexual behavior was totally normal for you and your friend group in high school?
 - c. What would have been totally weird or unacceptable?
4. Now that you're in college:
 - a. What kind of sexual behavior is totally normal for you and your friend group?
 - b. Do you think that's different for guys?
 - i. Why/what do you think about that?
 - c. Do you think sex and sexuality are treated differently in college?
 - i. How so?
 - ii. Are there different expectations?
 - d. What role do you think alcohol plays?
 - e. What about parties?
5. Do you think that other people your age feel differently or similarly about sex and sexuality?
6. Do you think that other people your age are having more or less sex than you?
7. Where you raised with any religion?
 - a. If so: what kind of messages do you feel like you got from the church regarding sexuality?
8. Did you ever talk to your parents about sex?
 - a. If so: what kind of messages do you feel like you got from your parents about sexuality?
9. Do you feel like you're getting any messages from the media about sex or sexuality?
 - a. What kind of messages?
 - b. When you're just getting dressed or going shopping, do you feel a pressure to be sexy?
10. Assuming that you got messages promoting abstinence, how did you make the decision to go against those messages and become sexually active?
11. Who do you most not want to disappoint with your sexual behavior?

- a. What do you think would disappoint them?
12. Do you feel like the messages you're getting about sexuality conflict with one another?
- a. What do you do when they conflict? How do you choose which ones to listen to?

Table 1: Demographic and Relationship Information on Research Participants

NAME	AGE	YEAR	RACE	SEX ED	SORORITY	VIRGIN	RELATIONSHIP STATUS	SEXUAL ORIENTATION	Christian	Open/Closed Parents
Gretta	27	Senior	White	Ab-only	No	No	Single	Straight	Yes	Open
Cassie	23	Junior	White	Ab-only	No	Yes	Engaged	Straight	Yes	Open
Haley	22	Junior	White	General	Yes	No	Single	Straight	Yes	Open
Lydia	20	Sophomore	White	General	No	Yes	Dating	Straight	Yes	Closed
Julie	22	Junior	White	General	No	No	Single	Straight	Yes	Open
Marie	21	Junior	White	Ab-only	No	No	Dating	Bi-curious	Yes	Closed
Nicole	20	Sophomore	White	General	No	No	Single	Straight	Yes	Open
Rachel	18	Freshman	White	General	No	No	Dating	Straight		Closed
Jenny	23	Junior	White	Ab-only	No	No	Dating	Straight	Yes	both
Becca	26	Senior	White	General	No	No	Single	Straight	No	Closed
Dierdre	23	Senior	White	General	Yes	No	Dating	Straight	Yes	Open
Debra	20	Sophomore	White	Ab-only	No	No	Dating	Lesbian	Yes	Closed
Wendy	20	Junior	White	General	No	No	Dating	Lesbian	Yes	Closed
Ami	25	Senior	Black	General	No	No	Dating	Straight	Yes	Closed
Kate	21	Junior	White	General	No	No	Single	Straight	No	Both
Yvonne	25	Senior	White	General	No	No	Married	Straight		Closed
Tessa	22	Junior	White	Ab-only	Yes	No	Dating	Straight	Yes	Both
Sarah	21	Junior	White	Ab-only	No	Yes	Single	Straight	Yes	Closed
Isabelle	18	Freshman	White	General	No	No	Single	Straight	Yes	Closed
Fiona	19	Sophomore	Black	General	No	No	Single	Straight	No	Open
Emma	21	Junior	White	Ab-only	No	No	Dating	Straight	Yes	Closed

Informed Consent Form

**Department of Sociology
University of Tennessee
Lanier F. Basenberg and Dr. Lois Presser, Principal Investigators
(865) 974-6021**

AGREEMENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

PURPOSE

I, _____, agree to participate in this research study. The purpose of the study is to assess opinions about sexuality among young women. The researchers will be interviewing young women who are University of Tennessee students and Tennessee residents to achieve this purpose. All data gathered by the research staff will be used only for the purpose of the study.

PROCEDURES

I understand that this study involves interviews in which I am participating. Interviews will take place in private meeting spaces on and near campus. I understand that my interview will be digitally recorded and reviewed by Ms. Basenberg and Dr. Presser only.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS

No risks or problems are expected to result from the study. The potential benefit of the study is a better understanding of young women's sexuality and views on sexuality.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I am free to refuse to be interviewed as part of this study. I am also free to decline to answer any question or questions. These decisions will be kept confidential.

AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

If I have any questions about the study or the interviews, I am free to call Lanier Basenberg or Dr. Presser at (865) 974-6021, or email Ms. Basenberg at lbasenbe@utk.edu.

My name will not be on any record except for this form. This form will be kept in a locked file. Only Ms. Basenberg and Dr. Presser will have a key to this file. All other records, including the digital recordings and the transcriptions of those recordings, will be kept under a made-up name instead of my real name. The information that I provide during the session will not be associated with me, even after the study is over. After six years the digital recordings of my interview will be destroyed.

SIGNATURES

I, the undersigned, understand the above explanation and volunteer to participate in this study.

Participant's signature

Date

Principal Investigator's signature

Date

VITA

Lanier Frances Basenberg was born November 30, 1982. She completed her BA in sociology at Kenyon College in 2005, and will complete her MA in sociology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2009. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, deviance, social psychology, and criminology.