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“SOME GUYS DO, BUT THAT’S NOT ME.”

LANGUAGE USE AND THE REJECTION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

by

LANIER BASENBERG

Under the Direction of Dawn Baunach, PhD.

ABSTRACT

Young men experience daily struggles to live up to an American ideal of masculinity that does not leave room for emotion, tenderness, and respect for their sexual partners – and they are beginning to reject this ideal outright. In this study I give young men the space and freedom to talk openly about sex in general and their sexual experiences in particular, with the goal of ascertaining how their talk illustrates and impacts their performance of masculinity. I employed a qualitative approach, including focus groups consisting of college men of all sexual orientations, and a comprehensive survey regarding their sexual experience. The focus groups were shaped by three primary questions: to whom do you talk about sex, what do you talk about when you talk about sex, and how do you talk about sex? I analyzed transcripts from the focus groups using sociolinguistics and narrative theory, and found that the participants feel restricted by hegemonic masculinity and constrained by societal expectations for their sexual behavior. The young men in

this study express their frustration via their language, both with the words they use and those words they choose not to use. Of special importance in this study is a focus on men of color, and how their experience and their language are shaped by their exclusion from hegemonic masculinity. A deeper understanding of the ways in which young men talk about sex and thus how they perform masculinity within sexuality will allow us to have a better picture of the role of language and communication in their experiences as sexual beings. With an increased understanding of the experience of young men, we might be able to help young men to feel more open about expressing themselves, to lead healthier sex lives, and to reduce rates of non-consensual sexual activity.

INDEX WORDS: Gender, Sexuality, Linguistics, Masculinity

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LANIER BASENBERG

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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## DEDICATION

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to everyone who has helped me over the course of this dissertation. Your moral support has been instrumental in completing this project. Thank you to everyone who talked with me, fed me, drank coffee with me, read my Facebook updates, brought me special candy, and offered to help in any way they could. Special thanks to my parents, who have been very clear about never doubting me, and to Rick, who not only supported me but actively stepped in when I was in a bind. Additional thanks to Dissertation Squirrel, who has sat outside my window chattering for much of this process and provided a welcome distraction.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 literature review .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.1 Masculinity .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.2 College Culture.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.3 Sexuality in College.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.4 Language and Narrative.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.5 Theoretical Frameworks .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b><i>2.5.1 Social Constructionism .....</i></b>	<b><i>21</i></b>
<b><i>2.5.2 The Social Construction of Sexuality.....</i></b>	<b><i>23</i></b>
<b><i>2.5.3 The Social Construction of Masculinity .....</i></b>	<b><i>26</i></b>
<b><i>2.5.4 The Social Construction of Language .....</i></b>	<b><i>29</i></b>
<b><i>2.5.5 The Social Construction of Othering .....</i></b>	<b><i>30</i></b>
<b>3 methods .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>3.1 Sample .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>3.2 Recruitment .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>3.3 The Questionnaire.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>3.4 The Focus Groups .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>3.5 Transcription.....</b>	<b>48</b>

3.6	Analysis .....	49
4	who do you talk to about sex? .....	51
4.1	Friends .....	52
4.1.1	<i>Hierarchy of Friends</i> .....	53
4.1.2	<i>Friends vs Partners</i> .....	55
4.2	Women .....	56
4.2.1	<i>Platonic</i> .....	57
4.2.2	<i>Non-Platonic</i> .....	58
4.3	Partners.....	60
4.3.1	<i>Communication and Improvement</i> .....	61
4.4	Parents .....	64
4.4.1	<i>Mothers vs Fathers</i> .....	64
4.4.2	<i>Initiation by Parents</i> .....	66
4.5	Who Do You Do Not Talk To?.....	67
4.5.1	<i>Family</i> .....	68
4.5.2	<i>Women</i> .....	70
4.5.3	<i>Coworkers</i> .....	72
4.6	Conclusion .....	73
5	what do you talk about? .....	74
5.1	Stereotypically Masculine Talk .....	75

5.1.1	<i>Dichotomy</i> .....	76
5.1.2	<i>Bragging</i> .....	77
5.2	<b>Non-Stereotypically Masculine Talk</b> .....	80
5.2.1	<i>Feelings about Sex</i> .....	81
5.2.2	<i>Feelings about Pornography</i> .....	84
5.2.3	<i>Feelings about Hooking Up</i> .....	86
5.2.4	<i>The Other Person's Feelings</i> .....	88
5.3	<b>Discomfort Talking about Sex</b> .....	90
5.3.1	<i>Personally Uncomfortable</i> .....	90
5.3.2	<i>Making Others Uncomfortable</i> .....	98
5.3.3	<i>The Use of Humor</i> .....	102
5.4	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	103
6	<b>How do you talk about sex?</b> .....	104
6.1	<b>Slang</b> .....	104
6.1.1	<i>Slang and Violence</i> .....	107
6.1.2	<i>Otherring and Slang</i> .....	108
6.1.3	<i>Slang and Women</i> .....	111
6.2	<b>The Only Disrespectful Participant</b> .....	114
6.3	<b>How do you talk about women?</b> .....	116
6.3.1	<i>Words for desirable women</i> .....	116

6.3.2	<i>Words for undesirable women</i> .....	118
6.4	Respectful language .....	121
6.5	Conclusion .....	122
7	Discussion.....	123
7.1	Summary of Findings .....	123
7.1.1	<i>Who do you talk to?</i> .....	124
7.1.2	<i>What do you talk about?</i> .....	125
7.1.3	<i>How do you talk?</i> .....	126
7.2	Discussion of Findings .....	129
7.3	Limitations.....	135
7.4	Recommendations for future study.....	136
	REFERENCES.....	139
	APPENDICES.....	168
	Appendix 1 .....	168
	Appendix 2 .....	170
	Appendix 3 .....	176

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A common portrayal of college men in the media is that they want as much sex as possible with as many women as possible. If you speak with nearly any college-aged woman, she will tell you a version of this stereotype. If you observe media aimed at young men, the protagonist will nearly always be rewarded with sex or the singer will detail his sexual accomplishment. Very little credence is given by the general population to the emotional aspects of sexuality for young men, and instead the focus is typically on physical gratification or social status. The general discourse in American society places very little emphasis on the feelings of young men, while giving a great deal of weight to the feelings of the young women with whom these men are assumed to be involved. However, these assumptions about young men are misguided and harmful. Young men are experiencing daily struggles to live up to an American ideal of masculinity that does not leave room for emotion, tenderness, and respect for their sexual partners – and they are beginning to reject this idea outright (Allen 2007, Duncan 2015, Messerschmidt 2012). In this study I attempt to give young men the space and freedom to talk openly about sex in general and their sexual experiences in particular, with the goal of ascertaining how their talk illustrates and impacts their sexual well-being.

In the literature regarding language and sexuality, only a few key groups have previously been studied. Scholars have studied the ways in which women talk about sexuality (Hall and Bucholtz 2012, Hincliff and Gott 2008, Jackson and Cram 2003, Speer 2005), the ways men talk about sexuality (Baker 2008, Knight et al. 2012, Seidler 2003), and the differences between the two (Cameron 2005, Cameron and Kulick 2003, Talbot 2010). However, these are usually grown adults in settled relationships. Research has been done on the way that younger people talk about sex (Eder 1995, Haywood 1996, Moore and Rosenthal 1992, Regnerus 2005, Smith, Guthrie, and

Oakley 2005), although most of those studies are British or Australian. Additionally, the way straight people talk has been contrasted with the way gay men and lesbians talk (Cameron and Kulick 2003, Crossley 2004, Kulick 2000, McCormack 2011). However, very few scholars have yet explored the way young straight men talk about sex and sexuality with each other. There have been studies on young men in fraternities (Brown and Messman-Moore 2009, Sweeney 2011), and the way they deal with sexuality and the options presented to them (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, and Ward 2009, Furman and Shaffer 2012). If only about 400,000 college men are in fraternities (fraternityinfo.com), they represent a mere 4.5% of the college men in America (<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>). It is important that we turn to the larger college population to get a better representation of masculine culture. Additionally, there have been a few works published regarding the negotiation of romance and masculinity in the lives of young heterosexual men (Allen 2007, Gilmartin 2007, and Korobov and Thorne 2007), which I hope to build upon with this study. Finally, I believe it is worth mentioning that none of these works focused on men of color, or even included a notably racially diverse sample.

Although there are many studies about language and sexuality, there is a gap in the knowledge about young men and the way they talk about and express their feelings about sex. The goal of this study was to learn more about college-aged men and how they view sexuality, and to do so by studying their language. It is my contention that by studying the words that young men use (including slang) and with whom they use certain words, we can get a clearer picture of how they are dealing with sexuality in their own lives. We know that young men have difficulty talking openly with each other, as other studies have shown (Allen 2007, Gilmartin 2007, Seidler 2003). We know that problems exist between young heterosexual men and their female partners (Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010, Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000),

especially as the sexual culture at colleges is increasingly based on “hooking up” and not on dating (Bogle 2008, Fielder, Carey, and Carey 2012). Moreover, we know that young gay men struggle with their sexual identities (Stevens 2004) and the building of relationships (Simonsen, Blazina, and Edward 2000). We know that incidences of “date rape” have increased among heterosexuals at college campuses (Basow and Minieri 2011, Bouffard and Bouffard 2011). It is my contention that these issues are related to young men and their ability (or inability) to speak openly about sexuality.

This research will add to the literature about the connection between language and action. In addition, this research will add to our knowledge about how young men make sexual decisions, how they deal with sexuality in their peer group, and what might affect their sexual relationships in their college years. If we understand how young men deal with sexuality during this vital stage in their lives, we might better understand how they deal with sexuality during marriage, dating, divorce, child raising, and old age. Furthermore, if we understand how college-aged men are talking about sex, we might understand more about college culture. Finally, knowing how language affects sexuality in young men may help us understand how it affects sexuality in young women, as well.

My research question is essentially this: how do the ways that young men talk about sexuality impact their sexual outcomes? To answer that question, I focus on three main factors:

- To whom do they talk?
- What do they talk about?
- How do they talk?

In regards to the first question, I think it is important to understand to whom college men feel comfortable speaking. Do they mainly talk to men or to women? Do they differentiate

between their friends based on the gender of those friends? Do they talk with their sex partners? Do they speak openly to other people about the sex they are having with their sex partners? Do they speak to their parents or other authority figures, such as counselors, professors, or health workers? Are there differences in choices between men of different races?

My second question is more a question of content. What do they talk about, when they do talk about sex? One might suspect that young men are talking about different things with their friends than they are with their sex partners, but are they? If they talk to their friends about their sex partners, how much information do they reveal? How soon do they tell their friends that they have (or have had) a new sex partner? Does the information they reveal and the time at which they reveal it change depending on the young men's feelings about their new partners? If so, how do emotional connections factor in?

My third question is linguistic: *how* do young men talk about sex? Are they using slang words or phrases? Are their words positive or negative in their connotations? Do they like the slang words available for sex or do they wish they had a wider range of words from which to pick? I am also interested in what kinds of language young men are uncomfortable using. Is there slang that they find distasteful? Does their slang change according to aspects of their identity?

The answers to these three main questions allow me to answer the final question: do the ways young men talk about sex affect their sexual outcomes? Do young men only do things they have the words for? Linguistic theory suggests that people might engage only in activities (or feelings) for which they have the language to express. Do young men ascribe feelings to themselves and others based on language? For instance, do they assume women are emotionally attached to them after sex because they have heard that such a thing happens? Do they use different language with their partners than they do with their friends? Do they use language they



are not fully comfortable with, and if so is it possible that they also engage in sexual activity with which they are not fully comfortable? With these questions I hope to determine whether certain kinds of sexual activity, such as emotion-free casual sex, are more common because young men are familiar with them via language and have the words to describe them.

It was my hypothesis that language use does affect the sexual outcomes of young men, and that the kinds of language they use will be reflected in the kinds of sexual encounters they have. That is to say, men who are more likely to use respectful language are probably also more likely to have emotionally healthy relationships. Similarly, men who use derogatory language are likely to be unsatisfied with their sexual relationships or to report a series of short, impersonal sexual encounters. I further hypothesized that there would be a link between the amount of sexual talk in which young men engage and their sexual satisfaction. Essentially, those young men who are comfortable talking about sex may be more likely to have healthy sex lives and be more comfortable with sexuality in general.

To test these hypotheses I used qualitative methodology and grounded theory. The main focus of my research takes the form of focus groups. I completed six focus groups, with six to nine participants in each. The focus groups were run by a man moderator, as I was concerned that my presence in the room might cause the young men to change their language or censor themselves. In addition to the focus groups, each of the young men filled out a questionnaire. The questionnaire covered demographic factors such as ethnicity, age, religious background, and previous sexual experience. However, it also included questions about comfort level with women, with their current sex lives, with gay people, and with pornography. By combining the information gleaned in the questionnaires with the statements made in the focus groups, I was able to ascertain information about each individual, by comparing what they say in the focus

groups with what they marked on the questionnaire. I could also measure the group as a whole, in terms of patterns in both survey responses and in conversations during the focus groups. The combination of the two methods helps me to identify underlying patterns and gives depth to my findings.

I use four theoretical frameworks in this study: social constructionism, hegemonic masculinity, narrative theory, and the concept of “othering.” First, I employ social constructionism to help explain the way in which our shared ideas about masculinity and sexuality have been created. Social constructionism is a way of understanding how our social schemas came to be, and how those schemas might impact us. Second, I use the concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine what we expect out of young men. Hegemonic masculinity states that we, as a society, have specific expectations of men regarding their appearance, their attitudes, their goals, and their behavior – and more importantly, that any man failing to live up to these expectations is deserving of criticism. Third, I explore the language the young men use via narrative theory, which suggests that our language shapes our reality. Narrative theory argues that the words we use are collected by us through interactions with each other and media, and that the language we have at our disposal will determine our actions and feelings. Finally, the young men who participated in this study engaged in a good deal of othering, which is a way of explaining why we might insist on separating ourselves from people who perform an act or use a word. Othering allows us to acknowledge that a thing exists, while also distancing oneself from it and claiming to find it distasteful. When combined, these theories help to shape my hypotheses because they help to explain how we, as a society, create a version of masculinity which is nearly impossible to attain. They further illustrate how we use language to share our ideas about

masculinity and to indicate which aspects of masculinity and sexuality we accept or find unacceptable.

In summation, this is a study about how men talk about sex. Its purpose is to examine how a selected group of men talk to each other about their sex lives, their relationships, their feelings, and their concerns. It is my contention that the time is right for increased study of young men, especially in light of our current concerns regarding rape and sexual assault in the college environment. By exploring how young men talk about sex and sexuality, we can begin to understand how they feel about sex and sexuality. Armed with that information, we can begin to take steps that will improve the sexual outcomes of college students of all genders. In the following section I will delve deeper into a review of the literature regarding masculinity, language, relationships, and sexuality to set the stage for my study.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The scholarly fields of sexuality and masculinity are full of examples of an ever-changing balance between the biological elements of being human and the socially constructed ways of enacting these aspects of humanity. In the following section I review the existing literature regarding masculinity in the United States during the transition to college, and regarding how cultural ideas regarding masculinity are changing to become more open. I also examine the current norms concerning sexuality, especially those involving casual sex. Finally, I assess the scholarly research regarding language and the use of language to express ideas, including how that language use is shaped by gender.

### **2.1 Masculinity**

Young men in America must go through a process of learning to present themselves as masculine. It is especially important that they present their masculine selves to other men. This

presentation of self starts as early as preschool. Boys are often instructed which toys to play with (Blakemore and Centers 2005, Wood, Desmarais, and Gugula 2002), and this proto-masculinity is often heavily censored by parents (Kane 2006). Boys show concerned adults that they are developing appropriate levels of masculinity by playing with appropriate toys or at least leaving feminine toys behind. Boys are encouraged to engage in gender-segregated activities during play time (Goldberg, Kashy, and Smith 2012, Stockard 2006) and especially in the more regulated arena of playing and watching sports (Kremer-Sadlik and Kim 2007, Messner 1992). Boys are encouraged to be physical and aggressive in the obvious realm of sports, and they are rewarded for aggression in their verbal exchanges and play, as well (Connel 2008, Klomsten, Marh, and Skaalvik 2005, Messerschmidt 2000, Messner 1992). This type of aggressive play both emphasizes their masculinity and further removes them from the feminine behavior of their female counterparts.

Perhaps the two most important lessons young boys learn concern the governing of their emotional selves and the presentation of their physical selves. Although they might experience a tumult of feelings and emotions, young boys are often taught by their elders to keep such feelings tightly in check (Allen 2005, Manago et al. 2008). Any emotional displays must be regulated, lest others think the boys are weak (Garbarino 2001, Garner and Hinton 2010, Kindlan and Thompson 2009, Messner 1992, Newberber 2009). Although the majority of their feelings are supposed to be internalized, there is one important feeling that is supposed to be expressed: that of interest in women. Boys are presumed to be heterosexual (Renold 2007, Riggs 2008), and they are encouraged to express sexual interest in girls as a way of proving their own masculinity (Pascoe 2007). It is important to note that all boys are not raised this way, and I may have

encountered young men who have had a more egalitarian childhood in my study. However, such emphasis on masculinity does continue to be the American norm.

The media that young men consume give them multiple role models and scripts for masculinity. Media aimed directly at young boys, such as comic books, action movies, and video games, are filled with messages regarding masculine behavior (Kivel and Johnson 2009, Moss 2011, Slatton and Spates 2014). The male characters are usually aggressive, muscular, and prone to physical violence (Gauntlett 2008, Hamilton et al. 2006). Characters who are not aggressively masculine are generally subject to negative comments from players and critics alike. Such non-masculine characters include gay men (Linneman 2008), black men (Entman and Rojecki 2000), and Latino men (Dixon and Linz 2002). These men are stripped of masculinity because they fail to live up to the American ideal of a masculine male: a white, young, straight, educated, sporty, heterosexual family man with a good job (Connell 1987). Connell coined this idealization “hegemonic masculinity.”

There are two major problems with hegemonic masculinity: one, it is impossible to achieve and two, failure to achieve it is looked down upon. These two problems mean that nearly every modern man in the United States is essentially trying and simultaneously failing to live up to a masculine ideal. Such failure is nearly guaranteed among non-white men, who are blocked from this form of idealized masculinity before they even begin (Alexander 2006, Coles 2008). This roadblock has led to the creation of multiple types of masculinities which can be observed in our current social landscape (Coles 2009, Connell 2005, Seidler 2006). So long as there is a relationship between masculinity and power, specifically a measurable difference between the power men have and the (lesser amounts) of power everyone else has, masculinity has been

achieved (Connell 2005). Multiple varieties of masculinity currently exist, many created in the absence of other alternatives.

One such variety is the type of masculinity performed by black and African-American men in the United States. Because the all-powerful version of white hegemonic masculinity is unavailable to black men, often a different type of masculinity is enacted: one which values athleticism, promiscuity, wealth, and a certain amount of criminal behavior (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001, Hopkinson and Moore 2006, Johnson, Richmond, and Kivel 2008, Mutua 2006, and Poulson and Bryant 2011). This version of masculinity can be seen in the media directed at and consumed by young black men (Hunter 2011, Iwamoto 2003, Miller-Young 2007). For young black men, the pressure to be sufficiently masculine is intense (Archer and Yamashita 2003, Fields et al. 2015) and failing to live up to masculine ideals is dangerous.

The pressure to achieve hegemonic masculinity is no less prevalent and no more easily attained for Asian men in the United States. For young Asian men, especially, stereotypes regarding masculinity are almost unfailingly negative: they are too small, too weak, too smart, too nerdy, and too soft (Eng 2001, Sue 2005). Asian American men have the advantage of being a model minority (Lee 2015, Wong et al. 1998, Wong and Halgin 2006), rather than considered dangerous, but this does not translate into sexual desirability (Liu 2002, Shek 2007). Similarly, Latino men are blocked from achieving traditional hegemonic masculinity and thus promote a more “machismo” version of masculinity in their own culture (Abreu et al. 2000, Fragoso and Kashubeck 2000, Vigoya 2001).

When young men have put all of these messages together, they must then put those messages regarding masculinity into practice. This enactment of masculinity is commonly referred to in gender studies as “doing gender,” a concept articulated by West and Zimmerman

(1987). Their theory is that gender is something we actively and routinely do, rather than something that is passively assigned to us. We do gender with our words, our actions, our posture, our beliefs, and especially our language (1987). This performance of gender is a learned behavior, and the ways in which we do gender can change over the course of time or across cultures (West and Zimmerman 2009).

Judith Butler further expanded on the idea of gender as an active process, proposing a theory of gender performativity (1990). In her now-classic book *Gender Trouble*, Butler outlines the differences between biological sex and performance of gender (1990). Although she is primarily concerned with women and performance of femininity, the implications of her work are meaningful for this study. Just as femininity can and perhaps must be performed, so must the performance of masculinity be a priority for young men. Butler further explores the performance of gender in her 2004 book *Undoing Gender*, in which she expounds on the idea that performance is not automatic, but rather learned and practiced. Because it is learned, it can be “unlearned” or at least another version can be learned. This means that performance of gender is fluid, and it can change during one individual’s lifetime.

Although the idea of performance of gender has met with criticism (Bordo 2008, Fraser 2008, Namaste 2009), primarily focused on the lack of agency and personal choice that the authors feel performing gender allows. Essentially, they argue that the idea that we are constantly performing a learned version of gender does not account for biology, does not allow for intent on the part of the actor, and does not offer any useful solutions to gender inequality. Despite those criticisms, doing gender has become such a landmark theory that in recent years there has been a wave of publications regarding “undoing gender” (Cole 2009, Deutsch 2007, Pullen and Knights 2007, Risman 2009). Even Judith Butler, whose work on performance of gender is of special

importance, and is thus prodigiously cited, has adopted the idea of undoing gender as the title of one of her recent books (2004). Undoing gender, or dissolving the previous performance of gender, does allow for personal choice and indicates personal understanding of gender performance. In this manner undoing gender gives more agency to the individual. In this study the young men participants certainly engage in the doing of gender, but they also show evidence of attempting to either undo restrictive versions of masculinity or allow for more options regarding the performance of masculinity.

## **2.2 College Culture**

When young men go to college, they must adjust to an entirely new lifestyle. If they are attending a residential college, suddenly they are living without parental presence, possibly for the first time in their lives, and they are surrounded by other young men their own age. There is also the atmosphere to consider: although they might have begun drinking, experimenting with drugs, and having sex while still in high school (Kenney, Hummer, and LaBrie 2010, Miller et al. 2007), in college such activities escalate (Fromme, Corbin, and Kruse 2008, White et al. 2006). Young men might start to feel a good deal of pressure regarding how much sexual activity they engage in (or do not engage in) as well as how much or how often they drink (Borsari and Carey 2001, Brown and Messman-Moore 2009).

Without the constant presence of their parents, many young men find themselves responsible for their own care for the first time in their lives. Suddenly no one knows how late they are staying up, when they wake up in the morning, if they go to class, if they do their homework, and so on. This onslaught of freedom can be overwhelming for some (Borsari, Murphy, and Barnett 2007, Mattanah et al. 2012, Terry, Leary, and Mehta 2013). In addition to



navigating the responsibility of classwork and class attendance, they are also navigating the freedom of their social life. In most college situations there is no curfew, and often there are no rules about bringing possible sex partners back to the dorm rooms. Young men find themselves suddenly able to live according to their own schedule and without the supervision to which they are most likely accustomed. Often this change is accompanied by an increase in sexual activity and drinking (Fromme, Corbin, and Kruse 2008).

Whether young men live in student housing or not, they will be surrounded by “the party culture” (Read et al. 2002, Ven 2011). College is often viewed as a time for drinking and having fun, rather than a time for learning. Young men might feel pressure to live up to this ideal and might begin drinking and partying more heavily than they have before. College students have higher rates of prevalence of drinking and higher rates of heavy drinking than their non-college attending peers (Jackson et al. 2005). They do not drink as casually as their non-college peers - instead, when they drink they tend to binge drink (Courtney and Polich 2009, Jackson et al. 2005, Kimmel 2008, Slutske 2009). Drinking is associated with masculinity (Peralta 2007, Slutske 2009, Young et al. 2005), especially the ability to drink often and copiously. Young men who are anxious to prove their masculinity might choose to do so via heavy drinking.

In addition to sexuality, social constructionism helps to shape our understanding of other aspects of college men’s lives, including the importance of their status as students. The young men in my study were all enrolled in college, which meant that they were dealing simultaneously with expectations for men their age and expectations for men in the college environment. Aside from what happens inside the classroom, there exist certain expectations for “the college experience” and these are socially constructed norms regarding drinking, partying, sex, and other extra-curricular activities (Presley, Meilman, and Leichliter 2002). One very important aspect of

the college experience is the expectation that while in college, young men will engage in heavy drinking (Capraro 2000, Young et al. 2005). The transition from high school to college is marked with several changes, but the act of drinking alcohol is an especially common aspect of that transition (Abar and Maggs 2010, Read et al 2002, Sher and Rutledge 2007). Drinking, and drinking heavily, is a sign of both independence from one's parents and of masculinity (Capraro 2000, Peralta 2007). It shows that the young men are in charge of their own bodies, and that they can "handle their liquor," which suggests they are in control of their bodies.

However, heavy drinking is also linked to poor decision-making and negative sexual interactions (Standerwick et al 2007, Zuckerman 2007). Some of those negative sexual interactions are more deviant than illegal, such as choosing to have sex while drunk or not remembering to use a condom (Hingson et al 2003, Leigh et al 2008, Patrick and Maggs 2009) while some are very serious cases of attempted or completed rape (Cowley 2014, Messman-More, Ward, and DeNardi 2013, Moorer et al 2013). There is a general expectation that alcohol can facilitate sex (Lefkowitz et al 2015, White et al 2009), and that expectation can lead young people to consume alcohol or facilitate the consumption of alcohol by others with the end goal of a sexual encounter.

### **2.3 Sexuality in College**

Young men in college face with certain sexual expectations. As I discussed previously, men are expected to be the sexual aggressors, and they are rewarded for having multiple sexual partners. Heterosexual young men are expected to pursue young women and make continuous sexual advances (Grazian 2007, Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Rather than stopping at any specific point during a sexual encounter, young men are expected, by both their partners (especially female partners) and their peer audience, to continue to push for further activity,

while young women are expected by whom to serve as “gate keepers” who stop sexual activity at a certain point – that is, before penile penetration (Baumeister 2004, Rosemalen 2000). This same gate-keeping norm further instructs that a young woman should stop the sexual activity at a progressively later point as the relationship advances (Leiblum 2002), thus rewarding the young man for his efforts.

However, this traditional script for sexual advancement does not always play out in contemporary relationships. Having a “fuck buddy” or “friend with benefits,” defined as a person one has sex with but does not consider to be a romantic partner, negates the entire dating schema (Currier 2012, Garcia et al. 2012, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006). If a young man can find someone with whom to engage in sexual activity without having to take her out or devote emotional energy to her, it is understandable that he might choose to simply hook up. “Hooking up,” defined as casual sexual relationships with no expectation of emotional intimacy (Bogle 2008, Hamilton and Armstrong 2009, Monto and Carey 2014), is perhaps the most accepted way to engage in sexual behavior during college. Choosing to hook up but not be involved emotionally leaves a young man available for many such sexual partnerships.

Because young men are rewarded by their peers (and not typically punished by young women or even dismissed as possible future partners), the hook up culture can be said to benefit heterosexual young men who wish to have as many female sex partners as possible (Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010, Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville 2010). Not all young men, of course, are seeking quantity of partners over quality. However, the hook up culture has become the predominant way for heterosexual college students to sexually interact (Monto and Carey 2014, Stinson 2010). Although research suggests that women find “the hook up culture” to be beneficial only to men (Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010, Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville

2010) and something that women merely put up with without finding satisfying, it is still the most popular option for interaction between college-aged men and women (Arnold 2010, Currier 2013).

For young gay, bisexual, and queer men, hook up culture is very comfortable and common (Garcia et al 2012). That is to say, there is less stigma involved in casual sex among gay men, possibly as a result of the lack of stigma for men having sex in general (Gudelunas 2012). Hoff and Beougher (2010) estimated that as many as sixty percent of young queer men participated in casual sexual relationships, which makes hooking up a very normalized experience. Young queer men have more options for anonymous or casual sex both in public (cruising spots) and online (placing ads or using apps) than young straight men, according to some researchers (Binson et al 2001, Seage et al 1997). However, this ease and normalization does not mean that gay men are not taking risks with their health (Rice et al. 2012, Wilkerson, Brooks, and Ross 2010) and with their emotional well-being (Barrios and Lundquist 2012, Frederick and Fales 2016, Muehlenkamp et al. 2015). Just as hook up culture can be emotionally damaging for the heterosexual population (Bradshaw, Kahn, and Seville 2010, Paul and Hayes 2002), it can be harmful for any combination of genders and sexual orientations.

Hooking up is so common that it is rare for students to go on actual dates (Fielder, Carey, and Carey 2012, Stinson 2010). Instead of going on one-on-one dates, college students (both straight and queer) are more likely to meet out at parties, in bars, or on group dates (Bogle 2007, Stinson 2010). Couples might pair off at the end of the night and engage in sexual activities with each other. These interactions do not imply emotional connection or even a desire to see each other again. Instead of dating and determining if they like each other enough to engage sexually,

as was considered the norm in previous generations, college students might instead interact sexually first, and if they like each other enough they might go on a date (Bogle 2007).

However, not all students report that they are happy with this arrangement. Although most seem to engage in the hook up culture, repeated studies have shown that they are not completely fulfilled (Furman and Schaffer 2011, Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006, Hamilton 2009). Students surveyed (especially female students) indicated that they wish they could date one person at a time, or spend quality time with people they are interested in, but they feel pressured by peers to participate in the hook up culture (Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006, Owen and Fincham 2011). Instead of pursuing the type of relationship they might prefer, both men and women go along with the norm and continue hooking up, in part because they believe everyone else is doing it (Lambert, Kahn, and Apple 2003).

Scholars are in disagreement about whether “the hook up culture” is beneficial or not. Most argue that it benefits young men, as they can experiment with multiple women without having to promise emotional attachment to any of them, while arguing that it is harmful to women for exactly the same reasons (Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville 2010, Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). However, this assumption of emotional attachment indicates that only the young women involved form emotional attachments, which gives the young men involved little credit for their emotional needs and development. Previous literature also argues that the unclear nature of the phrase “hooking up” is integral to its use. While young men can use the phrase and allow listeners to assume they “went further” than they actually did, young women can use the phrase and allow listeners to assume the interaction stopped sooner than it did (Bogle 2008). In both instances face is saved -- young men are thought to be more sexually active and young women less sexually active than perhaps they are.

## 2.4 Language and Narrative

Talking about sex is still largely taboo in American society. This taboo creates an interesting paradox for adolescents and young adults, because they are constantly surrounded by sex. Not only are they besieged with hormones and full of curiosity, they are bombarded with sexual imagery and depictions of sexual acts. The media are constantly promoting sex in advertisements, movies, and television shows directed at teens and young adults. But at the same time, their parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other adult role models are telling them that sex is dangerous, bad, and meant only for adults (Measor 2004, Roosmalen 2000). Again, we must recognize that not all adults give these negative messages. Young men and women are understandably confused, and they typically are not given the linguistic tools to work these issues out for themselves (Renold 2007, Wilson et al. 2010).

When young people do begin talking about sex, it is largely through jokes, innuendo, and slang (Abel and Fitzgerald 2006, Ford et al. 2007, Wilson et al. 2010). They might have learned the scientific names for actions and body parts through sex education classes or books, but they have likely never heard any adults talking openly about sex. Many young people are misinformed or making up information as they go, but this does not stop them from sharing these “facts” with their peers. A good deal of false information is spread during the formative adolescent years simply because young people are desperate for information and willing to believe any that comes their way. The lucky ones will later learn facts instead of relying on rumors heard in school, but a few will enter into sexual relationships without knowing anything about their bodies, the sex act itself, their feelings, and possible consequences.

Although sex education provides knowledge about vital issues like anatomy, pregnancy, and STIs, the emotional aspects of sex are rarely addressed in the school environment (Irvine 2004; Measor, Tiffin, and Miller 2000). Most sex educators advise their students to wait until they are “ready,” or even more often, to wait until they are married. But this advice can be somewhat futile for young people who have strong physical urges and who may not marry until their late twenties (<https://www.census.gov/hhes/families/files/graphics/MS-2.pdf>). Many young people find being told to wait disingenuous, because they know or suspect that their own parents engaged in premarital sex (Measor 2004). The media aimed at young people further complicate this issue. Although some television shows and movies deal with the loss of virginity in a sensitive and thoughtful way (e.g., *Friday Night Lights*, *Glee*, *The O.C.*), more often sexuality is played for laughs and seen as a source of comedy and embarrassment (e.g., *American Pie*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Not Another Teen Movie*, etc.).

Thus, when young people start becoming sexually active, they may have little emotional preparation. This lack of emotional cognizance can show in their attitudes and behaviors, but it can also show in their use of language. Despite the fact that they are engaging in what could be considered adult behavior, they often use juvenile language to discuss their own actions (Ford et al. 2007, Pascoe 2007). A large part of sexuality at this age is demonstrating that you are sexually active to your peers (Adler and Adler 1998, Heinrich 2013, Richardson 2010), and one of the most common ways to do this is to tell stories about previous interactions (Dean 2011). This storytelling both gives the teller credibility as an experienced sexual person and gives vicarious thrills to the listeners. The fact that the teller may not have engaged in said acts is beside the point, even though this leads to pluralistic ignorance. Sex is a sort of competition at this age, and the winner is the one who does it first -- and then tells about it.

How we talk about sex differs among the genders (Cameron and Kulick 2003, Holmes and Meyerhoff 2008). Men tend to use more direct language while women tend to hedge (Cameron and Kulick 2003, Coates 2008). Scholars consider this difference a byproduct of the social norms regarding male and female behavior (Cameron 2006, Garbarino 2001, Wilson et al. 2010), rather than an inherent biological tendency. The differences in language are especially apparent during the formative adolescent and college years (Cameron 2005, Coates 2015). Young men tend to use language that is rougher and involves more curse words (Talbot 2010), in part to demonstrate their masculinity and the casual nature with which they think about sex (Heinrich 2013). Young women, on the other hand, feel more obligated to use either more refined or vaguer language, in order to protect their reputations and emphasize their femininity (Holmes and Meyerhoff 2008, Talbot 2010).

In sum, young men are under a great deal of pressure to perform masculinity. They are raised believing that specific behaviors are more masculine than others, and that they must perform these behaviors in order to be considered a “real” man. When they become old enough to engage in sexual interactions, they must add performance of sexuality to their performance of masculinity. Additionally, they must take into account how their female counterparts (if they are heterosexual) are enacting femininity, and negotiate performing heterosexuality with them. Finally, they must adjust to the manner in which sexuality is performed in the college atmosphere, especially to the practice of hooking up for casual sex. In the section that follows I examine the theoretical frameworks which, when combined with knowledge of the literature reviewed above, shape this study.



## **2.5 Theoretical Frameworks**

To explore the issue of young men talking about sex and sexuality, I employ four theoretical frameworks: social constructionism, hegemonic masculinity, othering, and narrative theory. All four share a constructionist view of society, which makes social constructionism itself my primary theoretical framework. The social construction of sexuality and the social construction of language are frameworks that originated from the social construction framework itself. Both theories help to explain how our ideas about masculinity and language are created, and how those ideas are changing. For the purposes of this study, I use the social construction of sexuality to explain how sex and sexuality are viewed in modern American society. I then bring in hegemonic masculinity to explore how young men believe they are “supposed to” act. Similarly, I use the theory of othering to explain how the young men frame their place in society and their choice of actions by differentiating themselves from others. Finally, I use narrative theory to explore the language young men use to talk to each other about sex, and why they might tell certain stories to each other. These stories are themselves a form of social construction, because they form the sexual schema from which the young men are working. Together, these theories help to situate the lives of the young men who participated in the study by showing how they place themselves in the social world and how they use language to demonstrate their social standing.

### **2.5.1 *Social Constructionism***

The theory of social construction is at the heart of the other theories I am using. Social constructionism posits that all of our social actions are designed and understood by the people with whom we interact. Berger and Luckmann (1966) believed that past theorists (e.g., Marx, Weber, etc.) paid too much attention to theoretical and scientific knowledge, when the “real”

learning of things happened socially. They developed social constructionism to explain the social learning process: as a society, we essentially create “schemas,” which are organized patterns or plans for behavior. We create these schemas to make our world understandable. For instance, we have created schemas to describe how young heterosexual men should act at college parties: they should drink heavily and flirt with women. This schema is not strictly necessary or infallible, but it guides the behavior of young men because they believe it to be correct.

If we are all using the same schema, we are able to make sense of what others do in the course of social interactions. In fact, it is vital that others are involved in social construction, because language is necessary for the sharing of understandings (1966). We use language as a tool through which we frame our schemas and impart them to others. Essentially, we create ideas about the world around us, share them through language, and act of those ideas together. This linguistic aspect of social constructionism matches very close with symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), in that both rely on social interaction and shared understanding.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest these schemas are enacted in habit, because they posit that all human activity is based on habit. These habits gradually become institutionalized. These institutionalized habits take on social meaning and become embedded in society. This process means that some actions become so familiar and meaningful that we, as a society, recognize them without even having to think consciously about them. In this manner the schemas under which we operate become essentially invisible to us, as they are merely part of our everyday lives. These schemas that we create are not objective truth, but rather shared understandings of the world which can change as society changes (1966).

For the purposes of my study, social construction is a framework for understanding the world in which the young men live. Their daily interactions with others, including hanging out

with their friends, talking to women, and going to parties are all part of the schema they have learned since coming to college. I was able to observe certain patterns of interaction in the short moments in which I handed them their informed consent and questionnaires, as they did things like shake my hand and greet the other participants. Over the course of the focus groups, more social construction came into play as they learned and negotiated the norms for being in a focus group (such as taking turns when speaking) and for talking openly about sex with strangers (such as making jokes to make one another more comfortable). Even more importantly, the honest conversation in the focus groups shed light on the ways in which their social lives and their sexual interactions are guided by social construction, as the participants repeatedly referred to what they are “supposed to” do or what “other” people do. Social construction is an often invisible part of our lives, but it helps to explain how the young men who participated in the study shaped their ideas about sex and sexuality. Even more importantly, constructionism helps to explain how the young men chose their language and how that language reflects their sentiments.

### ***2.5.2 The Social Construction of Sexuality***

Social constructionism is especially important for sexuality. Although the drive to have sex and reproduce is at least partly biological, virtually everything about how that drive is fulfilled (or not fulfilled) is social. We socially construct norms and values regarding sexuality, and these norms and values change within and across societies (Fausto-Sterling 2000). For instance, whether sex is pursued via courtship or casually hooking up depends on the social norms of the time, and such norms regarding sex are socially constructed. Norms can change over the course of a generation – or as my participants claimed, over the course of just a few

years. They had to learn new norms just in the transition from high school to college, and they learned them socially. The social construction of sexuality is an important theory for understand how the young men in my study navigated the ever-changing norms regarding flirting, dating, and sex.

No discussion of the social construction of sexuality would be complete without Foucault. In his 1976 work *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault outlines the manner in which the “repressive hypothesis,” which posits that society at the time did not speak about sex, was in fact untrue. Instead, he argued that people had begun talking about sexuality more than ever, and that one’s sexuality was now a part of one’s identity (1976). Where previously sexuality had been another thing humans did, or perhaps even an art form, now it was an important part of the self which must be monitored and analyzed (1976). This idea regarding sexuality as a part of one’s identity meant that sexuality was not necessarily private, but rather meant to be shared as openly as any other part of one’s identity. *The History of Sexuality* was especially impactful for members of the LGBT community, for whom sexuality was becoming political (Halperin 1997, Spargo 1999, and Turner 2000). For the young men in my study, their sexuality was not necessarily the most important thing about their identity, but they were open with nearly everyone about their sexual orientation, regardless of how they identified.

In *The Social Construction of Sexuality* (2003), Steven Seidman outlines the ways in which society determines how an individual might think about everything from sexual desire to sexual intercourse. For the purposes of my study, Seidman’s work demonstrates especially well the ways in which society shapes the way young men might think about their sexual interactions. Essentially, the society in which they live lays out their options for them: heterosexuality, dating, vaginal sex, and so on. In his book, Seidman describes the ways in which

heterosexuality has been determined as the norm for American sexuality (2003) and how we have come to accept heterosexuality as an identity and not simply a choice. Seidman builds on Foucault; both explore the ways in which sexuality and society intersect.

Other works take this theory even further, helping to explain how specific aspects of modern sexuality are shaped. Of especial important to this study are *Hooking Up* (Bogle 2008) and *Guyland* (Kimmel 2009), both of which take the idea of the social construction of sexuality and apply it to the world in which my participants are currently living. Both books examine the “rules” or schemas behind how to have sex, and both books find those schemas to be socially constructed. In *Hooking Up*, Bogle details the nuances of “hook up culture,” a schema in which casual sex is not only permitted but heavily encouraged. My participants certainly found this schema to be prevalent in their lives. They spoke quite openly about the differences between hooking up and having relationships, and about feeling pressured by that schema. Essentially, hook up culture shapes their sexual experiences. Similarly, in *Guyland*, Kimmel explores the social development of a schema in which young men are allowed by society to remain in the mindset and even the physical environment of “twenty-somethings” for an indeterminate amount of time. Young men are allowed to remain unattached – to jobs, to women, to sex, and to traditional markers of adulthood. This construction of both lifestyle and sexuality also proved to be relevant to my participants, who found that seeking a relationship with an expectation of monogamy was considered unusual and perhaps unmasculine. In both of these examples, the sexuality of young men is shaped by forces that appear to be outside of their control.

It is important to note, however, that the majority of the subjects in *Hooking Up* and *Guyland* are white. Such a racially limited sample is not unusual in scholarly work, but it can impact findings. The majority of the participants in my study were not white, and though their

experiences were similar to those of the subjects in *Hooking Up* and *Guyland* in some ways, the impact of race cannot be ignored. There have been relatively few studies of the experience of men of color in terms of their sexual experience, although noteworthy exceptions include *We Real Cool* by bell hooks (2004) and *Bad Boys* by Ann Ferguson (2001). It is my intention that this study serve as another addition to that area of the literature.

### **2.5.3 *The Social Construction of Masculinity***

In much the same way that enacting one's sexuality can be encouraged or restrained by society, the ways of expressing one's masculinity are similarly socially constructed. The idea of hegemonic masculinity was first presented in 1985 by Carrigan, Connell, and Lee in their piece "Toward a new sociology of masculinity." They were searching for a way to study masculinity that was not a mere by-product of studying the plight of women. It was Connell's 1987 book "*Gender and Power*," however, that became the most cited source of the phrase "hegemonic masculinity." At this time hegemonic masculinity was a "pattern of practice" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and not just an idea of how men should be. It is the things that men do to sustain the patriarchy. Not only does it require physical acts, but also emotional performance. Hegemonic masculinity demands aggression, stoicism, and toughness (Donaldson 1993). This form of masculinity is not meant to be enacted by all men. Instead, it is aspirational. Hegemonic masculinity is primarily intended for white, upper-class, educated men (Donaldson 1993). However, it is also open to change, as the authors understood that time and social change would alter the ideal of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

As predicted by the authors, the concept of hegemonic masculinity changed over the last twenty years. In the early 1990's hegemonic masculinity was treated by scholars as a concept that could be used to understand different aspects of male behavior, including crime

(Messerschmidt 1993, Newburn and Stanko 1994), men in media (Hanke 1998, Jensen and Sabo 1994), and sports (Messner 1990, Messner and Sabo 1990). Since then, however, there have been multiple critiques of the idea. Writers argue that the idea of hegemonic masculinity is too restrictive (Collier 1998, Whitehead 2002), that it is too ambiguous (Jefferson 2002, Martin 1998), and that it is too functionalist (Demetriou 2001). These critiques detail the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is restrictive because it only allows for a very strict enactment of masculinity: one must, as the list says, be “young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (Goffman 1997). Obviously, not all men can live up to such standards, and rejecting the portion of the population that cannot achieve the characteristics described in that list as not masculine enough leaves very few men eligible for contention. Interestingly, other scholars have described the concept as too ambiguous. To be fair, Goffman’s list is not canonical, but rather an exhaustive list of the qualities he saw as valued in society. The ideas about what qualities define a masculine (and even hyper-masculine) man can change quickly and their relative values can change as well.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of hegemonic masculinity is that allows men to perpetuate the patriarchal system under which much of American society works. In particular, hegemonic masculinity allows men to more easily control women. In some cases, it allows men to control other men (Donaldson 1993). In this way, hegemonic masculinity can be harmful, as it encourages men to dominate each other in a negative manner (Connell 2005). Different cultures have different versions of masculinity, but for the purposes of my dissertation, I deal with the American ideal of masculinity. Traits like physical strength, wealth, conventional attractiveness, ambition, and demonstrated heterosexuality are all valued (Connell 2005). For American men

who are not already advantaged in terms of race, class, and sexuality, hegemonic masculinity can be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

In fact, this difficulty in achieving the ideal of hegemonic masculinity might be why such an ideal survives. Some would argue that there are no men who live up to this ideal (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), which means that American men are taught to chase an unattainable dream. For the purposes of my study, this is crucial. Hegemonic masculinity remains at the forefront of gender scholarship. The young men who participated in this study are largely without the means of achieving an idealized masculinity. They are young, disproportionately non-white, and in the middle of their college careers. Therefore, they may not be able to live up to the American ideal of being white, handsome, wealthy, and athletic.

Instead, the participants in this study performed a softer, more emotionally-aware version of masculinity. Gender scholars have begun to note that masculinity is no longer as strict as it once was, or at least not as strict as the very descriptive initial definition of hegemonic masculinity (Allen 2007, Coles 2007). In its place, a new version of masculinity is emerging. This newer version allows for multiple enactments and performances of masculinity, not all of which need to come from white, rich, educated men with aggressive speech and emotional stoicism (Duncanson 2015, Messerschmidt 2012). This expansion of masculine ideas is also socially constructed, of course, but it does allow more room for variation. Most importantly, it allows room for men of color to embody a version of masculinity that does not also serve to hold them down.



#### 2.5.4 *The Social Construction of Language*

Our use of language is also socially constructed. For theoretical analysis of language, I draw on the narrative theory of Jerome Bruner (1991). Bruner argues that language does not merely exist, apart from any human effort or participation. Instead, language is constantly created, shared, and changed through human interaction. The knowledge that a person possesses is never created spontaneously, but rather collected through interactions (1991). Thus the knowledge that we are walking around with, and constructing our lives with, is never “solo,” but rather shared. This knowledge varies across different cultures; it is rarely constructed purposefully, but rather, occurs unintentionally over the course of time. As people have similar or shared experiences, these experiences become part of a shared narrative (Bruner 1991). We essentially tell each other stories to make sense of our experiences and to build bonds with each other.

When stories become part of our shared experience, they also take on the role of schemas. For instance, it is through absorbing the narratives of others that we build a schema of how sexuality should look. Bruner talks about narrative as schema in another work. In *Life as Narrative* (2004), Bruner says that we tell narratives as a way of “world making,” by which he means that we construct our mental worlds (if not also, in turn, our physical worlds) via the narratives we tell ourselves and each other. By creating and sharing these narratives, we socially construct schemas about many things, including sexuality and masculinity, and share them with each other, which makes them part of a society’s narrative “canon.” An example is the language we use for people who enjoy casual sex. We tell each other that men who are actively sexual with multiple partners are “studs” or “players.” At the same time, we tell each other that women who actively sexual with multiple partners are “whores” or “sluts.” Therefore, we create a shared

story in which two people who are doing the same thing – perhaps even with each other – are dramatically different types of people.

For the purposes of my dissertation, I use narrative theory to explore how the men in my study share schemas regarding masculinity, sexuality, and negotiations of sexual encounters. Narrative theory will help to frame the way in which men have learned certain ideas and how they share them with each other. The young men in this study came from different backgrounds, but they are all likely be aware of specific masculine ideals, sexual norms, or explanations of feminine behavior. Narrative theory helps to explain why they are familiar with such norms and how those norms and explanations have been spread.

### ***2.5.5 The Social Construction of Othering***

The final theoretical framework I use is that of othering. Othering is the act of differentiating oneself from another person or group – or perhaps more precisely, differentiating a group from oneself. The concept of othering can be traced back to the early work of Hegel, who wrote that consciousness of the self demands consciousness of others, and thus a separation between the self and the other is created (1910). Simone de Beauvoir took the concept of “the other” even further with her work *The Second Sex* (2010) in which she details the othering of women, in the form of their social mistreatment and their consideration as less worth and less important than men. For de Beauvoir, the entire gender was considered “other” and the place of women in society was shaped by that separation. Thus, the idea of having a self and an “other” was well established in philosophy before the social impacts of such a concept made study of “the others” applicable in social research. Thus the idea of the existence of “an other” grew into an examination of how other people were different from oneself (often worse) and how other people were treated differently than “us” (also generally worse).

Othering as a social theory framework was first used in anthropology, as a construct to explain how conquering nations defended their eradication of native society (Spivak 1985). Essentially they would “other” the natives, depicting them as less advanced and in need of a better way of life. It has since been picked up in multiple fields, such as nursing and education (Canales 2000, Weis 1995), as a way of explaining human interaction in which lines are drawn between “us” and “them.” It is similar in practice to Gluckman’s (1963) explanations of defining one’s values through the identification of collective values, in an in-group/out-group scenario. By clearly delineating who “we” are and who “they” are, we know with whom we belong and what we must do to stay members of our group.

A crucial aspect of othering is the use of language to create a distinction between groups. By talking to one another, and especially via the use of gossip (Jaspers, Ostman, and Verschueren 2010, Jaworski and Coupland 2005, Thornborrow and Morris 2004), we are able to identify the behaviors which our social group finds acceptable and those it will sanction. Thus gossip is essentially a mechanism which allows us to deem unsavory practices as something that other people do, and therefore not something in which we ourselves would participate, because we are better than those people. Gossip serves the social function of allowing us to other.

The young men in the focus groups engaged in the practice of othering a great deal, in what I believe was a repeated attempt to clarify moral boundaries. For instance, when asked about words one might use to describe a woman with whom you do not want to have sex, the participants were able to offer multiple slang terms: ho, THOT, grenade, etc. However, they almost immediately othered people who use those words, clarifying that while they had heard such slang, they did not use it themselves. They wanted to be sure that the moderator (and the

invisible researcher) knew that they were not the type of person who would use derogatory language, even though they were aware of the existence of such language.

Othering is another example of social construction. These young men have constructed a place for themselves in the realm of masculinity and language, and that place does not allow for derision or disparagement of women. The fact that they went so far as to repeatedly distance themselves from people who use certain language demonstrates their awareness of a schema of masculinity (perhaps specifically the older version of hegemonic masculinity) and their simultaneous awareness that they do not want to be lumped into that schema. In fact, they desire to create a new schema in which multiple varieties of sexuality are allowed and negative language is something only other people employ.

In conclusion, each of these theories rely on the idea of social construction. Social constructionism itself is an over-arching theoretical framework which helps to explain the way that ideas are shaped and shared among people who belong to the same culture. It follows that ideas about sexuality, masculinity, and language use would arise out of the general framework of social construction. Our shared ideas about masculinity are changing, as I addressed in the literature review, but those changes are also part of the way social construction allows for change and modification of standing schemas. Similarly, the ways in which we interact sexually are part of a schema, and the young men in this study are negotiating that schema and their place inside it. Even the use of othering implies social construction, as it relies on both the construction of who is good and who is bad, but also on having the language with which to dismiss those whom you believe are not like you. In the chapters that follow I apply these theoretical frameworks to analyze the ideas and language from the focus groups. Each chapter provides further examples of

the ways in which the schemas under which the participants operate are constraining yet in a constant state of change.

### **3 METHODS**

In this section I will outline the methods used in this study and provide a detailed explanation of how I chose those methods and how I implemented them. This was primarily a qualitative study, although I did include in survey in order to gather background information on the participants. My primary methodology for gathering data was focus groups. In the following chapter I will describe my sample, the focus groups, the survey, and my methods of analysis for the data that emerged.

#### **3.1 Sample**

In total, forty-four men participated in the focus groups. Because they completed a questionnaire in addition to the focus groups, I have a great deal of information on the participants. In the following section I describe the young men who participated, and how their demographic information and previous sexual experiences may have influenced their language in the focus groups. Although the statistics gleaned from this data are basic, I believe they help in understanding the participants and in placing the experiences of the participants in the larger social picture.

The participants ranged in age from 18-27. This is a fairly wide age range, but the majority of participants (80%) were 19-22. Only five participants were 24 or older, making those “older” men a minority. Similarly, only four men were 18. The other 35 men were all clustered in the 19-22 range, which is typical for the university at which this study was completed (<https://colleges.niche.com/georgia-state-university/diversity/>). The ages of the participants

reflect not just the population of the campus on which this dissertation was completed, but the average age range for college students in the United States (NCES 2015), which is 18-24.

Also in keeping with the general makeup of the university at which the study was completed, the participants were of a variety of races and ethnicities. White students are only 34% of the student population ([www.collegeportrait.org/GA/gsu/print](http://www.collegeportrait.org/GA/gsu/print)) at the university, and white men made up exactly 34% of my sample, as well. In total, 15 men listed themselves as White, 11 (25%) as Black, 5 (11%) as Hispanic, 9 (20%) as Asian, and 3 (7%) as mixed race. I was pleased to get such a diverse sample in terms of race, as I believe it allows for more contemplation of the intersections of race and masculinity than would be possible with a less diverse sample. It is important to note here that the university from which this sample was drawn is itself unusually racially diverse, as compared to other universities of its size ([collegefactual.com](http://collegefactual.com)) and is situated in a highly racially diverse city (Lloyd 2012). Therefore, I cannot claim any special sampling techniques which garnered the diversity of my sample, but I do believe that the racial diversity is significant to the findings contained in this dissertation.

One factor that concerned me in my recruitment was the possible over-selection of sociology majors, considering the fact that much of the recruitment was happening in sociology classrooms. However, this turned out not to be the case: one 4 participants (9%) were sociology majors. Biology and computer science were more common majors among the participants, with five majors each. The rest of the majors were scattered, but there was not a bias towards the social sciences. Additionally, only three had taken a sexuality course while in college, so I do not believe their opinions were especially influenced by sociology courses or instructors.

In terms of sexual orientation, my sample included only four sexual minorities. Two participants listed themselves as gay or homosexual, in addition to one bisexual participant and

one asexual participant. Thus 6% of the participants identify as gay or bisexual, which is a slightly higher percentage than is typically found in the general population (NHIS 2014). The study took place at a university in a large city which is known for its friendliness to the LGBTQ community, and when recruiting I was careful to assure possible participants that their sexual orientation was not a barrier to participation. I was clear during recruitment that men of all sexual orientations were welcome, and in fact queer men were especially welcome. I would have liked to have had more LGBTQ participants. At one point I considered putting together an entirely LGBTQ focus group, but recruitment was difficult enough, and I accepted the participants according to their availability rather than their sexual orientation. Although the data from such a group might have been interesting, blending orientations in the groups did not prove to be problematic. In fact, one of the questions on the questionnaire asked the participants to rate their comfort regarding spending time around gay men, ranging from a 1 (not at all) to a 5 (very). The average was a 4.1, which indicates that although the straight participants are only “fairly” comfortable with gay men, they are still, on the whole, comfortable.

I began with questions about virginity. I asked about virginity because I thought it might be relevant to the participants’ opinions regarding sexuality, and because I wanted to get an accurate understanding of the sample. Out of the 44 participants, five listed themselves as virgins, which is 11% of the sample. Interestingly, four of those five were Asian and the other was mixed race. Although I cannot speculate on their upbringing or possible religious connections to their ethnicity, I do think it is noteworthy that all of the virgins were not white. There was no option for explanation on the questionnaire, and only two of the men who described themselves as virgins explained their motivations for retaining their virginity in the

focus groups — both named religious reasons and indicated that the religion of their parents was also a factor.

The participants were asked about their age at the first instance of several sexual acts. The average age of virginity loss, as measured by first instance of vaginal penetrative intercourse, was 17. This age of virginity loss is in line with the national average (CDC 2011). Virginity loss for non-heterosexual men is somewhat more difficult to measure. This measurement issue is reflective of the social bias regarding sex — as though nothing but penis-in-vagina sex matters. I did ask the men at what age they first participated in oral and anal sex, and the ages of the gay and bisexual participants at those occurrences were all between 16 and 17, so in that regard they were in line with the ages of virginity loss for heterosexuals. However, I do not wish to compare those two occurrences or indicate that they are equivalent.

After ascertaining whether the men were sexually active, the questionnaire continued with questions regarding the participants' current relationships. These questions came in two forms: one set was in reference to their current activities and partners and one set was regarding how they felt about their current situation. The first set covered several factors: age at virginity loss, current relationship status, whether or not they had a “friends with benefits” arrangement, and so on. These questions were designed to gain some understanding of how sexually active the participants were, in order to shed light on their later comments in the focus groups.

The first statistic of interest concerns whether or not the participants are currently sexually active. Out of those who listed themselves as heterosexual, 75% had had sexual intercourse in the last six months. One aspect of this that struck me as interesting was that so few of them were virgins, and yet not all of them had an active sex life. Of those who had had sex in the last six months, the most common number of partners in that time was three or fewer. This



means that while some men were having a great deal of sex, most were having occasional sex with only a few partners. I believe this speaks to the issue pluralistic ignorance covered in the literature review – when asked, most college students will tell researchers that they believe everyone else is having more sex than they (Sprecher and Treger 2015). However, these participants are not having extraordinary amounts of sex, and these are the men who volunteered for a sex study. The men who are uncomfortable talking about sex (and self-selected out of this study) might have even fewer partners, further disproving the schema about college being a time of frenzied sexual activity (Bogle 2008, Sprecher and Treger 2015).

In order to examine the participants' relationships, I included two questions regarding commitment. One question asked if the participants were currently in a monogamous relationship. Only 31% of the men responded that they were. Of those men, two were married. The second question asked whether the respondents had a "friend with benefits" or regular hook up partner. 30% of the men (of all sexual orientations) responded that they did. This type of relationship might mean that they both have other sex partners, or that they simply do not have the emotional relationship that typically goes with monogamy. Regardless, it means that the men have had sex with this person more than once and anticipate having sex with them again in the future, which does imply some amount of connection. (There was only one instance of a participant marking "yes" for both of these questions, and I believe he did so in error, as other aspects of his questionnaire were confusing and contradictory.)

The most common type of sexual activity was decidedly casual. When asked if they had engaged in casual sex over the last six months (here defined as "not a committed relationship"), 52% of the participants reported that they had. This statistic is in line with the literature regarding hook up culture (Bogle 2008, Epstein et al 2009, Fielder, Carey, and Carey 2012) and

the general schema for modern sexual relationships in college (Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006). Whether or not the participants were happy with the casual sex they were having is addressed later, during the qualitative section, but more than half of them were engaging in casual sex, nonetheless.

The next section of questions was designed to measure the relative contentment of the men regarding relationships and women. Each of these questions was answered on a scale from one to five, with one representing “not at all” and five representing “very.” The first of the questions asked “how comfortable are you around women, in general?” The average for that question was 4.3, indicating that the participants were fairly comfortable, verging on very comfortable. However, I wanted to know more about those relationships, so the next two questions asked about their satisfaction with their emotional relationships with women, and their satisfaction with their sexual relationships with women. The participants were largely comfortable in their emotional relationships, averaging 4.0. In regards to their satisfaction with their sexual relationships, however, the average dropped to 3.8. This is not a huge drop, but I do think it is worth consideration. It suggests that the young men who participated are comfortable with women in general, and even fairly comfortable with their emotional connections, but have concerns regarding their sexual relationships. These concerns will be further examined in the focus groups, especially in regards to hook up culture.

As a final note regarding the sample, the majority of the participants did not know each other. Occasionally a group of two or three friends would arrive together and participate in the same focus group, but there were no groups in which all of the participants knew each other. Some researchers argue that the interaction between friends or acquaintances can produce even richer data (Krueger and Casey 2014), and there were certainly a few exchanges between friends

that produced interesting data. However, it was my hope that the participants would be more open with men they were unlikely to see again, and I believe this was the case.

### **3.2 Recruitment**

Recruiting participants for the focus groups was by far the hardest and most time-consuming aspect of the entire project. I believe this difficulty was due to two main factors: insufficient rewards for participation, and challenges regarding scheduling the focus groups for the participants. I managed to resolve both issues in the second wave of recruitment, but it was a learning process and added several months to the study.

In the first wave, I recruited participants through a variety of means, including fliers, emails, direct plea, and social media. The initial design for the fliers specified that participants would receive free pizza during their participation in a focus group, and included the phrase “WANT TO TALK ABOUT SEX?” in large letters (Appendix 4). This was a rather obvious tactic, but it was my intention to catch their attention with the word “sex” and move on from there. At the bottom of the flier was my email address and instructions to email me for more information. Armed with this flier, I wandered around campus approaching young men and asking them if they would like to participate in my study. I made it clear that the study was for my dissertation, and that they would be rewarded with free pizza. The young men were generally polite and accepted the flier, but I believe I only successfully recruited one or two men via this method. I also sent out an email to the sociology instructors requesting a small amount of time in their classes to explain my study and try to recruit their students. I went to three classes, at the invitation of their instructors, and gave a short talk and distributed fliers. When I could not attend

the classes personally, I gave instructors copies of the fliers, and they handed them out to their students.

Additionally, I tried to use social media in my favor by creating a Facebook page for the study. Facebook allows you to target specific audiences, and I was able to select the appropriate age range, gender, general location, and people who had “liked” the university’s Facebook page. This was an interesting experience and gave me a great deal of insight into how marketing on Facebook is done. However, I do not believe that I recruited a single participant from that page, so in the end it was unhelpful. I also tried Twitter, tagging the sociology department in a post about my study. That effort also yielded no participants of whom I am aware.

This first wave of recruitment, which took place during the fall semester of 2014, was almost entirely unsuccessful. The combination of fliers, classroom talks, social media, and personal connections yielded very little. I believe that was largely due to the absence of sufficient reward. In the first wave I promised free pizza, and that was simply not enough incentive, especially when combined with the already busy schedules of undergraduate students. When the first wave resulted in too few interested participants to even make up one focus group, I knew I had to change my tactics. I decided to offer a generous monetary incentive: twenty dollars. For a college student, twenty dollars in cash is a substantial amount, and this worked in my favor. I redesigned the flier to feature the monetary compensation (Appendix 5) and when the IRB approved the new flier, I began passing it out as soon as the new semester began.

The second round of recruitment began in January of 2015. The second round was very fruitful and resulted in three focus groups. Unfortunately, it was also very expensive. I was unable to procure a grant to cover the cost of paying the participants and feeding them, although I did apply for several. I attempted to start a crowd-funding campaign to cover the costs but that

campaign was also unsuccessful. Getting funding for sex research is notoriously difficult (Alptraum 2015), and while I was able to raise a bit of money through the generosity of people who already knew me, it was ultimately a failed attempt. I ended up paying for the pizza, sodas, and participants' time out of pocket. Although it was expensive, paying the participants turned out to be a major factor in generating interest, so I do not regret that decision.

For the third and final round of recruitment, which took place in the fall of 2015, I made another change, this time in regard to scheduling. I began recruiting (via fliers) on the same day as the focus groups. This turned out to be very effective. Same-day recruitment made me nervous, because I would much prefer to have a set number of participants well in advance of the study, but such a short time frame suited the participants. I believe that promising to participate in something that is not in the immediate future made the idea of participation too abstract. Learning about the study and then participating that very day, however, seemed to match with their very busy schedules and general preference for immediacy. Twice this resulted in too many men showing up, but turning away possible participants was far preferable to not having enough. I also went to classrooms at the invitation of instructors and asked professors and instructors to pass out fliers again. Several participants mentioned that they had become aware of the study through these classroom talks, so perhaps the classroom talks were more memorable with the benefit of monetary compensation. I believe I was able to recruit four or five participants via the in-class fliers or speeches. This third round of recruitment also yielded three focus groups, although I believe I could have done more if it had been necessary. I decided not to, as my data had reached a saturation point, but the combination of money and immediacy proved to be very effective. If I am able to do further research in a university setting, I will certainly be using those two methods.

### **3.3 The Questionnaire**

When the participants came into the room in which we held the focus groups, they were given two things: an informed consent form and a questionnaire. The informed consent form was actually two copies of the same form, and they signed one (which I kept for my records) and kept one copy for themselves. The questionnaire (Appendix 2) was designed to collect demographic information about the participants. It began with simple questions regarding the participant's age, ethnicity, marital status, and major field of study. The questions then moved into aspects of the participant's sexuality: his sexual orientation, age at first sexual encounter, current frequency of sexual encounters, current relationship status, and pornography viewing habits. Finally, there were a series of questions that were measured on a scale, and those questions examined the participant's comfort with women, relationships, and gay people. The questionnaire was four pages long, and the participants were given pens with which to fill it out. The participants were given the questionnaire as they came in and settled into their seats, so completing it was a somewhat leisurely process. Typically they filled out the questionnaire while eating pizza and chatting with the moderator or other focus group participants. When every participant had finished the questionnaire, the moderator collected them, put them in a folder, and began the focus group.

### **3.4 The Focus Groups**

Before beginning data collection, I first completed a pilot focus group, with the purpose of testing the questionnaire, the questions asked by the moderator, and the moderator himself. The participants for this group were graduate students from the sociology program who were aware that they were participating in pilot group and who gave feedback to me and the moderator after the focus group concluded. Although the men who participated in the pilot group were

different than the intended subjects, as they were older and more familiar with the intricacies of collecting data, they were immensely helpful in tailoring the questionnaire and the guiding questions. Doing a pilot group was also helpful for the moderator, as he learned more about the study itself and gained practice guiding the conversation. After reviewing the feedback from the pilot group I made some changes that increased the clarity of the questionnaire and likely improved the overall process.

I completed six focus groups between January and September of 2015. Researchers generally agree that four to six focus groups are enough to create saturation (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013, Krueger and Casey 2014). Each group had between six and nine participants, as is standard (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). It is also standard for focus groups to last one and a half to two hours (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013, Krueger and Casey 2014), and each of mine lasted between one hour and two hours, depending on how talkative the participants were. The focus groups were held in a small conference room in the Sociology department, which allowed them to be both on campus and in an easily located site. The size of the room and the lack of windows also offered the participants privacy, which I hoped might create a relaxed setting. The conference room had an oval table and cushioned chairs, so when the moderator sat at the table, the environment was friendly and conversational.

I recorded the focus groups via two methods: a digital sound recorder placed in the center of the table, and a video camera set on a tripod in the corner of the room. Having multiple methods of recording the groups turned out to be advantageous, because (perhaps predictably) one of the recording devices failed on two occasions. The participants seemed entirely unbothered by the presence of both the digital recorder and the camera. I believe this was because the digital recorder looked like a large, old-fashioned cellphone and the camera was in a

corner, in order to be as unobtrusive as possible. I did not begin recording until each participant had come in and signed the informed consent form.

When the participants came in, the moderator or I greeted them and gave them the informed consent sheet and the survey. They signed one form and I gave each participant a copy of the form, as well. As previously mentioned, I did provide pizza and soft drinks for the participants, and they were invited to enjoy those while filling out the survey and waiting for all of the participants to filter in. As soon as all of the participants had arrived and filled out the informed consent sheet, I checked the recording devices, set them to record, and left the room.

After signing the informed consent form, each young man was given a code to protect his confidentiality. Only the code appeared on the questionnaire and in transcriptions of the focus groups. Each participant was given an identifying code number which indicated both their group and their person. For instance, a member of the first focus group might be “A3,” while a member of the fifth focus group might be “E5.” Each participant had a little card, like a name card, to place in front of them on the table so that the other participants could refer to them by their code, if they wished. At the beginning of the focus group the moderator asked each of the young men to identify himself via his code (and only his code) so that I could match their physical appearance and voice to their questionnaire and their comments during the focus group. No other identifying information was asked of them while they were being recorded.

I stayed in my office (which was on the same hallway as the conference room) for the duration of the focus group. My office was only a few doors down, and when the focus groups were having an especially good time or trying to talk over one another, I could hear them. However, since the focus groups took place in the evening, very few other people were still in their offices, so this noise did not disturb others. Additionally, the participants were given



privacy and did not have to worry that they might disturb others. When the focus group was finished, the moderator would come get me. At that point I came back to the conference room, distributed twenty dollar bills, thanked the participants, and reiterated that they could contact me with questions.

I would have liked to have run the focus groups myself, so that I could have some control over the direction and flow of conversation. However, as a woman, my presence would cause the young men in the focus group to talk differently than they would normally. Labov (1972) calls this “the observer’s paradox.” There is no way to keep the subjects from possibly talking differently than they might if they did not believe themselves to be observed, but I could at least remove my female presence from the focus groups and hope that a more male-centric language would dominate.

Therefore, I decided to employ a young male moderator, who would be carefully trained and prepared by me. For the first three groups I used a recent graduate from the university. For the last three groups I had to train another moderator, as the first became unavailable. Using two moderators was not ideal, but it was unavoidable. However, I chose two men with the same outward characteristics and similar abilities to lead and encourage a focus group. Both moderators were outgoing, personable, and direct. Even more importantly, both were organized and able to lead a conversation with subtlety.

I chose two men who presented as heterosexual. In the presence of another young, straight man, my hope was that heterosexual focus group participants would feel comfortable enough to use the kind of language they would normally use with each other (Hollander 2004). The moderator’s role in creating a comfortable environment is crucial (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014), and the participants are likely to feel most at ease if they feel that the moderator is in

agreement with them about the topic of sexuality. I recognize that I might have been alienating queer young men by using a heterosexual moderator, but the focus groups were made up primarily of straight males. Therefore, I was willing to take that risk to create as much comfort in the focus groups as possible.

Additionally, both of the moderators were members of racial minority groups. The student body at Georgia State is unusually mixed in terms of race, as compared to other universities of the same size, so I felt that no matter the race of the moderator, I risk alienating some racial group. Because I cannot avoid that, I felt that it was best that the moderator be a minority in order to encourage minority participants to speak comfortably and openly (Krueger and Casey 2014).

Both moderators were trained by me, and the second moderator had the advantage of being able to hear about problems and solutions from the first three groups. Their training consisted of a detailed explanation of my study, so that they understood the point of the focus groups and the relevance of the questions. We would then go over the questionnaire, so that they knew what questions the participants were being asked. The majority of the training consisted of practicing and discussing the written questions and prompts that the moderator alone was given. The questions they asked were written by me and designed to create a flow (Appendix 3). However, the moderators were encouraged ask the questions in any order they saw fit, especially if the focus group ended up on a conversational track and that inadvertently answered later questions. The second moderator listened to a recording of a previous focus group as well, which helped to demonstrate to him how moderating was done and what types of issues might arise. Upon analysis of the recordings and the transcriptions, the answers given by the participants and

the general tone of the focus groups did not vary substantially between groups led by the first and the second moderator.

The most important task of the moderator, however, was a bit more difficult to train: encouraging conversation between participants. The reason I chose focus groups was to facilitate interactions between young men, so that I could both study their language and study their world-building. The role of the moderator was not simply to ask questions in order, but to prompt the participants to speak openly and engage with one another. I wanted the focus groups to have a conversational feel because this familiar style of speaking was likely to make participants comfortable and encourage them to talk to one another (Steward and Shamdasani 2014). I wanted such exchanges between the participants because the language that the young men would use when interacting would likely be different than that which they would use when talking to an interviewer, since they were essentially communicating as a group process (Krueger and Casey 2014, Seal, Bogart, and Ehrhardt 1998). Thus the moderators were instructed to encourage discussion and let the focus groups wander a little bit, at their discretion.

This type of interaction between participants is what makes focus groups valuable methodologically (Smithson 2000). For the purposes of my dissertation, discussion regarding the opinions and values of the participants would give me insight into the norms around sexuality for these young men, because it would be like watching them actively engage in world-building (Hyde et al. 2005, Warr 2005). Carey and Smith (1994) call this the “group effect,” and while they warn that the researcher must be aware of the participants feeling pressure to conform, they also note that the group effect produces rich data. I was concerned about the group effect changing the language or participation of the young men, but I also wanted to see if such a pressure to conform emerged, as the pressure being applied would itself be interesting data

(Hyde et al. 2005). Ultimately, I chose focus groups because of the data that could be produced by the men talking to each other.

Despite my interest in unscripted conversation, the focus groups did have a structure, which was provided by the guiding questions asked by the moderator. The guiding questions addressed issues of sexuality, but also the place of sexuality in the lives of the young men. There were questions that asked when they talk about sexuality, what they discuss, and with whom. Are they more comfortable talking to men or women? Do they talk to their guy friends about their feelings regarding sex, or just about their sexual activities? Have they ever spoken with their parents about their sexuality or their sexual activity? Do they have female friends with whom they feel comfortable talking? Do they feel like gender makes a difference when discussing sexuality? How comfortable are they discussing their desires and needs with sexual partners? How often do they discuss the sexual activity in which they are engaging with their partners? How do they feel about “hooking up” and “date rape” and “the dating scene”? Ultimately I wanted to gain insight into how these young men experience sexuality in their daily lives, but also into what kind of language they use to express themselves.

### **3.5 Transcription**

I did the transcription for the focus groups myself. I wanted to do the transcription personally because I had not collected the data personally, and I wanted to gain that extra familiarity with the data. I began transcribing while still conducting focus groups, as is recommended (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014), and I found this helpful, as I was able to give advice and direction to the moderators between groups. With each focus group, I listened to the entire recording once through, then went back and began transcribing from the beginning. I did not use transcription software, as there is not yet any reliable software that can recognize

multiple voices. I used the voice recordings for the most part, because the sound was clearer. However, I was able to refer to the video recordings when I was unsure of who spoke a particular sentence or if the participants used gestures or body language.

I was careful to transcribe the groups precisely, and by that I mean that I included pauses, filler words, gestures, and noises. When the participants laughed or made noises of disgust, I included that in my transcription notes. I felt that it was important to capture the mood as well as the language, because it creates a more complete picture. I also wanted to record the exact language used by the participants, as I felt this created the most accurate version of their statements. Interestingly, this resulted in “like” being the most commonly used word in the entirety of the transcriptions, clocking in at more than 2,000 uses and accounting for seven percent of the total words. “Yeah” was a distant second with nearly 700 uses.

### **3.6 Analysis**

For the analysis of the transcriptions, I used a software program called NVivo. This program allows you to upload documents, such as transcriptions, and then offers multiple ways to analyze those documents. I primarily used NVivo for coding, and I found it tremendously helpful. NVivo allows the user to create “nodes,” which are essentially themes of coding. In the program, you can create a node for anything you think might be important: a theme, a phrase, an entire conversation, and so on. You can later combine the nodes into groups of similar things or hierarchies, in which one large node contains several smaller nodes. For instance, I created a “parent node” for all references to pornography, with “child nodes” under it for separate categories like feelings about pornography, violence in pornography, and learning from pornography. The nodes are also not exclusive, which means that I could code the same

exchange in a focus group under more than one category. If, for instance, the participants talked about watching pornography with their partners, I could code that under both “pornography” and “talking to partners.” This program is basically the electronic version of sticky notes and highlighters, but with major technological upgrades.

I went through each focus group transcription and code as I went while also adding pieces of dialogue to already existing codes. This was the most “grounded theory” part of the process, because I created nodes as themes emerged. I went through the focus groups in order, uploading the transcription to the NVivo software and coding each line of the transcription, from beginning to end. When I had finished the last focus group, I went back through and did this process again, sometimes adding new nodes but mostly checking that I still agreed with my previous coding. As I was writing the analysis, I occasionally went back and checked the coding again, looking for specific things, but most of my original coding was retained.

I ended up with thirty-five nodes, although some of those are parent nodes and had additional children nodes underneath. NVivo also enables the user to see how many source groups are included in each node, so I was able to see which elements of my coding existed in each group and which were only mentioned once or twice. This allowed me to measure occurrence and saturation. For example, “who you talk to” was a node I created to address to whom the participants were comfortable talking about sex, and that node was present in every focus group. Other nodes, like “threesomes” and “friendzone” were only present in one or two focus groups, and because I was able to count the occurrences of each node I was able to see which nodes were the most prevalent and thus likely the most important.

Another helpful aspect of NVivo was that I was also able to keep track of which participant said what, because of the identifiers which I was able to give the participants. Thus, I

could track how many times A3 spoke as opposed to A4, for instance. I could also add identifying characteristics to each speaker, thus enabling me to keep track of the speaker's race, virginity, age, and so forth. Using these identifiers I could measure things like how often white men spoke about condoms or whether there was a correlation between age and participation in hook up culture, for instance. Although such correlations could certainly be made without software, I found this element of the program very useful.

The final stage of analysis, of course, is finding out what the data are really telling you. I used a modified grounded theory method for this project, by which I mean I had some idea of what I hoped to find, based on my review of the literature, but I was also open to seeing what emerged. As my analysis progressed I was intrigued by the themes that emerged and also by the themes that failed to emerge, so to speak. I knew that I would find certain themes based on the questions that I prepared and which each focus group was asked, but over the course of analysis I found that some of my questions were never really answered and others, which I did not prepare, were answered in great detail. Such an emergence of unanticipated data is typical of grounded theory and of qualitative research in general (Birks and Mills 2015). Bearing that in mind, the following chapter I discuss what I found in the transcriptions, how some of the findings were unanticipated, and what those findings may mean.

#### **4 WHO DO YOU TALK TO ABOUT SEX?**

“Like with your boys you don't talk about your feelings and everything, too.” (E4)

One of the organizing questions for this project was “who do you talk to about sex?” The focus group moderator started by asking if the men talked to anyone about sex, and they nearly universally said “yes.” The follow-up, naturally, was a question regarding to whom they talked.

In general, their answers broke down into three separate categories: their friends, their sexual partners, and their parents. The conversations they had with each of these disparate groups were obviously different, but each group provided unique opportunities to discuss their sexual experiences. With their friends, the young men could be open and perhaps a bit crude. Most of the conversations revolved around whether or not they had had sex – it was essentially a binary. Occasionally, with friends they considered close, the young men would discuss with whom they had had sex or with whom they were trying to have sex, but very rarely would they discuss their feelings. Second, the young men talked about sex with their sexual partners. In some cases this was as simple as discussing the details of the sex they had just experienced together, but in other cases young men expressed that they felt there was value in having open and honest conversations with their partners. They felt both an emotional closeness and an improvement in the quality of their sex lives after discussing the sex that they were having with their sex partners. Finally, with family, it was generally a matter of either learning about sex or being told to be careful when having sex. Whether participants felt more comfortable talking to their mothers or their fathers varied, but it was nearly always uncomfortable.

#### **4.1 Friends**

Most participants noted that they do talk to their male friends about sex, although often the information they shared was selective. A very typical answer to the question “who do you talk to” sounded like this: “Mostly just bros. Like ‘Hey man, fucked this girl last night, she was really hot, blahblahblah’.” (B4) In fact, a version of this simple response was often the first answer to the question, and subsequent answers became deeper and more detailed. This response may have been an effort to be in line with stereotypical norms about male behavior – especially those that suggest that young men do not have emotional reactions to sex, or that they are simply



attempting to have as much sex as possible (Allen 2007, Kimmel 2008). It may also be reflective of the seeming dichotomy that most surface-level conversations about sex with other men seem to have: had sex vs. did not have sex. In the quote above B4 did not even attempt to include details, or show that he intended to include details. He simply ended with “blahblahblah,” which is indicative of his dismissal of the importance of any information that might come after “I had sex.”

However, not all conversations stop after revealing the basic facts. When speaking with friends, a few patterns emerged. Many men had a hierarchy of friends, and they decided how much detail to reveal based on placement in that hierarchy. Others highlighted the difference between male and female friends. Once young men felt comfortable going beyond the dichotomy, the range of people with whom they spoke about sex expanded.

#### ***4.1.1 Hierarchy of Friends***

One of the most interesting aspects of this question was that many men placed their friends in a sort of hierarchy regarding the conversations they are willing to have with those friends. While some aspects of sexuality might be discussed with any friend or acquaintance, many men noted that they will only discuss the more personal or intimate aspects of their sexual experiences with a select few friends.

For most of the young men, the friend with whom they were very comfortable was also male. Many made a specific delineation between close friends and more casual acquaintances when deciding with whom to share details: “I mean, yeah. Amongst us guys, I’m very open about it. If I’m close friends, I’ll share stories I guess?” Moderator: “Ok.” “Maybe not give full names, sometimes? But yeah.” (C4) As this participant is attempting to explain, while there is an acceptance of casual talk regarding sex, there is also a line that most men were unwilling to

cross. Some talk about sex was normal and comfortable, but talk of feelings or of details was more restricted. Often these details included emotions. As the following participant outlines, close friends are more likely to hear about more intimate encounters:

I've done both, but... but it was with a select few people that I feel comfortable with. Talking about like – they're like – if I'm with just – talking about like – just some of my casual friends, they'll be talking about, more than likely just about stuff we've done in the past. But if I'm talking with someone like I'm kinda like really close to, like one of my best friends, then I'll be like “yeah, this is what I have planned” you know, “for her later” or whatever. (C7)

Despite the hesitancy of his words, C7 is making a clear distinction between people who are close friends and people who are “casual” friends. In this hierarchy of friendships, the participants spoke openly about sex with the friends they consider the closest and most trustworthy. For some men, their best friend is a sounding board and trusted advisor. “Oh, yeah! Like my best friend and I – he's been my best friend for like four years and we're very open in terms of just like whether it was bad and whether it was good and the reasons thereof.” (E2) In these cases, one might argue that their friendships resemble those of their female counterparts. The stereotype is that close female friendships involve sharing “everything,” including secrets and feelings, while close male friendships involve long bouts of not speaking at all while playing sports or drinking. For the majority of the participants, that stereotype did not hold at all. Several had very close and open friendships with other heterosexual males, and they did not feel that their masculinity was in question because of it.

### 4.1.2 *Friends vs Partners*

Several of the young men noted that there are very important differences between the conversations they have with their friends and those that they have with their partners. The following is a particularly telling exchange between two participants who are discussing the difference between talking to their friends and talking to their partners:

E4: I feel like with your partner it's more like intimate. Than what you would talk about with your boys.

E6: Yeah. Like they don't get the facts. They just get like a basic little overview.

E4: Yeah.

E6: Like they get excerpts, but you don't talk about everything. You talk about everything with your girlfriend, you know?

E4: Like with your boys you don't talk about your feelings and everything, too.

E6: Yeah.

As E4 notes, with their male friends, the young men are less likely to speak openly about their feelings. They might share some facts – or again, the binary of did/did not have sex – but they were unlikely to get into how they felt about the sex they were having. They have “boys” with whom they talk, but they save the parts they consider intimate for the women with whom they are having sex. Both E4 and E6 are black, and it is also possible that norms regarding toughness and sexual achievement among black men affected their choices regarding with whom to talk.

Essentially, it is ok to talk with one's friends about sex, but there is a limit on how deep such a conversation can go. One young man put it this way: “I'm just generally more open with my partner – or, when I had a partner, I was more open with my partner than I would be with my

friends.” (A6) There is a certain level of trust or vulnerability that these young men are willing to share with their partners but which they are not willing to share with their friends.

Even when the men chose to talk to their friends instead of their partners, their friends might not support that decision. One participant expressed his frustration:

I think the way it should be, is people should be able to openly communicate.

Unfortunately, I think a lot of guys will go and be like ‘Yo, I’m having this problem...’ and talk about it with their friends. And try to work it out with them? Like try to figure it out? When really they should just be going to the source of the problem. (B5)

For him, his friends’ unwillingness to be open with their partners was both an issue with the relationship and an issue with the friendship. While talking to one’s peers, and especially to one’s close friends, can be helpful when dealing with an issue, this young man felt that going directly to the source was the only way to solve a sexual problem. He seemed to feel that his friends’ inability to speak with their own partner about their sex life indicated a lack of maturity, and it frustrated him.

## **4.2 Women**

For a few young men, they found it easier to talk to women about their sex lives than to talk to other young men. Several young men noted that women bring a different – and often valuable – perspective to the conversation. As one participant succinctly phrased it: “Pointers, man! Pointers.” (B1)

However, when talking to women about sex, the young men noted that they divided women into two categories, and the conversations differed based on the category in which the

women were placed. Those two categories were quite simple: women with whom they were hoping to have sex, and women with whom they were not planning on having sex. As one participant explained, the women in whom he was not interested were easier to talk to:

Yeah, I can talk to girls about sex and I do pretty often. I have a lot of female friends. But I usually don't talk to girls that I have the possible, immediate potential of sleeping with. [general hmm-ing from other participants] I don't know, I guess because like – I feel more comfortable around women I know are just going to be my friends. (A6)

For this young man, the pressure of trying to impress a possible future sex partner precludes him from talking openly about sex, presumably because he fears making himself look foolish or unattractive. The other young men in that focus group agreed with his statement (as indicated by their hmm-ing noises), but not all of the participants had the same viewpoint.

#### **4.2.1 Platonic**

For some participants, their most trusted conversational partners were women with whom they were not planning on having sex. In these cases the young men saw their conversation partners as whole people with their own sexual agendas, and they found the absence of pressure to impress them refreshing. One participant spoke in great detail about a platonic female friend who lived in his building. They developed a comfortable relationship and became confidants.

And like, we had a like, completely platonic relationship. ... Like we can just talk about it? And it's not a problem, like it's not awkward or anything like that. Like she'll tell me

about whatever her and her boyfriend or whoever she's seeing are doing, and I'll tell her about me and my girlfriend or whatever are doing at the time. (C7)

In this case he seemed to almost find it odd that he can talk so openly with a woman, and yet he finds her input valuable and enjoys their platonic relationship. They share intimate details about their lives, and he feels comfortable doing this because he feels that there is no sexual tension between them.

Similarly, D6 found that talking to his platonic female friends was much the same as talking to his platonic male friends: "I kinda feel like maybe, most of my female friends would feel just as comfortable as most of my male friends would be." For him, there is little to no difference in the conversations, just because of the difference in the genders. For another participant, he finds that when talking to female friends he can have a different discussion than when talking with his male friends: "It's just like 'yeah, this happened' or why, or what the experience was like on an emotional level. We're discussing what happened there rather than the act itself." (F1) In this case, rather than just discussing the act of sex, he is able to have a detailed conversation about what happened emotionally, and what it might mean for him and for his partner. For all three of these men, talking to a platonic female friend offers a safe haven for both advice and expression of emotion.

#### **4.2.2 *Non-Platonic***

On the other hand, some young men expressed that they only talked about sex with women they viewed as possible future sex partners. A conversation about sex, no matter how vague, might lead to a sexual interaction: "I talk about sex with girls that I think I want to have sex with. About sex. And sometimes it's kind of like a way to break into it or something. But

only if the conversation leads to that.” (A1) Although A1 is attempting to use a conversation about sex as a gateway to actual sex, he is still wary. His wariness is likely a hesitancy to scare away a possible future sex partner.

Several men were afraid to talk about sex with women who might be future sex partners, for fear that their talk would be considered too forward and possibly unnerving. When asked why he wouldn't talk to women with whom he might want to have sex, one participant responded: “Because that would be kinda like, too direct, for like that kinda convo with them.” (E1) His fellow participants noted that someone who would talk that openly might be considered a “creep” or a “pervert.” This idea that men who talk to women about sex are being creepy is especially interesting, because it highlights the social norms regarding gender and sexuality. While these same young men are comfortable talking to each other, it is assumed that young women are not prepared for that kind of conversation. However, by assuming that they would be “creepy” to women, these young men are essentially prepared to take the blame for making women uncomfortable, which demonstrates both social awareness and personal responsibility. They do not put the blame for the conversation being uncomfortable on the women, but on themselves. They do not want the young women with whom they might be speaking to feel pressured or unsafe, which shows social awareness about the harassment many young women experience every day.

Similarly, another participant noted that he lets women start conversations about sex specifically so that he does not “creep them out.” He is willing and ready to have such conversations, but he puts the option for starting them in the hands of the young women and then tries to match their tone:

I think for me – sometimes – like say I’m dating a young lady or whatever? I kinda almost leave it up to her to start that conversation. Because you don’t want to like offend her, or like push her away or whatever. So once she starts talking about it, it’s like ‘ok, cool’ and then you only match the level she matches it at, you know? You don’t go talking about a whole bunch of different positions and all this other stuff when she’s only talking about how she kinda likes it sometimes, you know? (F7)

He wanted possible future sex partners to feel comfortable talking to him, and to attain that comfort he left all talk of sex at their discretion. In this manner he was empowering the women with whom he talked, even if his ultimate goal was still sexual. It made for an interesting mix of social understanding in regards to the feelings of the women around him and selfishness in regards to goals of sexual fulfillment.

### **4.3 Partners**

An obvious partner in a conversation about sex would seem to be the person or persons with whom one is sexually involved. Surprisingly, not all of the participants were comfortable with such a conversation. Talking with their sexual partners about sex was a divided issue, but it seemed to be based on the role of any given partner in the young men’s lives. As one participant noted, when talking about the difference between conversations with your friends and with your partner: “Like they get excerpts, but you don’t talk about everything. You talk about everything with your girlfriend, you know?” (E6) His use of “you know” may be a way of checking for agreement, since it is phrased as a question. However, it might also be taken as a somewhat assured phrase that suggests emphasis. E6 believes that everyone talks to their girlfriends about sex, and he wants to make sure all the other participants agree.



For some young men, they viewed their sexual partners as allies with whom they were sharing an important experience. Consequently, when they talk to them about sex they consciously alter their speech to make it more appealing to their partners: “And when I’m talking to like my girlfriend – or lack thereof – if she was here (laughs)...I’m usually a lot more um – I TRY – it’s usually my intent to be more in touch with my emotional or mental side...” (C2) Although C2 did not have a partner at the time of the focus group, he is still conscious of his past conversations and how he intentionally changed his own language.

For others, their partners were temporary companions, likely never to be seen again. This lack of serious connection to their partners is likely a result of the “hook up culture” in which many of the young men were willing participants (Bogle 2008, Bradshaw, Kahn, and Seville 2010, Fielder, Carey, and Carey 2012). Rather than dating one person at a time and assuming monogamy, many of the young men were having sex with acquaintances while assuming that the young women who were their partners were doing the same. For this reason, talking about sex with their partners was sometimes useful and sometimes seen as pointless. As E2 put it: “I guess it would depend on the relationship with the person I was sleeping with. If they’re just a one-night stand, or friends with benefits, or someone I was monogamously seeing – depending on where they fell in.” In this instance, E2 felt like talking to his partners is not necessary because he knew that he might never see that partner again.

#### ***4.3.1 Communication and Improvement***

Some young men saw conversations about sex as an excellent way to improve the sex they were having. As one participant pointed out, having open conversations about sex can be helpful:

I think it's important to know where the other person is coming from. Like if you're getting intimate, they should be just as satisfied as you are. And they should know about your satisfaction. For the same reasons that you would want to know if you were not satisfying somebody. (D8)

Here D8 recognized both the sexual satisfaction of his partners and of himself. Some scholars argue that the amount of readily available porn has negatively impacted the sex lives of young men, especially in regards to the (lack of) importance of the female orgasm (Carroll et al. 2008, Crabbe and Corlett 2011, Stulhoffer, Brusko, and Landipret 2010). The fear is that the young men are focused on their own penises and not concerned with the pleasure of their female partners (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, and LeBreton 2011, Salisbury and Fisher 2014). Here, however, we see evidence that young men truly are concerned about the pleasure of their partners, and they are prepared to have honest conversations about it.

In fact, such conversations could be used as a means to explore more adventurous sexual options: "Um, I definitely see like, it can work on that level? After like, you've had a long-time girlfriend for like, a year and a half now, and we have gotten to that stage where like, we're talking about what else we want to do, like 'What do you want to do different, do you want something a certain way' and stuff like that." (C7) In this case, the participant sees the conversation as not just helpful, but also as a means to create a more fulfilling sex life for both partners.

The importance of satisfying your partner was also mentioned by another young man: "I think that – the thing is, when you do have a partner, or somebody that you're with, even temporarily or long term, you have to discuss more of the details because it's required." (A4) In

this instance A4 was suggesting that talking about sex is “required” in a relationship. Again, this is somewhat different than the general perception of young men would suggest. These two men were concerned about pleasure and willing to hear suggestions and make changes if their partners were unhappy or could be made happier.

That said, other participants were not as pleased to have such detailed conversations because those conversations might include criticism. Where the previous quotes indicated that open communication can be positive, B5 had a different experience: “Like I remember this girl critiqued me one night. And I was just taken aback, like ‘Oh, damn.’” (B5) Given that he refers to the woman in question in such a vague manner (“this girl”), I suspect that she was not a long-term partner. The fact that she critiqued him suggests that she felt there was room for improvement. However, the fact that he was surprised suggests that not only was he not aware that his performance was lacking, but that he did not think a casual sex partner would bother to provide feedback. This sentiment stands as a nice corollary to the previous comments about how communication is necessary in relationships, because it implies that communication is not necessary in hook ups.

For those participants who were purely interested in short relationships or even one-night stands, the focus on pleasure was not important. With a temporary sex partner, they were afraid that talking about the sex they were having would be seen as criticism, and not worthwhile: “I just think the longer you’re with somebody the easier it gets to talk about stuff. Like most of the time, if you’re with a one-night stand, you’re not going to tell her she’s terrible at giving head ... if you’re never going to be with her again, you’re just going to tough it out.” (B2) As B2 explained, giving criticism or feedback might not produce positive results and the risk of insulting one’s partner was not worth the possible gain.

## 4.4 Parents

The final group that participants mentioned talking to about sex was perhaps the most uncomfortable group of all: parents. Several participants noted having had “the talk” with their parents, a nearly unbearable experience for all involved. The following is a very typical exchange when asked about talking with their parents:

M: Ok. Uh, do you talk to your parents about it?

E1: (noise of disgust) Hell no!

E6: My parents are just like...they just like – like they know?

E4: Yeah.

E6: But we don't talk about it directly.

E4: But they're like –

E6: “Be safe” and “take care,” you know.

E4: Exactly.

These young men do not want to talk to their parents about their sex lives, and further they are pretty sure their parents do not want to talk to them. In general, participants had three typical responses regarding talking to their parents: they prefer one parent over the other, they do not speak about sex for religious reasons, or the parents bring up sex themselves, usually in regards to protection.

### 4.4.1 *Mothers vs Fathers*

A few participants noted a gender divide when talking to their parents about sex. Several young men were more comfortable talking to their mothers than to their fathers. This choice surprised me, as I thought the same-sex parent would be a more obvious choice when discussing sexual activity (Cox et al. 2012, Maria et al. 2014, Salisbury and Fisher 2014). Perhaps the

choice of parent is more about feelings than advice, and the young men trust their mothers for emotional support. As one young man explained it, “I will talk about it – there’s not really anybody I won’t talk about it with, but it’s funny I feel like I would actually be more comfortable talking with my mom about it than my dad.” (C2) For C2 the choice of parent is a matter of a degree of comfort, but he even recognizes that choosing his mother might be unusual.

AA few of the young men felt that the significant difference between their conversations with their mothers and their fathers was caused by their parents themselves. As one participant tells it, his mother wanted an open conversation but his father was very uncomfortable:

Actually, my mother was pretty real, like his mother. Or like F7’s mother. BUT my dad was not. But it’s kind of counter-intuitive – or counter-productive, rather. My mom’s like “let’s be open about it!” but my dad’s like “No.” My mom’s like “Yes! Let’s be open about this.” But dad’s like “No, don’t talk about that” kind of a situation. So it was kind of back and forth. But with really no conclusion to what the conversation should be about. (F2)

For this young man, his parents’ lack of agreement meant that he never received open and honest communication about sex. Discomfort on the part of the fathers may be indicative of discomfort regarding sex, or simply discomfort regarding the sexuality of their own children (Elliot 2012). American culture often paints the father as supportive of their sons’ sexual experiences and perhaps even encouraging them to have sex (Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Fieldman 2002, McKinney and Renk 2008), but my participants told a different story. When the participants did

mention talking to their parents, virtually none of the conversation was in support of sex. Instead, the most common topic seemed to be the use of protection, especially in the form of condoms.

#### ***4.4.2 Initiation by Parents***

Most of the young men noted that they would rather not talk to their parents, but a few were given no option. Some spoke to their parents about sex in the past, but not in the present. Others' parents bring up sex regularly, especially using protection. I was interested to see memories of these conversations come up in the focus groups because research has shown that talking with one's parents about sex can lead to positive sexual outcomes in terms of lower rates of STIs and unintended pregnancy (Sutton et al. 2014, Wight and Fullerton 2013). Regardless of the possible improvement in their risk reduction, for the men who recalled early conversations with their parents about sex, those conversations were almost universally awkward. For some parents, as with F7's mother, talking about sex with their sons was a way to gain control of the conversation and make sure their sons had factual information:

My mom was real up front about it. I remember the first day of high school she made me leave the house with two condoms. And she said – she was pretty up front – she said “if you're going to do it, I want you to be safe. And they're not allowed in my house.”

Ironically, that's where it all happened. (laughs) But she was real like up front and she wanted to be like “you know, if you're going to learn it from anywhere at least learn it from me” kind of thing. (F7)

In this case, the mother was comfortable acknowledging that her son is going to be sexually active, but she wanted to take an active role in his learning how to protect himself. She would rather that he be safe, to the extent that she would give him condoms herself. Here again there

may also be racial and ethnic issues in play. F7 is black, and F2, who previously mentioned having a similar conversation with his mother, is mixed race. Their mothers may be more comfortable talking openly about sex and protection than the mothers of the white participants, if only to protect their sons as much as possible against an already biased society (hooks 2004).

For those who regularly talk to their parents about sex, often it was the mother initiating the conversation: “I prefer not to, but my mom, she asks all the time. ... She like ask how many, or are you protecting yourself. Stuff like that.” (D7) But occasionally, it was the father: “My father asks if I use protection. That’s about as far as it goes. That’s about as far as I want it to.” (D2) In both of these cases the parents are asking about specific, manageable aspects of their sons’ sexuality. Neither are asking about their emotional state or the health and happiness of their sex partners. Instead, both are attempting to make sure their sons are “protecting” themselves. Here I believe they are referring to condoms, and that in this case protection has two meanings. One, it is the condom protecting the young men from STIs and any other physically harmful side effects that might damage their bodies. Two, it is the condom protecting the young men from impregnating a young woman. Many parents fear that an unexpected pregnancy will change their sons’ future; possibly for the worse (Elliott 2010, Epstein and Ward 2008). Although the young men themselves cannot become pregnant, they can be charged with child support at the least and forced into living with an unhappy relationship in the worst case. For the parents of these young men, the best way for them to protect their sons is to encourage them to protect themselves – and in this case that means using condoms.

#### **4.5 Who Do You Do Not Talk To?**

For every comfortable or enjoyable conversation about sex, there seems to be an opposite conversation in which one or both parties are extremely uncomfortable. Initially, I had thought

that the list of people that young men were comfortable talking to would be longer than the list of people they were uncomfortable talking to, but this proved not to be the case. Instead, the participants seemed to have a fairly short list of people with whom they were comfortable talking, and nearly everyone else in their lives went in the uncomfortable category. When asked with whom they do not talk about sex, most of the participants had the same answer: family. As the conversation developed, however, more uncomfortable conversation partners were listed. A few of the young men noted issues with professionalism and talk of sex in the workplace, and others stated that they refrained from talking about sex with women they do not know out of consideration of those women's feelings. In the following section I will go through their examples of uncomfortable conversation partners and discuss their feelings about each.

#### **4.5.1 Family**

In every group, the first answer to the question “Who do you not talk about sex with?” was the same: family. Although some people were comfortable talking about sex with their parents – or at least accepted being asked about sex – every focus group named their family as the people they were least likely to talk to. The following is a very typical exchange:

M: Next question, who are some people that you would not talk about sex with? And like, what's some reasons that you wouldn't talk about sex?

B4: My parents.

B2: My grandma.

M: Ok, why?

B2: Because it would be weird!

No other explanation is given by the men in that exchange, and no further explanation is needed.

“It would be weird” summarizes the feelings of nearly every man in every focus group,



especially when they think of a detailed or explicit conversation, and it appears to apply to everyone who falls under the category of “family.” As another participant notes: “You don’t want your family then like seeing you at family dinner, making eye contact with you and thinking about it.” (E5) He is essentially pointing out a key aspect of American family life: we know our family members are sexually active, but we prefer not to think about it – even to the extent of pretending they are not (Elliot 2012, Epstein and Ward 2008). It is as though we have an unspoken agreement to never speak of sexuality in the confines of the nuclear family.

One participant did offer an exception: “Maybe a male cousin. Or a male family member that’s not like, directly like, father or brother.” (E5) In this case he seems to be suggesting that male family members might be a more comfortable fit for a conversation than female partners, and that a more distantly related family member would be more comfortable than an immediate family member. Perhaps getting some “distance” from one’s nuclear family allows for a greater degree of comfort.

In addition to the basic discomfort surrounding talking to their families about sex, social factors like religion and ethnicity were mentioned as explanations. A few participants noted that their parents barely spoke about sex at all, and they felt that the root cause of this was their parents’ religiosity. One participant, A7, was very comfortable with his sexuality and open to having conversations about sex with nearly everyone in his life. However, he did draw the line at his parents: “I mean, I talk about it. But my family comes from a very strict Roman Catholic background, and they just avoid it.” (A7) For him, sexuality is taboo subject within the confines of his family, and he puts the responsibility for that squarely on his family’s religion. Given that Christianity, which was the religion listed most frequently by the participants in the survey, teaches that sex should be saved for marriage, this is not terribly surprising. As A3 expressed, “I

don't talk to my family like these two, uh, A4 and A5 said. I don't talk to them about it 'cuz they're heavily religious. So, abstinence-only, don't worry about anything else..." A3's parents avoided the topic all together, with the possible exception of enforcing the abstinence-only education that he received in school. Another participant told essentially the same story, but with ethnicity in place of religion: "Typical Asian parent. They just told me 'NO. No sex, not until you're married' and stuff like that." (F5) This young man is getting the same message from his parents regarding sex before marriage, but he attributes it to ethnic tradition rather than religious tradition.

A few participants seemed to believe that their parents were aware that they were having sex, but they refrained from talking about it. "My parents *know*, but I don't think I've ever talked to them about it." (B7) Parents with adult children are forced to acknowledge that their children are likely having sex, and those parents may even encounter signs of it, but speaking to their sons about sex is still too uncomfortable. As B2 phrased it: "I think it's more of an understood thing. They know it's happening, but they're not going to sit me down and be like 'Sooooo??'" In these two cases, the young men suspect that their parents are simply choosing not to engage in a conversation. This choice of their parents is a minor reversal on the idea that the young men are choosing not to talk to their parents because in this case the parents are also choosing not to talk to their children. The young men are giving agency to their parents but still refraining from having an awkward conversation.

#### **4.5.2 Women**

Some men noted that deciding not to talk about sex can be a matter of preserving the comfort of the other person or persons. They noted that not all people are open to talking about sex, and not all situations are conducive to an open conversation about sex or sexuality. In these

instances they were showing a high degree of social awareness, especially regarding the idea that conversations about sex with unfamiliar women might be uncomfortable for those women. In the following exchange the participants talk about the difference between talking to someone you know is comfortable and someone you think might feel awkward. They ascribe feelings of awkwardness to women, specifically:

D3: I would say any male friend, I would talk to about it. But only like select female friends. Based on how well I know them. And like...how well I think it's going to be perceived.

D5: Yeah, like their perception on it.

D2: I don't like making other people uncomfortable.

D3: Yeah, exactly.

Other young men felt that talking to women about sex was uncomfortable precisely because of the differing viewpoints they believed women to have. Perhaps they felt that the women would judge them, or perhaps they were simply concerned that the women they spoke with would not share their opinions:

M: So like, what makes it uncomfortable, talking about sex, with like, those female friends that you have?

D5: They don't have the same viewpoint as you, or they don't see it your way.

D7: You just can't tell them like, all the stuff that you do.

In this case the young men seem to believe that young women, even those in their own social circle or friend-group, have entire different views on sexuality than young men. They are ascribing a certain amount of discomfort to women, especially by suggesting that all women do not have the "same viewpoint" as all men. This exchange reads as almost essentialist, in the

sense that D5 and D7 are insinuating that women are sexless or that all women feel the same way about a given subject.

Similarly, D2 acknowledged the place of sex talk in women's lives and respected their possible desire to avoid that talk, but still assumed that women in general share one feeling on the subject of conversations about sex. He noted that women are often inundated with talk about sex, and that he fears being another source of annoyance and harassment in their lives:

I just think it's more just, I don't know, I don't wanna to talk about something that like, is taboo for them. Like walking up to a guy, I mean, that you've met a few times, and thing bringing up some sexual thing? It's not going to be a big deal. But with a girl, she might perceive the wrong messages. (D2)

When he notes that they might "perceive the wrong messages" he is showing an understanding of unwanted sexual contact, even if just in speech. However, he is still assuming that the same level of discomfort holds for all women – or at least that it might – while men are presumed to be comfortable with talking about sex with strangers. In this regard D2 shows social awareness, especially in contrast to D7 and D5, who thought that young women should simply be excluded from conversations about sexuality, but still makes essentialistic assumptions regarding gender.

#### **4.5.3 Coworkers**

Another common answer regarding discomfort when talking about sex was feeling uncomfortable when someone brought up sex in the workplace. While many of the young men who participated have lower level jobs, typically in the service or restaurant industry where standards can be a bit more lax, that does not stop them from wishing to work in a professional

environment. In this exchange, D2 again demonstrates sophisticated social awareness regarding conversations about sex and discomfort:

D2: Professionally – when I hear my coworkers talking about it, I don't mind? But I cringe. Like I'm sitting there and some dude I barely know but works the same job as me is talking about sex, that's weird to me?

M: Yeah.

D2: Depending on the context. Because like, if he's talking to his own friends, that's cool. But if he's talking to me I'm like "I don't know you, dude." It's not that – it doesn't bother me? But I guess it's kinda strange.

As this participant notes, there are situations in which it is inappropriate to talk about sex. Even though his coworker may assume that his chosen topic of conversation is acceptable to those around him, the participant notes that there is a line. He is not actively bothered, in the sense that he doesn't feel so uncomfortable that he cannot work, but he is still somewhat uncomfortable with his coworker's talk.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined the various answers to the very simple question "Who do you talk to about sex?" The men in the focus groups gave a wide variety of answers, but in their answers they showed that they are willing to talk to a fairly wide group of people about sex in general, but are prone to sharing intimate details with only a few people.

I had expected to find that college-aged, heterosexual males would feel comfortable talking about sex in nearly any situation and at nearly any time (Emig and Rowland 2010, Milani 2014, Stokoe 2012). Or, if they were not comfortable talking about sex, they would at least pretend to be comfortable, in order to perform the type of masculinity they thought they should

be enacting (Benwell 2014, Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, and Holmes 2014). However, they showed restraint. First, they explained that they do not share intimate details with everyone, but that they create a hierarchy and only share specifics with a trusted set of close friends. Second, they demonstrated emotional intelligence by describing how they decide when to talk to women about sex and when such talk might make women uncomfortable. Finally, they told me something I did expect: that talking with their families about sex is awkward.

The corollary to the first question, with whom do you not talk, was also interesting. I was impressed by the participants' demonstrated sensitivity, especially when refraining from talking about sex in situations where they thought it might make others uncomfortable. This emotional awareness is contrary to stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, but perhaps reflective of the new models of masculinity which are emerging (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Harris 2010, Schrack and Schwalbe 2009). Now that I have established that young men do talk about sex and that they adjust their tone and detail to the conversational partner when doing so, it is time to explore the content of those conversations. In the next section I address what the young men talk about, when they do talk about sex.

## **5 WHAT DO YOU TALK ABOUT?**

In this section, I address the second shaping question: what do you talk about, when you talk about sex? I anticipated a list of conversational topics. Instead I found a wealth of feelings. As I previously mentioned, the fact that young men have feelings is not surprising – but the openness with which they spoke about their feelings and their seemingly genuine regard for the feelings of others were both somewhat unexpected to me. I had expected a performance of masculinity that included a great deal of bravado, including bragging about their sexual prowess and the numbers of partners with whom they had enjoyed sex. I thought that the young men

would perform a type of masculinity that seems valued in the movies and music that are aimed at men their age. Instead, I got a different performance: one of measured, thoughtful regard for the place of emotion in sex and in talking about sex. It is entirely possible that the participants were saying the kinds of things that they thought I (or at least, the invisible researcher who would be reviewing the recordings) wanted to see – that they were performing enlightened male sensitivity for what they hoped would be an appreciative audience. However, it is also possible that recent studies of masculinity which show acceptance of a “softer” masculinity (Allen 2007, Duncanson 2015, Messerschmidt 2012) are more accurate than media depictions of idealized men. The young men in my study may be more representative of the average college male and less representative of the average character in an action blockbuster. In their efforts to answer the question of what they talk about, they spoke about wanting sex with emotion, and about being careful not to offend others when talking about sex in general. In the next section, a similar awareness of feelings arises, and the question of performance of masculinity continues to be asked.

### **5.1 Stereotypically Masculine Talk**

The “stereotypical” talk in which young men are thought to engage involves two main aspects: confirming that you had sex and bragging about that sex. When we see young men depicted in the media (Kivel and Johnson 2009, Moss 2011, Slatton and Spates 2014) they are often engaging in one of these two speech options. The young men in my focus groups acknowledged both of these options, but then they made the interesting choice of othering the bragging aspect. In the following section I explore both the had sex/did not have sex dichotomy and the manner in which the participants treated bragging about sex.

### 5.1.1 *Dichotomy*

When asked what they talk about when they talk about sex, one very common conversational element emerged: the dichotomy of whether one did or did not have sex. In fact, calling this a conversation might be a bit of a reach because participants indicated that talking about sex (especially when speaking with people other than one's close friends) typically only included whether it did or did not happen. No emotions, details, or discussion need be included.

Here group B describes a normal conversation:

B2: But as deep as it gets with your friends is just like "Yo, I got ass."

B7: Exactly! Us talking about sex, it's completely "Hey, you uh..." "Yeah!"

(laughter)

(general agreement)

B2: That's about it.

B7: "Did she-?" "Yup." "Did y'all-?" "Mmm-hmm."

(laughter)

The clipped conversation and generalized statements do not seem to indicate much, but the young men seemed in agreement that only that amount of information was necessary. Other groups discussed the same dichotomy and agreed that when talking in mixed company or in a group, this was often the only thing said on the subject of one's sex life. This dichotomy was the only example of "stereotypical" male conversation about sex in which the participants of the focus groups all claimed to participate. But even while admitting that such a conversation would be normal, they also seemed to be making a joke out of it. It seemed to be an exchange that one might have in jest, even amongst trusted friends. The simple dichotomy was, perhaps, a learned



behavior in which the young men engaged even though they were hoping to have a more detailed conversation later.

### 5.1.2 *Bragging*

The other commonly referenced conversational pattern was bragging about sex. Typically, the focus groups mentioned first confirming that sex did occur, then noting that bragging happens immediately after. Here, again, is Group B having a characteristic exchange:

B3: I've done some boasting, straight up.

B4: If she's a 10, then –

Others: Yeah, yeah...

In this exchange B3 openly admits that he does at least a small amount of bragging himself, and the others are quick to agree that circumstances might warrant such talk. This admittance of bragging is not surprising, as it does fall in line with the stereotypical talk associated with young men (Benwell 2014, Emig and Rowland 2010). Other participants, however, prefer to depict bragging as something that younger, less experienced men do. When trying to explain what men talk about when they talk about sex, Group D suggested that they will start with the dichotomy (did/did not have sex) and then add details that inflate their own sexual prowess:

D6: It's generally like, if dudes talk about it, they'll just talk about how hot the girl was or something. Or, depending on the situation, how easily it happened.

D7: Yeah. How easy it was, or how good the oral was. How good the head was, or how good the pussy was.

D6: Yeah. To make themselves sound good or whatever.

Here they are othering the act of bragging, by suggesting that it's something that others do. This is the first example of othering that I found, but it becomes a very common occurrence as the

focus groups unfold. I thought it was interesting that they first acknowledge that bragging is common, but immediately suggest that is something they have seen rather than something in which they engage. Further, they are attributing motives to the men doing the bragging. Not only do they not engage in bragging themselves, but they assume other men do it to elevate their (presumably lower) status. This further suggests that the men who are speaking do not need to do such a thing, as their status is already secure. Thus, in one short exchange, they elevate their own status while lowering others, all while dismissing the very idea of bragging. It is a fairly clever linguistic turn.

However, it also raises questions regarding the act of bragging about sex. The young men in Group B admitted to bragging, at least in exceptional circumstances, but the men in Group D speak as though they never brag. Do they not also need to boost their reputations for sexual prowess? Why might other men do so, but they themselves choose not to? Group E took this assumption of motives even further, by suggesting that the men who brag openly might not even have had the sex they reference, but are instead trying to inflate their own ego or reputation:

E3: A lot of guys, like they lie a lot.

E6: Yeah, that's true.

E3: They'll be like "I did this with her. And her and her and her." But like, they won't –

E4: They ain't did that with none of them girls.

(laughter)

Here, again, the participants other people who engage in bragging, but this time by suggesting that such bragging often comes in tandem with lying. In this case they seem to be suggesting that not only does bragging involve lying, but it is somewhat of an open secret that men who brag openly are lying. Again, it is an interesting assumption that other men need to exaggerate their

sexual conquests, but these particular men do not. I think E4's statement is particularly interesting because he is choosing to use overtly casual language with both poor grammar and the word "ain't" thrown in. Furthermore, his tone and his language in the rest of the focus group leads me to believe he is using this language ironically. E4 is black, and the above quote was his only instance of non-grammatically correct language, which suggests he was using "ain't" both for comic effect and as a performance of "coolness." He does not use "ain't" again over the course of the focus group in which he participated, but he does purposefully use it in that sentence for the purpose of dismissing the bragging of other men. E4 is proclaiming his own superiority by casually dismissing the use of "correct" (and "white") speech, which would seem to be contrary, but which works neatly here.

It is also interesting to consider why the men in the focus groups find bragging so distasteful. The literature suggests that bragging is a normal male behavior, and that engaging in bragging about one's conquests is itself a rite of passage (Kimmel 2008, Pascoe 2010). Media featuring young men often portray them as full of bravado and wild claims, which also serves to normalize the act of bragging (Gauntlett 2008, Kivel and Johnson 2009). But these young men appear to find bragging distasteful, and doubt the veracity of braggards' claims. It is possible that the focus group participants are unusual in this regard, or perhaps they have simply aged out of bragging behavior. However, it is also possible that these young men are performing a kind of sensitive masculinity because they believe that is what is expected of them in this situation. The participants might feel that their participation in a study demands language and behavior that is more sensitive or thoughtful or exemplary of a more "politically correct" form of masculinity than they might normally display. These young men might be trying to please the moderator (and the woman researcher behind the study) with their maturity, rather than speaking as they

normally would. This possibility concerns me, but because their language is different than the literature and media would suggest, I am forced to confront the fact that either the portrayal of young men is wrong, these young men are unusual, or these young men are changing their performance to please the invisible listener, who in this case is me.

In the following sections the participants will continue to demonstrate what I have termed “non-stereotypical” masculine behavior, especially in regards to their language. As I analyzed the data the emotional awareness of the participants and their sensitivity towards others took me somewhat by surprise, as I had assumed that they would perform a more aggressive and macho form of masculinity. Instead they are honest and unembarrassed about their emotions. Their othering of men who brag about sex was only the beginning, and as my analysis continues, I point out several other instances of the participants behaving in non-stereotypical ways. This behavior leads me to believe that the very recent studies regarding “multiple masculinities” warrant further consideration, and that perhaps the singular model of hegemonic masculinity is outdated (Allen 2007, Duncanson 2015, Harris 2010). Messerschmidt himself (2012) has published a revision of his own theories regarding hegemonic masculinity, and it is my contention that a softer, more varied version of masculinity is represented by the young men in this study. In the next section I detail how the participants spoke freely about their feelings and their desire for emotional connection, and how those sentiments might represent a new model of masculine behavior.

## **5.2 Non-Stereotypically Masculine Talk**

The most interesting thing about the focus groups, for me, was that the stereotypically male talk essentially ended after they discussed the did/did not dichotomy and bragging. Not

only did they “other” men who have those two types of conversation, the participants immediately moved on to other topics. However, regardless of what topic they discussed, they also continually addressed their feelings. The transcriptions included many examples of feelings: feelings about hook ups, feelings about relationships, feelings about feelings, etc. At first I thought I made some sort of coding error, but repeated re-readings of the transcriptions revealed consistently open and honest talk regarding how they *felt* about everything. In accordance with the grounded theory method of qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I found that I needed to analyze what the data told me rather than what I expected to find. Thus my chapter about “what you talk about” turned into a chapter about feelings. In the following section I explore the different topics about which the participants had strong feelings, and what those precise feelings were.

### **5.2.1 *Feelings about Sex***

One of the findings that emerged from the focus groups was a genuine conversation about sex and emotions. Many of the young men were involved in the hook up culture, but not all were satisfied with the sex they were having there. For some, they did not enjoy the continual hunt for a new partner, and for others the lack of emotional connection negatively impacted the sex. As D7 put it: “Like it’s a lot better when you’re with the person and you actually like them than when it’s just random. Or not even random, but somebody you’re not really caring about.” Although a bit confusing, his statement sheds light upon both the desire for meaningful human contact, and the complexities of hook up culture. It is possible to have partners who exist on a spectrum of feelings from no emotional involvement to deep love, all while still calling it “hooking up.” The separation of love and sex seems implied, but the focus groups produced a lot of talk about reconnecting the two.

A key example of this happened in focus group C. One young man admitted his preference for sex within relationships, and the others were surprisingly quick to agree:

C7: And then I went through that different period of just having like, like steady casual sex before I started talking to someone again. And...I have to say that I do understand you feel like that lack of like fam-famil-

C5: Familiarity?

C7: Yeah.

C3: I think that's the word.

C7: Yeah. Like you feel that lack of - I guess some people like that fact, having a new girl each time. But sometimes you get that like...you want something constant.

C7 is somewhat hesitant in his speech, and cannot even find the right words to express his desire for emotional stability. However, he knows that it is something he wants, even though he is not able to easily express it. I expected the other young men to disagree, or to make light of his desire for feelings. Instead, they did the opposite. Once one person mentioned it, other young men in the focus group were ready to admit the same thing:

Ok yeah, I was just going to say that uh, C2 again, I was going to say that uh, the way that I handle sex has been stated. With that said, as a person who doesn't necessarily practice casual sex, I've had it before? And I don't know...it's like...you immediately understand the exact thing that C3 was talking about? Like it's great in the moment, but that like deeper fulfillment is not there. (C2)

C2 speaks with hesitancy, in the sense that he phrases so many sentences as though they are questions. I suspect that he is slightly uncomfortable with his admission of desire for feelings, and he is hoping that the other participants will not reject his statement. C2 is black, and it might be argued that he is under more pressure to correctly perform masculinity than the white participants. Again, I think even the participants expected a performance of masculinity that included being overtly casual about sexual relationships. However, he need not have worried, because almost immediately another participant chimes in, with almost exactly the same thoughts:

Um, C3. The sex I'm having... is great? It's, it's fun? But it's not lasting. It's like, I don't really connect with my partners on more than a physical level? So it's like "oh wow, this is fun for the time being, but now I'm just going to be sad and move on." (C3)

In that focus group alone, nearly half of the men spoke about not enjoying sex as much when they do not have feelings for their partner. The majority of the men in the group indicated agreement with that sentiment, even if they did not speak for themselves. Once one participant openly admitted his disappointment with unemotional sex, the others were comfortable agreeing and even adding their own experiences. Their open admittance of vulnerability and desire for emotional fulfillment seemed genuine, even though it was sometimes tentative. In fact, the very tentativeness of their speech would seem to suggest that they are not practiced in expressing their emotions regarding sex, and they may even be unsure if they are supposed to have and acknowledge such feelings. Although it is possible that they are performing the type of masculinity which they believe I expect to find, their performance is hesitant and feels sincere.

### 5.2.2 *Feelings about Pornography*

Some of the young men were surprised that sex came with so many feelings because their first exposure to sex was through pornography. The literature regarding young male sexuality has been inundated with studies about pornography and its effects on the young men who watch it (Carroll et al. 2008, Crabbe and Corlett 2011, Stulhofer, Brusko, and Landipret 2010). It is commonly accepted that modern American boys and men will watch a great deal of pornography before they become sexually active and that viewing pornography will shape their sexual expectations. 41 (93%) of the men in the focus groups admitted to watching pornography, so it is reasonable to expect that pornography was a shaping part of their sexual experience. In fact, the average rate of porn consumption among the participants was “nearly every week,” with 30% of them noting that they watch pornography several times a week. One, in fact, wrote on the survey that he had already watched pornography four or five times that day. There were three participants who said that they did not consume pornography at all. Of those three, two were sexually active in the last six months, but not regularly, and one was a virgin. These numbers point to a great deal of pornography being watched or viewed by the participants, so it stands to reason that their ideas about sex might be shaped in this way.

However, pornography does not reflect the reality of sex, and some of the participants were surprised when they learned that:

M: But what – what was different about each of your experiences? Like actually having sex and then going “Wait a second!” And actually like comparing it to movies, or pornography, or sex ed.

D4: It was more intimate.

D8: Yeah, it’s like there’s a connection.



D5: Yeah.

D6: Yeah.

D5: You could say that.

D8: Like when you're watching something it's very dry. But there's this connection that like, you could never get, from just watching porn.

I thought this exchange was especially interesting because of how three of the young men chimed in to agree with the first statement. Again, I expected them to be somewhat performative, and instead they openly admitted to their surprise. The young men of this generation learned about sex from many sources, but the impact of pornography cannot be ignored. In the majority of mainstream pornography, especially that available for no cost on the internet, there is no emotional connection between the actors (Paul 2007). Occasionally there might be a hint of a storyline, but there is little to no focus on the individual actors as characters or as people (Fisher and Barak 2001, Williams 2004). For this reason, many young men are surprised by the reality of a sexual experience when they do begin having sex themselves. They are unprepared for real human bodies (including cellulite and hair), and they are unprepared for real human emotions (Paul 2007, Sun et al. 2014). The exchange above is a prime example of the way in which the difference between pornography and real life becomes apparent, and the surprise that may arise from that disparity. That said, they seemed to find the emotional intimacy of sex a pleasant surprise. As they discussed in the previous section, emotion and caring made for better sex. In the next section, they will discuss how to deal with emotion when engaging in casual hook ups.

### 5.2.3 *Feelings about Hooking Up*

Many of the participants took part in hook up culture, but their opinions on the benefits versus the negatives varied. Some thought hooking up was an excellent way to meet one's sexual needs without entering into the emotional ordeal of a relationship. Others participated in hook up culture but preferred the security and familiarity of a relationship. In focus group E, one participant spoke honestly about the differences he found between casual and relational sex:

E2: Like hooking up is great? But when I was in a monogamous relationship, like when it was a year in? That was the best sex I ever had. And then –

E6: I agree.

E4: Yeah.

E2: And then every sex I've had since then? I mean, it's still good. There's no such thing as a bad orgasm. But...

(laughter)

E2: I mean, even when we were just fucking to fuck? There was still some emotion. So the worst sex we ever had then has been better than any sex I've had since. ...So like hook up sex, it's great. But the best sex I've ever had was when I was committed to someone. Like in that relationship.

I was surprised by both his honesty and the quickness with which other members agreed with him. In fact, E6 was so eager to comment on feelings that he actually interrupted E2 in his efforts to agree with him. It is also worth noting that E2 was the only gay member of this particular group, but his experience regarding sex and emotions appeared to be universal (the other participants knew about his sexual orientation because of his previous statements). Rather than

reject his experience, men who participated exclusively in heterosexual relationships were quick to agree with his statements, which indicates that such an affinity for emotion might be unrelated to one's sexual preference. It also indicates their comfort with homosexuality, which is another example of a rejection of "macho" heterosexuality.

Another young man in Group E quickly admits the same desire for emotion: "And it was ok. Like when I first started having sex in high school, like after I did it for a while? Like after we did it more and more, the passion was there. But when I was doing it with the other girl, there was no passion." (E3) I think it is noteworthy that he uses the word "passion" twice, and both times appears to be using it as a stand-in for emotion. It is not that the female partner in question lacks the lusty, physical side of passion, but rather that she lacks the caring, emotional aspect of passion. His speech is somewhat hesitant, but his desire for more emotional impact is clear.

The solution to this lack of emotional connection, for some, was to stop participating in hook up culture. One participant found that as he aged, he was less interested in sex with strangers. Here "being old" is relative, as he is only 22, but he still feels that he has matured past the point of enjoying hooking up. As he explains it:

C7 agrees with C1. It's definitely on a personal level type thing. Like, I've gotten to the point now where I don't hook up anywhere near as much as I used to? And like, I guess I finally got kinda tired of it, like? ...And like – it's called 'getting old,' now. Because like, I'm like 22 now. So I really don't think it's like, something I can just keep doing. I want some stability in my life now. (C7)

C7 makes an interesting point about “aging out” of the hook up culture. He seems to believe that casual sex is something you do for a while and then stop, which suggests that he is othering the desire for casual sex. Essentially, he is denying that people who are older and more emotionally evolved (such as himself) would enjoy such a thing. Here, again, we see not only evidence of a softer form of masculinity, but a desire for that softer masculinity.

#### **5.2.4 *The Other Person’s Feelings***

Another interesting concern that the participants shared regarding the hook up culture was having sex with women who might not be emotionally prepared for a one-night stand. Having such a concern suggests the speakers are aware of both their own emotional involvement in sex and of their partner’s emotional involvement. A few young men noted that they do not actually enjoy having sex with strangers and would rather sleep with partners that they at least know on a casual level. As D7 put it: “I don’t think I could literally like just do it if it’s somebody that I really don’t know. That I just met.” Although the standard hook up seems to assume two complete strangers, a few participants found that too uncomfortable. A4 goes into more detail:

I mean, I would say you still – have respect for people in general so it’s just a matter of – you still have to kind of know the person well enough to know, are they in a situation where that wouldn’t be negatively impacting on them. If they’re – people do things for a lot of reasons, there are people who have sex for attention or something... So do you really want to enable something that could be damaging to them or to you, for that matter. So it’s often a matter of that, you want to make sure that the person involved isn’t in a condition that would warrant further action. (A4)

He is somewhat hesitant in his speech, but he is trying to express a genuine concern for the emotional state of his possible sex partners. He is aware of the reasons why women might feel pressured to have sex or might believe themselves ready for a casual hook up, but he is also aware of the possible negative results. A4 is not short-sighted – he knows that a few moments of pleasure may result in damage for his partner or himself, and he is able to express that concern to the group.

Although it is obviously not a surprise that young men have feelings, it was a surprise for me to see them talking so openly about their feelings regarding the sex they were having. I had predicted that they would try to stick more closely to the masculine stereotype and “perform masculinity” for each other. One of the reasons I chose to use focus groups was to catch young men talking to each other, rather than talking to me. It was my assumption that the young men would use different language when in an all-male environment, and that the language they used would be performative. However, it seems that when offered the opportunity to talk openly about sex with their peers, the young men almost immediately opened up and began talking honestly about their emotions. When one person in the focus group shared an intimate truth, the others tended to agree, rather than ganging up on him for his lack of masculine sensibility. Although I knew going into this research that researchers and the general public have been short-changing young men, in terms of the general stereotypes about them having little emotional connecting to sex, the sheer volume of quotes regarding emotion was unexpected and interesting. Again, they may have been performing a “sensitive” version of masculinity that they assumed the moderator (and the invisible researcher) wanted to hear. While there is a version of masculinity that

demands harsher language and less emotion, they might have assumed that such a performance would be seen negatively in this environment and chosen their statements accordingly.

### **5.3 Discomfort Talking about Sex**

“Some guys, they’re talking about sex wherever, whenever. But that’s not me.” (D5)

One of the most important questions posed to the focus groups was: “When are you uncomfortable talking about sex?” While much of the focus group was spent talking about sex, it was also crucial to think about when such talk is inappropriate and how the young men decide which situations are which. Two categories emerged from this question: when the young men themselves are uncomfortable, and when they believe others are uncomfortable. Once again they showed remarkable restraint and emotional awareness regarding the feelings and comfort of others.

#### **5.3.1 *Personally Uncomfortable***

Although this was a self-selecting group of people who were prepared to talk about sex, because they knew it was a sex-related study, there were still multiple instances in which the participants noted that they would be uncomfortable talking about sex. In general, they found that they were comfortable discussing sex with only a few people and that those people had to be close friends. This categorization of conversation partners means that they were uncomfortable discussing sex with the majority of people – both those too close (such as family) and those not close enough (such as co-workers). In some instances, it was the situation which made the conversation uncomfortable, but in others it was the amount of information shared.

### **5.3.1.1 *Too Much Information***

One of the things that made the participants the most uncomfortable was hearing what they considered to be too much detail. They were comfortable discussing sex somewhat abstractly, but when actual positions, fetishes, and critiques were mentioned, they became distinctly uncomfortable and tried to shut those conversations down as quickly as possible. As A6 describes it below, a certain amount of information is fine, but even among friends, he does not wish to hear every detail:

A6, uh, just like, details among friends. I just don't like – you have to be really careful how many details you're giving in a conversation with me, because I don't like, I mean, I don't really mind, like it's not going to be the end of the world, but like I really don't want to hear all that. Like just be vague, please. So that's the only reason – like I only get really uncomfortable if they're going into intimate detail about like specifics and stuff, and I'm like, I just don't want to hear that. (A6)

For others, hearing the details is not the problem, but rather what those specific details are. More than one participant noted that they are fine with their friends having kinky sex lives, but they would rather not be subject to the specifics. As one participant noted: “Um, it's hearing people's fetishes. ...hearing certain things, like those fetishes that are just out of proportion, I feel a little uncomfortable with.” (A3) This is in line with much of mainstream America's views on sexuality (Moser 2006, Samuel 2013), so his discomfort is not surprising. In fact, another participant told a story in which he had to go pick up a friend the morning after a kinky sexual encounter that went astray, and his discomfort is nearly palpable:

And he was telling me about it? And that's there this is going to that uncomfortable part, where I'm like 'I don't want to know this!' Especially since I've seen this girl? So I'm like putting a picture to the face, so I'm like 'No, no...' It just steps outside of my own like, preferences, and like comfort zone? (C7)

In this instance C7 is able to verbalize his discomfort and to recognize that his friend's story includes the kind of details that fall outside of his personal comfort zone. This implied that he has a comfort zone, which shows a good sense of awareness, and that he is prepared to put a stop to conversations that fall outside that zone. At the same time, however, he is perfectly comfortable with his friend participating in fetish-oriented sex and does not judge him for his choices, which suggests, once again, a softer and less judgmental masculinity.

### **5.3.1.2 Forcing It**

Another uncomfortable situation the participants mentioned in the focus groups was being made uncomfortable by the other person's lack of awareness. Several of the young men mentioned their discomfort when other people would tell them about their sex lives, but their major issue **was** not with the information but with the information being shared with them, by other men, against their will. This discomfort proved interesting to me because it showed, yet again, the sensitivity on the part of most of the participants. Essentially they were made uncomfortable by others not showing that same level of sensitivity. As F2 phrased it: "I think it depends on what F4 was saying about context. You know, some people may or may not be uncomfortable with it, or comfortable with it. Or maybe I myself don't feel like they're a reliable person to talk to about it." He demonstrates a high degree of social awareness in terms of who



might be interested in a conversation about sex and who might wish to be left out. A participant in Group A took this thought even further:

And um, I would say the only other thing are people who try to force it on you. Kind of what A1 mentioned, where if you're just right there trying to have a normal conversation and somebody is trying to explain to you why so and so does this in bed, you're kind of being overly aggressive. I'm not giving you the body language or the response that says I want to have this discussion right now. (A4)

For A4, the experience of another person not being attuned to his body language is maddening. He feels like he is being very clear and is genuinely surprised that the other person cannot pick up on his signals. A4's social awareness is high, but when faced with someone who does not recognize his attempts to turn away or otherwise stop the conversation, he is made deeply uncomfortable.

Similarly, one participant noted that he was uncomfortable being forced to hear about the unsavory actions of others – specifically, about cheating on a partner. Once again, I thought that hearing about cheating would not bother the young men because of the portrayal of “players” in modern media (Dworkin and Sullivan 2005, Seal and Ehrhardt 2003), but I was wrong. The participants found cheating distasteful, and they certainly had no wish to hear about it. In focus group A, the prospect of hearing about cheating was mentioned by A1 but later picked up by A3, who had strong feelings on the subject:

Um, A3. Yeah, going back to what A1 was saying, it's like another thing I'm kind of disturbed about, it's like I don't want to hear like that you get off from cheating on someone. Like if you feel bored in your relationship and you try to do something to spice it up, right? But the only way you can actually feel better is to do it with someone else. And not let your lover or spouse know about it. And just get off on that thrill. That's another thing I don't want to hear. I feel uncomfortable when they tell me that stuff. (A3)

The other participants in his focus group agreed with this sentiment, and seemed generally disapproving of the idea of cheating. Again, I believe this is an example of choosing not to perform a macho version of masculinity, but instead performing a more sensitive version that honors monogamy and respect.

### **5.3.1.3 *Virgins***

One subset of the participants who expressed discomfort when talking about sex was not a surprise: those who had never had sex. There were five virgins in the focus groups (out of 44 total participants), which is a somewhat low number given that recent studies suggest as much as forty percent of college students are virgins (Kern and Malone 2015, Jayson 2011). However, most people do not know those statistics, and it is commonly assumed that everyone is having sex (Lamber, Kahn, and Apple 2003, Sprecher and Treger 2015). In fact, if you were to ask college students, most would assume that everyone else is having more sex than them, a phenomenon known as pluralistic ignorance (Katz and Allport 1931, O'Gorman 1986). For this reason alone, it is not surprising that the young men who are virgins are uncomfortable talking about sex, no matter the situation.

One such young man dodged the question of talking about sex by insisting that it never came up: “No, with me and my friends, it’s like – the reason we are all friends is that we’re all Comp-Sci majors trying to go to Tech. So that’s what we talk about every time we talk.” (A5) It is certainly possible that his friends are also virgins and thus they stick to conversations about non-sexual topics. However, the fact that they never speak about sex is also indicative of repression and perhaps of exclusion, since it may indicate that they do not spend time with non-virgins. It is also worth noting that A5 is Asian, and in fact three of the five virgins were Asian. While this is hardly a big enough sample to begin making generalizations about Asian men and sexuality, I do believe there may be a relationship between their Asian ethnicity (and more specifically the values important to the parents of these participants) and their virginity. However, since the above sentence was the solitary mention of virginity by any of the three Asian virgins, I can only speculate.

Another participant is more upfront about his virgin status:

Uh, it used to be that I did NOT like to talk about sex, because I was a virgin for a long time. Not that I was embarrassed by it, but it was a hard thing for me to explain to people. Because of the way I was raised, you know, I was waiting for marriage. But um, even still, after I wasn’t a virgin I didn’t like to talk about it that much because I wasn’t PROUD of it. It wasn’t like me to go brag like ‘Oh I had sex with ALL these girls –‘ But now I am a lot more comfortable, to talk about it. But I mean it was a transition. Change.  
(C4)

Although C4 is no longer a virgin, he remembers his discomfort when talking about sexuality during that period. Even now, having lost his virginity and being sexually active, he is deeply uncomfortable speaking about his sex life. This uneasiness is likely a result of guilt and related closely to his religious status, but regardless, his discomfort regarding his virginity has an effect on his willingness to talk about sex.

Another participant from the same group had essentially the same issue. For C2, he experienced discomfort while talking about sex because his status as a virgin was seen as so unusual that it prompted more questions than he was willing to answer. In this sense, he was almost a novelty, which only served to make him more uneasy. In fact, C2 found talking to women difficult because of his discomfort with talking about sex in general.

No, it's usually like – the conversation starts and it's like – usually it initiates from the person – the girl asking me like “oh, how many people have you slept with” or something like that, and I'm like “WELL...” and then I say what I say, about how I was raised and everything like that. And they're like “oh, so you don't do anything?” and I'm like “Oh, I do some stuff, but I'm trying to not go like...vaginal sex” (uses finger quotes), um, so it's just like – (C2)

(C3 snorts and mimics him using the finger quotes)

(everyone laughs)

This is especially interesting because the young man who mocks his finger quotes, C3, also shared his feelings about sexuality and virginity. I feel that it's worth noting that the others were not necessarily being unkind – in fact, in this group a few of the participants were close friends –

and in fact they were mocking his style of storytelling (using his fingers to make quotation marks in the air) rather than his virginal status. Even when one might think that admitting virginity would cause a young man to be an outcast, the others show sensitivity towards his sexual status but feel fine mocking his gestures.

#### **5.3.1.4 Judgement**

The final situation in which the participants mentioned being uncomfortable was when they felt that others were being too judgmental when talking about sex. This applied both to judging unknown others for having certain characteristics (being gay or kinky) and judging known others for certain sexual failings.

The young men who participated in the focus groups were remarkably tolerant of sexual choices. This broadmindedness is likely due to both their generation's inclusivity (Altemeyer 2002, Bowen and Bourgeois 2010, Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002) and to the self-selection process of being willing to talk about sex for a study. That said, a few of them surprised me by noting their discomfort when faced with the intolerance of others. For instance, A4 found the judgment of others to be very distasteful: "I mean, if somebody enters a conversation saying 'gay people are weird' or whatever it may be, or 'a woman who likes to do this is weird' or whatever it may be, it's very off-putting to be so judgmental right away." A4 finds a general lack of tolerance to be unacceptable, and mentioned that he refrains from further conversations with people whom he finds too judgmental.

Several other participants noted that they become uncomfortable when hearing about other people's sex lives, but especially so when the other people are either nearby or being degraded. This often came up when they were discussing what they think women talk about,

because several men shared that they think women discuss the performance of their partners in great detail. A1 went on about this for quite a while:

Oh yeah, um – I’m actually really comfortable talking with my friends about sex and everything, the only thing that make me really uncomfortable sometimes, and this is usually only in groups, is if somebody is explaining their sexual failings, you know? Or like, quote-unquote, if they couldn’t perform or something like that? Then it starts getting a little uncomfortable. Or like, if my best friend’s girlfriend – and me and my best friend and his girlfriend, we’re all really close – if she starts talking about having sex with him, or something like that, and what she doesn’t like, and he’s RIGHT THERE – And it’s like “c’mon, stop, I don’t need to hear about all this, you don’t need to explain it to me” and to have him be right here and stuff, it’s just weird. (A1)

He was not alone in this sentiment, but he expressed it the most clearly and in the most detail. I think his discomfort is telling because not only is he unnerved by the detail he did not ask for, but he is concerned about the feelings of the subject of the conversation. Other men noted similar discomfort when faced with negative details regarding their friends’ performances.

### ***5.3.2 Making Others Uncomfortable***

The second major theme when discussing uncomfortable conversations was the fear of making others uncomfortable. Several of the focus groups had conversations in which the participants noted that they refrain from talking about sex when there are other people nearby, when they think people might not want to hear their conversation, or when they think their

audience is simply inappropriate. Here, again, they are showing a remarkable amount of both self-awareness and awareness of the comfort of others.

One specific situation in which the participants noted that they would feel uncomfortable talking about sex was in public. D6 even named a specific situation: “Or like, on the bus or something? Even if it’s me and a friend who are very comfortable talking about sex, we don’t know about the people sitting around us.” (D6) He knows that the bus requires people to be in close proximity to one another and is conscious of the possibly inappropriate nature of his talk, and thus he (and his friend) refrain from making those strangers uncomfortable. A participant in Group A shared the same sentiment:

It’s almost the same thing. Like you gotta be worried about your environment because if me and my friends, like if we talked about that in a public environment like a restaurant, and a mom and a daughter came in and heard us talking about last, what happened last week – Like obviously, like, like some of them wouldn’t care, because it’s freedom of speech. For me, it’s like if I don’t want to hear stuff about what they’re doing, I won’t want them to hear what I’m doing. (A3)

His concern for the feelings of others is noteworthy. One thing that interests me about his statement is his awareness that he does not want to hear about the sex lives of strangers, and thus he postulates that they do not want to hear about his. Although he recognizes that some people might not care, he is considerate enough to keep in mind those who might and to speak quietly (or not at all) when in public. Another interesting factor is his use of the word “like,” because he

uses it both to fill in pauses and to temper his statements. It comes off as hesitant and apologetic at the same time – both of which do not denote masculine toughness, but rather the opposite.

Similarly, other participants noted that they do not always know what other people are prepared to hear. In Group F, two participants were discussing discomfort and context. F2 shared the following: “I think it depends on what F4 was saying about context. You know, some people may or may not be uncomfortable with it, or comfortable with it.” It is a rather messy sentence, but F4 is trying to demonstrate awareness of the feelings of the people to whom he is talking and adjust his own statements accordingly. E6 said essentially the same thing: “It just seems like inappropriate at that time. Like you don’t know them. You don’t know what they like, too.” He was referencing talking to women, specifically, but the same principle holds: talking about sex when it makes other people uncomfortable is unacceptable behavior. The most eloquent and long-winded participant on the subject was A4:

I mean I would say, you want to maybe be respectful of people’s different comfortability levels and things like that. So it’s not something that I would bring up just meeting someone or in a public environment. Because you don’t know what their comfort level is going to be and it might not be something appropriate. So generally it’s just if you know somebody well, or they come to me about a topic, then it’s ok. But it’s not something I’m going to force on someone and possibly put them in a situation they don’t really want to be in. (A4)

A4 seems remarkably aware and respectful in his analysis of when other people might not want to hear about sex.



Other participants, like E3, have a more selfish view: “Like I don’t want to come off creepy.” Both young men are avoiding talking about sex, but for slightly different reasons. However, E3 is onto something crucial: when talking about sex might appear to be “creepy” rather than simply inappropriate. The other young men in his group went on to have an exchange regarding the amount of people who are necessary to make a conversation appropriate:

E5: When there’s more than ten people in a room listening closely.

M: Ok, ok. So if it’s NOT a private conversation.

E5: Like a private can be up to three or four. Not including yourself. But if there’s more people, then I’m just gonna...not.

E4: I mean, I feel like it’s dependent on the situation. Because there could be a time when there’s like five guys and five girls and y’all like, drinking together.

E3: Yeah.

E4: And it’s not weird, then.

This is an interesting exchange to me, because they are essentially quantifying how many people are necessary for a conversation to feel private. For E5, too many people in the room makes him unwilling to talk openly. But E4 suggests a situation in which such talk might be more comfortable, and his solution involves alcohol and mixed genders. This arrangement is an interesting compromise, because while the presence of alcohol makes sense (in terms of lessening inhibitions), his suggestion that the presence of women would help is unusual. The group had talked earlier about being somewhat uncomfortable talking about sex with women, and E4’s suggestion that a matched group of men and women would be ideal strikes me as odd. Perhaps the intention is that when the sexually-focused conversation ends, the group can pair off and move towards sexual activity.

### 5.3.3 *The Use of Humor*

Finally, when feeling uncomfortable talking about sex, there was one coping mechanism employed by the participants: humor. In one focus group, they noted that using humor can diffuse the discomfort.

D3: I feel like there's always humor involved in these stories?

(general agreement)

D3: It's never like "hey, I had sex with this girl." They're going to use some funny word or something. Some funny phrase. Just to make you laugh – it's not to literally inform you.

D2: I think there's never been any bragging, with me and my friends – or some people I guess, but for the most part, pretty much every time I try to make it funny. I'm not going to lie.

M: Just put that spin on it.

D6: It makes it easier to talk about, I guess?

This exchange highlights the way they can negate the awkwardness of a conversation about sex.

D3 makes a good point when he mentions that humor can alleviate the discomfort, but even so he phrases it as a question. When the other members agree, he goes on to detail how using humor might work and to "other" the use of humor, even though everyone has just agreed that it is acceptable. He insinuates that using humor is normal, but still something that other people do.

D2 agrees with this sentiment, but he takes more personal responsibility and admits to using humor personally. I thought it was an interesting exchange because the young men seem to collaborate on suggesting that humor is a good tool, rather than one person declaring it to be true.

## 5.4 Conclusion

In this section, I expected to find an answer to the question of “what do you talk about, when you talk about sex?” Instead I found a wealth of feelings. As I previously mentioned, the fact that young men have feelings is not surprising – but the openness with which they spoke about their feelings and their seemingly genuine regard for the feelings of others were both somewhat unexpected to me. I had expected a performance of masculinity that included a great deal of bravado, including bragging about their sexual prowess and the numbers of partners with whom they had enjoyed sex. I thought that the young men would perform a type of masculinity that seems valued in the movies and music that are aimed at men their age. Instead, I got a different performance: one of measured, thoughtful regard for the place of emotion in sex and in talking about sex. It is entirely possible that the participants were saying the kinds of things that they thought I (or at least, the invisible researcher who would be reviewing the recordings) wanted to see – that they were performing enlightened male sensitivity for what they hoped would be an appreciative audience. However, it is also possible that recent studies of masculinity which show acceptance of a “softer” masculinity (Allen 2007, Duncanson 2015, Messerschmidt 2012) are more accurate than media depictions of idealized men. The young men in my study may be more representative of the average college male and less representative of the average character in an action blockbuster. In their efforts to answer the question of what they talk about, they spoke about wanting sex with emotion, and about being careful not to offend others when talking about sex in general. In the next section, a similar awareness of feelings arises, and the question of performance of masculinity continues to be asked.

## 6 HOW DO YOU TALK ABOUT SEX?

The third of the big three questions asked in every focus group was “what words do you use when referencing sex?” With this question I was trying to find out what kind of slang the young men used, in order to analyze the slang itself and how the slang might impact their feelings regarding sex. I did, indeed, learn new slang from this question. However, I also saw more evidence of the young men having sensitive responses to language. For instance, they noted that women do not like specific words, and that they refrain from using those words in an effort to not upset women. They also used very little aggressive slang themselves, opting instead for either accurate descriptions of their actions or more euphemistic language. In fact, many went so far as to actively deny using slang and insisted that using such language is something “other” young men do, or perhaps something they did when they were younger but have since given up. This was true in each group, consistent amongst the different ethnicities, and appeared to be nearly unanimous, with two exceptions which I will detail below. Once again, this may have been performative, in the sense that they were adjusting their language to fit what they thought was appropriate for the focus groups, and I address that possibility further as examples arise. In the follow sections I analyze their language use and consider its authenticity. I begin by examining what words the participants use for sex, and then move on to what words they use to talk about women.

### 6.1 Slang

At the outset of this project I predicted that among my most interesting findings would be examples of how the young men used slang, and how that slang shaped their views on sex. In the focus groups, however, the use of slang was scant. The participants offered a surprisingly small selection of slang when asked how they talk about sex, and most of the words or phrases they did

offer they immediately denied using themselves. In the following section I detail the slang they mentioned, and also how they felt about the words and usage of the words.

When asked to list examples of words they might use to describe the act of sex, a few terms came up in nearly every group. The most commonly offered slang for the act of sex was “smash,” followed by “bang.” As D8 put it: “You can’t go wrong with ‘smash’. That’s like, probably the answer.” His response is interesting because first, it assumes that there is one correct answer that the moderator is waiting to hear, and second, using the word “smash” is going to be acceptable in every situation. He first says that you “can’t go wrong” with such a word, which assumes that the audience for such language is like-minded. This postulation is an interesting assumption because most English speaking Americans are not 18-24 year-old men and thus not accustomed to such slang and not likely to find it acceptable. Indeed, I think one could quite easily go wrong with “smash.” Second, he assumes that “smash” is so commonly used that it must be the correct answer. In one sense he is not wrong, because “smash” was mentioned in every group. In another sense, D8’s assumption that “smash” is the slang *du jour* is rejected by all the men who mention the phrase but insist that they themselves do not use it.

Aside from smash and bang, both of which describe vaginal sex, the most commonly mentioned slang terms tended to be for oral sex rather than for penetrative sex. The young men listed “head,” “dome,” and “getting topped” more than once, all of which are slang terms for receiving oral sex. No slang for performing oral sex upon a woman or man was mentioned, which is perhaps indicative of the value placed upon the penis, and reception of pleasure by the penis (Braun and Kitzinger 2001, Murnen 2006). In terms of vaginally penetrative sex, the majority of the words indicated action, and not always shared action: “bang,” “smash,” “hit it,” and “slamming it in” were all mentioned multiple times. While “bang” and “smash” could

indicate mutual actions, “hit it” and “slamming it in” both indicate action on the part of the penetrator and nothing from the person being penetrated.

While plenty of crass and violent slang was mentioned, the young men showed a preference for more sensitive language. They suggested phrases like “getting it on” and simply “had sex with.” Interestingly, both of these phrases indicate mutual action and consent. Although their language might vary when speaking with each other (as opposed to speaking with women or other prospective partners [or again, researchers]), they seemed to notice as they were naming slang that they do not tend to like the more violent phrases. For instance, a well-traveled member of Group C mentioned that he likes the word “shagging:” “But personally I have to say like since I’ve lived in England, I personally choose to say shagging. I don’t know, I think I find it a bit more wholesome.” (C7) One would think that being wholesome is that last consideration when talking about sex, but this young man finds himself choosing language based on that desire.

Another set of young men in Group C had this exchange:

C2: Sometimes I say “bang” instead of “sex with.” But yeah, I feel like I usually, regardless – wait, do I? (speaking to C1) I usually say “sleep with” or “have sex with.”

C1: You don’t even cuss, man.

C2: Yeah. So I usually either say “have sex with” or “sleep with”.

It could be that these two men make up a somewhat biased example because as C1 points out, C2 does not even use strong language in his normal speech. But I think this exchange is noteworthy because C2 is figuring out his own language use in real time, and it appears that he has never thought about it before. His choices may mean that he is unconsciously chooses language that is less violent and somewhat more respectful to describe his sexual activity. In fact, he chooses phrases that imply the willing consent and participation of his partner, rather than phrases that

indicate his act (that of penetrating) is the only consideration. The very fact that he prefers such language reflects his desire to be respectful rather than macho.

### **6.1.1 Slang and Violence**

Although the young men tended to use words and phrases that were not violent, they did recognize that the majority of slang familiar to them was violent in nature. As D2 put it: “Any word for like, killing [general agreement]” Most of the slang mentioned focused on the act of penetration (rather than on an act in which two people are participating) and most of that penetration was depicted as aggressive. This linguistic aggression is not uncommon, and multiple studies have been done in which the words for sex are seen as by scholars as violent and one-sided (Dalzell and Victor 2008, Murnen 2006). However, the young men in my focus groups were not only aware of the violent nature of such language, they were actively against it.

In the following exchange, participants in Group C have an interesting conversation about how slang for sex has become violent:

C1: Well, C1. Well, I will say like, I feel like the slang is getting more and more violent.

C7: Yeah, like “smashing”.

C1: Yeah, I feel like the younger people now are like “I hit it,” “I beat it,” “I smash it.”

(laughter)

C1: More and more violent! Next thing you know it’s going to be “kill.”

(laughter)

C1: For real. It’s getting more and more violent.

C7: Next it’s like “I nuclear bomb it.”

C1: I murder it.

Here they show awareness of the current slang, but they also go out of their way to “other” those who would use such language. They joke about how violent it is, but insist that only “younger” people are using that kind of language, suggesting that they themselves are too mature for such talk. I do not mean to make light of their maturity, but it is worth noting that the oldest among them is 24. By suggesting that only younger people use such slang, they are referring to people only a few years younger than themselves but presumably much further behind in maturity.

### ***6.1.2 Othering and Slang***

One of the most popular techniques for denying the use of slang in their own conversations was to other people who use slang. In every focus group, the participants showed awareness of slang and were able to offer up examples of words for women or words for sex. But many of the participants denied using such language themselves. Instead, they suggested that other people use that language, or that younger, less experienced men might use such language. For instance, in Group C, a participant uses very passive language to describe slang: “C1. I think the word that has become popular now is ‘smash.’” Here he does not imply that he uses the word “smash,” but that the word itself has become popular outside of his influence or usage. C1 does not associate himself with the word, but implies that other people might use it. He is essentially othering people who say the word “smash” and distancing himself from those who would use it regularly.

The following exchange is another good example of how the young men answered this question:

M: What times of slang words do you use when you’re referring to sex?

A2: None.

A3: None.



M: No slang?

A7: A7, not really. I don't anymore.

In this exchange the young men in Group A essentially deny using of slang, although A7 admits that he used slang in the past. In addition to othering those who still use slang, he is suggesting that using slang is something that specifically younger people do. In much the same way participants suggested that hooking up is something younger people do, they are also suggesting that using slang is something in which younger people engage. At what age one ceases to use slang is unclear, but it would appear to be something young men age out of. Again, their denial of slang usage and othering of those who use slang might be performative – they might wish to believe that more mature people do not use slang, and thus associate themselves with that mature behavior and disassociate themselves with behavior that they fear is viewed distastefully. Essentially, they might be performing maturity.

Even when they might want to use slang, young men might be discouraged from doing so by their peers, in a more active process of othering. This deterrence, too, might be a part of performance of maturity: stopping someone else from being immature is certainly a mature activity. The following is an interesting exchange in which A2 admits that he would like to use slang, and in fact he has researched slang on the internet, but he feels uncomfortable actually using the slang in conversation. Here he describes a sex act he read about online, which he appears to want to try, but the other members of the group shoot him down:

A2: I always, I always wanted to use – A2 – like I'll always see stuff on like Urban Dictionary like "Superman that ho" –

A3: Yeah.

A2: Like those ones - you have to like –

A3: Souljaboy!

A2: Yeah, but they'll like... "nut on her back." Oh yeah, like they call it Supermanning. Like doggy style, nut on her back, and the pull the covers like it was a cape? And then call her Superwoman. Something like that. Yeah –

A6: Wow.

A2: Yeah, but I would never use it.

A6: Oh wow.

A5: Anyone who would actually use a thing like that is just such a fag.

There are two interesting things happening here: one, A2 wants to participate in what he sees as creative use of language and popular sex acts and two, A5 denounces it entirely. First, A2's eagerness to detail the act is of interest because he feels completely comfortable sharing not only the steps of the act itself, but that he has only read about the act of Supermanning and not actually done it himself. This means that he is admitting to researching sex acts online, which seems paramount to admitting a certain lack of coolness. A2 is 19, which may have something to do with his lack of knowledge. Further, he is willing to share fairly vulgar details with other men, most of whom are strangers, with the apparent belief that they will also find such acts both amusing and desirable. Second, A5 completely shoots him down. Not only does A5 fail to find the act of Supermanning acceptable, he finds it so distasteful that he claims that anyone who would do such a thing is a "fag." This usage of fag does not necessarily imply homosexuality, but rather encompasses a general lack of masculinity and coolness (Pascoe 2011). Essentially, A5 is dismissing anyone who would do such an act (and A2, in the process) outright, thus negating A2's attempt at fitting in by knowing about inventive sex acts. It is an impressively blunt dismissal and met with agreement from the other members. Their dismissal signifies a

certain level of maturity, even though A5 uses the decidedly immature label of “fag” to dismiss A2. Another point of interest is that A5 is Asian and a virgin, but no one appears to argue with his assessment of the straight, sexually active, and black A2 as a “fag” or believe it has anything to do with A2’s sexual orientation.

### **6.1.3 Slang and Women**

One reason that the participants offered for choosing not to use slang was the desire to not cause offense to women. For instance, they might choose different language when talking to men and to women. F1 offered a good example of this: “With guy friends I would say getting laid. With girl friends I would stick to uh...literally had sex with or slept with.” (F1) He is showing that there is a difference between how he speaks with men and with women and that awareness is reflected in most of the other groups.

When discussing words for sex, Group B got off on a tangent about proper words for genitalia. They noted that they have a hard time talking about sex because they are often unsure of what words to use. They do not want to cause offense, but they do want to be able to refer explicitly to the body parts in question. The participants discussed this in the following exchange:

B4: But some of my partners, that’s like - there have been certain words? Like they don’t like hearing “vagina” or “pussy”.

B8: (laughing) But that’s what you’ve got!

B4: Right?! But –

B1: I mean, that’s the anatomical term! How can you not –

B8: Like what else do you want me to call it?

This conversation is interesting to me because the young men are trying to please their female partners, and yet also trying to be accurate. They are genuinely baffled by the offense their partners seem to have taken, but they are anxious not to cause problems, so they are willing to change their language accordingly. They go on to discuss how they themselves are comfortable with words that describe their own genitalia, but they believe that women are not. I was surprised by how many of the young men did not use slang but rather chose language that accurately described the sexual encounter. In some cases, this choice of words happened because they wanted to avoid vulgarity, as with C2: “Yeah, C2? I usually um, try to base my words off of uh – I don’t want to sound vulgar? So I usually said ‘had sex’ or ‘sleep with.’ I mean, I say ‘bang’ sometimes too.” Here, again, he is trying not to upset the women he might be talking to (and with whom he might want to have sex) so he tries to adjust his language to avoid vulgarity. He also admits to using more violent slang, but his first impulse is to choose his language to suit his audience.

Similarly, in the following conversation B1 and B3 talk about how the women they know do not like specific words, and they show a rather advanced emotional response to using those words. For instance, B1 is so strong in his insistence that women do not like the word “titties” that he cannot even imagine using the word when talking to a woman.

B1: Yeah. But there’s a lot of words about their own anatomy that girls are sensitive to that they just don’t want to hear.

B3: Titties.

B1: Yeah! Because I could never say “Damn, girl, you got some nice titties.” Can you imagine? That would never happen at all.

The thing that interests me most about this exchange is B1's insistence that he cannot even imagine using the word "titties." Such language is so far outside of his comfort zone that he believes it would never happen. He jokes that he literally cannot imagine such an exchange and invites the others in his group to try to imagine it themselves as further proof that it could not happen.

Many of the participants explained that they drew a line between talking about sex with women and talking to women about sex. When talking to women, they explained that more sensitive and less explicit language was required. For instance, D5 explains how he talks to his partner about sex: "I use 'sex' and 'fucking.' Like I would tell my friends 'yeah, I'm fucking this' but I would tell my partner 'oh, you wanna have sex today?' Or something like that. I wouldn't be like 'oh, you tryin to fuck?'" He does not explain why he would use different words with his partner, but he changes his language dramatically in his quoted examples.

Another man in his focus group makes a similar choice. When discussing talking about sex with his own wife, he changes the language that another man used. D6 was telling a story in which his friend told him about going out looking for sex, but D6 found that he was not comfortable using the exact language his friend had used:

D6: I probably wouldn't say "my friend went out getting his dick wet tonight," you know?

(laughter)

D6: Like I wouldn't say that to my wife. I probably wouldn't say that to a lot of women I know.

The other participants laugh at the phrase his friend used, but they are completely sympathetic to his desire to not expose his wife to such vulgarity. His empathy is interesting because he is not

using the phrase about himself, or even using a phrase of his own invention – he is merely repeating, verbatim, what a friend said about his own sexual adventures. Even so, he is unwilling to repeat it to his wife.

## 6.2 The Only Disrespectful Participant

There was, of course, one exception to the general rule of consideration and respect when speaking about women. Although this is only one example and involves only three participants, I would like to address this segment because of the linguistic turn it takes. While discussing what words you use for sex, two participants in Group D had the following exchange:

D7: I've found that you can't really just – there ain't really no good words for getting a girl to give you head. There's like "Suck my dick" –

D4: "Put your mouth on it!"

(laughter)

D8: You're not going to say "fellatio".

D7: There's no good way to tell a girl to do that.

There are several interesting things happening in this short bit of conversation. First, D7 starts with acknowledging that there is no socially acceptable language, at least of which he is aware, for demanding oral sex. He starts by saying "getting a girl" to perform fellatio and ends with "tell[ing] a girl," but neither is a request. In both instances, it is a demand or at least an instruction, but in neither case is consent or desire (on the part of the woman) implied or even acknowledged. Two other men join in – D4 makes a joke in which he is suggesting another phrase for the same demand, but even though he is joking, the phrase is still not a request. The others laugh at his joke, and then D8 jumps in. D8 does not attempt to counter or correct the tone of the demand for oral sex. Instead, he keeps with the demanding tone, but acknowledges that

one would be unlikely to use more correct terminology. Finally, D7 joins back in with a summation of the conversation, a sentence which is probably the single most offensive thing anyone said in any of the focus groups: “there’s no good way to tell a girl to do that.” This sentence contains so much of what I thought I would find in the focus groups: entitlement, belittlement of women, casual misogyny, and general disrespect for partners. At the same time, he is acknowledging that such a command is unacceptable, so he knows that he cannot say it. However, I think it is worth noting, once again, that this was the only such instance of such negative language.

Having only this one example of disrespectful language leads to several other questions: why was this the only time a participant spoke so disrespectfully? It does not stand to reason that he was the only participant, out of nearly fifty, who felt this way – he was more likely the only one who spoke this way. And even he made such a statement only once, and in a rather jovial manner. Is it possible that the other participants would speak like this if they knew they were not being recorded? Is it possible that D7 spoke this way only because he knew he was being recorded? Was D7 merely performing the version of masculinity that he thought was expected of him, as a black man? Was D7 reproducing the kind of masculinity he has seen portrayed in the media, even though he does not generally follow those norms himself? Was he performing, or were the others performing? With only one example of outright misogyny in the entire sample, I would logically conclude that the young men who participated in my study were generally respectful of women, including those with whom they want to have sex and those with whom they do not. But this one fragment of conversation gives me pause, even though it is unusual compared to the bulk of the focus group conversations I analyzed.

### **6.3 How do you talk about women?**

The corollary to the question about words for sex was about the words that the participants use to describe women. With this question I was trying to address slang for women, and how it might change based on the men's perceptions of the women in question. The question about women had two parts: what do you call women with whom you would like to have sex, and what do you call women with whom you do not want to have sex? These two questions were designed to have very different answers. What I found, once again, was a surprisingly thoughtful and mature range of answers. There were certainly a few slang words that were negative in tone, but often they were offered up as things that other people say, or that the men used to say when they were younger and less mature. The participants largely othered those who use negative slang and insisted that they themselves mostly called women by their names. In the sections below I will show how the participants talked about women and what they felt was appropriate.

#### **6.3.1 *Words for desirable women***

The most commonly used slang for desirable women was definitely “bae.” This was interesting to me because “bae” is a relatively new term, first gaining popularity in 2014, according to some sources (Steinmetz 2014, Zarinski 2014). C2 gives my favorite version of this answer, because he seems unsure whether it is correct: “Bae. C2, bae. Boo. Bae?” He repeats himself several times while also offering an alternative answer, but his apprehension is misplaced, as every focus group offered the word “bae” for this question.

Other answers were somewhat more traditional. Some of the men purposefully used terms that were not slang, and others seemed mystified by the use of slang by other men. As one man in Group D explained: “I still just say girlfriend.” Here he is suggesting that he has always said girlfriend and will continue to do so, regardless of the other slang available.



Sometimes the men were purposefully vague. While some preferred to use the woman's name, others preferred to leave a little mystery:

D4: Someone.

D8: Yeah, just like "I'm going to go hang out with someone later."

These two men might be trying to avoid naming the woman in question, in order to maintain privacy. Of course, it is also possible that their either do not know the woman's name or there is not a specific woman in mind, but rather a general plan to find one later.

As one member of Group C explained it, he does not even use the name of the woman, instead referring to all potential sex partners with pronouns: "Well for me, C1, I don't have words, I just say 'me and her chill.' Like I don't have names, just like "me and her chill." There is another interesting linguistic turn of phrase here, too. When C1 says "chill," he might mean it as a verb or an adjective. He could be suggesting that he and the woman in question hang out together in a relaxed manner, or that he and the woman have an understanding (likely regarding the casual nature of their sexual relationship) of which they are both calmly accepting.

Other men preferred to use the name of the woman in question. Group F had the following exchange:

F5: Probably by her name, usually.

(laughter)

F4: Yeah, depending on how close they are to the context, their name can invoke their standing among your friends.

In this example, not only do F4 and F5 appear to accept each woman as an individual, but they admit to having talked about specific women so much that their best friends have a frame of reference for the women in question. In this circumstance, slang does not even enter into the

conversation because, once again, they are showing a general regard for the humanity of the woman in question. As F1 went on to explain: “I mean like, with my best friend, the name will come up at the beginning of the discussion, but after that it’s just ‘she’ and ‘her’ [general agreement].” Not only does he reference having a best friend with whom he is emotionally open, but the other young men agree that they would have roughly the same conversation.

### **6.3.2 *Words for undesirable women***

One of the questions designed to shed light on negative slang was “what do you call women you don’t want to sleep with?” This question produced two different kinds of answers: one was straight up slang and the other was respectful of women as people. In the first, the young men offered up several examples of insulting words and phrases. In the second, the participants once again demonstrated a respect for their female cohorts.

#### **6.3.2.1 *Insults***

As predicted, the participants had many descriptive and often vulgar words ready for women whom they found undesirable. One of the examples of negative slang that was referenced more than once was “grenade:”

Umm, A3. The only one I would call is if like me and my friends were going out somewhere and we see a couple girls like we would call the one that we don’t want to be with ‘grenade.’ I mean, if there’s five guys and there’s five girls, one guy is going to have to take the grenade, while the other four get successful. Like someone is going to have to take the blow. And so we call her the grenade. Like we’re sure we don’t want to be with her. (A3)

This is an interesting insult precisely because it is so descriptive. It is a metaphor that implies the grisly death, or at least injury, of the man who ends up with the least desirable woman. However, ending up with an available woman does not seem like such a grave punishment for a young man out looking for sex. Two other groups offered “grenade” as well, suggesting that it is a relatively common phrase. A few other examples were more classic, such as “butterface (a woman who is attractive in all regards except for her facial beauty, thus everything is good “but her face”),” “bitch,” and “slut.”

Some examples were very much of the moment, and if I were not currently in the classroom with students who are the same age as the participants, I might not have known their meanings. For instance, D5 said: “I’m going with THOT.” This word is actually an acronym, and it stands for That Ho Over There. It is an interesting insult because it implies that not only do you not know the name of the woman in question, but she is sexually promiscuous and she is nearby. I also find “thirsty” interesting, and it was mentioned by several groups. To say a woman is “thirsty” implies that she wants sex, and thus that the mere wanting of sex makes her undesirable, because it is undignified for a woman. However, it can also imply that she wants sex but is not reading the signals indicating that the other person does not want to have sex with them. In this case “thirsty” is not an insult regarding sexuality, but an insult regarding an inability to understand social cues. “Thirsty” can be used for either a man or a woman, which also makes it unusual. Each of these examples were fairly consistent throughout the groups, and do not appear to have a racial or ethnic association. One might argue that much of the slang offered by the participants was pioneered in music created by black men, but all of the men who participated appeared equally familiar with the slang mentioned above, suggesting that even if these insults are culturally appropriated, they are widely known.

### 6.3.2.2 *Othering those who use insults*

When talking about insults, the young men once again used the linguistic practice of othering, by suggesting that some people use insults for women, but they themselves do not. In Group A, when asked for words to describe women with whom you do not want to have sex, A2 denied using such terms: “Not anymore. Um, A2. I’ve just like grown out of that stuff.” Here he is implying that he previously engaged in such behavior, but now considers such language childish. C2 also does not use negative slang for his own partners, but might use it for other people: “I feel like the only time I use those is when I’m referring to other people. Like “oh yeah, you know that’s so-and-so’s ‘friends with benefits’ or something like that.” This is an interesting choice, because he speaks respectfully about the women with whom he is sexual; but the women with whom other people are sexual might not deserve that kind of respect. He does not mind his own casual sex partners; but he others the casual sex partners of other men. Or perhaps he is simply trying to use the language that he has heard those men use about their partners and is trying to comply with their choice.

In my favorite example, B4 not only suggests that only “other” people use negative slang, but that in fact people from Jersey Shore use such slang:

B1: A grenade.

B2: Ho.

B4: That’s Jersey Shore bullshit. I don’t want to use that.

It is unclear whether he does not want to use that language because Jersey Shore people use it, or whether he is suggesting that Jersey Shore people would use it because it is so disrespectful, but either way he is denigrating the very concept (and people from this part of New Jersey).

Similarly, a participant from Group E suggests that he has heard people use slang, but he himself

does not: “Uh, a lot of people just say bitch. ‘That bitch.’” Not only does he pause and use a filler word before saying the word “bitch,” but he suggests that it is something only other people do.

#### 6.4 Respectful language

When asked about names for women they do not wish to have sex with, the young men demonstrated a respectful awareness of the humanity of the women in question. Rather than referring to them as an object or using a term that suggested undesirable qualities, many of the participants insisted that they simply use the women’s names. In the following exchange, men in Group D explain that they do not use negative slang, because they feel it unnecessary:

M: Ok. What about someone you DON’T want to sleep with? What do you call those people?

D8: Their name.

D5: I’d be like “Oh, Sasha wanted me but I didn’t want her.”

D8: Yeah yeah yeah. Like “Ashley’s cool, but we’re just friends.”

M: Ok.

D8: You’re not gonna be like – I don’t know. As long as you know their name, that’s enough said.

D8, in fact, seems rather insulted by the question. His tone in his first answer (“Their name.”) was almost angry. D5 joins in to back him up, and then D8 continues to insist that he would not use negative slang. They go on to further explain how they do not judge women for wanting sex and thus they do not want to be disrespectful:

D2: Yeah, I don’t really have a name for that. I don’t really care.

M: So you try not to cut anybody down.

D2: Yeah, I don't care. Sex is sex. Go for it.

D6: Unless you have a really strong reason to. But I can't think of any situation. Unless I really didn't like them.

In fact, D6 tries to imagine a situation in which he would feel justified using a negative term for a woman who wants to have sex, and he can barely do so. These young men are remarkably sex positive – which is not unusual when talking to men about other men, but is somewhat unusual when talking to men about women (Attwood 2007, Flood 2007, Flood 2013). I expected a certain amount of slut-shaming, and I was honestly surprised when the men were offended by the very idea.

## 6.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, in answer to the questions about slang, I was anticipating hearing negative slang used to describe both the act of sex and the women with whom the young men might have sex. Most of what one hears on the radio or even sees portrayed by the media would suggest that young men are consistently disrespectful of women and casual about sex. By contrast, the young men in the focus groups were aware of such language and posturing but denied that they themselves took part. It could be that they are choosing their language carefully because they know that they are being recorded. But even so, I was not in the room and the young men were talking to each other and a young male moderator, so if they were performing “being thoughtful” they were performing it for each other. That is to say, if they are giving answers which do not represent their reality, they are trying to portray themselves as less “macho” rather than more “macho,” which is not what I expected to see. It is also very possible that the type of men who were willing to participate in a study about sex on a college campus were self-selecting, and those men are naturally more thoughtful regarding sex. I tried to get around that bias by offering

generous compensation and recruiting from as wide a base of students as possible, but I cannot know whether other young men who are students at the same university would use different language. All I can say with certainty is that the young men who participated were from a variety of ages, races, religious backgrounds, and social classes. It is my hope that they do represent the average man, at least on this campus, and that the average man is more considerate than the previous research (and the media) gave them credit for being. In the next chapter I will discuss this dilemma, as well as the more significant findings from this study and their implications for future research.

## **7 DISCUSSION**

In this study I used qualitative methodology to find out how young men talk about sex. I wanted to know who they talk to, what they talk about, and what kinds of language they use. I recruited young men to participate in focus groups, which were led by a male moderator. In these focus groups they talked about those three main questions, but they also addressed topics like pornography, sex education, relationships, slang, and their feelings about those topics. In addition, they completed a questionnaire that gave me background information on their personal characteristics and their previous sexual experience. There were three main questions asked in the focus groups: 1) Who do you talk to about sex? 2) What do you talk about? 3) How do you talk about sex? Those three questions formed the three main chapters of my dissertation, and I discuss them in further detail below.

### **7.1 Summary of Findings**

What I learned over the course of this project is that young men are putting much more thought into their own feelings and the feelings of others than mainstream society gives them credit for. As a gender scholar, expected to find much more use of dismissive slang and

embracing of hook up culture than I found. Perhaps I have been misled by popular media or by the research I have read regarding issues with campus rape. Instead of being aggressive, the young men who participated were almost invariably thoughtful and careful. They spoke repeatedly about not making others uncomfortable and about making choices that would not hurt or disempower other people. When they did talk about slang, they consistently “othered” those who would use such language. When they talked about hook up culture they admitted their longing for a more emotional connection with their partners. When they discussed being uncomfortable talking about sex they were mostly uncomfortable on behalf of others, whether it was being in a public place or listening to someone else say something they found offensive. The young men in this study were considerate at every turn, and the fact that young men are stereotypically portrayed otherwise is doing them a great disservice.

### ***7.1.1 Who do you talk to?***

The first question asked was a simple one: who do you talk to about sex? The answer turned out to also be fairly simple: one or two trusted friends and one’s long-term partner. Nearly everyone else in the men’s lives was off the list. The men did not want to talk to a group of friends, or a casual partner, or their parents, or their co-workers, or their adult parental figures, or even women with whom they might want to have sex. This care when speaking about sex was unexpected because I thought young men would be more comfortable talking about sex, or at least feel pressured to talk about sex. Instead, they had a very limited list of people with whom they would talk, and those people were very special to them. Casual conversations were uncommon, or at least uncomfortable, and no real information was shared.

The reasons they offered for having such a limited list of conversation partners were also interesting: either the conversation made them uncomfortable, or they feared that it would make



the other person uncomfortable. This showed a high degree of social awareness. With their parents, such feelings of discomfort were expected. Not talking with one's parents about sex because of the awkwardness that might ensue is a common trope in movies and an anticipated part of the socialization of sex (Elliot 2012, Schalet 2011, Widman et al 2013). But when the young men refrained from talking about sex in the workplace, with women they did not know, or around members of their extended family, they were demonstrating the kind of emotional understanding that we do not typically expect from young men. Instead of brashly bragging about all the women they have slept with, or how great they are at sex, they kept their conversations private and quiet. In doing so, they respected the comfort of others, even strangers.

### ***7.1.2 What do you talk about?***

The second question was "What do you talk about, when you talk about sex?" Here, once again, they showed high degrees of awareness and restraint. I divided their answers into two categories: the kind of conversations that might be considered stereotypical, and those that went against stereotype. First, regarding "stereotypically" male talk, they admitted that many conversations about sex start and end with a simple dichotomy: had sex or did not have sex. When speaking with people other than their trusted friend group or their partner, most of the participants indicated that they only share that much information. If they did have sex, they might engage in a brief bout of bragging. However, the participants almost exclusively claimed that they do not brag except in the most exceptional of circumstances. Instead, they spoke about bragging as something other people do, especially younger people.

The bulk of conversation in regards to talking about sex was taken up with talking about feelings. The participants talked about their feelings constantly and openly, and this was the greatest unexpected finding for me in the whole project. First of all, they were surprised sex

came with feelings because they had never been taught this by porn, which is where they received their initial impressions of sex. Second, they were surprised to find that sex was better when you had an emotional connection to your partner. Third, they were very surprised to find that sex without an emotional connection was not very much fun at all. And finally, they were also concerned about the feelings of their sex partners and would consciously refrain from having sex with certain partners if they thought they might not be emotionally prepared.

The obvious corollary to talking about sex is not wanting to talk about sex, and the participants had plenty to say about that, as well. In general, they refrained from talking about sex if such talk made them uncomfortable or if they were afraid it might make another person uncomfortable. They did not care for hearing about another person cheating or harshly judging others for their sexual choices, as it made them uncomfortable. Those who were virgins were also uncomfortable talking about sex, which is not surprising. The participants also noted that they were uncomfortable talking about sex when such talk might reach inappropriate ears – those of strangers, small children, or really anyone other than the intended audience. In general, the participants sounded like they were more likely to be uncomfortable talking about sex than comfortable.

### ***7.1.3 How do you talk?***

The third main question asked in the focus groups was regarding how the young men talk about sex. I was specifically looking for use of slang and code words, and my expectation was that the young men would have a wide range of slang and much of it would be negative. The participants were certainly able to offer up examples of slang, but they generally denied using it themselves. First, they often suggested slang, when prompted, as though it was somewhat unfamiliar to them. Often they would ask for the question to be repeated, and their answers were

given in a questioning tone, with their voices going up at the end, as though they were asking rather than telling. Second, if they offered a slang word, especially one that was negative in connotation, they would be clear that it was something they believed others said. Rather than admitting to using such language themselves, they would other the use of both derogatory and positive slang. Essentially the participants would admit that they were familiar with such words, but only through having heard other young men use them. Finally, participants in multiple groups noted how violent the terms for both women and for having sex tended to be. One group, in particular, went off on a bit of a tangent in regards to the violent nature of slang words for sex, and repeatedly expressed their surprise at the violence of the words.

The corollary to the third question, which was about language the participants use to reference sex, was about what kinds of language the participants used to describe women. This question had two parts: words for women with whom you would like to have sex and words for women with whom you would not like to have sex. In yet another example of thoughtful and respectful behavior, the most common answer for both was “her name.” Some of the young men admitted to having a more complex code, such as one in which the place where they met being a code for the woman in question. However, the majority of the participants denied using negative language themselves. They were familiar with such slang, much as before, but they again othered those who use such language. In fact, they often expressed outright distaste for those who use derogatory language.

There was, of course, the one young man who showed a lack of respect for his partners with his comment regarding there being no good way to demand oral sex. However, as I mentioned in my earlier analysis of his comment, he was the exception to the rule. I expected to find a much richer sample of language and slang, especially considering how far outside

stereotypical male college culture I am. Instead, I was familiar with all of the slang offered, and very little slang was offered in the first place. The language that the young men did use was often vague, which served the purpose of protecting their privacy (and that of their partners), but that vagueness also came across as respectful.

One final interesting aspect of how the young men talked was their tendency towards up-talking. Up-talking is when the speaker ends a sentence on an upward intonation, as though asking a question (Graydon 2015). Up-talking is typically considered a female aspect of speech (McKinnon 2015) and is usually seen in women. This gendered designation may be because up talking makes each sentence sound like a question, and thus the speaker seems as though they are seeking reassurance or asking for the approval of the listener. Many of the young men who participated, especially those who often spoke in long paragraphs (and are featured in block quotes in previous chapters) demonstrated up-talking when talking about sex. I argue that they were not entirely comfortable talking about sex or about the specific aspect of sexuality which they were discussing. I did not expect to hear up-talking from the participants, but it was not the only typically feminine aspect of speech that emerged. The participants also used the word “like” very often – mostly as a filler word, but occasionally in its grammatically correct form. In fact, “like” was the most commonly used word in the entirety of the transcriptions. Use of “like” in this manner is typically feminine (Coates 2015, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013) but was employed regularly by my participants. I believe this use of language, both the up-talking and the word like, are further examples of the changing masculinity in which these young men are taking part.

## 7.2 Discussion of Findings

What this means is that we, as a society, need to allow for a greater range of expression of masculinity. Specifically, we need to allow young men of color to join in this changing performance of masculinity. The young men in my study felt somewhat trapped by expectations that they be casual regarding sex. For instance, when asked with whom they talk about sex, nearly all of the participants indicated that they have one or two close friends with whom they share intimate details. This means that they know that they are not supposed to share feelings and experiences openly, or casually, or with a large group. However, they nearly all found a loophole in that they had one or two trusted friends to whom they could admit their insecurities, ask advice, and process their experiences. Therefore, they want to talk about sex and they want to talk about sexuality. But the young men in this study did not feel that they were supposed to do so.

The young women who are their peers, on the other hand, are expected to have those feelings and are rewarded for sharing them openly. The media consistently portray young women as emotionally open, perhaps even to a fault. We see depictions of young women sharing a pint of ice cream while wearing pajamas, or drinking martinis while discussing their sex lives, or typing extended text messages to their friends from the bathroom while on a date. The young men with whom they are on these dates or about whom they are having these feelings are not allowed similar emotional expression. They are expected, according to stereotypes of masculinity, to stoically handle the exact same situations, but they revealed in this study that they will – secretly – later reveal their concerns to one trusted friend.

Even more important, the participants repeatedly shared that they are not happy with their current emotional connections to the women (and men) with whom they are having sex. They

know what college life and the hook up culture are “supposed” to look like, and in some cases the participants were happy to go along with those models for relationships. But the majority of the young men were not content with their current sex lives. This discontent became clear in the quantitative data from the survey, in which the average response to the question “how satisfied are you, generally, with your sexual relationships with women?” resulted in a rather low 3.8 – above “somewhat” but below “fairly.” Although 3.8 is not terrible, it is very important to consider that on the previous question, “how satisfied are you, generally, with your emotional relationships with women?” the average response was 4.1. These responses indicate clearly that the participants were comfortable with women, that they have, at worst, “fairly” good emotional connections with women, but they are not pleased with their sexual relationships. It is certainly possible that this is indicating quantity and not quality – that the participants meant that they are not satisfied because they want more sex (instead of better sex). In the focus groups, that question is answered. The participants speak repeatedly about their concern for the emotional welfare of their partners, the necessity of talking about sex with long term partners, the lack of emotional connection in their casual hook ups, and their displeasure with that lack emotional connection.

The importance of this study is the light it sheds on the experience of the young college man. All of my participants felt pressure to be masculine in regards to their sexual experiences, and they expressed this pressure by talking about stereotypical male behavior and the ways in which they did not fit that mold. They understood what stereotypical masculinity looks like, and what it sounds like, but they did not identify with it. Instead, they quietly wished for meaningful sex and ways to make other people more comfortable.

Even more importantly, this study illuminates the experience of college men of color. In previous works the primary subjects have been white men, but my sample was different. The majority of the men in my sample (56%) were Black, Hispanic, Asian, or mixed race. The fact that their experience matches with that of the men in previous studies is relevant, but I would argue that their experience of masculinity (and especially of trying to achieve hegemonic masculinity) is much different than the men from *Guyland*, or *The Man in the Head*, or *Hooking Up*, or even *Dude You're a Fag*. Previous works on masculinity began the process of showing how limiting hegemonic masculinity can be, and how displeased some college men are with hook up culture. This study builds on those findings by showing that the same limitations, challenges, and disappointments exist for young men of color – and in fact those issues are likely even more deeply affecting the men in my study. The pressure to be masculine weighs on all young men, but the pressure for young men of color is even heavier, because their ability to achieve hegemonic masculinity is blocked before they even begin. Thus they are struggling against nearly insurmountable odds, and it is no surprise that they are finding it challenging.

This study reveals that we are limiting young men, especially young men of color, and this finding is important because it has resonating impacts throughout their lives. If we teach young men not to express their feelings and not to seek emotional connections, then expecting them to find fulfilling marriages is unreasonable. We have set up a “typical” progression for young men in which they experiment with various sexual partners from their teenage years through their late twenties, and then suddenly they are expected to magically know how to engage in an emotionally and physically fulfilling relationship. We do not teach them to talk about their feelings or to address situations in which they might feel uncomfortable. We simply demand that they behave in an appropriately masculine manner, which involves putting aside

fears and discomfort in the favor of “being strong.” This version of masculinity is spotlighted in media portrayals of the “player,” the “stud,” and the strong-but-silent leading man.

This version of masculinity leads directly to poor relationships and to rape culture. American universities are currently experiencing an unacceptable amount of sexual assault (Cantalupo 2014, Napolitano 2014, Yung 2015), especially for women in their first year (Katz et al. 2010, Lawyer et al. 2010, Mouilso and Fischer 2012). Research has shown that women are more heavily victimized in college than in high school (Kiebs et al. 2009, McMahon 2010, Testa and Hoffman 2012) and that drinking increases women’s likelihood of victimization (Messman and Moore 2008, Palmer et al. 2009, Testa and Livingston 2009). Further, repeated studies have shown that the programs currently in place are not working (Anderson and Whiston 2005, DeGue et al. 2014, Vladutiu, Martin, and Macy 2010) and that women are hesitant to use them in the first place (Orchowski and Gidycz 2012, Walsh et al. 2010). If universities are genuinely willing to make changes to correct the issue of sexual assault, those changes must start with the men, and not the women. The problem is not women going to parties or women drinking or women wearing short skirts – the problem is men committing assault. Instead of studying the ways in which alcohol diminishes self-control (Franklin, Boufford, and Pratt 2012) we must tell men not to assault people. As part of that, we must stop enforcing hegemonic masculinity. We must allow men to perform different versions of masculinity, and we must allow them to talk openly about their feelings. Most importantly, we must teach them to admit their desires and emotions to other men.

In terms of policy, dramatic changes need to be made in regards to policing, reporting, and punishing of sexual assault. There is a great deal of research regarding the effectiveness – or rather, the lack thereof – of sexual assault prevention policies on campuses (Anderson and



Whiston 2015, DeGue et al. 2014, Vladutiu, Martin, and Macy 2010). Such research is necessary and important, but more is needed. Specifically, I would like to see more policies which focus on rape prevention by focusing on men. Obviously punishment of proven perpetrators of assault is necessary. But so is prevention. An increase in mental health care for men, including a normalization of therapy, would be enormously helpful. Lectures and literature on how to identify sexual assault and how to recognize your own complicity in such assault would also be beneficial. Talk therapy groups, perhaps even mandatory ones for men living in dormitories, would help to bring conversations about sexual assault and prevention to the forefront. As the saying goes, “Stop telling women not to get raped and start telling men not to rape.”

If we teach young men that having feelings and speaking openly about those feelings is wrong, they will learn to bottle up emotion and to embrace a “macho” version of masculinity. They will perform a careless, disrespectful, and sex-focused version of masculinity, which ultimately will be harmful for their partners. If young men are taught that nothing matters more than having as many sex partners as possible, they will not be allowed the opportunity to develop emotional connections or to learn how to please specific partners. Instead, they will learn how to convince partners to have sex with them, possibly through less than savory means. Then they will move on to the next partner, then to the next one, and so on. They will not grow emotionally, and their partners will not be allowed that opportunity, either. The young men in this study talked about wishing for more emotional connection during sex, and they will never be allowed to achieve that if we do not drop the focus on numbers and allow for a focus on quality.

In terms of theory, this could mean that the era of hegemonic masculinity is over and it is time for a theoretical shift. As I discussed in the literature review, there has been a recent wave of publications regarding the “undoing” of gender (Connell 2010, Risman 2009, West and

Zimmerman 2009). In addition, there has been a trend towards a multiplicity of versions of masculinity (Allen 2007, Duncanson 2015, Messerschmidt 2012). Perhaps the time has come to let go of restrictive versions of masculinity, including those that discourage emotional attachment, and welcome a new plurality of masculinities. Although men will always be held to standards of masculinity in some regard, less restriction of their emotions would be a welcome change.

Perhaps the most important finding is that some young men are looking for a way out of hegemonic masculinity. When offered opportunities to perform masculinity, they chose not to do so – by othering, by making alternate choices, and by thinking carefully about the emotions of others. When asked what kinds of words what might use to describe a woman with whom you do not want to sleep, for example, they quickly rejected the use of insults. Certainly, they knew of insults, and they were able to name them. But they denied using such insults themselves, and instead pointed to men who were younger or less evolved than themselves. Despite their active participation in hook up culture, they demonstrated awareness of the possible detriments of hooking up and expressed a desire to keep their partners from emotional harm. They did not want to hold to the demand made by hegemonic ideals that they separate sex from feelings, and they were not afraid to admit it to each other.

For that reason, the primary finding from this study is that young men want more emotion in their sex lives, and they want credit for the emotion they are already having. To expect young men to have an entirely different experience than the young women with whom they are involved is ludicrous, but it is also common. We are short-changing young men, and in doing so we may be inadvertently creating the monsters from whom we seek protection.

### 7.3 Limitations

The participants in my study were self-selecting; all of them were enrolled college students; all of them were from the same university; and all of them were paid for their participation. Although none of these limitations are particularly unusual, they undoubtedly had an impact on the study.

First, the men who participated did so out of a desire to participate, which means that they were already comfortable discussing sex in a group setting. Men with a lower comfort level essentially opted out, so there is the possibility that the men in the study are more open about their sex lives and their sexuality than the average young man. Essentially, I may have attracted an unusually unguarded group of men. Because my participants agreed to do the focus groups while knowing they were about sex, they were likely more comfortable talking about sex than the average college student. This comfort level may have influenced their answers, and thus those answers may not be representative of the average college-aged male.

Second, due to restrictions from the Institutional Review Board, I only recruited young men who were enrolled students at the university at which I study. This choice means that all of the participants were college students, who are not representative of the general population of men their age. It may also mean that they may be unusually culturally aware and critical of American society. Although three of the participants were sociology majors, and two had taken a sexuality class previously, there is still the strong possibility that the participants have been asked by instructors at the university to think about sexuality critically in other classroom situations. They also might have used slightly different language than their non-student peers, simply because of being actively enrolled in college classes. If the participants have taken classes that require critical thinking, teach feminism, or even explore the social boundaries of gender,

they might have come to the focus groups with that knowledge on the forefront of their minds. In that case, it is possible that their peers who are not in college would have entirely different answers.

I would also have liked to have kept the same moderator for all of the groups, purely in the interest of having one less variable. Although the data from the groups were similar enough to cause no concern, there is no denying that a change in moderator will create a change in the way the questions are asked and the way the groups are run. The second moderator had the opportunity to learn from the first moderator, which was helpful, but they are simply not the same person. I was lucky to find two such wonderful and intuitive moderators, but if I could have made the choice to use only one, I would have.

Finally, I feel that I must question the extent to which paying the participants changed their answers. I found it necessary to provide an incentive, as my first efforts to recruit were not fruitful, but there is always the risk that incentivizing a study will change the kinds of participants who are attracted to the study. That said, it is possible that I was able to find a wider range of young men to participate solely because those who would do it for free and those who required payment are different people and thus provide different answers.

#### **7.4 Recommendations for future study**

The changing image of masculinity is an important area of study, and I would like to see and personally undertake more research on it. In future studies I would like to see focus groups done with non-students. A comparative study, done with the same questionnaire and the same focus group questions, but with young men who are not enrolled in college, might yield different results. It is also a possibility that such a study might yield similar results, in which case a more confident statement of representation could be made. When I presented this research at a

conference, one member of the audience suggested doing focus groups at his Army reserve base because of the plethora of young men with free time and the desire to talk about sex. I think his idea is a good example of searching out groups of young men, and specifically groups with a shared interest or quality, for future research. Other possible groups would be incarcerated men and single fathers.

Similarly, it would be interesting to ask the same questions of young women, both students and non-students. The young men in this study appeared to believe that women talk about sex differently than men do, as evidenced by their different choices when talking to men and to women. It would be fascinating to compare their conjecture with data from young women who are asked the same questions. Additionally, if the answers from the young men were against stereotype, perhaps the answers from the young women would be as well. Where the young men wished for more emotional connection, perhaps we might find that the young women wish for less. It is also possible that young women also wish for more emotion in their sex lives, and there is simply a lack of communication regarding emotion. The participants repeatedly shared their belief that women talk about sex more than men, and I would be interested to see whether women think the same.

Another factor that could be examined in future research is the age of the participants. I used college-aged men, but I would be interested to see how answers might change with both younger and older men. Do fathers talk about sex differently than childless men? Do married men differ from divorced men in their use of slang? In this study I had a few virgins, but virginity is not so unusual at this age – what would be different if I recruited adult men who were involuntarily celibate? It was also interesting to me that the men in my study suggested that younger men are more prone to using slang. I would like to test that by asking these questions to

young men in middle school or high school, to see if their word usage is dramatically different from that of the college men.

Finally, I would like to conduct similar research in a different part of the country. Many of the participants were raised in Christian environments, which is very common in the area in which the study was conducted. For instance, the men who had retained their virginity noted that they did so for religious reasons. Others noted that they initially intended to remain virgins until marriage, also for religious reasons, but had since become sexually active. Perhaps young men raised in a different religion or with no religion might have different feelings regarding sex before marriage or sexuality in general.

In summation, more work remains to be done. Although I am prepared to make the claim that the participants in this study rejected hegemonic masculinity, their rejection does not indicate that all men do the same. Further studies regarding language use, especially studies done with a wide variety of male subjects, could shed light on the changing face of masculinity in America. An increased understanding of the weight under which men are living, in regards to pressure to perform masculinity, may lead to solutions to issues like sexual assault, dissatisfaction with hook up culture, and emotional distance in relationships.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

Georgia State University  
Department of Sociology

#### Informed Consent

Title: The relationship between language and sexuality among college-aged men

Principal Investigator: Dawn Baunach

Student Principal Investigator: Lanier Basenberg

Sponsor: Funding provided by donations from kickstarter.com

#### I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate language and sexuality. You are invited to participate because you are a college-aged male over the age of 18. A total of 30-40 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require 1-2 hours of your time over one day.

#### II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will participate in a focus group on the campus of Georgia State University. You will be answering questions from a moderator and talking to other college-aged males about sexuality, who you talk to about sex, and what kinds of words you use. You will also fill out a brief and confidential questionnaire. The questionnaire should take about five minutes, and the focus group will take 1-2 hours. You will be recorded via both audio and video during this focus group. You will be given free food and paid \$20 for your participation when you complete the focus group. The funds to pay you were raised via kickstarter.com.

#### III. Risks:

There is the possibility that participation in this study may cause you some discomfort, because openly talking about sexuality is not usually socially appropriate. If you experience any discomfort, you are free to not answer the question asked or terminate your participation in the study. However, we appreciate your participation and want you to feel as comfortable as possible.

#### IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about language and sexuality, and your participation will help us gain that knowledge.

#### V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can keep any food you would like but if you withdraw you will not be paid.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Only Dawn Baunach and Lanier Basenberg will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). We will use a pseudonym rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored in a locked safe. The audio and video recordings of the focus groups will not contain any identifying information. The audio and video recordings will be kept on a flash drive in a locked safe when not in use. They will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. You may recognize other participants of the focus group and they may recognize you, but please do not discuss what was said in the focus group outside of the focus group itself. You risk breaching the confidentiality of the study if you do so. The researchers cannot guarantee that members of the focus group will act appropriately after the fact, but we do ask that you maintain each other's privacy and confidentiality.

Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

We ask that you do not share any information you learn about other participants during the course of this focus group. By signing below, you are agreeing to keep all personal details shared by participants confidential, even if you know the participant personally.

VII. Contact Persons:

Contact Dawn Baunach or Lanier Basenberg at 404-413-6500 (or lbasenberg1@student.gsu.edu) if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer and be audio and video recorded for this research, please sign below.

Participant	Date
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent	Date

**Appendix 2****Questionnaire for Participants**

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Do you consider yourself: (select as many as appropriate)
  - White or Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_
  - Black or African-American \_\_\_\_\_
  - Hispanic or Latino \_\_\_\_\_
  - Asian or Asian-American \_\_\_\_\_
  - American Indian or Native American \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other (Please identify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Do you consider yourself:
  - Heterosexual \_\_\_\_\_
  - Bisexual \_\_\_\_\_
  - Gay \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other (Please identify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Who of the following people are aware of your sexual orientation? (select as many as appropriate)
  - Father \_\_\_\_\_
  - Mother \_\_\_\_\_
  - Sibling(s) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other family members \_\_\_\_\_
  - Best friend \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other friends who are gay/bi/queer \_\_\_\_\_
  - Co-workers \_\_\_\_\_
  - Roommate(s) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other (Please identify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Are you married?
  - Yes \_\_\_\_\_
  - No \_\_\_\_\_
  - Engaged \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you have children of your own?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_

No \_\_\_\_\_

If Yes, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your current housing situation?

I live alone \_\_\_\_\_

I live with roommates \_\_\_\_\_

I live with a romantic partner (not married) \_\_\_\_\_

I live with my spouse \_\_\_\_\_

I live with my parents \_\_\_\_\_

8. What is your major?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Where would you place yourself on the following scale?

Extremely liberal \_\_\_\_\_

Liberal \_\_\_\_\_

Slightly liberal \_\_\_\_\_

Moderate \_\_\_\_\_

Slightly conservative \_\_\_\_\_

Conservative \_\_\_\_\_

Extremely conservative \_\_\_\_\_

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

10. In what religion were you raised?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. What religion do you currently practice?

\_\_\_\_\_

12. How often do you currently attend religious services?

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Less than once a year \_\_\_\_\_

Several times a year \_\_\_\_\_

Once a month \_\_\_\_\_

Two or three times a month \_\_\_\_\_

Nearly every week \_\_\_\_\_

Every week \_\_\_\_\_

More than once a week \_\_\_\_\_

13. What kind of high school did you attend?  
Public \_\_\_\_\_  
Private \_\_\_\_\_  
Homeschool \_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
14. What kind of sex education did you have at school?  
Abstinence-only (You were only told to abstain from sex until marriage) \_\_\_\_\_  
Comprehensive (You were told to abstain, but also told about how to use  
contraceptives and treat STIs, in case you did have sex) \_\_\_\_\_  
None \_\_\_\_\_
15. What kind of sex education did you have at home?  
Abstinence-only \_\_\_\_\_  
Comprehensive \_\_\_\_\_  
None \_\_\_\_\_
16. Have you taken a sexuality course while in college?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_\_
17. Have you ever had a sexual encounter (kissing, manual stimulation, etc.) with a  
female partner?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_\_
18. Have you ever had a sexual encounter (kissing, manual stimulation, etc.) with a male  
partner?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_\_
19. How old were you when you first had oral sex?  
a. Performed upon you? \_\_\_\_\_  
b. Performed by you? \_\_\_\_\_  
c. Have not had oral sex \_\_\_\_\_



20. How many times in the last six months have you had oral sex with a partner?
- a. Performed upon you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Performed by you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Have not had oral sex \_\_\_\_\_
21. How old were you when you first had anal sex?
- a. Performed upon you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Performed by you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Have not had anal sex \_\_\_\_\_
22. How many times in the last six months have you had anal sex with a partner?
- a. Performed upon you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Performed by you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Have not had anal sex \_\_\_\_\_
23. How old were you when you first had vaginal sex? \_\_\_\_\_  
Have not had vaginal sex \_\_\_\_\_ (Skip to question 25)
24. How many times in the last six months have you had vaginal sex with a partner?  
\_\_\_\_\_
25. How many times in the last six months have you had casual sex (not a committed relationship)? \_\_\_\_\_
26. With how many partners have you had sex in the past six months? \_\_\_\_\_
27. Are you currently in a monogamous relationship?
- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
  - No \_\_\_\_\_
28. What is the longest period of time you have been in a monogamous relationship?
- Less than a month \_\_\_\_\_
  - Less than a year \_\_\_\_\_
  - Less than five years \_\_\_\_\_
  - More than five years \_\_\_\_\_

29. Do you have a “friend with benefits” or “hookup partner”?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_\_  
How many such partners have you had over the last six months? \_\_\_\_\_
30. Have you ever had sex with someone you had not met before that day?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_\_  
How many times in the last six months? \_\_\_\_\_
31. How comfortable are you around women in general?  
1 (Not at all) 2 (A little bit) 3 (Somewhat) 4 (Fairly) 5 (Very)
32. How satisfied are you, generally, with your emotional relationships with women?  
1 (Not at all) 2 (A little bit) 3 (Somewhat) 4 (Fairly) 5 (Very)
33. How satisfied are you, generally, with your sexual relationships with women?  
1 (Not at all) 2 (A little bit) 3 (Somewhat) 4 (Fairly) 5 (Very)
34. How comfortable do you feel around gay men?  
1 (Not at all) 2 (A little bit) 3 (Somewhat) 4 (Fairly) 5 (Very)
35. Since you became sexually active, have you gone through long periods (six months or more) when you were sexually inactive?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, were these periods voluntary \_\_\_\_\_ or involuntary \_\_\_\_\_?  
Not applicable \_\_\_\_\_
36. How regularly do you use condoms?  
Every time \_\_\_\_\_  
Almost every time \_\_\_\_\_  
About half the time \_\_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_\_  
Never \_\_\_\_\_  
Not applicable \_\_\_\_\_

37. When having sex with female partners, how often do you inquire about their birth control methods (ie: if they are on the pill)?

- Every time \_\_\_\_\_
- Almost every time \_\_\_\_\_
- About half the time \_\_\_\_\_
- Seldom \_\_\_\_\_
- Never \_\_\_\_\_
- Not applicable \_\_\_\_\_

38. Have you ever gotten a female partner pregnant?

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No \_\_\_\_\_
- I don't know \_\_\_\_\_
- Not applicable \_\_\_\_\_

39. How often are you drunk/high/otherwise impaired when you engage in partnered sex?

- Every time \_\_\_\_\_
- Almost every time \_\_\_\_\_
- About half the time \_\_\_\_\_
- Seldom \_\_\_\_\_
- Never \_\_\_\_\_
- Not applicable \_\_\_\_\_

40. Have you ever had an STI (Sexually transmitted infection) test?

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No \_\_\_\_\_
- If yes, how recently? \_\_\_\_\_

41. Have you ever had an HIV test?

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No \_\_\_\_\_
- If yes, how recently? \_\_\_\_\_

42. Do you watch pornography?

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, how often?

- Less than once a year \_\_\_\_\_
- Several times a year \_\_\_\_\_
- Once a month \_\_\_\_\_
- Two or three times a month \_\_\_\_\_
- Nearly every week \_\_\_\_\_
- Every week \_\_\_\_\_
- More than once a week \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3

### Questions for Focus Group

#### MODULE ONE

##### **Do you ever talk about sex?**

And the other big question: why not?

Did you have any sex ed in school?

What kind?

Was it helpful?

What makes you feel uncomfortable about talking about sex?

What makes you feel comfortable?

Would you say you feel comfortable talking about sex? Why or why not?

Do you feel like it's ok to talk about sex?

Do you feel like you're not supposed to?

In what situations do you feel like it's ok to talk about sex?

#### MODULE TWO

##### **To whom do you talk?**

Do you talk to your guy friends? (Why/why not?)

Do you talk to women? (Why/why not?)

Women you're in a relationship with?

Women you're friends with?

Who usually initiates talks about sex, in your relationships?

Do you talk to your parents? (Why/why not?)

Do you talk to other "adults"? (Why/why not?)

Do you think women talk about sex with each other? (Why/why not?)

Do you think they talk *more* than men or about the same?

How do you think women's talk about sex is similar to or different from men's talk about sex?

Did you have sex ed in school?

Do you think the teachers or program leaders were helpful in teaching you about sex?

### MODULE THREE

#### **What kinds of things do you usually talk about?**

Sexual interactions you've had recently or in the past?

How you feel about the sex you're having/not having?

What do you think most guys talk about, when they're talking about sex?

Why do you think that?

What do you think most women talk about, when they're talking about sex?

Why do you think that?

Do you talk about different things with your friends than with your partners?

(Why/why not?)

Do you use different words/slang? (Why/why not?)

Do you talk about your partners with your friends? (Why/why not?)

Do you use different words/slang when talking about someone you're dating?

(Why/why not?)

If yes: What kinds of words do you use for women/men you're dating?

What kinds of words do you use for women/men you're casually sleeping with?

What kinds of words do you use for women/men you don't want to sleep with?

What do you think about hooking up?

What kinds of women/men would you hook up with?

What kinds of women/men want to hook up?

What kinds of women/men want relationships?

What do you think about condoms?

Do you use them?

Do you like them?

What do you think about other birth control?

Do you think it's up to you, or the girl?

What do you think about pornography?

Do you think it's realistic?

Do you think women watch it?

Do you think you've learned anything about sex from pornography?

