

RELIGIOSITY INFLUENCES ON
SEXUAL ATTITUDES AMONG
YOUNG EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN
A THESIS
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INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of research that examines the effects of religiosity on sexual attitudes among both male and female adolescents (Coleman, Lester, and Testa 2008; Brükner, Hannah, and Bearman 2005; Regnerus 2007; Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, and Randall 2004; Rostosky, Regnerus, and Wright 2003; Schensul 1998; Billy, Brewster, and Grady 1994; Brewster, Cooksey, Guikey, and Rindfuss 1998; Simons, Burt, and Peterson 2009). Many existing studies also examine how female adolescents interpret contradicting cultural messages about sex from media sources, such as music, movies, television, and magazines (Tolman 2005; Pierce 1990; 1993; Kunkel, Cope, and Biely 1999). However, little scholarly attention has been paid to how young adult, evangelical Christian women utilize messages from their own conservative religious culture to understand sexuality. My research is important because previous scholarship posits that evangelicals adhere to strict norms regarding sexuality (Steensland et al. 2000), but no study analyzes if and how young adult, evangelical women utilize strict value norms within their religious culture when framing sexuality.

My research explores how evangelical Christian women between the ages of 18 and 26 utilize messages regarding sexuality from their pastors and parents to shape their attitudes toward sexuality. Utilizing interviews with 21 young adult, evangelical Christian women, this project draws on subculture identity, scripting, and reference group theories as a framework to examine how this group understands sexuality. Although previous research has examined the intersections of sexuality and religion, as well as adolescents' and young adults' perceptions as to what constitutes sex, no study has focused exclusively on how young, adult evangelical Christian women view the purpose(s) of sex and how they define virginity loss and sexual purity. The results will

illustrate the extent to which young adult, evangelical Christian women use religious subcultural scripts from pastors and parents to understand sexuality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Subculture Identity Theory

The subcultural identity theory of religion (Smith, Emerson, Gallagher, Kennedy, and Sikkink 1998) posits that evangelicalism offers its believers a sense of identity and meaning by providing a unique set of values and norms that emphasize how evangelicals are distinct from other religious groups. The attitude or belief that evangelicals are distinct from others can be particularly advantageous for strengthening in-group identity and commitment. As evangelicals stress restrained sexuality to a greater degree than other Protestant groups, they are likely to take a firm stance toward sexuality (Steensland et al. 2000). These firm stances can come from pastors, a literal interpretation of the Bible, and messages from parents. This theory will help answer whether young adult, evangelical Christian women use messages from pastors and parents regarding strict sexual norms.

Scripting Theory

When a person creates a script, she connects and organizes related information. This information comes from a group of similar sequences of actions or “scenes” from her life. She interprets and defends these actions, then creates a similar set of actions of her own (Mosher and Tomkins 1988). Scripts are used selectively and modified as individuals make their own life choices. Scripting theory suggests cultural scripts are crucial in shaping sexual normatives and assumes that sexual patterns of behavior are locally situated, socially rooted, and learned over time (Schensul 1998). This study will explore the extent to which young adult, evangelical Christian women use religious subcultural scripts, or a set of rules learned from their religious environment, to

understand sexuality. By specifically examining how young adult Christian women in my study frame their general attitudes of sexuality, this study can help scholars understand how conservative evangelical subcultures are maintained.

Reference Group Theory

Reference group theory is based on the idea that individuals use the standards of other significant people in their life to make self-appraisals, comparisons, and choices (Dawson 2001). According to reference group theory, a young woman's attitude can be shaped by the group in which she participates (Bock, Beeghley, and Mixon 1983). When a group serves as a frame of reference for an individual, and when the individual's and the group's values oppose one another, the individual is more likely to conform to his or her group's values and beliefs (Bock et al. 1983). This study utilizes reference group theory to explore the extent to which young adult evangelical Christian women's general attitudes toward sexuality are shaped by the values of their group, and it provides insight in understanding how evangelical women navigate through the different value messages from pastors and parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religiosity

There are many denominations classified as conservative Christianity, and they do not agree on any one set of beliefs (Woodberry and Smith 1998). Social scientists use the terms "fundamentalist," "evangelical," "born again," and "conservative Protestant" interchangeably (Kellstedt and Smidt 1991). I define conservative protestants according to the three core principles of evangelism: (1): a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, (2): an acceptance of the authority of the Bible, and (3): the recognition of the necessity of conversion for salvation, or salvation obtained through faith in Jesus Christ (Hunter 1981).

Two churches in particular, Assemblies of God and Southern Baptist, define themselves as conservative, born again, or evangelical in a statement of faith on their website (ag.org 2012; sbc.net 2012). Though nondenominational congregations do not identify as one unified church body like Assemblies of God and Southern Baptist, nondenominational or independent churches tend to be conservative in nature and resemble evangelical Protestants in many beliefs (Steensland et al. 2000).

A literal interpretation of the Bible is a key doctrine of evangelicalism and conservative churches (Smith 1990). This is important and relevant to sexuality because some passages in the Bible are interpreted as explicitly condemning sex before marriage (Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 5:1;[6:13](#), 18; [10:8](#); 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). Additionally, the Bible, according to the Assemblies of God and Southern Baptist websites, is “inspired by God and therefore totally true and the standard for all human conduct” (ag.org; sbc.net 2012). Though Biblical passages are often interpreted as specifically condemning sex before marriage, there is little to no research that explores how young adult, evangelical women understand Biblical scripture regarding sexuality.

Conservative evangelical denominations typically emphasize strict adherence to particular doctrines (Steensland et al. 2000), such as condemning sex before marriage. Conservative Protestant churches also typically discourage contraceptives and birth control, emphasizing that sexual activity should take place only for the purposes of reproduction (Brewster et al. 1998). Previous research examines to what extent pastors’ follow these strict evangelical doctrines, or if they knit their own biases into sermons (Smith 2009). This scholarship analyzes messages from both conservative and liberal Christian pastors to determine what Protestant pastors tell others about sexual morality. No research exists, however, that examines the extent to which these doctrines are

utilized by young adult, evangelical women to understand sexuality. Denominations tend to generate their own worldviews and help shape members' concrete beliefs through formal preaching and informal discussions (Steensland et al. 2000). Therefore, I examine how young adult, evangelical Christian women use messages regarding sexuality from pastors in forming their own beliefs regarding sex.

Influence of Family Religiosity

Young adults learn appropriate sexual norms early in life as they are influenced by the values and behavior of their parents or guardians. The family is integral in forming sexual attitudes because it provides role models, a social and economic environment, and standards and guidelines of sexual conduct (Thornton and Camburn 1987). The family is a primary agent of socialization, and parents often use religion as a context for teaching important values for setting specific behavior standards. Existing research finds that parents' frequent church attendance and engagement in religious activities may delay the time of teens' sexual debut (Manlove et al. 2006). Less research, though, focuses on messages young adults receive from their parents regarding sexuality.

One important exception is Regnerus's (2005) work examining parental religiosity. His research finds that regular parental church attendance contributes to less frequent conversations about sex between parents and their children. Though his work explores the frequency of conversations regarding sex, other research examines the conversations themselves regarding sexuality between a mother and daughter (Lefkowitz, Boone, Signman, and Kit-fong Au 2002; McKee and Karasz 2006; Tannen 2006). However, this scholarship explores gender differences in conversations between mother and daughter and mother and son (Lefkowitz et al. 2002) and the specific points of conversation regarding sexuality that mother and daughter can agree upon, such as

sexual health issues (McKee and Karasz 2006). Popular psychological literature explains the mother-daughter dynamic and how it affects conversations about sex (Tannen 2006).

In sum, though the family can serve an important role in teaching moral values and providing guidelines for sexual conduct, the research is mixed on how the family influences adolescents' sexuality. On one hand, a family's religious involvement can delay teens' first sexual experience, but research also finds that parents' consistent church attendance can limit conversations regarding sex. My research examines how young adult, evangelical Christian women use messages from their parents to form their current general attitudes toward sexuality, especially as young adult, evangelical Christians away from their parents at college, or at least under a less direct parental influence than adolescents or young adults not attending college.

What is "Sex" to Young Evangelical Christian Women?

People define sex and abstinence differently (Byers, Henderson, and Hobson 2009; Carpenter 2001). Previous research shows that most university students believe they can engage in a certain level of sexual activity and still remain abstinent. Students in one study (Byers et al. 2009) marked as many as 17 different sexual behaviors they still counted as "abstinence." Additionally, some participants believed they could maintain their virginity and still engage in oral sex or anal sex, while others believed that *any* sexual act was a loss of virginity. Likewise, Bersamin, Fisher, Walker, Hill, and Grube (2007) found that 70 percent of adolescents who engaged in oral sex believed they retained their virginity. Though college students define sex and abstinence differently, previous studies show that vaginal intercourse is nearly always considered to be sex (Bogart et al 2000; Carpenter 2001; Bersamin et al. 2007; Byers et al. 2009). College students who said they had never engaged in vaginal intercourse, results found,

had more conservative values and sexual attitudes (Byers et al. 2009). Religiosity may help explain *why* students select several items of sexual activity as “abstinence” (pressure to remain pure). Christian students, similar to students in other studies whose religiosity was not measured, also identified as virgins after engaging in oral sex (Burdette et al. 2009).

Different groups attach different meanings and definitions to sexual activity. Previous research show that young women believed their virginity to be “precious,” while the young men in the study saw their virginity stigmatizing and something to be “lost” (Carpenter 2001). Less research shows how young adult, evangelical Christian women define sex or virginity loss, and more specifically, how these women arrive at these definitions. My study examines how young adult, evangelical Christian women construct their attitudes of sexuality, including virginity loss. How do they use, for example, messages from specific influences within their conservative religious subculture, such as pastors and parents, to understand sexuality?

How do Gender and Sex Intertwine?

Previous scholarship examines the extent to which evangelical Christian women adhere to strict gender roles regarding sexuality (Aune 2008; Sharma 2008; Kim 2008). The literature is mixed as to whether evangelical women adhere to evangelical norms and traditional gender roles, or whether adherence among this group is weakening. Some research shows that adherence to strict evangelical norms is declining (Aune 2008). Other studies show that maintaining strict norms is important to evangelical women. For example, working-class Korean-American married evangelical women use their evangelical faith to negotiate their power in marital conflicts and the division of household labor by taking primary control of all the housework and being submissive and deferential in conflict (Kim 2008). A similar study addresses how Christian women

bargain their power within marriage by acting subordinate and sexually passive (Sharma 2008). The women feel both oppressed and empowered as they feel a sense of accountability to carry out traditional norms regarding sexuality. Similarly, my research examines whether young adult, evangelical Christian women hold a sense of accountability to their larger evangelical group in carrying out strict and patriarchal norms regarding sexuality.

METHODOLOGY

My study utilizes narrative-style research to explore how young adult, evangelical Christian women receive messages from their parents and pastors to understand sexuality. Narrative research stems from ethnographic and feminist literature. Personal one-on-one in-depth interviews provide an ideal venue for gathering the individual's account of his or her experiences and beliefs (Schensul 1998), and this study models this style of research.

Initially, I anticipated recruiting many of the participants through a snowball sampling method. After recruiting two participants via this method, though, I encountered great resistance in finding participants. I then changed course to recruit participants through a campus-wide recruitment email to all enrolled students attending a mid-sized, Midwestern, four-year liberal arts university. In the recruitment email, I introduced myself as a graduate student gathering data for my thesis. I explained that the purpose for my research was to understand how a conservative Christian woman's religious culture shapes her beliefs about sexuality. I specifically recruited female participants ages 18-26. I chose to interview women between these ages because this is a time when a young woman's identity is continuously being formed (Sharma 2008). In addition, this is a good group to study because women feel a sense of accountability in carrying out traditional and patriarchal norms regarding sex (Sharma 2008).

Conservative, close-knit church communities are relational systems, and provide young adult women structure when negotiating identity and life issues, such as sexuality, during this time period (18-26) (Sharma 2008).

In the recruitment email, I asked if the potential participant considers herself a conservative Christian. The email also stated that “conservative” can be a gray area, but that conservative Christians typically attend a nondenominational, Assemblies of God, or Baptist church. I included three web links within the recruitment email: the National Association for Evangelicals statement of faith; the Southern Baptist statement of faith; and the Assemblies of God statement of faith. I used the Southern Baptist and Assemblies of God statements of faith because these are two of the larger evangelical Christian denominations in the country (thearda.com 2012). I said that the statements of faith were simply guidelines, and not a checklist, for those who are unsure if they consider themselves conservative.

Those interested in participating needed to have attended church fairly regularly or attended church fairly regularly in the recent past. Though church attendance is not a measure for determining if a participant qualified as a “conservative” evangelical woman, it was important to ask potential participants about their church frequency because the interview questions asked participants to articulate messages received from pastors within the church(es). If a participant did not attend church regularly, it is less likely she would have heard messages regarding sexuality. As many of the students would likely be away from their hometown church, some of the participants may not have found a church home around the college, but could still contribute to the discussion if they attended church regularly in the recent past. When I received an email response, I confirmed that the potential participant met the requirements of the study. I then

coordinated a time and location convenient for the participant to meet.

The Participants

From the 40 email responses I received from the college recruitment email, 21 women met the requirements of the study and were able to participate. Saturation occurred within these 21 interviews. I believe that adding more participants to this study would unlikely introduce new concepts. All of the participants in my study attended a conservative, evangelical church at one point in their lives, either at their hometown church growing up or at a church on or nearby the college campus. Nine, or just over 40 percent, of the women identified as non-denominational, or as attending a non-denominational church at the time of the interview. However, three of the participants who identified as attending a non-denominational church attended a Baptist church growing up. Although one participant currently attends a First Presbyterian church, and Presbyterian is not classified as “conservative,” the participant spent all her time before entering college in a very conservative Baptist church, and continues to align her own beliefs with evangelical beliefs. Furthermore, she attends the Presbyterian church because it is close to campus, but attends the Baptist church when she is on break from school. Another participant claimed no church affiliation because she could not at the time find a similar conservative church to her hometown conservative Baptist church. She identifies herself as a conservative Christian, and continues to attend her Baptist church when she visits her family during school breaks.

Nineteen women, or all but two of the participants, said God was “very” important in their life. Seventeen of the participants said religion was “very” important in their life, and the other four participants said religion was “somewhat” important in their life. Over 50% of the participants live away from parent(s) and reside alone or with a non-romantic roommate on the college campus, but it is likely that many if not all live with their parents

when they are not in school. Only two of the participants live with the parents, and these participants are 20 and 21. Four of the women are married and live with their spouse.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Data come from surveys and semi-structured, in-depth interviews, ranging from thirty to ninety-minutes in length. The average interview was 45 minutes in length. Interviews were conducted between July and September 2011. The women first filled out a short survey assessing basic demographic questions, church attendance, and questions that addressed how important God and religion is to their lives.

An interview immediately followed the completion of the survey. Questions inquired about messages they receive from four distinct areas: their parents, peers, church leaders and from the Bible. To begin each interview, I asked questions about their relationship with God or Christ and the benefits of attending church. When clarification or elaboration was appropriate, I asked follow-up questions. Each interview was recorded with the interviewee's written permission and then transcribed. To maintain anonymity, each participant was immediately provided a pseudonym in place of her name before I began coding.

Coding

The interview data were analyzed using a constant comparative method. The constant comparative method joins coding and analysis to generate theory more systematically than explicit coding and analytic procedures (Glaser 1965). This method is helpful in discovering patterns among multiple participants' words and phrases (Glaser 2002). I coded emerging themes from the transcripts, or words and phrases specifically mentioned repeatedly in the data, such as pleasure, intimacy, procreation, mental (purity), abstinence, marriage and dating. Utilizing the constant comparative method, once I discovered a reoccurring phrase, such as procreation, for example, I compared

similar reoccurring phrases (reproduction and children) that belonged to the same category (purposes of sex) before moving on to further coding. I then combined all the reoccurring similar themes into broader groups of themes presented in my results, such as “procreation and enjoyment as important purposes of sex.” I conferred with the literature for initial themes, and examined all the data with these themes as well as new emergent themes during the analysis process. I constantly checked assigned codes against one another to make sure they all fit uniformly and accurately together. How young adult, evangelical Christian women internalize and understand messages regarding sexuality from their own conservative religious culture produced the final analytical results.

RESULTS

My study examines how young adult, evangelical Christian women understand sexuality. The results reflect the perceived messages from parents and pastors regarding sexuality. This distinction of *perceived* messages from the parents and pastors is an essential distinction, as a number of the participants note that the messages regarding sexuality from pastors and parents were at times unclear. In this section, I elaborate on how the participants understand various aspects of sexuality within a strict religious subculture, such as the purpose(s) of sex, the definition of virginity loss, and sexual purity.

Messages from Parents and Pastors

The family can play a central role in adolescents and young adults’ understanding of sexuality by setting standards and guidelines of sexual conduct (Thornton and Camburn 1987). Pastors, too, can reinforce strict conservative norms and value statements regarding sexuality that make up evangelical Christian women’s religious subculture (Steensland et al. 2000). What are the messages regarding

sexuality from pastors and parents, and how do the women in this study use these messages when framing their understanding of sex?

The message of sex has changed from 40 years ago (Moslener 2009). The faith-based movement that emerged in the 1970s encouraged teens and young adults within conservative religious culture to wait for sex until marriage. Little discussion emerged though, as to what to *wait for*, exactly. The message has since shifted. Sex is intimate, enjoyable, and created by God, and acceptable as long as it's in the confines of marriage between a man and a woman. New conservative Christian literature encourages young evangelical women to wait for sex, but with a new spin: delay sex because there is an "incredible feast" waiting for you within your marriage (Dresh 2004; 2011; Ethridge 2009). According to the women in this study, the messages they receive from their pastors and parents are similar to messages from 40 years past, rather than the new sentiment to wait for sex with a spouse because sex can be more enjoyable within marriage.

Messages from parents

Several women in this study noted that one or both of their parents made it clear that abstinence was important. Participants did not believe abstinence, though, was clearly defined by either parent. The participants then, formulated their own understanding of abstinence or loss of virginity. The parents may have been influential in shaping the participants' view of abstinence even though the women perceived that parents were unclear in stating *what exactly defines abstinence*. Many parents reiterated abstinence in messages regarding sex to their daughters. Even when a parent(s) talked about abstinence, though, little else regarding sex was included in the conversation, or a more in-depth conversation regarding sex was flatly denied. However, several other participants noted that their parent(s) never had a conversation

regarding sex, even to discuss abstinence. Participants expressed that their parents were too “embarrassed” to talk about sexuality. In this section, many women in this study recount how their parents, though mostly their mothers, support abstinence as an important way of life regarding sexuality. When asked about the message(s) she received from her parents concerning sex, Lauren replies,

“My mom, I think the topic of sex makes her uncomfortable, so she doesn’t really talk about it, ever. All I know is that she’s pro-abstinence.”

Lauren’s perception is that her mother felt uncomfortable talking about sex. Although her mother didn’t talk about sex “ever” she “knows” that her mother is pro-abstinence. Unlike Lauren, August notes that her parents clearly discussed abstinence. She says,

“My parents tried to inform me, and also tried to tell me abstinence, abstinence, abstinence. I remember having talks with my mom in high school and we’d both be talking, and I would say, so what would you do if I got pregnant? She said, ‘You’re not going to.’ ‘What if I do?’ She said, ‘It’s not going to happen, I don’t have to worry about it.’ She wouldn’t even talk about it.”

Although August remembers conversations with her mother about abstinence, she notes that her mother would not broach the subject of pregnancy, even when August brought up the subject herself.

Some participants in this study had parents who talked with them about abstinence only, while other participants in this study had parents who did not talk with them at all about sex. Some participants expressed frustration with their parents’ silence on the subject. Others found that discussing sex with parents was “awkward.” Amanda notes that the topic of sex was never brought up. She says,

“My parents didn’t really talk about it ever. It kinda gets a little nervous around that subject. It was never in conversation, but just knowing that purity was supposed to be top priority.”

Both of Amanda’s parents diverted the topic of sex. Even though her parents did not expound on details as to what they believe sexual purity encompasses or should include, Amanda says that she “just knows” purity was a top priority. Amanda makes a keen observation when she says, “it was never in conversation, but *just knowing...*” Other participants also expressed that their parents never discussed sexuality, but that they “just knew” or there was an “understanding” about sex. Marta, for example, notes that although she never received a “sit down conversation” about sex, she “just knew” what was expected of her. Two participants, Elle and Denise, express frustration and irritation that their parent(s) never discussed sex with them. When asked if she received messages regarding sex from her parents, Elle says,

“No. My parents never said anything. I just talked to my mom about it a couple weeks ago. I said why didn’t you guys tell me anything? She said, Oh, I thought your friends would take care of that for you. I said mom, that’s the worst thing ever.”

Elle’s mother assumed that Elle would receive sexual education or knowledge regarding sex from another source, and thus never discussed sexuality with her daughter. Elle’s reply to her mother that “that’s the worst thing ever,” reveals her disappointment in the absence of a conversation between mother and daughter regarding sex. Denise also reacts to her mother’s silence on the subject of sex— noting that her mother had seven children and still did not bring up a conversation regarding sexuality. She says,

“I was like geez, you have seven kids. I think that it’s been fairly limited to just being like, you know what the church teaches, you need to do that. In fourth or fifth grade, you see the video from school. My mom briefly was like, do you have any questions? OK, bye.”

Some of the participants said that they had a straightforward or frank “birds and the bees” talk with one or both of their parents regarding sex. For a few of the participants, it was not uncommon, either, for a parent to purchase a purity ring for the participant in conjunction with a discussion about sex, though some of the participants purchased a purity ring on their own or with other members of a youth group at their church. Most, however, could not recall a frank discussion from their parent(s) regarding sex. Lauren’s and August’s comments represent many of the participants’ own recollections—that their parents supported abstinence as a lifestyle for their daughters. Elle and Denise also represent other participants’ comments of frustration that there was simply no discussion of sex, at any point, from either parent.

Messages from Pastors

What messages do young adult, evangelical Christian women receive from pastors? As college students, many participants heard messages from both a church or bible group on or near campus as well as their hometown church. Some participants also moved with their families and found a different church in their new location, or changed churches altogether for other reasons. This accounts for several different messages received during different times of the participants’ lives. Women in this study noted that a pastor emphasized sexual purity and sexual morality, but the participants felt neither was clearly defined. Furthermore, the women in this study felt messages from pastors regarding *why* one should refrain from sex was also ambiguous. When asked about messages regarding sexuality from pastors, many participants responded

that their pastors mainly discussed sexuality within the context of marriage and dating. However, when the pastors discussed the details of their marriage and dating sermons, participants felt that references to sex remained vague.

Participants found messages from pastors regarding sex ambiguous. For example, participants noted that “you just *knew* what was expected of you.” August’s recalls a poignant message from her pastor regarding sex. She says,

“Here’s the thing: when I was younger, I was told you weren’t supposed to have sex until you were married. No one ever said why, they just said ‘It’s wrong.’ So I just grew up thinking, you’re a horrible person if you have sex before you’re married.”

August’s frustration is similar to other women in this study who also felt that the messages they receive from pastors or other religious leaders were ambiguous. August also recalled a message she later received as a teen at a Christian summer camp from a religious youth leader. She says, “God doesn’t want you to keep you from sex because it’s *wrong*, but because it carries emotional attachments.” August notes that her pastor was not clear on the definition of sexual purity, though he emphasized that sexual purity is important. She says,

“Well, that’s where I feel like some people get into gray areas with that. My church, they say, be sexually pure. But the pastor doesn’t say, like, well, you should only kiss for this long, or you shouldn’t make out. No one says exactly what it means.”

When asked if her church ever defined sexual purity, she said, “No, they didn’t. I don’t know what it means. I know what it means, but I don’t know what they would think is appropriate.” Though August notes that sexual purity is “gray,” she also adds a significant point. Her church admonishes her congregation to remain sexually pure, but

her perceived understanding is that the pastor does not clarify what *is* sexual purity. How long should one kiss, for example? Similar to Augusts' experiences, Erin also says her pastor did not include clear definitions of sexuality. She recalls that her pastor discussed sex in terms of abstinence only and "perverted sex." She says,

"There's the don't fornicate one, which is no sex before marriage. Then there's no perverted sex, which is gay, lesbian, and sex with animals kinds of things. Other than that, just about sex, no."

Erin and Augusts' pastors encourage sexual purity and abstinence before marriage. However, the pastors don't clearly define sexual purity. What is appropriate, for example, when it comes to sexual purity? This ambiguity opens the door for participants like Erin and August to shape their own, more detailed and clear understandings of sexuality.

In fact, the women in this study believe that they know more about what sexual purity *is not*, rather than what *it is*. Lauren finds that sexual purity is not exactly cut and dry. She says,

"I hate to say it, but honestly, I know more of what it isn't than what it is. At a basic level, it's not having sex outside of marriage. I feel it's less cut and dry than how it's portrayed."

Lauren admits that although she understands sexual purity at a basic level is abstinence, she also recognizes that the other elements of sexual purity are not clear to her.

Similar to many of the participants who feel like their pastors have not clearly defined sex, many of the women in this study also feel that pastors were unclear regarding dating behavior. Erin recalls not just *one* message she received regarding dating behavior, but an entire series of messages. She says,

“In 2010 they had a whole series about dating and how you can have biblical dating. Basically, discuss things with the person you’re dating. To discuss limits and agree on those limits together.”

Erin understood “biblical dating” as discussing and agreeing on limits with a romantic partner, but she does not define exactly how the Bible outlines “limits” for dating behavior. Though participants recall various messages from pastors regarding dating “rules,” ambiguity remains, even when the proscription is specific. Brock recalled a message from a church youth pastor regarding dating proscriptions, but is not clear as to what the pastor believes “it” is when she says “it could happen.” She says,

“Keep your emotions in check and don’t put yourself in compromising positions where it could happen. If you’re going to go alone with somebody, make sure it’s in a public place.”

Brock and Erin discussed varying dating guidelines from youth pastors, such as dating in a public place and discussing limits with a romantic partner. Along with messages about dating behavior, ambiguity regarding sexuality also persists in messages from pastors surrounding marriage. When asked about messages she received regarding sex from her pastor, Penny says,

“Honestly, most of them have been geared towards married couples. Since I’m not of that age or maturity yet, I couldn’t exactly relate. The idea was: don’t cheat on your husband or wife. Treat them equally with respect.”

Penny suggests that messages from her pastor regarding sexuality were marriage-centered, and therefore did not seem to affect her, and consequently, her framing of

sexuality. Other participants' recalled that many of the sermons from pastors regarding sex were marriage-centered.

The participants did not perceive that the messages regarding sexuality from pastors were clear in defining sex. When pastors did discuss sex, the participants noted that it was often in reference to proscribed dating behavior and marriage only, and these references to sex were still ambiguous. When I asked participants Brock and Erin how they decided on limits and boundaries with a romantic partner if a pastor did not clearly outline limits in a sermon, they said they looked to advice from friends. They also noted that they used their gut instinct or the "Holy Spirit," when making these decisions. As the participants perceived the messages were unclear, they worked to develop their own understanding of sex, while still utilizing some parts of their conservative religious teachings.

Understanding Sexuality

What were the participants' understandings of sexuality, then? The women in this study framed pleasure as a key purpose for sex, but most noted that procreation is also an integral purpose of sex. Similar to previous studies (Bersamin et al. 2007; Carpenter 2001; 2002; Bogart et al. 2000; Byers et al. 2009; Halpern-Felsher et al. 2005) that examine the sexual beliefs of other young adults and adolescents, most of the women in this study believe that vaginal intercourse, anal sex, and oral sex result in virginity loss. Also concurrent with other scholarship, the participants found many gray areas for what counts as "sex" outside of vaginal penetration, oral sex, and anal sex.

Purposes of sex

The women in this study believe there are two important purposes of sex: procreation and enjoyment/intimacy. It's important to note that while the participants believe that procreation serves as an important "mechanical" purpose of sex, they also

believe they are many other purposes of sex. Most participants cited procreation or reproduction as an important purpose for having sex, providing that sex remains strictly within the confines of marriage. Hannah recognizes that within her evangelical religious subculture, there are strict values and norms dictating the purpose of sex, but she also recognizes that intimacy and closeness can also serve as important purposes of sex.

“Mechanically, it’s for procreation, because God said be fruitful and multiply. Fill up the Earth. I want lots of humans. You’re my own creation. An equal purpose, not necessarily secondary or primary, is an intimacy and closeness between marriage partners.”

Hannah’s response provides a pertinent example of how she navigates through her understanding of the purpose of sex utilizing a specific conservative value message. Though Hannah draws on a message from the Bible, rather than from a pastor or parent, it exemplifies how she utilizes reference group theory. Understanding the Bible in a literal sense is part of the religious doctrine or faith of evangelical Christians (Smith 1990), and Hannah bases part of her answer on a literal truth from the Bible, and thus “represents” the larger evangelical subculture. She placed this answers first, before her own individual assessment of the purpose of sex, in order to represent the larger group.

Another participant, Ashley, believes that reproduction is the number one reason for sex. She’s also just as sure, though, that sex is meant to be enjoyed. She says,

“I believe that it’s just supposed to provide a deeper level of intimacy in marriage between you and your husband and to draw closer. I believe it’s meant to be enjoyed. Reproduction is first, number one. But believe it’s meant to be enjoyed, definitely. And strengthen a marriage and a relationship between a husband and wife.”

Ashley may feel that in order to remain faithful and true to her conservative faith and church, she needs to make clear that reproduction is an integral part of sex, even if she is personally not engaging in sexual activity for the purpose of reproduction. Ashley is also clear, as she noted twice in her statement, that this level of enjoyment and intimacy is not only meant for marriage, but specifically for a marriage between a *husband and wife*. Though only a few participants expressed that homosexuality is sexually impure or sexually immoral, many participants framed their responses of the purpose(s) of sex to be exclusively between a married man and woman. When asked about the purpose of sex, Candice says,

“It’s there for enjoyment. It’s instrumental in creating children. It serves to bring husband and wife closer together. Sex can be used for any of those purposes at any given time, so it depends on what the driving purpose for that particular one is. I would honestly say to bring the husband and wife together, especially if you’re not trying to have children at that time.”

While Amanda and Ashley note that sex is important for enjoyment and creating children, Candice adds that sex can serve to bring married partners together *if* creating children is not a priority or even a desire of the couple. If children are not a driving purpose, she noted, sex can be used as a tool to bring husband and wife closer. Sex brings husband and wife together, *especially if you’re not trying for children*. Candice possibly created this script to fit within her own lifestyle as an unmarried young college student. It is likely children are not in her immediate horizon. Her goals may include a career before children, thus the need to create language that fits within a working lifestyle.

In sum, the participants believed that procreation *and* intimacy were important elements to the purpose of sex. Procreation as an important purpose seemed to derive

from a specific doctrine from the participants' evangelical church, either through a pastor or through the Bible, while the participants' responses regarding sex for the purpose of intimacy did not derive from a pastor, Bible, or parent. The participants also noted that as long as sex is enjoyed within the confines of marriage between a married man and woman, it can and should be enjoyed. Sex can bring married partners together, and can be utilized for different purposes at different times, depending on the goal(s) of the couple.

Virginity loss

Coinciding with previous research that examines the general U.S. population of adolescents and young adults, (Carpenter 2001; Bersamin et al. 2007; Byers et al. 2009) the women in this study have a variety of ideas about what constitutes virginity loss, ranging from any form of stimulation to genital touching and watching pornography. The majority of the participants, though, felt that anal sex and oral sex both count as a loss of virginity. Many, or nearly half of the participants, understood virginity loss as "intercourse." Although anal sex, oral sex, and vaginal intercourse are counted as a loss of virginity to most of the women in this study, many other gray areas remain when the participants consider virginity loss. For Bryn, though, oral sex counts as virginity loss. She says,

"I guess in my personal definition, I would think of that. At the end of the day, I think it's sex. In the context of marriage, if it's something you desire, I think it's fine."

Bryn reinforces other participants' comments that sex is acceptable as long as it is within the confines of marriage, including oral sex. Her comment also reflects the changing message that sex is "fine," as long as it remains within marriage. Another participant,

Dana, finds oral sex and anal sex do count as a loss of virginity. When asked about anal sex and oral sex, she responds,

“Yeah, that’s tough. My initial gut responses: yes. I’m not a scholar of the Bible, but I feel like when they even hint towards a different kind of sex, they all count as your sexuality.”

Dana uses messages from the Bible to help develop her response, but concedes that she is “not a scholar.” Though she does conclude that anal sex and oral sex do count as “sex,” she also observes that there is nothing wrong with these forms of sex. This demonstrates how a participant utilizes a particular script from her own religious subculture in forming her definition of sexuality.

Although some women feel ambivalent about whether anal sex or oral sex count as virginity loss, almost all the women in this study consider intercourse as virginity loss. Participants noted that when you have “actual” intercourse, you are “obviously” no longer a virgin. When asked about the definition of virginity loss, Amanda says,

“Actually having sexual intercourse. At that same time, I think there’s ways that people try and push that.”

Though Amanda believes having sexual intercourse as a loss of virginity, she also suggests that there are other “ways” that people push the boundaries regarding sex. However, nearly all the women in the study included caveats within their responses, such as Elle’s response, that “once you take your clothes off, though, you’re probably not pure anymore.”

Mica also says that there is more to virginity loss than sexual intercourse. She says,

“Obviously if you have intercourse you’re no longer a virgin, but I think there’s more to it than that. I think...there’s this dark line.”

Though Mica is clear (“obviously”) that sexual intercourse counts as a loss of virginity, there’s a line between sexual intercourse and other sexual activity, though she doesn’t state exactly what lies within the “dark line.”

Though sexual intercourse for most participants counted as a loss of virginity, the participants provided varying definitions of virginity loss, such as: “the act of having sex,” and “once you’ve had sex, you’ve lost your virginity,” and, “I think having sex with someone, you lose your virginity.” Additionally, oral sex and anal sex to most participants count as a loss of virginity. Sexual activity outside of these specific actions, however, remains gray and inconsistent among the participants.

Sexual purity

Several participants responded that sexual purity is a mental state and a “thought process”. Although thinking impurely doesn’t constitute a loss of virginity according to participants, it’s still a sin, and can lead to sinful actions. For Ashley, mental and physical purity go hand-in-hand. She says,

“To stay pure, you need to stay mentally pure as well. You’re just setting yourself up for failure if you think it’s OK to think on these things and not act on them. [When] you’re thinking on these things, it makes it a lot harder to not act on them when you’re in that situation.”

The mental process of remaining sexually pure is connected to the physical aspects of sexual purity. It’s just as important to not “think on these things,” according to Ashley, as it is to act on them. Similar to Ashley, Mica concurs that sexual purity is not exclusive to the physical. She says,

“I think it’s easy to fall into the trap of believing that it is just physical. If you feed it mentally, it is eventually going to seep into your actions.”

Because when I think of purity—it's not just about your actions. That emotional and mental part of it can play a huge factor."

Not only are the mental and physical connected, Mica notes, but mental impure thoughts can contribute to impure physical actions. To remain sexually pure and "free of sin in your thoughts," as Zoey noted, one must remain physically *and* mentally pure.

Sexual purity, then, to the women of this study, includes a mental aspect as well as physical. When asked about their definition of sexual purity, four participants specifically referred to the Bible for their response, noting that Jesus said you can commit adultery in your mind with lustful thoughts. Remaining sexually pure is an important message reiterated by pastors, but with little perceived clarification as to what defines sexual purity. The participants, then, form their own understanding of sexual purity, and many included mental purity in their definition.

DISCUSSION

This study examines connections among young adult, evangelical college women and the messages they receive from pastors and parents regarding sex. Results indicate that although the women in this study received varying messages from pastors and parents regarding sexuality, these messages were not always clear or consistent. The participants internalized these messages as received, but they also worked with them and considered them against one another and in relation to other messages they received from other sources or from personal experiences. These messages from pastors and parents are not irrelevant, though. The ambiguous nature of their messages provided women the opportunity to develop their own understanding of sexuality, while still utilizing some parts of their evangelical religious teachings within their responses. Additionally, many of the women said they did not have any conversations regarding sex

from their parents, which can also help explain why the participants created their own understandings of sex.

Though many of the participants said that *one* of the main purposes of sex is procreation, it is noteworthy that many women saw multiple reasons for the purpose(s) of sex in addition to procreation, such as enjoyment and intimacy. As all the participants were attending college at the time of the interview, and would likely delay children until after graduation or after they begin a career utilizing their college degree, this could help explain their responses to the purpose(s) of sex. More specifically, they could have included intimacy and enjoyment *in addition* to producing children as important purposes because with the exception of one participant who was pregnant at the time of the interview, none the participants were trying for children, were pregnant, or had children at the time of the interview.

In addition to examining how young evangelical Christian women view the purpose of sex, this study also analyzes how these women understand virginity loss in similar ways to the general U.S. population of adolescents and young adults (Carpenter 2001). Most of the participants, for example, consider intercourse a loss of virginity, and many, over half, consider oral sex and anal sex as a loss of virginity. Beyond these definitions, though, there was little consensus as to what defines loss of virginity as well as sexual purity.

This study also adds to previous literature as it connects religiosity and sexuality with scholarship that utilizes and incorporates subculture identity, scripting, and reference group theories. Though each theory has served my research well, caveats in the participants' statements have added a layer of complexity to understanding the research strictly from the lens of each of these theories. For example, reference group theory was helpful in understanding how young women's attitudes regarding sexuality

can be *partially* shaped by the group in which they participate. In reference group theory, individuals use the standards of other significant people in their life to make choices (Dawson 2001). However, if the standards themselves are perceived as unclear, such as standards of sexuality, it may be more difficult for the individual to utilize such standards in their own life. Thus, it may have been difficult for the women in this study to use standards of sexuality passed down from pastors and parents when forming their understanding of sexuality if they perceived that the messages received were unclear. Participants used messages from pastors in forming *part* of their responses in regards to the purpose of sex.

In addition to reference group theory, subcultural identity theory was also helpful in understanding how women in this study framed their understanding of sex. This theory posits that evangelicals can offer a strong sense of identity by providing a unique set of values to their group (Smith et al. 1998). Evangelicals are likely to take a firm stance toward sexuality (Steensland et al. 2000). These value norms and firm stances on sexuality are passed down through messages from pastors. This theory was helpful in understanding the degree to which women use messages from pastors in maintaining these norms and values. The findings suggest that women did use messages from pastors in their responses regarding the purposes of sex. Their beliefs about sexuality included the traditional value message that reproduction is an important purpose of sex. However, the women also said enjoyment and intimacy were important purposes of sex. Perhaps because the participants perceived that these messages were unclear, they worked to develop their own understanding of sex, while still utilizing some parts of their conservative religious teachings from pastors.

Scripting theory, which suggests that cultural scripts are in particular essential in shaping sexual normatives (Schensul 1998), was also useful to my research. This

theory helped me understand the extent to which the women in this study used religious subcultural scripts, or a set of rules learned from their religious environment, to understand sex. However, the women in this study perceived that the scripts, or messages received from their churches and their family, were unclear. When creating scripts of their own to make life choices regarding sexuality, they likely used a certain amount of agency, since the scripts regarding appropriate sexual activity was perceived as unclear.

In this project, I find these three theories do not explain every part of the participants' understanding of sexuality. In fact, I find that a new, or fairly unexplored way of examining how young adult evangelical women understand sexuality, adds to these theories. This strategy allows for terminology regarding sex to include "pleasurable" and "enjoyable," as long as it remains within the confines of marriage. Previous literature discusses how evangelical *programs* frame sex as "worth the wait" (Gardner 2006), and non-academic work encourages adolescent and young adult, evangelical Christian women to wait for sex because it will be most enjoyable when it is shared with your God-ordained partner (Dresh 2004; 2011). However, no research specifically finds that young adult, evangelical Christian women understand sexuality as pleasurable and enjoyable—as long as it remains with the confines of marriage. No study examines how evangelical Christian women use messages of sexuality from pastors to frame their understanding of sexuality.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Though this study provides useful insights into how young adult, evangelical Christian women construct their own understand of sexuality, it is not without limitations. The sample for this study came from a mid-size, Mid-west university, where the participants are educated. This type of college-sample is biased as other participants

not included in this study that are not college-educated could have responded differently. Furthermore, I limited my potential pool of participants by only including statements of faith from the Southern Baptist and Assemblies of God websites, though I also included a link to the National Association for Evangelicals website. There are many other conservative churches in the area where I recruited participants, such as the Church of the Nazarene, the Church of God, and The Wesleyan Church. Perhaps women who belong to these religious groups felt my study did not apply to them. Therefore, I may have inadvertently excluded women from these groups in my study. Because women in these groups could potentially have different experiences than the women in my study, future research may wish to explore women who belong to these other conservative Christian groups and their attitudes toward sexuality.

I attempted to snowball to recruit participants, but I received a great amount of resistance as potential participants were very cautious to discuss sexuality without knowing the final results of the work. Initially, to recruit participants, I attempted to contact pastors of nearby conservative Christian churches. I made phone calls, personal visits, and emails to locally situated churches. I encountered a great deal of opposition. I recruited only two participants utilizing this method. I suggested leaving a flyer or making an announcement at the church. I also said I would attend the church service the day of the recruitment. The only two pastors that were open to this approach provided a potential contact to interview. The other pastors, even if I knew them personally, were resistant or very cautious to provide contacts or allow me to speak or leave recruitment literature at their church. Future scholarship should examine young adult evangelical Christian women who do not or have not attended a four-year college, especially a liberal arts or secular college. It may help the current research in assessing differences, if any, that exist in how evangelical Christian women understand sexuality

and how they use messages of sexuality from pastors and parents from within their religious subculture.

Future research should also examine other influential factors that could affect how this group frames sexuality, such as peers, Christian literature, or media. There are many qualities of an evangelical Christian woman's religious culture not examined in this study. Every participant in my study cited "fellowship," "community," or "spending time with other believers" as a benefit for attending church. This demonstrates that denominations often serve as a social connection. Interestingly, though, only one participant mentioned "worship" as a benefit of attending church services. Scholars should look more closely at how fellowship and community with other Christians affects or influences their understanding of sexuality.

Finally, I did not ask each participant how they formed their ideas of sexuality or whether they agreed with the messages they received from their pastors or parents. Perhaps the women in this study utilized agency in developing their understanding of sexuality because they perceived that the messages from their pastors and parents were vague and inconsistent. However, additional research would be needed to substantiate these claims.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study indicate that despite traditional messages received from an evangelical subculture, young adult, evangelical Christian women do not necessarily incorporate *only* these beliefs when framing their understanding of sexuality. This study contributes to the literature in two important ways. First, it brings to light the messages young adult, evangelical Christian women receive from pastors and parents regarding sexuality. These messages were perceived by the women in the study to be unclear.

The ambiguous nature of their messages provided women the opportunity to construct their own understanding of sexuality.

Second, it illuminates how young adult, evangelical Christian women understand the purpose(s) of sex, the definition of virginity loss, and sexual purity. Some of the women in this study utilized Biblical scripture in formulating their responses.

Additionally, an absence of a discussion surrounding sex from parents likely created room for the participants to create their own understanding of sexuality, including the purpose(s) of sex, the definition of virginity loss, and sexual purity. Vague and inconsistent messages from pastors and parents regarding sex, no conversations from parents regarding sex, and Biblical scripture—all contribute to the participants' overall construction and understanding of sexuality.

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