

ABSTINENCE DISCOURSES, PRACTICES AND SEXUAL
LITERACY AT A SMALL, CHRISTIAN CHURCH
IN CENTRAL TEXAS

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my Mom, Dad, brother and Nana who helped me get through this arduous process and encouraged me when I needed motivation, my friends who listened to me talk endlessly about sex education and abstinence, and Barret who started this adventure with me.

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I. STUDYING SEX, THEORY AND METHODS

“Mommy where do babies come from?” With one question, I started on my unique sex education journey. My mother said I asked about babies and pregnancy when I was five years old. Although they once belonged to a fundamentalist Christian community, both of my parents said they were open to discussing sexuality, so I could approach them with any questions I had. Overall, they tried their best to make me feel comfortable.

Sometime during middle school, my teacher gave me a permission slip to participate in the sex education session. I took it home feeling confident that my parents would sign it without any hesitation. However, my mother said, “You don’t need to go to that...you already know about sex.” The next day I returned to school emptyhanded. When my teacher asked everyone for their permission slips, I looked around the classroom as other students handed theirs in and realized that I was the only one who did not bring a signed slip. My teacher walked me to an empty classroom and turned on a Disney princess movie. Initially I was embarrassed to be escorted out alone, but I enjoyed watching the movie. During lunch, my friends asked why I had to leave the classroom and I told them my parents were strict.

Many parents regardless of religious affiliation avoid discussing sexuality, or fail to teach sex education competently, and that lack of communication is often mirrored back by their children (Affi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2008, 7). Normalizing the silence around sexuality by not broaching the subject creates barriers to dialogue and knowledge. Parents should demonstrate positive behavior (behavior that is beneficial to an individual in some way) and initiate conversations to normalize the topic, which

will make youth more comfortable with asking sexual health questions. Yet many parents still hesitate to address sexuality due to many factors such as poor communication skills, the difficult nature of the subject, a lack of education from their parents, and/or an uncertainty of accurate information (Affi, Joseph and Aldeis 2008). According to Ray and Brown (2011), there is a measurable disparity concerning the quality of sex education between secular parents and Christian parents across different sects (Catholic, Non-denominational, Baptist, Lutheran and Methodist). Both groups of parents needed improvement but most religious respondents lagged by 11 percent and 16 percent respectively regarding the frequency and quality of sexuality discussions (18).

The perspective of abstinence-only proponents is that minors entirely lack the capacity to make reasonable choices concerning their sexuality. They are considered incapable of using protection and contraception properly, which leads to negative personal and social consequences, unwanted pregnancies, rising STI rates, etc. In this view, it is the duty of parents, adults in general and the state, to protect their best interests through the promotion of complete abstinence before marriage. For abstinence proponents, providing information on contraception/protection amounts to giving young people permission to have sex. In their opinion since minors must be abstinent, they do not need this information. [Gresle'-Favier 2013, 718]

In either case, secular or religious parents may feel that thorough sex education is not necessary because they expect abstinence¹ until marriage.

As a child, my family and I went to bible study occasionally with friends. We talked about premarital sex² a few times, but the memory of any specific topics escapes me. My parents both advocated for abstinence. When a movie included sexual content or drug addiction, my mother would use it as a “teaching moment” to talk about risky behaviors. She would say “don’t do drugs” and “remember, wait [to have

¹ Choosing not to have any kind of sexual activity. Someone who practices sexual abstinence does not run any risk of contracting a STD/STI or having an unwanted pregnancy. American Sexual Health Association, *Sexual Health Glossary*, (ASHA, 2018), 1.

² Sex between people who aren’t married. Planned Parenthood, *Glossary*, (Planned Parenthood, 2018), 71.

sex] until you're married." "Masturbation³ is okay as long as it is private, and in your own room." I think both of my parents emphasized the consequences of premarital sex more than anything else.

My first few sexual relationships revealed the inadequacies of my sex education in terms of learning about contraception⁴. I had never been taught how to use condoms or about success and failure rates. As a result, when my partner used one for the first time I had no idea how to put it on, if he was putting it on correctly, or how effective it would be against STIs or pregnancy. My limited knowledge of condom usage made my sexual health his responsibility. In general, I felt safe at the time because I was taking the birth control pill. However, reflecting on the circumstances, I was not as knowledgeable as I should have been.

Like many other young people, my personal experience with sex education was clearly lacking. My parents said they were open to discussing sexuality, yet they did not let me attend the class at school that covered this topic. Consequently, I was unfamiliar with condoms and uncomfortable with taking the lead in using them. Presently, I manage my sexual health well, but receiving quality, comprehensive sex education growing up could have given me more confidence.

Comprehensive sex education teaches about abstinence as the best method for avoiding STDs and unintended pregnancy, but also teaches about condoms and contraception to reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy and of infection with STDs, including HIV. It also teaches interpersonal and communication skills and helps young people explore their own values, goals and options. [Advocates For Youth 2008]

My personal experiences with sexual health and a curiosity to understand what other young Christians had experienced inspired me to investigate abstinence

³ Self-stimulation of the genitals for the purpose of sexual arousal and pleasure. American Sexual Health Association, *Sexual Health Glossary*, (ASHA, 2018), 3.

⁴ Any behavior, device, medication, or procedure used to prevent pregnancy. Also known as birth control. Planned Parenthood, *Glossary*, (Planned Parenthood, 2018), 17.

discourses⁵, practices, and sexual literacy, especially the existence of SHIRA (Sexual Health Information Refusal and Avoidance) among Christians as part of my master's thesis in anthropology. SHIRA is a term I created to embody the practice of individuals, organizations, and/or institutions avoiding discussions about sexual health, or refusing to disseminate accurate sexual health information, usually to or with minors. My research that focuses on a small Christian church in Central Texas documents some significant issues such as how my study participants use personal agency to manage their sexual health, how their religious practices and beliefs affect those choices, differences in the quality and frequency of sex education, intergenerational differences, and how theological views affect SHIRA overall.

While scholars in fields such as psychology, sociology and religious studies have investigated the influence of abstinence discourses, my review of the literature indicates they have relied primarily on surveys. My study at Anon Church, located in Central Texas, uses ethnographic methods and relies on analytical frameworks that address relations of power such as those of Foucault (Foucault 1978; Foucault, 1979; Foucault 1986) and Ortner (Ortner 1978; Ortner 2006).

Conceptualizing Sexuality, Power and Agency

In the past, early “armchair anthropologists” studied “primitive” sexuality in the 18th century asserting that their own sexuality - including abstinence discourses and practices, patriarchal relations and heterosexuality - was superior to that of “the natives” (Lyons and Lyons 2004, 20). Even when anthropologists commenced

⁵ Institutionalized practices and dialogues concerning chastity that shape sexual expression and give significance to sexual acts and occurrences. They exist as fields of dynamic “relations and interrelations” where power and knowledge are created and disseminated. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books 1979); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books 1981); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London: Tavistock 1986).

fieldwork in the early 20th century, most continued to label other cultures' sexual expressions as primitive and promiscuous. As the field of anthropology matured and progressed, cultural relativism became integral to reducing the hyper-sexualization of "the Other" (Donnan and Magowan 2010, 1-21). However, researchers still legitimized "modern white sexuality" (unrepressed sexuality) as a valid standard of measurement to determine what liberated, healthy, sexual expression was for everyone, regardless of ethnic, or cultural background (Juarez et al 2016, 109).

Sexuality is socially constructed and serves as a particularly "dense transfer point" for power relations (Foucault 1978, 103). Experts, or authoritative intellectualists, regulate clients and patients through sexuality as they categorize and assign behaviors significance, which transmutes the categories into tangible identities, and contributes knowledge to social and medical institutions (Lyons and Lyons 2004, 12). Thus 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' became legitimate categories when medical professionals manufactured them in the 1860s, and these terms became normative sexual statuses by the 20th-century (Katz 1995, 83). The lack of analysis of heterosexual reproductive marriage and a focus on other sexual orientations established a higher level of social capital for "straight" individuals (Lyons and Lyons 2004, 186). Experts labeled many sexual acts and created specific, power-laden identities:

The regime of professional authorities on sexuality, as Foucault understood it, had the effect of constructing sexuality so that incidents that might otherwise be defined as isolated fantasies, sensations, or behaviors were deployed to fit those who experienced them into reified categories. People were persuaded to perceive themselves as possessing single identities and consistent sexual desires. [Lyons and Lyons 2004, 185]

Certain sexual categories have been given value while others were “othered” and labeled as subaltern⁶.

As someone who expressed his sexuality through relationships with other men, Foucault was well aware of the disadvantages his sexual orientation bestowed; he became more engaged in studying sexuality over the years with his research culminating in the publication of several works including *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault famously concluded that the repressive hypothesis was in fact incorrect and sexuality was historically controlled and managed, not repressed (Foucault 1978).

One had to speak of [sex] as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was in the nature of a public potential; it called for management procedures; it had to be taken charge of by analytical discourses.

Victorian sexual modesty was actually a tightly controlled expression of sexuality maintained by powerful medical authorities, academics, and other institutions such as churches (Foucault 1978, 22).

Foucault argued that a historical shift in power shaped current notions of sexuality. Centuries ago, what he referred to as sovereign power was embodied within individuals and centralized in institutions such as monarchies, empires and churches that controlled vast amounts of the world’s population. To elaborate, when Mary Queen of Scots became the ruler of England in 1553, she worked to restore Catholicism’s influence by reinstating heresy laws (Jones 2016, 5). This led to 300 people being burned at the stake and earned her the nickname “bloody Mary” (Jones

⁶ Someone or something that holds a lower status in society or is considered criminal. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1891-1937).

2016, 5). The centralization of power and her direct influence over who lived and who died was quite evident.

Over time, kingdoms were replaced with institutions both inside and outside of government, while the right of sovereigns to take a life or to let someone live was “replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault 1978, 134-138). This new form of power, namely biopower, conceptualizes the species body as being laden with the functions of life itself and biological processes such as birth, longevity, death, and reproduction (Foucault 1978, 139). In modern society, organizations such as the WHO (World Health Organization) attempt to foster life and combat disease worldwide (WHO 2017), while individual governments decide which issues are more important to address, resulting in less funding for other social issues. The goal is to create a healthy, high-functioning population and optimize life (Inda 2005, 5), while allowing the deaths of defective, unhealthy and unproductive members of society (Foucault 1978, 138). This is illustrated by the work of organizations like the National Institute of Health, which decides how to allocate funds for disease prevention (NIH 2017).

Discourses, or institutionalized practices and dialogues that shape and give significance to social interactions and occurrences...where power and knowledge are created and disseminated, are essential aspects of biopower (Foucault 1978, 140; 1979, 1981, 1986). Foucault argued that contemporary governments and civic institutions foster discourses that construct citizen’s behaviors and consciousness, forming docile, useful bodies (1978, 140).

Although Foucault was correct about social institutions holding great power over citizens as a collective (1978; 1980), Sherry Ortner is likewise correct about individuals possessing agency and power to make things happen, affect change, or

reproduce the status quo in society (2006). Combining ideas from Foucault and Bourdieu (1978), among others, Ortner's version of practice theory suggests that power flows through "the practices of social actors 'on the ground' and the big 'structures' and 'systems' that constrain those practices are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them" (2006, 2). Citizens' behaviors are restricted by governmental structures and systems that legitimize certain practices over others to ensure the success of the species body (Inda 2005). However, as Ortner argues, individuals have the agency to push back against social encumbrances (2006). Over time, as they modify or reject discourses and their respective formations, systems and institutions can be transformed from the bottom up (Ortner 2006).

My analysis of participants' backgrounds concerning abstinence discourses and sex education relies heavily on Foucault (1978, 1979, 1986) and Ortner (1978, 2006). Their dense accumulation of research addressed the shifting, ubiquitous nature of power and its different forms that can simultaneously be found within individuals as well as the state level of government. Foucault's focus on top-down power relations is vital for assessing how religious sexuality discourses shape participant's sexual practices, while Ortner's dual approach explains how individuals can choose to reject traditional abstinence practices through personal agency, reshape their beliefs and influence systems and institutions. Both theorists provide effective frameworks for analyzing discourses and practices related to sexuality.

Public Sex Education in the U.S. and Attitudes Towards Sexual Expression

For decades, the power to influence the masses through education has remained within governmental systems and institutions. Private sex education (received from parents, guardians, mentors, friends and now the internet) is too

dynamic and complex to speak about historically here, but the evolution of public sex education in the U.S. is well documented (this will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5). Public sex education did not always hold the place in America's cultural framework it does today. The concept was given life and significance by the social hygiene movement during the progressive era (1880-1920) when people were concerned with the spread of venereal disease (Huber and Firmin 2014, 27). This period was characterized by moral outrage directed towards prostitutes and the idea of sexually free women (Huber and Firmin 2014, 27). The intermediate era from 1920-1960 saw the introduction of organizations like Planned Parenthood, Alfred Kinsey's comprehensive study that re-conceptualized human sexuality, and the continued involvement of the U.S. Public Health Service in campaigns to prevent and treat STIs (Huber and Firmin 2014, 33). Kinsey's study challenged previous constructions of sexuality that confined the development of sexual desire in humans to specific ages (Huber and Firmin 2014, 33).

Public sex education and attitudes towards sexual activity continued to be influenced by significant developments like the sexual revolution in the 1960s-1970s which changed American culture forever as the birth control pill was released to the public, giving women more agency over their bodies (Huber and Firmin 2014, 37-43). Situational ethics also impacted how sexual morality was applied. Judgements of appropriate behavior were made based on each situation, not on a strict set of principles (Fletcher 1966). Exhibitionism and casual sex became more normative (Gathorne-Hardy 1998, 55) while government funding for comprehensive sex education programs in schools was increased by Title X (Huber and Firmin 2014, 39-41).

The 1980s to the present era saw the pendulum swing back towards sexual sobriety with the discovery of HIV and more government funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) sex education programs⁷ (Huber and Firmin 2014, 40-41). These programs came with a strict list of guidelines that enforced moral frameworks of premarital abstinence and contained discriminatory content against any non-cisgender or non-heterosexual individuals (Malone and Rodriguez 2011, 3). America's "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality places a high value on personal responsibility: even if the quality and content of a sex education program is lacking, many officials will not admit fault when unplanned pregnancy and STI rates are still high. The Obama administration attempted to swing the pendulum back towards comprehensive sex education with less funding for AOUM programs (Papisova 2016, 1) and the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPPI) (Wiley et al 2017, 5). However, the Trump administration is fonder of AOUM programs, despite their lack of contraception and STI information for teens who choose to remain sexually active (Belluck 2018, 1).

Previous Research on Sex and Religion

Sex education demands to be more thoroughly explored as a facet of Christian sexuality (referring to Protestant sexuality and associated discourses). In the meantime, humanities and social science researchers in psychology, religion and sociology have established significant correlations between religious ideology and premarital sexual expression. Petersen and Donnenwerth (1997, 1078) focused on youth at a small, localized Protestant site and observed that churchgoers who attended

⁷ Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage sex education programs teach abstinence as the only morally correct option of sexual expression for teenagers [and] usually censor information about contraception and condoms for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy. Advocates For Youth, *Sex Education Programs: Definitions & Point-by-Point Comparison* (Advocates For Youth, 2008), 1.

services at higher rates maintained higher levels of support for traditional abstinence practices. Helm Jr. et al (2009, 240) studied a church-affiliated university that included millennials. Ninety percent of females in six hundred and thirty-four surveys listed religious beliefs as the reason they would not have sexual intercourse before marriage (Helm Jr. et al 2009, 240). Additionally, McMillen et al correlated the religious orientation scale with the frequency of sexual behaviors at a Midwestern Christian university and ascertained that participants who were more religious were less likely to be sexually active (2011, 203). The survey study included six hundred and thirty-four participants between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine; 58 percent were female and 42 percent male.

On a global scale, Ogland and Hinojosa analyzed data from the 2002 Brazilian Religion Survey of two thousand respondents who were eighteen and older (2012, 417). Focusing on morality judgements, researchers discovered that Christians who attended Pentecostal churches more frequently were 114 percent more likely to have negative feelings about cohabitation before marriage than Christians who attended Pentecostal churches less frequently (419). Despite their reliance on a singular survey method, all of these studies indicate that some Pentecostal, Nondenominational and Protestant ideologies regarding premarital abstinence are still quite effective in shaping sexual expression (Petersen and Donnerwerth 1997, 1078; Helm Jr. et al 2009; McMillen et al 2011; Ogland and Hinojosa 2012).

Why Should We Keep Searching For Answers?

Even with recent secularization trends, Christian abstinence discourses can still exert influence among young Christian adults in contemporary society. Petersen and Donnerwerth's study indicated that as society has become more secular, the

acceptance of premarital heterosexual sex steadily increased from the 1970s to the 1990s (1997, 1078) and has most assuredly increased since then. Regarding generational differences and the number of Christian youth, there are 75.4 million millennials in America (adults who were between the ages of 18-34 in 2015) and they outnumber baby boomers (ages 51-69) by 0.5 million (Fry 2016, 1). As a result of secularization, millennials display a “lower level of religiosity” in terms of church attendance, yet show similar levels of spirituality in relation to believing that God, heaven and hell exist, and also frequently practice daily prayer (Alper 2015, 1). In effect, there is a measurable difference between the lower religiosity level of millennials and older Americans, but millennials are still spiritual and have their own sacred practices (Alper 2015: 2). As a matter of fact, 59 percent of young Texas millennials identify as members of a Christian denomination (Pew Research Center 2017, 1). “Texas is one of the nation’s centers of conservative religion” (Wuthnow 2014, 22). Christians of all denominations are still a significant part of the population and can potentially impact the larger population.

With this in mind, it is crucial to determine how abstinence doctrines affect Christian youth’s sexual practices and the quality of sex education for public health reasons. The practice of abstaining from sex is the only 100% effective form of birth control and drastically reduces the chance of contracting an STI (things like Herpes Simplex 1 can still be transferred by kissing). In most Christian circles, abstinence ideology is more complex and involves a spiritual element as well: it motivates people to stay chaste until marriage based on the traditional idea that sex outside of marriage is sinful and problematic.

On the other hand, studies show that 65 percent of males and 70 percent of females in the U.S. have had sex by nineteen years of age (Finer 2007, 74). Therefore,

we need a thorough knowledge of the overall effects of religious abstinence discourses on youth's sexual practices:

- Do Christian communities have higher rates of successful abstinence or are youth waiting to be sexually active until they get married?
- If Christian youth chose to be sexually active did they practice safer sex?
- Did their religious background change the way they protected themselves and their partner (i.e. condoms vs no condoms)?
- Did their experience with sex education adequately prepare them to be sexually active?
- Was their sex education experience in need of improvement?
- Did they receive any sex education at all?

Any individuals who choose to be sexually active without proper sex education can present a danger to themselves and their community. My study can assist public health officials by making the effects of religious abstinence discourses on sexual practices known through the experiences of participants from Anon church.

Regarding discursive influences, scholars still know little about the impact of premarital abstinence discourses and their effects on the quality of sex education and SHIRA. Research has shown that a lack of sexual health knowledge can contribute to high STI rates (Zhuravleva 2001). In 2009, the Texas legislature removed the health class requirement for high school graduation, taking away the one place many students received their sex education (Wiley et al 2017, 11). In 2013 Texas ranked 3rd for HIV diagnoses with 4,836 cases, and 10th for chlamydial infections with 498.3 per 100,000 rate (CDC 2015, 1). Texas' unintended pregnancy rate was also notably high among teens in 2010: 54 percent of teen pregnancies that year were unplanned,

costing the state an estimated \$2.9 billion (Guttmacher Institute 2017, 1-2). With the removal of the health class requirement for high school graduation from public school curriculums. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how religion might affect sexual discourses, sexual practices and sex education in the state. Relying more on ethnographic research techniques provides in-depth data and improves the understanding of Christian sexuality⁸.

Methods

My research questions address the relationship between Christian abstinence discourses, practices and beliefs about sex including intergenerational differences, the type and quality of sex education, and the overall impact on sexual health. I relied primarily on ethnographic interviews along with participant observation and direct observation to ascertain a greater depth of information.

To scout the San Marcos and Austin area for a population willing to participate in my study, I attended Sunday services at several local churches over a period of a few weeks: denominations included nondenominational, Baptist and Pentecostal. Finally, I selected a church with a younger population that I had randomly attended twice in the summer of 2014. Because I had no pre-existing meaningful ties to the church group, I minimized bias based on previously established relationships. This small nondenominational church in Central Texas, and all study participants, have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Hereafter, the church will be referred to as Anon Church.

Once Anon church's lead pastor Brandon consented to the project, I began to recruit study participants. Participants were self-selected and volunteered their time,

⁸ Physical desire, sexual orientation and sexual expression influenced by some form of Christian religious beliefs and practices.

which could have affected the results. Originally Brandon agreed to let me place informational flyers on the auditorium chairs before Sunday services; however, when the study began he changed his mind and limited my recruitment to bible study groups. Data collection occurred from June-August 2015, when Anon church was only two years old. Presumably, Brandon was still concerned with increasing membership and did not want to hurt recruitment efforts with flyers titled “sexuality study” (see Appendix 1).

Fifteen church members, eight women and seven men, agreed to be interviewed in-depth about their sexual histories and religious backgrounds (see Table 1). Because I wanted to explore generational differences, I interviewed both younger and older members. Ages ranged from eighteen to sixty-three with 73 percent of participants being defined as millennials and 27 percent defined as older generations such as baby boomers. In terms of ethnicity, twelve participants were Caucasian and three were Latinx. Additionally, eight were church leaders who held supervisory positions at Anon and seven were regular church members who just attended services. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Then voice recordings were destroyed after data processing. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to two hours depending on how willing the participant was to be open and communicative.

Participant observation and direct observation were also used to glean more data from bible study groups and a sexuality series called *XOXO: Friends, Flings, Relationship Things*. The series discussed topics such as marriage, dating in a hookup culture, and sex. The three bible study groups I attended were geared towards married couples, young professionals, and college-aged adults. Frequently, the messages in groups were about finding purpose in life and developing a deeper relationship with God.

After I collected the data, content analysis was utilized to determine themes and patterns within interview and observational data. After reading through the interviews, I assigned preliminary codes, entered the interviews into ATLAS.ti, and re-coded them twice more to eliminate extraneous or unrelated data. Once all interviews were coded, I assessed the code list, determined which patterns and themes were meaningful in relation to my initial research questions, and assigned codes to chapter sections and subsections. This analysis generated a foundation for the data described in my thesis.

Regarding study limitations and strengths on a smaller scale, there were a few notable factors. The study was conducted with an n of 15, although generally, qualitative studies have fewer subjects than quantitative research and the interviews were rich in detail. Participants also volunteered so the sample was not as arbitrary as it would have been if I had selected fifteen to twenty subjects at random from the bible study groups. Furthermore, my access to Anon's congregation was limited to members that attended the bible studies instead of having access to anyone who was at Anon on Sundays, which could skew the results in favor of discourses that were already heavily influenced by Anon church leaders. Although this may be true, only interviewing established church members could have provided more clarity in terms of the alternative abstinence discourse, and other discourses as well.

The smaller scale of the study also makes it difficult to determine how far reaching some of the patterns and findings are within the central Texas Christian communities. SHIRA for example was a common experience for my study participants, but further research is required to establish its presence or absence at other church sites in the area. This is valid as well in terms of ideology, sexual expression patterns and how many participants decided to remain abstinent or become

sexually active (discussed in detail in chapter 4). Similarly, proposed solutions to any issues discovered at Anon church may not be viable for other church groups because of differences in demographics, political leanings, location and/or size of the group.

Chapter Layout

Chapter two provides context and background information by taking a close personal look at the people of Anon church and their community values. Chapter three highlights an alternative sexuality discourse I discovered at Anon during the study, its relationship to more traditional abstinence discourses, and how it emerged. Chapter four examines how participants define sex in conjunction with their religious beliefs, and how this shaped their sexual expression. Chapter five details the types of sex education participants received from parents, religious groups and teachers, including gaps in current knowledge. Chapter six summarizes the main discoveries and post-study reflections along with potential applicable solutions to decrease SHIRA in the future.

Table 1. Participation Information

* definitions of virginity are from participants themselves

Name	Age/Sex	Denomination Growing Up	Participation Level	Role at Anon	Definitions of Virginity	Practice(d) Premarital Abstinence
Aaron	28/Male	Assemblies of God	Involved After Drugs	Executive Pastor	Virgin=No Intercourse	Yes
Brandon	34/Male	Christian Church Cooperative Fellowship	Attended Regularly	Lead Pastor	Virgin=No Partnered Orgasm	Yes
Chris	23/Male	Assemblies of God	Involved after	Worship Pastor	Virgin=No Act Where STD Is	Yes
Dani	20/Female	Catholic	Late Starter After 18	Bible Study Leader	Virgin=Pure All Around	Yes
Enrique	40/Male	Catholic	Late Starter After 18	Youth Leader	Virgin=No Intercourse	Yes
Felicia	21/Female	Catholic	Attended Regularly	Member	Virgin=No Acts That Increase Intimacy	No
Gina	18/Female	Nondenominational	Attended Regularly	Member	Virgin=No Intercourse	Yes
Heather	22/Female	Baptist	Attended Regularly	Member	Virgin=Pure All Around	Yes
Isabelle	21/Female	Church of Christ	Late Starter High School	Member	Virgin=Pure All Around	No
Jemma	20/Female	Baptist	Attended Regularly	Member	Virgin=Pure All Around	Yes
Katy	27/Female	Nondenominational	Attended Regularly	Bible Study Leader	Virgin=No Partnered Orgasm	No
Larry	63/Male	Baptist	Attended Regularly	Member	Virgin=No Intercourse	No
Mary	54/Female	Baptist	Attended Regularly	Member	Virgin=No Intercourse	Yes
Nathan	30/Male	Evangelical Frees	Attended Regularly	Accountant	Virgin=No Intercourse	Yes
Oscar	25/Male	Assemblies of God	Attended Regularly	Band Member	Virgin=No Intercourse	No

II. A PORTRAIT OF ANON CHURCH

Suddenly, an alarm sounds. Sleepily, I roll out of bed on Sunday morning and get ready to spend time with my friends and study participants. I drive to the church wondering who will be leading discussion today and what the topic will be. As I walk into the building, I am greeted by the host committee's smiling faces, regardless of it being 9:00am in the morning. They hand me a pamphlet with today's notepaper and a few quick points about the topic "Meant for More." That particular Sunday, the thirty-four-year-old lead pastor Brandon, was talking about the purpose of churches, which was to help people become more like Jesus.

What does that mean? Anon's philosophy revolves around consciously choosing to be the best version of yourself every day, from supporting friends and family to showing empathy and kindness towards diverse groups of people. Anon church members recognize that no one else will ever live a perfect life like Jesus, so they try to be more like him as they welcome others to study his life and follow in his footsteps. They also make an effort to address difficult subjects like sexuality, but improvements could be made for church members in terms of resources, and the frequency of sexuality discussions. To introduce Anon and contextualize my research I will (1) review the demographics, culture, location, (2) discuss ideological positions regarding sexuality, and (3) present some of the leader's career experiences and sexuality advice.

Age, Location and Politics at Anon

My findings are heavily influenced by the demographic makeup and political leanings of Anon church. According to Aaron, the twenty-eight-year-old executive

pastor, “Every church is gonna have its own DNA.” Anon’s ideology or DNA springs from the denomination, composition of the congregation, and location of the church. A few key members moved to the San Marcos/Austin area to start Anon church in 2012, including lead pastor Brandon; Katy, a bible study leader; Nathan the church accountant; and Chris the worship pastor. Quite a few of the original members came from the Assemblies of God (AOG) denomination, yet Anon church is officially nondenominational with traces of AOG beliefs (AOG is a cooperative Pentecostal branch of Christianity). Their tenets include full baptism, communion, and a belief in spirit-led living. Members also believe that every person is important to God because they are made in his image, and the bible was written by men inspired by God. Overall, Anon accepts common nondenominational beliefs such as Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, and the general command to treat others with love.

Equally important in Anon’s composition was the average age of the members and the church’s location. Brandon was only thirty-five years old. At least half of the attendees could be classified as younger, specifically between ten to thirty-five years of age based on appearance (I was not able to formally survey the population as I only had access to bible study members). There were various programs geared toward providing services and activities for children, college students, and young professionals. Several older members attended the church, but they were in the minority. Moreover, Anon is located in the San Marcos/Austin area where the college student population is high with more than thirty thousand active students at Texas State University alone (Blaschke 2013).

In order to understand members’ perceptions of their church community, I asked participants if they viewed Anon as conservative or liberal. Roughly half of the group stated that Anon seemed conservative in terms of being more traditional. In fact,

sin was still part of the leaders' vocabulary. However, the other participants said it felt more liberal than other churches they had attended in the past because it was more willing to address issues such as sexuality.

Anon's Characterizations of Sexuality

Generally speaking, Anon's sexuality discourses seem to have been affected by an accepting atmosphere combined with its location in a politically and socially liberal area of Texas between San Marcos and Austin (Tausanovitch, Chris and Christopher Warshaw 2014, 622), and a youth-oriented mindset. The church's goal was to have at least one to two message series per year that discussed relationships, sex and healthy families. During my study period, Anon held one series devoted specifically to controversial subjects like sex and pornography. They also hosted a sex and dating series for Valentine's Day. Importantly, Anon members welcomed me into their community even though I was researching a sensitive subject, because to them sexuality was an important part of life. They wanted to be a church population that addressed difficult social issues.

Above all, the main message presented by lead pastor Brandon carried both sex-positive⁹ and sex-negative connotations¹⁰:

The message I want to pass down to the church and to children is, sexuality is beautiful, you know, it's awesome. Um, but it can be better than you realize. It can be better than just this great feeling, this great night. It can be about being fully known by this person who will love you for all of eternity. I think there's a lot more to it than just like, don't do that until you get married, until you have a ring on your finger.

Anon focused on the benefits of practicing abstinence and emphasized that young Christians can fully enjoy their lives without having sex before marriage. They taught

⁹ Accepting sex and sexuality as a natural, good part of life. Planned Parenthood, *Glossary*, (Planned Parenthood, 2018), 80.

¹⁰ Believing that sex and sexuality are bad or dangerous. Planned Parenthood, *Glossary*, (Planned Parenthood, 2018), 80.

that God created humans with desire, but sex was created for fully committed relationships like marriage because it bonds people together spiritually and emotionally. Leaders also affirmed the belief that God's grace is omnipresent, hence there is nothing you can do to lose his love.

Brandon saw an increase in open discussions of sexuality as the silver lining to a secularized society. There are more public spaces that have been designated as safe and normative for conversations involving sexual topics. As sex talk became a societal norm in everyday conversations, the shift made it more acceptable for religious leaders to talk about sex because the dangers of addressing a taboo subject were lessened. Consequently, leaders could address difficult issues for people in their community and share their ideas about sexuality. There was a decreased chance of offending everyone in the congregation, or causing a blushing stampede headed for the door. "The church should be talking about a sexual topic if you can find the answer on the internet" (Chris).

Leaders' Training and Service Experiences

In the past, Anon church leaders have had unique experiences during their training. Many have learned that being a leader is humbling and difficult. Executive Pastor Aaron discussed his approach:

There are all different ways to talk about sexuality and relationships. It's a journey, you know? So I think, hopefully, my approach is that I am constantly learning and constantly getting better, and constantly growing. I'm trying to be a resource for the people that God has put in my life, you know? Again, if I feel like I ever get to a place where I have all of the answers, that is probably an unhealthy place to be.

For Aaron, feeling as if he had all the answers was an unhealthy mindset, and he was willing to work towards a higher level of capability. Many church leaders chose to

take the “let’s find the answer together” approach with their mentees to make the search for information a partnership instead of an order.

Forty-year-old youth-group leader Enrique regularly formed partnerships with teen girls at his old church who had become pregnant and needed an advocate or counselor:

Being in the youth ministry, um, that was a huge thing. Me and my wife would meet with parents on a regular basis about bad decisions regarding that. So from that aspect, as far as youth ministry for teenagers, yeah I had a lot of interactions with teen girls that we wanted to talk to that got pregnant. We had to help them through that, communicate to mom and dad cause they didn’t know yet. We were the first ones to know at times. And so we had to walk them through that, and be there for them.

The role of a religious leader is intricate, and as providers of spiritual guidance they are involved in the deeply personal experiences of people’s lives. Enrique noted that he and his wife became voices for teens who were probably scared to divulge their pregnancies to their families, and thus made the situation a little less intimidating.

Leaders also shared personal stories with their mentees in hopes they would learn from someone else’s experiences. Many leaders divulged their dating and sexual histories in order to empathize with their mentee’s situation. They also tried to impart a combination of sexual health information when appropriate and spiritual guidance as well to address emotional needs. Katy, a twenty-seven-year-old bible study leader, tried to be as honest about her background as she could in order to help her friends make the best decision possible for them:

I think being honest about my own experiences with my friends too, what those decisions are, is best. Yeah, honesty is like the best thing. No matter what you’re taking about, whether it’s trying to get someone to stop drinking and doing whatever, if you can talk about a personal experience, whether it’s good or bad, it will help them. It’s kind of like going back to the “why behind the what.” Why do you want to do this? Is it a positive thing and how is it going to help you? A year from now, how is it going to affect you? What about in five years, and in light of who you’ve been, who you are now, and who you want to be, is it a good idea, you know?

Katy and other Anon leaders tried their best to be transparent and talk honestly about their lives. They also encouraged mentees to pray and ask God for guidance before asking another person. Leaders believed young Christians need to know that they're not alone, that church leaders aren't superhuman, and that they also struggled at times with practicing abstinence. Remaining a virgin until marriage is challenging enough in contemporary society; it can seem like an unattainable goal for youth who don't have honest guidance from their spiritual mentors.

To the benefit of Anon church members, some leaders received specific training to counsel and deal with sexuality and dating issues. When Brandon attended bible college for example, he took several classes that talked about sex and dating:

Some of them kind of had ad hoc classes that would talk about dating, relationships and things like that. I don't think it was quite enough when I started at the school. We did do classes on dating and on relationships. I think we could have done more. We kind of ramped it up each year. We did like a dating seminar and would bring in couples that had been married for 40 years and have them talk about their marriage.

Dani, a twenty-year-old bible study leader, also received training through her old home church:

I've been to leadership training through my old church, and training through a ministry I was a part of [at college, but] that training wasn't specifically sexuality. It was more like, we called it heartaches. So when someone had something big, like they were gay or you know, something happened to them, like they were burned by a church and now they don't wanna believe, or they had an eating disorder, we were trained to handle big topics like that. Through that training I have found that I'm very patient and calm whenever people tell me big things.

Research suggests that the occurrence of religious leaders receiving formal training is becoming more widespread. According to Turner and Stayton (2012), many still feel unsure of their ability to provide adequate guidance (485). Organizations like the Center for Sexuality and Religion have been hosting the *Sexuality and Seminary Initiative* workshop since 2008 in an effort to boost leaders' confidence; this event

provides sessions on health and reproduction, sexual identity, intimacy, and many others (Turner and Stayton 2012, 491).

Conclusion

Anon is a unique, small, nondenominational church in a politically and socially liberal area of Central Texas. The majority of their members are younger in the ten to thirty-five age range. Anon leaders recognized that sex, dating, and relationships were common topics, especially among young adults. Therefore, leaders tried to give both head (sex education) and heart knowledge (religious guidance). Leaders like Dani encouraged members to “go to the throne, before they go to the phone.” She stated that praying to God should be the first choice no matter what the situation is; calling a mentor and asking them for advice was a secondary solution. Nevertheless, leaders at Anon didn’t want anyone to feel as if they couldn’t ask an actual person for help, so they did their best to be prepared through accumulated hands-on experience and official training. Collectively, the leaders were a well-trained team who served community members inside and outside of church walls with humility and skill. Overall church members made an effort to create a hopeful, sex-positive environment where everyone felt welcome.

III. EVOLVING PREMARITAL ABSTINENCE DISCOURSES: FROM VIRGINITY TO HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Over time discourses change, including ones that construct premarital abstinence. Virginity discourses date to the emergence of private property and namely the social stratification of societies (Blank 2007, 25). According to Ortner, female purity became functionally and symbolically connected to the honor and status of the family (1978, 19). As “reproductive agents,” women’s social value determined how far her family could move up the social ladder via hypergamy, and sexually pure women had a greater chance of marrying upwards (31). Christianity and its various sects eventually incorporated premarital abstinence and produced sex-negative discourses focused on sin and hell as primary reasons for abstaining:

In fact, the basic formulator of western Christian attitudes was St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.), who was converted from Manicheanism while he was undergoing a crisis about his own inability to control his sexual desires...sexual lust, he argued, was an inevitable aftermath of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden...Augustine concluded that celibacy was the highest good, that intercourse in itself was an animal lust, but in marriage, and only in marriage, was it justified because of the need for procreation...penance in the medieval Church came to be regarded as a healing medicine for the soul...in the process, of course, a conscience about sexual sin would develop. [Bullough 1977, 185-187]

This consciousness of sexual sin became an established component of traditional abstinence discourses and the transformative nature of certain sexual acts was strengthened. Social movements promoted chastity in the Middle Ages (Blank 2007, 149) and the enforcement of celibacy in ecclesiastical church courts continued until secularization movements spread over time (Karras 2011, 1011).

The sexual revolution of the 1960s played a significant role in the reconstruction of sexuality discourses, and the birth control pill was instrumental in revolutionizing women’s sexuality. Women finally had the power to disentangle pregnancy from sex “literally and symbolically” (Blank 2007, 229). As definitions of

sexuality evolved outside of church walls, there were bound to be changes within them as well. “One might conclude that religion’s ability to sustain traditional beliefs about premarital sex weakened. Such a conclusion would be consistent with most theories of secularization” (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997, 1072). Accurately, the influence of many Christian sects has weakened on a societal level, yet for many, including my study participants, religious discourses are still very compelling.

In particular, study participants at Anon promoted alternative abstinence discourses and often used sex-positive language. Overall, there seemed to be a shift away from language that generated guilt and shame and a move towards open discussions to engage church members. Study participants discussed virginity as a pathway or tool for creating healthy relationships. Nevertheless, this alternative focal point still supported premarital abstinence, so where did this newfound discourse originate and why? Church leaders who delivered sexuality messages from the church’s stage included sexual sin discourses in their speech, however there was just as great an emphasis on healthy relationships as well. This chapter will examine the differences between traditional abstinence discourses and the alternative healthy relationship discourse present at Anon church overall.

Church Leaders’ Dynamic Teaching Techniques

Over time, methods used by church leaders to address difficult topics have changed. A few participants commented on the current state of Christian churches and how pastors addressed sexuality. Things have evolved over the last twenty years because even “10 years ago pastors [were saying] ‘just don’t have sex’” (Chris). To enumerate, older practices such as promoting and maintaining pastoral silence about sexuality transformed to the standard “just don’t do it” discourses. Study participants

from older generations who grew up attending church failed to receive any formal sermons, yet everyone knew premarital sex was off limits. Therefore, participants said everyone hid any activity from their families and social networks. Mary, a fifty-four-year-old church member, didn't remember talking about sexuality in church at all. Larry, a sixty-three-year-old church member, also experienced a similar silence and attributed the lack of communication to sexuality's taboo classification. However, today many Christian churches recognize that silence or sexuality platitudes are not effective messages (Turner and Stayton 2012) and are evolving their methods of operation.

Chris further professed that some Christian churches have changed the way they present information. Based on personal experience, he believed that interactions between leaders and members had shifted from relying on a lecture format to including interactive discussions. Granted, Sunday sermons still frequently utilized call and response dynamics; however, these modern sermons engaged the audience more and bible studies have become valuable places to hold conversations about premarital sex.

It seems like it's more now "okay here's why this can set you up to win and why life can be better if love is this way." It feels like it's more of a discussion than just saying "well don't have sex and wait until you're married." You know? [Chris]

Instead of the church leader telling people how and when to express their sexuality with no response from the audience, an exchange of ideas occurs. While most views still support premarital chastity, members have a chance to question the status quo.

Healthy Relationship Goals and Sex-Positive Language

For centuries, traditional abstinence discourses have been prominent. Many Christians from various sects probably heard the phrase *sex is bad before marriage* as

they grew up. Over time, the *before marriage* segment dropped away and the idea that remained was *sex is bad*. Presently, lead pastor Brandon pointed out the discrepancy: “it’s taught that it’s bad and it’s wrong outside the context of marriage, but then something magical happens when you get married, and all of a sudden it’s not bad and wrong, you know?” Sex is a “dense transfer point for power relations” (Focault 1978, 103) because the transformative influence of engaging in a specific sexual act can affect an individual’s self-perception, status in social groups and society at large.

Fourteen out of fifteen participants spoke about sexuality by using more sex-positive language such as “sexuality is beautiful” (Brandon). As aforementioned, I predicted that the church’s political leaning and location in Texas would be reflected more in liberal language and ideology, and this supposition was supported by study results. According to Aaron, the goal was not virginity, it was about creating and maintaining healthy relationships.

All things considered, what is a healthy relationship? Discourses about healthy relationships have become part of our social psyche as evidenced by public health campaigns: a healthy relationship is defined as one that includes mutual respect, safe communication, equality and consent, the right to privacy with boundaries, and trust (NDVH 2013, 1). Study participants specifically defined a healthy relationship as one that did not cause scars or emotional baggage. They believed the best way to avoid burdensome emotions was abstinence, but preserving virginity was not the pinnacle of accomplishment. Aaron used a mixture of negative and positive language to describe the issue:

Sexuality cuts deeper and it takes longer to heal, and there are scars from the residue. That is why it’s so important. Again when you view [sex] as something that helps create intimacy, real intimacy like on a personal, emotional, spiritual kind of level...when you view it like that it’s kind of like, I have a piece of tape and I put it on the table then I ripped it off, and I put it on the table then I ripped it off. The more you do that the more that tape loses

its ability to do what it was designed to do. So in the end when you finally do find that person that you want to spend the rest of your life with, and you want to have that relationship, all of a sudden you walked in with this baggage you didn't even realize that you had.

Aaron's views on intimacy were ubiquitous among the other participants. Participants also focused on the best way to treat romantic partners. However, the tape example, which has been used in abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) sex education programs, was not widespread in the study. While he simply intended to explain how intimacy can potentially be difficult to achieve with emotional baggage, his statement implied that those who choose to be sexually active before marriage become worn-out and defective. Other participants even suggested that premarital sex made people "lose a part of their soul." However, the new alternative discourse focused on character and relationships instead of sexual purity. For the most part, abstinence was represented as functional, not sacred.

Anon members also incorporated economic discourses. They presented abstinence as an investment not a sacrifice. Waiting to have sex until marriage can build up equity in the relationship and help prevent either partner from leaving with emotional hindrances. When partners get married, they can cash in their equity and reap the rewards of their investment like unobstructed intimacy, and a lack of previous issues created from being sexually active before the wedding. Viewing abstinence through this lens could place a more favorable spin on denying physical pleasure.

In addition, sexual pleasure and desire were represented as a natural aspect of humanity; people would not go to hell for experiencing feelings that were woven into their biological makeup. According to Chris:

I think counseling anyone, I would totally let them know [urges are] normal. I mean, God is the one that created your body, so if we believe that, he's not

shocked by your urges. You know what I mean, it's not like "oh my God you are going to Hell for that." It's just like natural, you know what I mean?

Chris celebrated God's gift instead of characterizing sexual desire as unclean. No one should feel ashamed of, or be shamed for, his or her body's natural functions.

Portraying desire as a lovely aspect of human nature facilitates the breakdown of taboos against discussing sexuality in church.

Another positive viewpoint came from a few Anon members like Dani, Jemma, and Aaron. Both Jemma and Aaron were engaged to people who had been sexually active. When I discussed an ideal spouse with Dani she had this to say: "I just want to wait, and I hope that whoever I marry waited for me, but if they don't that's something we'll just have to get through together. It's not a deal breaker." Dani implied that potential issues might arise from a partner having had sex in the past, but for her that does not automatically make a man unworthy to be her spouse. These three participants recognized that premarital sex does not diminish someone's value or capabilities.

All things considered, my research shows that most study participants at Anon are making an effort to integrate positive ideology into sexuality discussions. During the study, vocabulary like sin was only noted once during the formal sermon, never in any interviews. In comparison, participants discussed sexual activity by referencing healthy relationships and/or the most beneficial ways to date before marriage in all fifteen of the interviews. Sexual desire was also portrayed as natural for Christians. This trend at Anon could exist within other churches in Central Texas, however more research at other locations would be required to verify that theory.

Sex is Great But We Will Still Shame You

Although positive differences in language and attitudes concerning sexuality were found at Anon, participants still reported feeling shame and guilt, primarily stemming from childhood. The majority of the damage was self-inflicted, which is symptomatic of biopower's continued hold on individuals; the manufacture of self-regulating, useful bodies churns out humans who internalize societal expectations and discipline themselves (Foucault 1978). As a result, study participants felt compelled to remain sexually pure by institutionalized abstinence discourses, leading to their self-induced feelings of shame.

In the U.S., expectations surrounding sexual expression have evolved over time. Before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, biopower's influence throughout the government and society encouraged citizens to regulate their sexual practices in favor of premarital abstinence via purity discourses. In fact, the *Journals of the Continental Congress* in 1778 required soldiers to pay for their own STI treatments (Blain 1778) to demonstrate disapproval of extramarital sexual activity (this also could have been a matter of cost). Public conversations about sexuality placed emphasis on premarital abstinence as well (Huber and Firmin 2014, 28), causing individuals to internalize purity discourses and self-regulate their sexual activity to optimize the species body with less unplanned pregnancies and STI's. After the sexual revolution and the arrival of birth control (Huber and Firmin 2014, 36), discourses that addressed premarital sex gradually became more accepting in mainstream society over time (as is evidenced by media portrayals of premarital sex as normative) and possibly within multiple Christian organizations (as Anon's alternative discourse demonstrates). However, public health and religious institutions still influence individuals in favor of

abstinence. Thus, some of my study participants experienced internalized guilt and shame regarding sexuality.

Executive pastor Aaron shared his view on what influences people's decisions in relationships:

You know it's real life [and] people are trying to navigate it, and I think that's why you're, why it's so important to have a morality compass. What is governing your view on morality, because that's going to speak to the way that you love. A lot of people don't have a biblical viewpoint, and so that has consequences.

From Aaron's perspective, people sans biblical teachings are making decisions that will have consequences. This suggests that people who do not use the bible for guidance in relationships are loving people the wrong way; hence, any negative occurrences in the relationship are immediately attributed to a lack of Christian beliefs. In 1881, Hodge and Warfield fought against the liberalization of churches and declared the bible to be infallible and Jesus to be the only path to salvation, which spawned groups of conservative fundamentalists (Luhmann 2012, 364). These lingering representations of scripture as literal words from God inspired many Christians like Aaron to believe that there was only one way to live a morally sound lifestyle.

Lead Pastor Brandon also held a similar perspective: "Sometimes people have sex because that's the best [way] they can come up with" or it is their most valued way to express love. According to Meston and Buss (2009, 85), women stated that the realization of being in love and wanting to express how they felt for their partner were two main reasons for having sex. Whether people are using love to justify sex or as an expression of heightened feelings for their partner, many are willing to engage in sexual activity before marriage. Brandon's viewpoint encourages a less judgmental

attitude, yet his approach still allows for the stigmatization of sexually active individuals.

During the XOXO series that discussed sex and dating, Aaron, Brandon and his wife Jessica referred to premarital sex as sin. The message that sex is simultaneously a gift from God within marriage and a sin outside of marriage carries positive and negative undertones. Notably, this series was one of the few instances where speakers used ‘sin’ in reference to unapproved sexual acts, which is telling of how much the group might be moving away from traditional premarital abstinence discourses.

In relation to negative feelings, ten out of fifteen participants shared stories about their experiences. Aaron for example, mentioned that people could feel shamed by hearing a premarital abstinence message at church if they had been sexually active. Unsurprisingly, gossip in any community is common (Wert and Salovey 2004), thus seeing a physically affectionate couple can lead people to make assumptions. Because of this, Chris was afraid of what other people would think, even though personally he had no problem with public displays of affection (PDA):

I think people are weird about PDA. I’m not making out in public or something, but just being normal about showing affection to someone. I think sometimes churches are really weird about that. Like overly weird. I don’t think I’ve seen that really [manifest] in my life personally. I think about it internally. I have that fear for no good reason. Like when I’m dating someone are they gonna think I’m weird if I’m holding her hand or give her a kiss? I don’t really like that I have that mindgame.

As a leader, he was especially conscious of how he presented himself to the church community. Hence, Chris feared being labeled as too affectionate (too sexual) although no one had ever rebuked him for inappropriate behavior. He referred to his predicament as a mindgame, suggesting that discourses shaped his thoughts and actions.

Abstinence discourses also shaped how Dani's best friend Kayla felt about her past sexual activity.

One of my very best friends did have sex before marriage and she is one of the best Christians that I know. I know that she is dreading the day when she meets her husband and has to have the conversation with him that she didn't save herself for him. And, um, I just see the pain that she goes through when she thinks about that, and she isn't in a relationship, but she's already heartbroken about it and, so, my heart breaks for her.

I would say that every person I've known has done something "shame-worthy." I guess they weren't shamed by outsiders, but shamed themselves, because they maybe knew better or just like, had better plans for themselves and were disappointed that they slipped up. And like I said, my best friend who that happened to, she had sex. No one ever judged her that I know of. I never judged her but she, it's something that she has to live with forever and if anyone shames her it's herself, so that happens to everyone that I know I think.

According to Dani, no one shamed Kayla for having sex, however she still felt stigmatized:

No one wants to be stigmatized and suffer the oppression that accompanies being labeled as inferior to others. Stigma is often invisible unless one discloses one's condition...the natural impulse for most people is to hide a stigmatized identity if at all possible, thereby avoiding disapproval and marginalization. [Bergart 2004, 35]

Kayla's negative self-perception was primarily self-inflicted; immersed in abstinence discourses, she determined that her behavior was morally wrong.

As a result, Kayla's feelings of hidden stigma caused her to leave Anon church for a short time because she feared what other members might say if they found out. Sex-positive language at Anon mediates traditional negative portrayals of sexuality, however church leaders still advocate abstaining from sex until marriage. Consequently, when someone does have sex they still experience waves of guilt. She eventually returned to Anon and is currently an active member again.

Focusing On Healthy Goals Still Encourages Abstinence

In light of shame-inducing discourses, participants' frequent use of sex-positive language demonstrates a significant transformation of traditional messages. Interviewees focused on the best methods to establish and maintain healthy relationships, yet this emerging discourse still reinforced more traditional ones focused on chastity.

In fact, participants like Dani frequently talked about abstinence as good. She believed that it increased the level of intimacy she would have with her future spouse:

How cool would it be for two people who saved themselves for each other to say that they only had sex with one person for their entire lives? I think that's the coolest, most intimate loving thing ever to be able to say that.

As church leaders and members focus on intimacy as the goal, they simultaneously advocate for premarital abstinence in the process.

Dani's distinct relationship with her parents contributed to her support of abstinence. Her mother became pregnant at a young age, resulting in an early marriage. When Dani was still young, her parents decided to separate. Today, she feels that if her parents had waited to get pregnant and marry, they might still be together. For these reasons, Dani's parents both initiated open conversations about sexuality because they wanted to keep her from experiencing the same challenges:

Personally, it's important to me, because even though I loved my parents it was hard not to grow up in the same home with both of them, and I think a lot of it is just because they were too young. And so it's important to me that I wait for the right person so I can raise my kids in a loving home with my husband.

Dani attributed her support of abstinence to her parents' experiences with sexuality and her Christian beliefs. Her focus on having a healthy marriage would still be accomplished through abstinence practices.

One of the more intriguing reasons participants gave for waiting until marriage was to prevent comparing sexual experiences with past partners. For many people who have had multiple sexual relationships a common question is eventually addressed in the new relationship: am I the best [lover] you ever had (Carlson and Sperry 1999, 165)? This normative question could spawn discontent and resentment if answered honestly. With this aspect of relationships in mind, a lack of sexual experience before marriage can reduce tension and may lower the probability of dissatisfaction regarding sexual expectations.

Chris also stated that sexual activity in a relationship could prevent partners from connecting through meaningful conversation. In other words, there are a variety of bonding tools humans can use to increase intimacy. When sexual activity is an option, couples can choose that over participating in deep conversation. Chris believed that communication through language held more value for a newer couple, while physical intimacy could contribute to making a relationship superficial. Representing early sexual activity as a cause for less intimate relationships supports premarital abstinence as well.

Where and Why Did The New Healthy Goals Discourse Originate?

One could say the alternative discourse might have emerged because mainstream society has become increasingly secularized, and some Christian sects levels of influence have eroded to a certain degree. Christianity's pull is still evident in politics, as is seen in the widespread presence of sex education programs that preference abstinence messages in Texas (Wiley et al 2017, 7, 34). "Texas is a location in which these complicated relationships among religion, race and ethnicity, and politics repeatedly [comes] into sharp relief" (Wuthnow 2014, 22). On the other

hand, while President Obama was in office he pushed for a reduction in funding of abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs because of their ineffectiveness (Papisova 2016:1), and gay couples recently earned the right to marry legally in August 2015. Contemporary policy changes like these could be indicative of Christianity's diminishing power over society's sexual constructs. A shift towards sexually-affirming language among participants at Anon might also reflect changes within the congregation, and possibly other nondenominational churches in the Central Texas area.

Although I was not able to ask about this shift, it might also have occurred subconsciously through leaders' attempts to recruit youth who have grown up in a highly secular world where casual sex is increasingly normalized. Anon discourses conveyed that you could be fully alive without premarital sex, that sex was a gift from God, and that people should strive for healthy relationships, not virginity per se; these messages emphasized sexuality as a wonderful phenomenon instead of something to be suppressed and feared. One of Anon's slogans is "everyone is welcome; nobody is perfect; anything is possible." They were accepting of others and aspired to reflect God's love to everyone who walked through their doors. Therefore, church leaders might have purposefully disseminated less judgmental messages by avoiding language representative of older Christian ideology that focused on sin and the consequences of hell.

Given these points, Anon's mix of conservatism and liberalism, in combination with their youth-centered point of view made an impact on how participants approached difficult topics. The church is also located near Austin, which is the most liberal city in the state (Tausanovitch, Chris and Christopher Warshaw 2014, 622). A more positive view of sexuality could have come from their youthful

pastors and congregation. However, the continuing inclusion of sin might stem from conservative influences through Christianity's stronghold in Texas, the most influential state in the Bible Belt (Wuthnow 2014). Dual sources of influence have definitely affected how participants described and/or perceived sexuality.

Conclusion

In essence, church leaders' use of "sin" in the sexuality series was reminiscent of traditional discourses that assimilated the concept of premarital abstinence from pre-Christian social laws (Blank 2007, 25). This overvaluation of sexual purity continued for centuries until it was quelled by recent secularization movements in the 1960s (229). Even so, certain sexual acts like intercourse remain imbued with metamorphic qualities and abstinence discourses have remained highly persuasive to Christians like my study participants. We still see remnants of those early, sex-negative constructions of sexuality at Anon church today. As a result, some study participants experienced guilt and shame related to their choices of sexual expression.

Despite the original depictions, study participants from Anon framed sexuality in a chiefly positive way during research interviews when they were able to express their personal convictions; they utilized a sexually-affirming, alternative abstinence discourse focused on healthy relationships. According to participants, desire was natural and the main goal of any Christian in a relationship was to create less emotional baggage for their partner, so both parties could have healthy, long term relationships in the future. This shift could have been a deliberate attempt by leaders to make Christian ideology and its practices more acceptable to youth from secular backgrounds. Participants also recognized an overall shift from closed discussions to a varied approach in engaging church members. Yet Anon could have been

unintentionally affected by the youthfulness of the congregation, and political community values as well. Therefore, abstinence discourses at Anon have transformed, but their purpose and side effects have remained the same. They still influence participants' sexual choices through religiously institutionalized practices and dialogues concerning premarital sex and its consequences.

IV. DEFINITIONS AND PRACTICES OF SEXUALITY THROUGH SPIRITUAL EYES

An important question has baffled religious leaders for ages, as well as the general public: what is sex? During the early 18th century, political, medical and economic influences spurred on the formation of more discourses about sex (Foucault 1978, 23), enhancing the need to control sexual constructs through the dispersal of sanctioned public discourses (25).

In the 19th century sex was medicalized as science and public health institutions became more powerful than custom and religion in society (Cacchioni 2015: 11). Medical experts began delving into areas of study formerly dominated by religious authorities such as alcohol, drugs, criminality and sex (Hard and Wellings 2002, 896). Doctor William Acton for instance, invented spermatorrhoea, a new medical condition that afflicted young men and boys caused by masturbation: symptoms included haggard facial features, laziness and impotence (Hard and Wellings 2002, 896). Doctors utilized medical diagnoses to influence the sexual behavior of the masses. This was reflective of the established practice of “representing illness as a punishment for sin” (Hard and Wellings 2002, 896). This was an explicit demonstration of biopower.

Definitions and perspectives of sex are affected by many factors such as historical context, cultural background, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, politics and more [Blank, Hanne 2007; Donnan and Magowan 2010; Dotson-Blake, Knox, and Zusman 2012]. In recent years, scholars such as Hanne Blank (2007) have continued to analyze meanings of sex: “when we talk about sexual acts, we do so within complicated frameworks of understanding that prioritize and value some kinds of sex, demonize others, and may even ignore a few” (18). Oscar, a

study participant, mentioned a lack of biblical approval or disapproval of oral sex, which has public health ramifications.

At the present time, medical and other institutions still possess a great deal of sway over constructions of sex and sexuality. In fact, both abstinent and sexually active participants included fragments of healthy relationship discourses in their sexual practices and beliefs. As Ortner (2006) would say, most individuals exerted agency, or personal power and influence, to accept abstinence discourses, while others tweaked and implemented novel forms of sexual expression that could transform the normative sexuality practices at Anon over time.

Although the increasing sexualization of U.S. society affected not only young heterosexual women but same-sex relations as well...what is most striking about the sexual revolution is its breaking down of sexual restrictions on heterosexual interaction and heterosexual relations outside of marriage. [Rupp 1989: 289-290]

An important question is: how does a personal definition of a sexual act affect the level of experienced guilt and shame? Restrictions and public sanctions on premarital sex have decreased. Therefore, if an individual (whether they are Christian or not) places no importance on the sexual act, would the ability to have healthy relationships still be negatively affected? Definitions of sexuality are powerful and fluid. Despite the medicalization of sexuality, abstinence discourses have continued to influence sex and sexuality practices in the U.S. especially in relation to youth (Gresle'-Favier 2010). As a result, the sexuality discourses found at Anon church today are an amalgamation of both medical and religious ideas.

Results

Today in the U.S. among secular communities, sex generally denotes intercourse, but there is still no accepted consensus among scholars (Donnan and

Magowan 2010, 3), or the general public for that matter. “Potentially reproductive sex is real in a way that nonreproductive sexual acts cannot be” (Blank 2007, 19). Sanders et al (2010) surveyed residents across Indiana (ages 18-96) and discovered that 94 percent considered penile-vaginal intercourse sex, while numbers dropped to 71-72 percent for oral sex (2). Yet for Christians who practice premarital abstinence the answer can be more complicated.

During interviews, I asked participants how they characterized sex, or how they characterize virginity (see Appendix 2) and the idea of secondary virginity¹¹ was mentioned as well. Because participants did not strictly distinguish sex and virginity, these are discussed somewhat interchangeably in the following chapter.

Regarding approaches to categorizing sexual acts, two opposing perspectives emerged: the inclusive and exclusive frames of reference. Participants who were more likely to define a sexual act as a validated form of sex were inclusive. Everything from oral sex to touching a partner’s genitals counted as long as orgasm was reached, so a broader spectrum of acts could be placed in the sex category. However, the opposite was true for the exclusive frame of reference: many sexual acts that would commonly be defined as sex were not included in this category. Even sexual intercourse that was usually legitimized might not be a valid form of sex if contraception was used.

Another key finding surfaced as well: defining sexual intercourse as the marker of virginity was gendered. Out of the seven participants who accepted intercourse as the boundary, the majority were male (see Table 1). Consequently, males had a more exclusive perspective indicating a lower probability of classifying

¹¹ You can regain your spiritual and emotional purity by pledging abstinence until marriage, no matter what your sexual history (became popular in the mid-1980s among conservative Christian groups). Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, Seal Press, 2010), 34.

other sexual acts as sex. In contrast, out of the eight participants who did classify other sexual acts as sex, the majority were female (see Table 1). In summary, males defined sex more exclusively, whereas females defined sex more inclusively.

My finding (males exclusive vs females inclusive) is contrary to some of the established literature. A recent secular study at Southeastern university found that 62 percent of participants believed oral sex did not “count” as sex: of that 62 percent, 76 percent were female and 25 percent were male (Dotson-Blake, Knox and Zusman 2012, 7). Females were more exclusive and males more inclusive in this secular study. This seems reflective of virginity still holding social capital for females, so they may not want to attribute as much significance to oral sex as intercourse, which would allow them to be more sexually active without changing their sexual status. However, males still gain more social capital as they gain sexual experience. Therefore, more males might be willing to classify oral sex as sex. My results in contrast, show that the opposite phenomenon is happening among participants from Anon church: most males defined sex as just intercourse while most females included many other sexual acts. Are religious abstinence discourses affecting definitions of sexuality and prompting males to value virginity more? Are females still valuing virginity and increasing the strictness of their definitions because of religious beliefs?

Table 2. Definitions of Virginity: What Counts as Sex?

Males	Majority Exclusive	Females	Majority Inclusive
Aaron	No intercourse.	Dani	No sexual activity with partner.
Brandon	No partnered orgasms.	Felicia	No sexual activity that could cause intimacy.
Chris	No sexual activity that could spread STIs.	Gina	No intercourse.
Enrique	No intercourse.	Heather	No sexual activity with partner.
Larry	No intercourse.	Isabelle	No sexual activity with partner.
Nathan	No intercourse.	Jemma	No sexual activity with partner.
Oscar	No intercourse.	Katy	No partnered orgasms.
		Mary	No intercourse.

*The majority of the male study participants (5 of 7) believed that virginity is maintained by not having sexual intercourse, and that intercourse is the act that counts as sex. The majority of the females (6 of 8) believed virginity is maintained by remaining completely sexually abstinent, and that many sexual acts can count as sex.

Inclusive Definitions of Sex

To begin, 47 percent of participants (the majority of which were female) represented sex using a blanket approach: most sexual acts counted, therefore managing virginity was more difficult and restrictive in terms of sexual expression. Dani stated that she would “define virginity as being sexually pure all around. Like, like I guess dictionary definition, like not having sex in any form or fashion including oral and all that other weird stuff that I don’t know about.” Dani believed any form of sex led to impurity, so in her relationships she completely avoided sexual activity with her partners. Heather also believed in complete sexual abstinence: “I’d say virginity is abstaining from any type of sexual activities, so whether that would be intercourse, sexual intercourse or just like oral.” Chris stated that a wide range of sexual behaviors count as sex:

OK, I think it’s funny because I’ve been in certain settings where they will have a good Q & A, and the pastor or someone else will say oral sex doesn’t count as sex. So to me, I’m more on the conservative side I guess on this. I would say like, oral sex is sex for sure. If you can get an STD from it, it is definitely sex. (laughs). And yeah. So I mean to me, I think anything like that would be, would be considered sex to me.

Chris characterized any sexual activity in terms of the ability to contract, or spread an STI, so for him oral sex counted despite his previous pastor classifying it differently. Excluding oral sex could cause people to make riskier choices, which has implications for public health.

Jemma and Brandon focused on the physical aspects of sexual purity and what changes occur in the body during sex:

But I think virginity to me would I guess be on the physical end. It obviously would be a man or a woman who is pure and who is untouched sexually I guess because I think that there – I mean there's – this world is crazy. There is so many different weird ways that you could like have sex. [Jemma]

I would say as simply as possible in my view, any form of sex, whether that's oral or manual or anything like that, I think to me is sex. I think that's most simply how I'd define it. At climax, at orgasm there are chemicals released in the brain that are going to make connections, that are going to wire us in a certain way. So I think that's the easiest line to draw, cause that's when most things are happening. So that's probably the easiest way I would define that. [Brandon]

For Brandon, any sexual activity with another person that involved reaching orgasm was a form of sex because of the chemicals released in the brain, like endorphins (Rokade, P.B. 2011, 436), which create feelings of attachment. In addition, the potential for two people to become emotionally connected exists and Brandon believed that developing connections with someone sans marriage would be harmful to a future relationship with a spouse, even though penetration might not occur. Jemma agreed for the most part. She supported avoiding all sexual acts whether the possibility of an orgasm was present or not.

Exclusive Definitions of Sex

On the contrary, 53 percent of participants (the majority of which were male) had very limited or exclusive definitions of sex. As an illustration, Nathan, the thirty-

year-old church accountant, agreed that sex was penile-vaginal intercourse (the dominant secular definition for sex (Planned Parenthood 2017, 2): “I would define virginity, kind of mostly in terms of a physical act of sex” (Nathan). This widely accepted idea of intercourse serving as the boundary between virginity and non-virginity is common inside churches including Anon, where seven out of fifteen participants held this belief. Interestingly, the exclusive perspective negates some sexual acts as valid forms of sex. As a matter of fact, the meaning of oral sex has been debated everywhere from college campuses to churches (Uecker, Angotti and Regnerus 2008).

Participants like Oscar, a 25-year-old member of the worship band, do not think oral sex counts as sex because it is not mentioned in the bible. “Biblically I guess as far as what it actually is... [the bible] doesn't talk about oral sex. If I had oral sex, I would still consider myself a virgin. It's weird but it is what it is.” Because there are no specific verses regarding oral sex, it allows for personal interpretation and the exclusion of this act.

In fact, Oscar went so far as to report that some Christians believe that only procreative acts counted as sex, thus excluding sexual intercourse with condoms. To clarify:

Some people call sex just like the reproductive part, and if you're using a condom then it's not really sex. I've heard all sorts of things. Some people believe that the reproductive act is the only act where it's sex. So, if you can't have a baby then it's not sex. So that would rule out a lot of things including intercourse with a condom.

These differing perspectives must also be acknowledged in order to create effective sex education content.

The concept of being a “born again virgin,” or claiming secondary virginity, was also mentioned. Dani shared her outlook:

Um, I think that you can reclaim your virginity. I do believe that. I believe that if you've had sex you can be, for lack of a better term, be a born-again virgin and decide you wanna take back your life and abstain from then on. I believe that is ok. That is not me (chuckle) because I'm still a virgin.

This message is hopeful for Anon church members who want to practice abstinence but previously failed to stay celibate until marriage: someone could have had sex but still be defined as a virgin. However, the phrase “taking back your life” implies that sexually active people are inherently less valued and have less meaningful lives and Dani also purposefully separated herself from sexually active individuals. While she labeled herself as “traditionally pure,” other sexually active persons were placed in another category. Her clear preference for traditional virginity imposes stigma on anyone who has been sexually active, effectively “othering” them into a lower status from her perspective.

Differing Approaches to Managing Premarital Sex and Fostering Emotional Health

In total, 73 percent of study participants supported the idea of premarital abstinence with their own personal interpretations and reasons why celibacy was positive. Ten out of fifteen participants (67 percent) considered themselves virgins or were virgins at marriage. They chose to accept institutionalized Christian sexuality discourses because they were opposed to sharing a deep commitment like sex with multiple partners who would not become their spouses.

Participants at Anon also elaborated on the purpose of sex. In particular, sex was represented primarily as a bonding experience that creates emotional intimacy and should only happen between spouses: “The healthiest context for a sexual relationship is within marriage. The reason I believe that is because that's the person you should be fully known by and be fully trusting with” (Brandon). Brandon portrayed sex as a tool for heightening intimacy within marriage. Along with other

participants, he believed that because people fully trust spouses and can get to know them on a deeper level, sex should not be used in any other context. Aaron agreed:

Sex is about becoming one, so sexuality, the way they approach it is that it has this...it is meant to be this adhesive in a relationship to keep you close together, to help make two into one and have an intimate relationship.

Another participant went so far as to call premarital sex emotionally abusive.

Jemma, a twenty-year-old church member asserted the following:

When you have sex outside of marriage it is completely one hundred percent selfish. And you are just fulfilling your own desires. I want this so I'm going to do this. And it's abusing the other person and you may not even know it. You're abusing them emotionally. And you don't even know you're destroying them.

Some participants like Katy and Oscar said they experienced emotional distress after having premarital sex or felt they had made a mistake. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between religious sexuality discourses that promote premarital sex as immoral and perceptions of emotional abuse.

Study participants deployed specific and varied strategies to remain virgins. Abstinence was expected in dating relationships for five out of fifteen participants, so there were no formal, face-to-face conversations about what level of physical affection was appropriate. However, ten out of fifteen actively discussed the issue of abstinence with their partners and which sexual acts were acceptable. Chris advocated for open communication:

If you're attracted to someone, it's going to be hard to set boundaries. But I think, I had that conversation with a couple of the girls I dated. And it's an awkward one. It's an awkward one to start, and it's an awkward one to have to establish your thoughts on sexuality and stuff like that. I do think as the man, I think we are actually more, we need to be the one that starts the conversation more. I think we don't want to, so it makes it a little bit harder. But I have found that if I initiate then the girl usually reciprocates. (Laughs) Whether that's for better or for worse, and yeah so that has been some of those conversations. They're never easy, but it does make the relationship stronger.

Not only did Chris acknowledge that conversations about sexuality strengthen the relationship, he also prompted males to be more proactive in beginning the dialogue. For centuries, the responsibility for establishing sexual boundaries has rested on the female partner in relationships, since a woman's morality, ethics and societal value have been inextricably linked to the degree of her sexual purity (Ortner 1978).

Additionally, Chris highlighted the protective practice of explicitly setting guidelines:

I think setting boundaries early on, like the time you are going to leave, so you don't stay somewhere too late or overnight, is important. It is all about pre-choice choices. What are your boundaries before you get into the moment?

In other words, having a game plan in place before going on a date makes maintaining boundaries easier.

Chris' pre-choice choices concept is the first key component of an effective abstinence-plus sex education program¹² known as *It's Your Game: Keep It Real* (University of Texas Research Prevention Center 2015). This evidence-based middle school program teaches youth how to select sexual boundaries before they enter relationships, detect potential threats that heighten the probability of crossing established barriers (like unsupervised house parties with alcohol), and protect or maintain their boundaries as well. Students who participated were less likely to have sex by their freshman year in high school and it increased condom usage among sexually active youth (Wiley et al 2017, 37). Arguably, pre-selecting physical boundaries is an important component of healthy self-management.

Another unique concept addressed treating a partner with the utmost care, because he or she could potentially be someone else's future spouse.

This is going to sound a bit extreme, but the way that I have always come to think about it, is when you are in a dating relationship, until you are married, that person you are dating is eventually going to be someone else's spouse. So

¹² Programs which include information about contraception and condoms in the context of strong abstinence messages. Advocates For Youth, *Sex Education Programs: Definitions & Point-by-Point Comparison*, (Advocates For Youth, 2008), 1.

the best way you can love that person is by honoring them, respecting them, and sometimes that means waiting, you know what I mean? [Aaron]

Church members like Aaron wanted to facilitate healthy relationship practices to avoid potential emotional baggage. Therefore, abstinence is the validated behavior.

To be clear, no one explicitly stated that dating sans sexual activity was a guarantee of a baggage-free relationship, however they consistently emphasized the decreased probability of negative side effects.

Interestingly enough, Brandon advocated for deepening desire and expressing it in the approved context of marriage. He believed that Christians who struggle with maintaining premarital abstinence can be cut off from desire because of prohibited expression. “I think the end result [of struggling] is being cut off from desire, and I think desire is put there by God. I think we need to deepen our desire and realize there’s a proper context for that.” Deepening desire could be a favorable experience after marriage, but if Christians are expected to delay sexual activity until marriage, increasing desire while attempting to stay abstinent seems counterproductive. Still, planning ahead can help many people manage their dating lives. “For someone trying to fight the temptation, I think a huge part of it is pre-choice choices. For example, if going to that place always leads to “X”, then maybe making the choice to not go there is the best choice” (Brandon). Overall, the end goal was to support abstinence and prioritize what they perceived as God’s wants more than their own.

According to Foucault, sexual practices like abstinence are influenced by several different sources: “we are dealing less with a discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions” (Foucault 1978, 33). A range of discourses are reflected in participants’ varying explanations for practicing abstinence. Premarital purity discourses from religious and political institutions encourage state-sanctioned forms

of marriage and family that could potentially keep youth from contracting STIs, which ultimately produces healthy, productive bodies.

Desire is Natural and Sex is Great for Committed Relationships So Why Wait?

Not all of the study participants chose to self-manage their bodies in favor of abstinence. Thirty-three percent were not virgins or had not been virgins when they got married for the first time. Felicia, Isabelle, Katy, Larry and Oscar took different paths, and chose to challenge their normative sexual Christian practices.

Katy dismissed the fallacy that many Christians do not experience desire as fiercely as non-religious people. “It’s like, [people] feel like if you’re a Christian, you shouldn’t -- like you just naturally won’t want those things which is not true because we’re also humans” (Katy). Because people draw mental and emotional strength from their religious belief system, having strong convictions about abstinence can aid Christians in abstaining from premarital sex, but this may not physically reduce desire. Instead, it merely increases their resolve to manage sexual urges. I believe that Anon’s validation of Christian’s physical needs helps create a space for understanding a participants’ choice to engage in premarital sex.

Another proponent of premarital sex was Felicia, a twenty-one-year-old church member. She talked about her experience with dating and romantic relationships, choosing to focus on love instead of marriage.

Um, I don’t necessarily believe that remaining abstinent till marriage is an absolute thing, especially in today’s society you know? Ninety-nine percent of the time it’s gonna happen before marriage, but I think you do need to wait till it’s someone that you love, and you have a connection with.

Felicia was as supportive of building an emotionally intimate connection with partners as other study participants, and she recognized the importance of creating a foundation of love and trust before becoming sexually active with a partner. However,

from her perspective, remaining abstinent is an unrealistic expectation, and waiting to confirm commitment through a wedding ceremony is unnecessary. For her, a loving healthy relationship is the deciding factor, which most participants said was the main goal overall.

Felicia was also opposed to the “hookup culture” because it promotes having sex with partners before emotional intimacy has been established. “It’s not...like most people in today’s culture, it’s not like, ‘oh I’m gonna have a one-night stand with somebody and never think about them again.’” Other participants echoed this sentiment against multiple partners as well.

Isabelle, a twenty-one-year-old church member, questioned why sex could be good for married couples, but bad for unmarried couples who were also in committed relationships. Wouldn’t sex be beneficial for them as well:

Sex isn’t bad, but you know, I was like, married people are having sex. So it’s good for like a committed relationship, but not for like a non-committed relationship? After 2 years of dating, it was like I’m in a super committed relationship. So why is that a different kind of thing? Even though I didn’t, even though I wasn’t abstinent, that definitely was a lengthy process of getting to know the person, like being really committed in a relationship. And so, we went through with sex.

After spending two years with her partner, Isabelle decided that she was ready to take their intimacy further. From her perspective, if sex is positive for dedicated married couples, then it should be good for committed non-marital relationships as well.

Isabelle’s beliefs about the purpose and appropriate contexts for intercourse did not generate guilt or shame when she became sexually active. If the main goal is to create and maintain healthy relationships, and no negative feelings hamper intimacy after sexual activity, is abstinence necessary?

She also suggested that abstinence pushed people into early marriage. Couples were tying the knot earlier on average in order to have sex within a validated context.

Now I'm 21 and I'm seeing like a lot of people that I grew up with in my old church starting to get married or get engaged and everything. And I feel like that's kind of a thing with Christian people sometimes. Quick marriages because of, you know, people staying abstinent when it usually wouldn't happen as fast. You're not committing to a person to [be their life partner]. You're like committing to someone because you've got to wait to have sex after marriage. So I don't know. That's a pattern that I see: young Christian couples getting married super young. [Isabelle]

According to Brad Wilcox, the director of the National Marriage Project, religious communities are still in favor of youth marrying early, even though the national age of marriage is steadily rising and marriage rates overall are dropping (Hales 2014, 3). Isabelle highlighted this negative side effect of promoting abstinence. Some people are willing to get married earlier than usual to express natural desire the "right way." Meanwhile they lose out on the important experiences in their twenties when many people find themselves and become full adults (Jay 2012).

Larry, a 63-year-old church member, felt that trying to police what others do with their bodies and lives was not his responsibility. He recognized that the best forms of sexual expression for one person may not be ideal for another.

Well I don't know if I could generalize [abstinence as beneficial] because everybody is so different, you know, that yeah, it'd be hard to generalize. But in general, it certainly creates less emotional baggage. Well, let's put it this way. I'm not in the position to make that judgment call for everybody. I wouldn't want to be in the position of enforcing that, you know, on anyone.

Individuals come from various lifestyles and backgrounds with differing needs and expectations. Larry decided to have sex before marriage, and he believed it was personally the best choice for him.

Oscar ultimately made the decision to have sex with an ex-girlfriend because they were planning to get married. However, when he formally proposed five years after college, she said no and their relationship ended. As a result, Oscar began to see his past sexual activity as a mistake, but he also recognized that having sex would not prevent him from having a successful marriage in the future:

I would start off by saying temptation is not sin, that's one of the biggest ones for me. Because if you want to have sex, that doesn't make you a sinful person. You are a human that is sexual. Secondly if you have sex, you are not ruined forever. Virginity is not [determinant]. The majority of what I hear from people about virginity is that if you have sex with someone, you have spiritually damaged that person forever. Because sex is the consummation, as they call it in the bible, consummation of the marriage. So if you consummate a marriage before you are socially married, you are still spiritually and physically married. Virginity is not like, that's not the thing. You are not ruined forever.

Oscar rejected deprecating abstinence discourses in favor of recognizing desire as natural. Most importantly, he believed that being sexually active does not ruin a person's value, or ability to be in a healthy successful marriage or relationship.

Conclusion

Definitions and practices of sex and sexuality have varied over the centuries (Donnan and Magowan 2010). More recently, the U.S. has favored medical and scientific authorities over religious sources (Cacchioni 2015). However, it stands to reason that practicing Christians also place a great deal of importance on spiritual doctrine as indicated by the 67 percent of participants from Anon church who were virgins or remained so until marriage and still supported abstinence. Conversely, 33 percent had premarital sex and framed it more positively than the others.

Participants also personalized their definitions of sex which presents tangible challenges for the public health system in terms of designing effective sex education programs for youth. In secular society, research from diverse scholars pinpointed intercourse as one of the definitive sex acts (Sanders et al 2010; Uecker, Angotti, and Regnerus 2008; Valenti 2010, 20-21; Dotson-Blake, Knox and Zusman 2012; Blank 2007). Although from Oscar's perspective, in the context of procreation, condoms diminish the significance of intercourse. For these reasons, it is crucial to ascertain how specific populations conceptualize sexuality and implement programming that

caters to their needs. Dani believed in practicing complete sexual chastity, whereas Isabelle questioned the necessity of abstinence in committed relationships. With this in mind, would Isabelle still be negatively influenced by an act like mutual masturbation? If preventing guilt and shame from affecting future marital relationships is the goal, and individuals had a higher chance of engaging in sexual acts without accumulating negative feelings, is it necessary to wait? Larry believed that everyone was different and waiting for marriage was not for everyone. Perhaps there is more than one effective method for ensuring emotional health.

Dynamic approaches to defining sex and sexuality continued with the inclusive perspective from participants, which was interesting but not unexpected in a community where sexual activity is highly controlled (Valenti 2010). This encompassed almost any act of a sexual nature, anything that could pass an STI from one person to another, and any act that could result in climax. Conversely, the exclusive view did not categorize oral sex as sex because it was not mentioned in the bible, limited sex to vaginal intercourse, and even suggested that intercourse with a condom was not sex because reproduction was not possible. Definitions of virginity were gendered: more males had an exclusive point of view and more females defined sex inclusively, which is the opposite trend of how genders define sex in secular society. Religious abstinence discourses could be increasing the amount of social capital males receive from remaining chaste. Ultimately, even after someone had sexual intercourse they could become a “born again virgin” through secondary virginity (Valenti 2010, 34). In the final analysis, while participants from Anon church are very cognizant of religious discourses in their definitions and practices of sex and sexuality, some have modified traditional expectations.

V. SEXUAL LITERACY AT HOME, CHURCH AND SCHOOL: WHERE IS THE GREATEST KNOWLEDGE GAP?

Well one pretty rare instance [of talking about sex] was when I was in like elementary school, my mom used to tuck me in and I asked her what is sex? I don't remember what she actually said, which is good. I think I would probably remember if I'd have asked her this when I was a teenager, but as far as when I was a teenager I really never had that sort of talk, talking about sexuality at all. We didn't have a lot of open and honest conversation. [Nathan]

Nathan's experiences of Sexual Health Information Refusal and Avoidance (SHIRA) at home, like that of most participants, were characterized by a lack of open conversation and parental involvement. He was raised in a conservative Christian family that expected him to remain abstinent until marriage. Therefore, Nathan's parents might have believed that providing him with important sexual health information was unnecessary. Unfortunately, many other participants from diverse geographic, generational and denominational backgrounds had similar experiences. A few churches addressed sexuality through independent established programs, church specific programs and youth pastor teachings, but most did not. In this chapter I will briefly outline the history of sex ed in the U.S. before I move on to present my own findings.

As sex education programs in schools developed over time, the potential to alleviate SHIRA and educate youth increased. During the progressive era from 1880 to 1920, sex education was shaped by the social hygiene movement, evolving perspectives on sexuality, eugenics and birth control, the Chamberlain-Kahn Act, and a resolution passed by the NEA (National Education Association). America experienced momentous changes regarding the representation of morality, sex, and the sex education of children (Moran 1996). The social hygiene movement, started in 1905 by Prince Morrow, argued against humanity's sinful nature and declared that sex

education was the key to reducing ignorance, helping people make better choices and lowering STI rates (Huber and Firmin 2014, 27).

In the early 1900s, Dr. Maurice Parmelee (a well-known sociologist) along with others contributed to advancing sex education. Parmelee believed sex education would make youth more responsible adults. Furthermore, in 1912-14 the NEA (National Education Association) declared they would assist with establishing sex education in schools across the country (Huber and Firmin 2014, 31). Notably, the Chamberlain-Kahn act of 1918 allowed the government to become directly involved in the formerly private sphere of sexual health management by detaining prostitutes and any other women who were suspected of carrying an STI (Huber and Firmin 2014, 30). This act may have simultaneously increased stigmatization of venereal disease, made the organized disbursement of sexual health information more important to the public and shifted the blame from men who had sex with prostitutes to the women themselves.

The intermediate era from 1920 to 1960 was defined by the creation of Planned Parenthood, the U.S. Public Health Service's efforts to prevent and treat STIs, the continued evolution of views about sexuality and premarital sex, Alfred Kinsey's seminal sexuality study, and the re-characterization of sex education programs. Margaret Sanger advocated for birth control (a term she coined) through the American Birth Control League in 1921, commonly known today as Planned Parenthood (Huber and Firmin 2014, 33). She pushed for birth control because she supported the eugenics movement (Huber and Firmin 2014, 28) and wanted women to enjoy sex without worrying about pregnancy (Chesler 2003, 1). Additionally, the U.S. Public Health Service received money for STI treatment and prevention programs. Eventually some of these prevention programs were designed specifically for teen

boys and girls (33). Although the commonly expected behavior was premarital abstinence, during the 1920s an influential subculture that supported casual sex was beginning to form (Huber and Firmin 2014, 34).

Kinsey opened the door even further for more uncommon views about sex by compiling over 18,000 sexual histories in the early 1950s that exposed and re-conceptualized sexuality (Huber and Firmin 2014, 4). He supported open marriage, and his experiments provided evidence that “humans are sexual from birth” (35). Kinsey also believed that premarital abstinence was more harmful than helpful (35). Despite his efforts, the majority of society was still pro-abstinence. Consequently, prevention programs shifted their content from sexual health management to educating families about money management, marriage and home economics to keep sex education palatable (35-36).

In the 1960s and 1970s a sexual revolution was spurred by new portrayals of sexuality and situational ethics, development of the birth control pill, government funding for sex education, sex-positive organizations like the National Organization for Women and changing goals for sex education programs. This era was characterized by “exhibitionism, immediate sexual gratification, sex without emotional connection or commitment, and a general freedom to use one’s body ‘as he [or she] wishes, to give himself [or herself] pleasure’” (Gathorne-Hardy 1998, 55). Thus, swing clubs, gay bathhouses, open nudity, and pornography became more mainstream (Allyn 2000), not to mention Joseph Fletcher’s *Situational Ethics: The New Morality* (1966) which circulated notions that sexual morality was relative to each situation (Huber and Firmin 2014: 38). In addition, the development of birth control pills allowed women to separate sexual pleasure from pregnancy (37) and gave them more freedom to engage in sexual experimentation before marriage.

The development of pro-sex organizations became widespread in the 1960s and 1970s as well. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), established in 1964, advocated for comprehensive sex education. The National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, focused on “attacking the sexual double standard” that gave men more social capital for being sexually experienced while shaming experienced women (Huber and Firmin 2014, 43). The American Association of Sex Educators and Counselors and Therapists established in 1967 provided training for sex education facilitators, and the Alan Guttmacher Institute founded in 1977 popularized reproductive rights through analysis and research (Huber & Firmin 2014, 37-38).

The U.S. government also increased sex education funding under President Johnson through Title X (Huber and Firmin 2014, 39-41). This comprehensive programming focused on risk-reduction and continued to advance under President Reagan (Huber and Firmin 2014, 39-41). Ultimately, the goal of sex education programs shifted from preventing sexual activity among teens to preventing pregnancy in general (Rotskoff 2001).

The modern era from the 1980s to the present, was characterized by the discovery of HIV, changes in Title V and Title X government funding, anti Roe V. Wade movements, and shifts concerning sex education programs. When HIV was identified in the early 1980s, mass panic arose over a virus that could not be cured and would most likely lead to eventual death (Balanko 2002). The rise of the Religious Right, which consisted primarily of white, conservative, Evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics who opposed homosexuality and abortion, also occurred in the 1980s (Wuthnow 2014, 21), perhaps as a countermovement. Secondary virginity, a concept promoted by conservative Christians, emerged during that decade as well

(Valenti 2010, 34). Soon after, pro-life activists became more vocal and organized, creating mass protests like the “Summer of Mercy” in 1991¹³. As a result, social support for public sexual expression and safe sex education funded through Title X fell dramatically, while advocacy and funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs increased when the Clinton administration passed Title V with new guidelines (Huber and Firmin 2014, 40-41). These AOUM (abstinence only until marriage) restrictive protocols, dubbed the A-H guidelines, had to be met in order to receive funding.

In these guidelines, A emphasized the psychological, social and health benefits of abstinence while B dictated that premarital abstinence had to be taught as the “expected standard” (Malone and Rodriguez 2011, 3). C promoted abstinence as the only sure way to avoid “out-of-wedlock” pregnancy and STIs, and D pushed monogamous heterosexual marriage as the expected standard (3). E stated that any sexual activity outside of marriage would guarantee “harmful psychological effects” (3). F said that having children without being married is harmful to the child, parents and society, and G wanted youth to rebuff sexual requests and abstain from alcohol and drugs since they lower inhibitions (3). Finally, H demanded that youth reach self-sufficiency before becoming sexually active (3). Today, these guidelines are still in effect and Texas receives a large amount of funding for Title V abstinence programs (merlan, 2013, 9), despite the fact that they discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community by consistently referencing heterosexual relationships, and violate youth’s rights to free speech and information about sexual health (Alford 2007).

¹³ The Summer of Mercy was a 6-week protest in Wichita Kansas in 1991, supported by many pro-life activists, Evangelicals and the Operation Rescue pro-life organization. They were protesting in front of a clinic where Dr. George Tiller worked, one of the 3 physicians in the U.S. who performed third trimester abortions at the time. Sit-ins and rallies were held with 2,753 people getting arrested. Donnally, Jennifer. "The Untold History Behind the 1991 Summer of Mercy." *Kansas History* 39, no. 4 (Winter2016, 2016): 245-261.

Political ideologies regarding personal responsibility are often seen as the solution to many social problems, allowing some officials to justify keeping AOUM programs alive and well. The U.S. moved closer to institutionalizing effective comprehensive sex education (FoSE 2015) under the Obama administration when Obama cut AOUM program funding from the 2017 budget (Papisova 2016, 1). However, the Health and Human Services department recently cut 200 million dollars from evidence-based sex education and family planning programs making it difficult to maintain services in the state (Goldenstein 2018).

All things considered, it seems that the U.S. has made progress over the last century toward increasing youth's access to tools and information regarding responsible, comprehensive sexual health management. However, huge discrepancies in quality exist, and federal funding has been dramatically reduced for evidence-based programs like Obama's Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPPI) and the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) to name a few (Wiley et al 2017, 5). For young Christians like Nathan, these issues were compounded by religious sexuality discourses and SHIRA. Public schools have a responsibility to teach the most effective and LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education programs available that will benefit their students (primarily comprehensive) (Malone and Rodriguez 2011, 3), especially since parents struggle to provide adequate sex education at home (Gordon 2008).

In my study, participants received varying amounts of sexual health information contingent on a few factors: attendance in a home-school or public school, parental candor about sex, and pastoral decisions to address sexuality. Overall, four participants received no sex education through their schools, four received abstinence-plus or abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) sex education, and seven received comprehensive sex education. A generational preference for a certain type of sex

education also emerged. Here are the stories of how abstinence discourses affected their experiences with sex education, including where knowledge gaps still exist (a lack of information about sexual health on an individual and/or systemic level).

Parental/Guardian Sexuality Messages

Not surprisingly, most participants received premarital abstinence messages from their parents and approximately 80 percent of participants had only one or no discussions about sex. Many of them, including twenty-two-year-old Heather, were told “just don’t do it:”

Yeah, my parents talked to me about it. Let’s see, they basically told me just not to do it. I don’t remember if they gave me very many reasons, aside from like if you get pregnant its very, not what God wants you to do. You know like, I just knew it was a no. Like you don’t, you just don’t. And I remember feeling like I would be very condemned, very ashamed if I did. It’s kind of like the message that I got, this is like it’s associated with condemnation and shame.

Unfortunately, parents of participants frequently resorted to giving orders about expected dating behavior without any explanation. This was one of the participants’ biggest complaints, both in and out of church.

In contrast, Brandon, Dani and Heather, were the three participants who had more open relationships with their parents, and continuously received sexuality messages as they grew up. “In our house, it wasn’t a single conversation. It wasn’t like the sex talk, then it was over...I grew up in a very, uh, in a house that was very open with communication” (Brandon). For Dani, sex was a normalized part of family conversations: “Um, so sexuality in general was always a very open topic for me growing up because my parents were actually teen parents. So it wasn’t like a huge secret.” Heather had parents who started with the “just don’t do it” message, then her mother opened the lines of communication:

Mom told me, like she didn't want me to feel like I can't talk to her about anything. And she told me some of her experiences, reasons why she didn't want me to [have sex]...how you get attached emotionally, and about how it has got consequences.

These three participants had parents who welcomed questions. Brandon's parents established an open-door policy and his sex-positive home environment could have contributed to the optimistic sexuality messages he chooses as lead pastor for Anon church.

Only Dani's parents promoted waiting for love not marriage. They were teen parents, so they believed that promoting abstinence was not the most effective way to discuss sexuality.

I would say they didn't really like promote abstinence. They definitely did emphasize that whenever I did decide to have sex to, you know, make sure it was with the right person that I really loved, and make sure I was informed about the repercussions of like having sex whenever I wanted to. And um, they never said like "wait until you're married," they just said "wait until you're with the right person." And it was me personally who decided that I wanted to wait until I was married.

Instead of being told to remain a virgin for an unpredictable length of time, Dani had open discussions about sex being appropriate within the context of love. Moreover, she and the other "opens" (participants who had parents willing to discuss sexuality) made the decision to be abstinent until marriage for the aforementioned reasons. However, if they had decided to be sexually active, they knew they had approachable parents who equipped them with knowledge to manage their sexual health.

Interestingly enough, nine out of fifteen participants' parents monitored them closely by establishing boundaries to keep them from having sex before marriage. As Brandon stated:

Um, I don't know how much of this was intentional on my part, or partly my parents and boundaries, but I also wasn't given a ton of opportunities. I could have gone out and created opportunities on my own, but I wasn't given a ton of opportunities to make [sex] happen.

His parents kept track of his whereabouts, and Brandon never felt the need to lie and sneak out to have sex with his partner. Brandon's parents tried to enforce common dating boundaries like not being alone with a partner, no kissing until they were in a committed relationship, and no courting (dating with the intent of marriage) until the age of 18 or until he moved out. Setting boundaries and goals early on, whether they are personally established by youth or their parents, could help youth achieve their sexual management goals.

As can be seen, 80 percent of participants' parents did not talk about sexuality, or had a single sex talk and never broached the subject again. Four of the five participants who had premarital sex lacked open dialogues with their parents, but all three of the "opens" were able to achieve their goals of remaining virgins until marriage. According to participants, the knowledge gap originated at home, and it was not markedly reduced by their church programs.

Church Sexuality Messages

Many study participants grew up in different parts of Texas and the U.S., so church sexuality messages varied widely along with the denominations. Sects included the Assemblies of God, Catholics, Baptists, nondenominational, the Christian Church Cooperative Fellowship, Evangelical Free and the Church of Christ. The message continuum stretched from not having any discussions about sexuality at all, to hosting weekend-long retreats for youth groups. Participants from older generations never encountered the topic of sex in church. If any religion requires followers to alter a natural behavior like sexual activity after puberty, providing guidance on how to achieve the desired results might be helpful. Younger participants from churches on the more conservative end of the spectrum focused on highly sex-

negative messages. Before Oscar got to Anon church for example, he was home-schooled and had never discussed sex with his parents. Oscar, a younger participant, grew up being taught that masturbation was evil by his first Baptist youth pastor:

Because when I was growing up it was always taught in church, in [bible study] groups, that masturbation is bad. It is in fact 100 percent sinful, wrong like evil. You just live without it, that's what happens...that's what you are called to do, they decree.

Moreover, Oscar was also taught if he got an erection, he had lusted after someone and sinned. This was difficult for him to accept, and ultimately resulted in sexual dysfunction:

So, my youth pastor would start out most of these talks with these sayings, like if you got a 'rising' or an erection, if you think about having sex that's sin. Then that was lust, so don't lust. So anytime it ever got that far in a relationship, that was sinning. That was his stand. They taught a lot of sex stuff at church. And so I'm asking him like, how do you get over this? When you get a boner do you, like you just sleep it off? What happens? And he was like, "Here the point is that you are not supposed to get to that place." He is like, "If you are getting turned on by another person like obviously you are in the wrong place, thinking about the wrong thing. Like you need a change of thinking." So, this is what he believed, this is what the youth pastor that is there right now still is preaching. So, this is like a belief, like the head pastor believes this. So to me it was a very guilty thing, and actually I have biological issues, so that is a lot for an experience.

These experiences taught Oscar to be ashamed of the natural processes in his own body, which manifested into erectile dysfunction. Ultimately, sexuality discourses can have somatic effects: as a form of biopower, they can influence an individual's knowledge and perceptions of their own body, affecting behavior and how the body itself responds. For study participants, there is no clearer example of how powerful negative sex discourses can be.

Oscar had a more sex-positive youth pastor later on who helped address some of the psychological scars left by his previous mentor. Oscar previously heard for example that "[comparison of sexual partners] was going to ruin the moment, and then it would ultimately ruin your marriage," but later "[his new] youth pastor [said]

that he had sex before he got married. So this was like him talking from experience.”

Fortunately, at least one church leader Oscar met acknowledged that premarital sex does not equate to ruined marriages because of a “scoreboard” in the bedroom; for him it was not an issue.

Eleven participants attended churches that addressed sexuality issues and related topics like dating. Felicia for example, attended a Catholic church, and they were shown videos. “I know we watched a video on it, but I really don’t remember what it talked about. It was one of those where they separated boys and girls. The boys watched one video and the girls watched the other one.” Comparatively, Aaron the twenty-eight-year-old executive pastor had attended a church that promoted waiting to date, or court, until someone was ready for marriage:

The church that I grew up in, um, and again I’m an old man. That’s terrible! But it was a very conservative approach. Their approach, what I was taught in church was you shouldn’t date. Dating was not a healthy approach; [or] to court. Courting was the term that they used back in the day. I don’t think we would use that in our lingo today. Um, but they would talk about the idea of, you shouldn’t be in a dating relationship unless you are ready to be married, unless you are ready to pursue marriage. I guess it is what they would say. The idea is to find your significant other, your soul mate, to which you will get married. If you are not in that season in life, where you are really ready to pursue that, you should not waste your time.

This courting approach would rule out more casual, secular dating in favor of searching for a soulmate and spouse.

Some churches also designed purity pledge programs for their youth groups, while others hosted the *Silver Ring Thing* abstinence program:

Through its use of ‘high-tech lighting, video and sound displays, along with comedy and skits, to preach its abstinence-only message, SRT has found a way to make virginity hip. At the end of the show, those who take the abstinence vow (or commit to a second virginity) are given Bibles and a silver ring as a symbol of their commitment. [Ehrlich 2006, 80]

Church groups and providers frequently reach out to professionally organized programs like the *Silver Ring Thing* to address sexuality. Highly structured programs like this can leave little room for conversations beyond premarital abstinence.

Dani attended a weekend sexuality retreat hosted by her former church in Wimberley. Attendees were separated by sex with boys in one group, and girls in another:

At the old, the other church I went to in Wimberley, we had a weekend retreat or seminar where girls had their own thing and guys had their other thing. And that was the first time that I experienced sex being talked about in a church. And it was really cool because there were girls that were very open about the fact that they had had sex before. And um, all of them like... I mean they weren't saying it was a mistake, but they like wish they had waited. And so it was really refreshing and encouraging to hear older girls that I looked up to encouraging me in what I believed in and what I stood for.

Dani spent the weekend discussing abstinence, and hearing from featured speakers who talked about their negative experiences with premarital sex. Her church took an immersive approach to handling the subject by investing more time to cover the topic.

As aforementioned, participants from older generations experienced an atmosphere of silence and an absence of sexuality discourses while younger generations were exposed to a proliferation of sexuality discourses, many of which were sex-negative. Younger participants also complained that parents and church leaders frequently gave orders about expected dating behaviors without explaining why they should abstain from sex. Providing examples of benefits and consequences regarding abstinence or being sexually active might have been more meaningful no matter what form of sex education churches chose.

School Sexuality Messages

During secondary school, study participants had a variety of sexuality messages presented to them, depending on the location and political climate of their

community. Three of them never received any messages because they were home-schooled, or not allowed to attend sex education classes, four attended AOUM or abstinence-plus programs, and seven subjects received comprehensive sex education. In fact, Katy's parents refused to sign her permission slip to participate in the sex education segment at school:

Well I know in middle school I wasn't allowed to go do this education stuff. I mean, I heard it at lunch later [from friends], but my parents talked about things, so it wasn't like I didn't, I wasn't unaware of anything. I knew about sex. I knew what happens. I think my mom was just kind of like, "I don't know exactly what they're going to be telling you." And then, in high school, we didn't do anything.

Heather and Brandon participated in fear-based programs like *True Love Waits* and *Worth The Wait* that included fear tactics like showing graphic images of STIs. These abstinence-only and AOUM programs are designed to control young people's sexual behavior by instilling fear, shame and guilt (Alford 2007). They rely on negative messages about sexuality, distort information about condoms and STDs, and promote conservative views based on gender, sexual orientation, marriage, family structure, and pregnancy options (SIECUS 2012):

Yeah, we did like *Worth The Wait* program when I was in 6th grade. That was the first one and I think like every year in high school there were tickets to this big auditorium and they showed us this slide show about STDs and all the bad things that could happen if you're sexually active. [Heather]

Other educational approaches included purity pledge cards and discussions about the fiscal cost of raising a child until the age of eighteen. Despite a growing awareness of AOUM programs ineffective nature, personal responsibility ideologies place the blame for unplanned pregnancy and STI rates on youth themselves.

Gina and Dani experienced a progressive program with more detailed information. Gina received a mix of abstinence-plus and comprehensive sex education between elementary and middle school:

Yeah, we've had sex education since, I mean, we had the option to do it in 3rd grade. My mom said no. But the first year I did it was in 4th grade. So that was, I don't really remember, but I remember that it was anatomical stuff. Like telling you about STDs and abstinence and stuff. But mostly [the 4th grade] wasn't really about that. It was just kind of like, it wasn't even really about sex, it was mostly about how your body works. Because you're young and you don't really know [what's going on], so it was mostly about how puberty works. And as I got older, in 5th and 6th grade is when [sex ed] started being more about stuff like STDs and pregnancy and abstinence. That was, abstinence was probably the biggest thing they talked about, but they did talk about condoms and other stuff.

Enrique (a forty-year-old youth group leader), Mary (a fifty-four-year-old church member), and Larry (a sixty-three-year-old church member), members of the older generations, recalled talking about reproduction and human biology. Enrique and Larry discussed topics in high school as part of health class, which also included STIs. Mary's teacher distributed a take-home pamphlet with information about puberty and reproduction that parents were supposed to discuss with their children. Ironically, the older generations primarily received comprehensive sex education, yet today they are proponents of AOUM or abstinence-plus sex education. This shift in preference could reflect their increased religiosity or their association of comprehensive sex education with the sexual revolution and cultural shifts over time towards normative, casual, heterosexual, premarital sex.

Programs that were more comprehensive included discussions about past sexual activity with a new partner and STI's.

They told us it was a good idea to, before you have sex with somebody, to talk about your histories with one another: how many partners they've had, if there's a possibility that they have STDs. You know to get tested before you start being sexually active with your partner. [Felicia]

STI testing is imperative for sexually active individuals: knowing one's health status is crucial to keep partners and other community members healthy (ASHA 2018).

The Best Form of Sex Education

Gina believed that frequent abstinence messages from both church and school programs were effective in terms of pushing her away from premarital sex.

I think sex ed and then the church did a pretty good job of making me not want to have sex before I get married. Also, I had a camp counselor after my sophomore year who pressed that keeping your sexuality pure involved everything, you know?

However, more recently she has been sexually active:

My view of a virgin is not having sexual intercourse. So then yes I am [a virgin]. I've done some other sexual acts so some people might consider me not, but by my definition and what I understand it to be anyway, I would say no.

The church and school programs might have increased Gina's knowledge about abstinence and sexual purity, although in terms of behavior she still engaged in some level of sexual activity. My findings suggest that there is no consistent correlation between receiving abstinence messages from two or more sources (parents, church and/or school) and maintained premarital abstinence. However, there is a correlation among participants who only heard abstinence messages from one source: all three of the sexually active participants in this group (Felicia, Katy and Oscar) only received abstinence messages from their churches. More research is needed to determine why this occurred.

Regarding generational differences, all three participants from older generations (Enrique, Larry and Mary) expressed continued support for abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) and abstinence-plus sex education, while all participants from the younger generations supported moving towards institutionalizing comprehensive sex education. Mary acknowledged that AOUM programs might be ineffective, but she championed them anyway:

I used to counsel at the women's pregnancy center and I would see these junior high school girls come in for pregnancy tests...They were active at a

very young age. And so I used to, I guess I was always on the side of just complete abstinence.

You just need to have complete abstinence. But I think what was happening is these children, I guess even growing up in the church were...they were bombarded with the same levels of temptation. And they were not prepared. Well they did not have any contraceptive with them or were not given any formal contraceptives. So *I think they found that a lot of them are getting pregnant even though they [were taught] abstinence. I'm still a big proponent of it, of abstinence. I think that is the healthy way to go all the way around. But I don't know how effective it truly is. I guess that doesn't mean you can't still believe in it and then push it.*

But I guess I would like to find some kind of happy medium where they're educated. You can educate them but then still have a view on what you think. So I guess I'm more abstinence still. I'm just going to stick to it. (emphasis added)

Despite the fact that Mary had worked with pregnant teens who participated in abstinence programs and doubted they were effective, she still advocated for teaching sex education from a “just don’t do it” viewpoint. She prioritized religious discourses over public health and medical discourses. Even though the older participants all received comprehensive sex education, and the majority remained abstinent until marriage, they all stated their support for abstinence sex education.

On the other hand, Dani and Oscar, along with other church members from the younger generations, had different thoughts on AOUM or abstinence-plus education. “Statistically [abstinence programs] are not [effective], you can’t ignore the facts. It is what it is. I think if you are going to teach one you should teach the other. Whichever one you want to come first is your own bias, that’s fine” (Oscar). Oscar recognized that most AOUM programs have not shown positive results in changing behavior, but according to him there should still be room for discussion. Dani felt that it was not the school’s place to order students to practice abstinence:

The school shouldn’t go the abstinent-only approach, just because I know a lot of kids who were taught that in the home, and they wanted to rebel. And I don’t think it is the school’s right to say like “you need to remain abstinent.” I think that’s a personal choice and something that kids should talk to with

their parents, and something they should decide on their own, and not something that should be taught in public school. I think that there should be a good balance. They should inform kids of like what will happen if you have sex too early, or if you don't have protected sex, and so I think it is important that schools teach about birth control, and protection, and STIs. But I don't agree with going with the abstinence-only approach. And that's coming from someone who does believe in abstinence.

There is a clear dividing line between the older and younger generations on this issue.

The majority from both groups want to see youth succeed in practicing premarital abstinence, and most acknowledged the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education, but there are still supporters for AOUM programs.

The Most Significant Source of Sexual Illiteracy

From my study participants' vantage points, the greatest knowledge gap continues to be fueled by parents. Between parents, church leaders and school officials, participants were most disappointed about the failure of their parents to take the lead in educating them about sex. As a researcher I became aware of the misinformation, and fear tactics commonly used in abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs (SIECUS 2012, 1-7). Originally, I thought participants would categorize the limited sex education in schools as most injurious to their self-efficacy regarding sexual health. However, I can understand feeling more disappointed that their parents, not their teachers, failed at fulfilling their educational responsibilities.

Home-schooled youth like Aaron, Jemma and Oscar characterized the gap in parental communication as especially negative:

Yeah, so I would say that initially, how do I word this, initially it felt negative. Like it had a negative effect. What I mean by that is, I felt like I didn't really have a lot of open dialogue. I felt a little bit isolated, like I didn't know the things I was supposed to know. [Aaron]

Oscar also attributed a lack of sexual health knowledge to receiving his primary and secondary education at home: "I was home-schooled. So, that was a somewhat

defining factor in not knowing.” Likewise, Jemma was not given an opportunity to attend a quality sex education program in a public school: “yeah, so I was home-schooled my whole life so I didn’t have that option.” She was somewhat more fortunate than Aaron and Oscar because her parents gave her a health book to read with information about fetal development and reproduction. However, there were still no open lines of communication for her to ask questions when she wanted more information.

All things considered, why are many parents not fulfilling their responsibility to provide sex education? Possible reasons include lingering taboos about sexuality, the reproduction of intergenerational silences regarding children’s sexuality, reliance on a single sex talk, parents assuming their children have no use for the information since they will remain celibate and parents also assuming that church programs and/or schools will take responsibility. Aaron explained the intergenerational transmission in his family: “really in [my dad’s] defense, he didn’t grow up with a father figure in his life, so I think a lot of his parenting has been figuring it out on the fly.” His dad didn’t have a father to learn from, so he talked to Aaron once, then never broached the subject again. Many parents either have no examples to rely on, or they take a page out of their parents’ playbook without making adjustments. In fact, Chris acknowledged that his parents leaned on the church community for his sex education: “I do think probably just because my dad was a pastor, they leaned on the church to communicate some things, like the abstinence side of things.”

Some parents like Jemma’s dad tried to teach her about the mechanics of heterosexual sex, but he left out some details.

So my dad tried to explain it to us in a very visual way. He grabbed his plumbing tools. He was like, this is what they called the boy part and this is what they called the girl part. And then he just put them together, but I was

still very confused. Like very, I just didn't know what sex actually was. I was still like, well what happens, like what do you do? What goes on?

Even after the demonstration, Jemma was quite confused about how sex worked. She was one of the participants that made it through high school without having sex; however, she is engaged now and still lacks knowledge of birth control and other contraceptives.

And birth control actually is one of the most standard things that even now I still don't know a lot about. I know that I don't even – I think I've asked my parents and asked my sister because she's married now and my sister takes birth control. My mom, I think she did [take birth control.], but I – I mean that was definitely something like I said, even now, I don't have a whole lot of answers for, so...

Although Jemma graduated from high school without choosing to be sexually active, she will need to know how to manage her sexual health as she enters the next phase of her life as a married woman.

Ironically, because parents have been unwilling or unable to talk about sex with their children, siblings have taken some of the responsibility for teaching each other. Oscar felt compelled to talk about sex with his younger brother because he knew from experience that his parents were not going to educate him:

...I knew that my parents weren't going to do it. So how I did it with him is we were hiking, and he was about to hit 13. So I knew that he was about to hit puberty. So I wanted to talk to him about whatever, erections or something, because he is going to get them when he just looks around and he doesn't need to feel guilty about it. His friends are going to be talking about masturbating and pornography. I just wanted to talk to him and let him know what was happening. Because now he didn't have any idea about sex.

I asked him do you know how a baby is made? And he was like "well no." He didn't. And so I'm explaining it to him and so he goes "okay so the guy pees on the girl?" No concept of reproductive organs. I was like no, no, no, there is a separate thing that's in your body. It's a different place, and he was like "what?" He was totally [clueless]. I'm like you are almost 13 and you don't even know that that's part of your body?

Oscar felt obliged to step in and teach his younger brother. He read a biology book at a young age and learned the basics about physiology and reproduction, so he was able

to give his brother guidance. Oscar himself knew little about sexually active relationships, negotiation and communication skills, contraception, gender or sexual expression, but he did his best.

As a result of parents failing to provide information, participants had negative experiences characterized by confusion and uncertainty. I believe that the foundation of SHIRA during adolescence paved the way for sexual illiteracy in adulthood:

I'm not a virgin because originally, like I had just thought of [sex] as like the baby-producing act. But then there's all of these other, I don't know. The line is very weird. But I guess for me, I'm not sure I still know. By the time that it was something I was deciding, it wasn't, there wasn't a whole lot of difference I guess between two actions. I'm still not sure where the line would be you know? [Isabelle]

Isabelle's Christian background, combined with the lack of sex education from her parents, church and school, led to uncertainty when it came to defining what sex was. This made it harder for her to be confident in her decisions.

As a pastor, Brandon advocated for the church to provide more sex education, especially conversations about sexual desire; he wanted to reduce the knowledge gap by talking about the reasons behind actions. He believed that discussions about why someone wants to be sexually active would greatly benefit everyone involved.

I don't think enough parents, people, churches, etc. talk about desire and why we have these desires and what those implications are. What if we talked about that, and asked why they want to have sex, what's behind that, whether it's a desire to be close to someone, be known and open to someone, to show and express love, etc? Then to talk about those feelings and desires, to discuss them more at a deeper level.

Sometimes people have sex because that's the best they can come up with, but I believe there's something even better than that. Sex within the commitment and covenant of marriage. Then you can dive into that conversation more.

Addressing motivations for sexual activity could be a healthy way to help youth select their boundaries and strengthen decision-making.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, study participants received a wide variety of sexuality messages from their parents, churches and schools. Dani, Brandon and Heather, the “opens,” were the few who had open lines of communication with their parents to address sex education questions and issues. The rest of the participants experienced moderate to high levels of SHIRA because (1) a few were homeschooled and had no access to school sex education programs, (2) parents did not teach their children about their own biology (3) they leaned on churches and schools to teach sex education, (4) churches upheld old traditions of avoidance concerning sexuality (5) and/or participants attended schools with less effective forms of sex education.

Religious and medicalized abstinence discourses were influential regarding sexual beliefs and practices: 67 percent of participants remained celibate, while 33 percent became sexually active before marriage. Some messages were more sex positive than others as Oscar can attest to: the somatic effects he experienced from being taught that his natural bodily functions were sinful is a testament to the ability of biopower to shape our consciousness.

Most participants were denied access to sexual health information in the celibate and sexually active groups and continue to manage their sexual health with limited knowledge. Only lead pastor Brandon received abstinence messages from his parents, church and school system. Heather, Nathan and Isabelle heard messages from two sources and two of them remained abstinent. The other eight younger participants only heard from one source. Regarding the effectiveness of the source of sex education (parents, churches and/or schools), the three participants in the “one source” category who only received an abstinence message from their church became

sexually active. Enrique, Larry and Mary from the older generations received no abstinence messages, yet the majority remained abstinent.

For younger study participants, there seems to be a correlation between the type of source, how many sources they received information from, and celibacy. Since the secularization of society, youth are less likely to be inundated with premarital abstinence ideologies or to be shamed by society for being sexually active. Discourses can gain more influence if they become more pervasive. Larry, Enrique and Mary seem to be the generational exception. However, premarital abstinence was more culturally widespread during their childhoods. As Larry said, “nobody knew or was suspicious [about who was sexually active].” Abstinence was the expected cultural standard until the sexual revolution. Those discourses already permeated society, possibly accounting for the majority of older participants remaining abstinent despite a lack of overt messages.

Douglas Kirby’s meta-evaluation of sex ed programs concluded that “there was no strong evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs delay the initiation of sexual intercourse, hasten the return to abstinence, or reduce the number of sexual partners;” in contrast, at least 40 percent of comprehensive programs accomplish those goals (Malone and Rodriguez 2011, 4). Since parents and churches have not consistently risen to the challenge we need schools to provide accurate, comprehensive sex education about both sex and relationships. Programs such as *Worth The Wait*, *Silver Ring Thing* and *True Love Waits* focus on fear tactics instead of educating students. Recently, the TPP’s (Teen Pregnancy Prevention) database of evidence-based programs has shown they have a small but “statistically significant impact” on sexual risk-taking behaviors with an increase from 37 available programs to 44 (Lugo-Gil et al 2016, 1); TPP also provides support for schools to

implement effective programs that will measurably help students manage their sexual health.

Sex education is a form of biopower and an institutional tool for lowering STI and unplanned pregnancy rates, which can affect an individual's ability to be a valuable and productive member of society. Based on numerous studies, AOUM (abstinence-only-until-marriage) sex education programs are demonstrably ineffective and discriminatory against the LGBTQ+ community, so they should be phased out (SIECUS 2012). With respect to public health, it is better to have effective comprehensive programs. Although positive sexuality discourses along with secularization have shifted power from religious institutions to medical establishments, some sin-focused discourses continue to possess significant political clout. Ironically, my research suggests that comprehensive sex education might empower Christian youth to practice premarital celibacy, although this finding needs further study.

Despite the development and widespread implementation of sex education programs in the U.S. over time, a weighty knowledge gap lessens the ability of teens and young adults to express their sexuality in healthy ways. The ball is still being dropped by parents, churches and school systems, which leaves youth with harmful gaps in their knowledge and skill set that prevent them from growing into more responsible, sexually literate adults. SHIRA is still a tangible, impactful issue that needs to be resolved.

VI. REFLECTIONS: WHAT NOW?

In the final analysis, Anon church members are simultaneously trying to make their spiritual home a place where sex should only occur within the context of marriage, and a place where people can talk openly about their sexual histories and desires. 73 percent supported practicing premarital abstinence. Some Anon church leaders like Dani had previous training in dealing with complex issues such as sexuality, but they never wanted to assume they had all of the answers. Lead pastor Brandon and his team guided this small, young, nondenominational church in Central Texas towards a regularly held sexuality teaching series involving planned discussions in small groups and predominantly positive characterizations of sex. This more progressive approach could have been a result of a younger demographic and Anon's location in a more liberal area.

On a positive note, Anon had a new alternative discourse that focused on creating and maintaining healthy relationships, and fourteen out of fifteen participants used sex-positive vocabulary during interviews. They advocated for relationships that did not cause emotional baggage via guilt and shame associated with premarital sexual activity. Abstinence was functional, not sacred. However, sexual sin was still a part of their abstinence discourses as was evidenced by language used during the *XOXO: Friends, Flings, Relationship Things* series. Worship pastor Chris was afraid of showing normative levels of affection around other church members, while other study participants like Dani's best friend Kayla shared vivid memories of times when they experienced shame and guilt because of their sexual choices. The premarital abstinence discourses were powerful enough to invoke self-censorship, hidden stigma and isolation. In spite of sex becoming a more socially acceptable topic in mainstream

society over time, study participants still experienced high levels of SHIRA (Sexual Health Information Refusal and Avoidance) during their childhoods.

Participants' natal church communities, homes and schools laid the foundations for SHIRA decades before they were born. As has been noted, premarital virginity predated Christianity and other major religions (Ortner 1978, 23). Methods of sexual expression became increasingly constrained. Today many Christian and secular parents expect their children to wait for marriage and strongly object to sex education, especially if it does not focus on abstinence (Gresle'-Favier 2013, 718). This mindset continues the cycle of SHIRA and sexual illiteracy in health.

Sexual Illiteracy, SHIRA, and Public Health Concerns

From study participants' perspectives, all three sources of sexual health information fell short, but the knowledge gap was most deeply felt at home. Eighty percent only received one sex talk or had none at all. Parents' silence heightened experiences of SHIRA, forcing participants to educate themselves, or even assume the responsibility of educating their siblings. Were parents avoiding discussions because of the intimate nature of sexuality, because their parents avoided the subject as well, because parents assumed children would receive the information from another source, or because parents expected their children to remain abstinent, and did not think they needed to provide sexual health information? It could be a combination of these possibilities, or something that remains undiscovered. Further research is definitely needed to arrive at the root causes of this issue. Only a few of the younger participants had churches that addressed sexuality and none of the older participants' churches broached the subject, despite the fact that churches expected participants to restrain their biological desires until marriage. Many were also exposed to substandard sex

education at school. Four participants never received any messages because they were homeschooled or prevented from attending the sex education class, four received abstinence-plus or abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) sex education, and seven received comprehensive sex education. Seventy-three percent grew up in Texas which has fallen well behind due to the national-level funding of AOUM programs and poorly designed abstinence-plus sex education programs.

Given Texas' high teen birth and STD rates, it seems clear that many young people are not receiving that information either from their families, or we now know with certainty, from their school curriculum. This is a serious public health concern. [Wiley, Wilson and Valentine 2009, 8]

These troubling statistics are evidence of the widespread failure of parents, schools and churches to provide information, as well as the preference for abstinence-only sex education in Texas.

Regarding the preferred type of sex education, the older study participants (twenty percent) still supported abstinence-based sex education even though they received comprehensive sex education, possibly because they associated values-free information with the sexual revolution and subsequent occurrences like the rise of HIV. However, millennial participants (80 percent) supported institutionalizing comprehensive sex education because they grew up during a post-sexual revolution, but neither their parents, churches, or schools prepared them to understand contemporary sexuality and manage expectations for premarital chastity.

My findings also suggest there is a small correlation between receiving abstinence messages from specific sources (parents, churches, or schools), and the number of sources. Out of the eight participants who only received abstinence messages from one source and were sexually active, Felicia, Katy and Oscar only heard an abstinence message from their churches. Is this indicative of religious institutions and discourses losing influence in contemporary society if they are not

supported by similar medical or governmental discourses as well, or just an example of a message being less effective if it is not amplified by multiple sources?

Concerning potential public health issues, the varying definitions of sex were thought-provoking. Based on participants' definitions, I created two categories known as the exclusive and inclusive perspectives: 47 percent of participants were inclusive and counted almost everything as sex, whereas 53 percent were exclusive and defined sex in a much stricter sense. Seven out of fifteen participants agreed that sex equates to penile-vaginal intercourse: five of the seven were male. Out of the remaining eight participants, six females said intercourse was not the deciding factor, meaning that other sexual activity could signify sex: virginity definitions are gendered. Females were more inclusive and males were more exclusive, which is notably different from secular literature.

Other studies have shown evidence of the opposite pattern occurring: males are commonly more inclusive and count other acts besides intercourse as sex while females are more exclusive and less likely to attribute value to acts such as oral sex. In secular communities, males gain social capital by accumulating sexual experience so categorizing other sexual acts as sex is advantageous. Although for females, they still lose social capital for being sexually active, so limiting definitions of sex to intercourse is beneficial and allows them to be physically intimate while reducing potential harm to their sexual and social status. The inverse pattern among my study participants (males exclusive and females inclusive) could be indicative of religious abstinence discourses affecting sexual practices and beliefs, as well as how social capital is earned in different types of communities. Male participants valued chastity more, so they chose not to validate other sexual acts besides intercourse to simplify maintaining their sexual status. Female study participants were probably more

inclusive regarding their definitions of sex because they valued virginity as well and the responsibility for managing sexual purity rests on women's shoulders since normative discourses suggest men's sexual urges are uncontrollable. If any sexual activity is categorized as sex, boundaries are easier to maintain.

The inclusive viewpoint is less problematic for public health officials, whereas excluding acts like oral sex and intercourse with a condom could pose serious challenges. Oscar's second youth pastor told him that oral sex did not count as sex and Oscar still holds this belief today because there is no mention of it in the bible. At least one participant believed in secondary virginity, so even after having sexual intercourse a Christian could become a virgin again in spirit and social status (Valenti 2010, 34). If church leaders are telling youth that certain acts are not classified as sex, yet engaging in them still has the potential for either partner to contract an STI, these contradictory messages could have serious public health ramifications. Risky sexual behavior could increase if this characterization becomes widespread in other Christian communities. There are only a few degrees of separation between the partners one individual is physically intimate with, and the rest of the immediate community (Christakis and Fowler 2009, 63), so secular communities at large would eventually be negatively affected as well.

These inconsistencies were reflective of the kaleidoscopic definitions of sex in our society (Sanders et al 2010, 32). Biopower operates within institutions such as governments, churches and medical establishments that influence definitions of sex and sexuality. Individuals and populations are shaped and influenced through discourse. Therefore, engaging in certain sexual acts imbued with discursive meaning has the ability to change an individual's status in society and influence their sense of

self, as well as how they manage their body, which influences the social body at large (Foucault 1978, 140; 1979, 1986).

Suggestions For Improvement

Study participants presented various ideas to improve the way sex education is taught. As an illustration, Jemma described the need for more open discussions and training for parents as well as church leaders:

The number one thing would be probably make it a more open and comfortable topic. I know that we've already kind of talked about that. But in an ideal world I want kids to be able to grow up knowing fully about sex. The consequences, the benefit, why God created it, everything like that, all of the above. And for them to learn that from their parents and from people who are in the church, so that's the biggest thing that I would change. Don't say "sex" like that's a bad word. You know it's so dumb, and to me obviously like it's an open thing. Also, for the children who grow up and start dating, [they should] form their own opinions.

Jemma and other participants advocated treating sex and sexuality as normative subjects to lessen the awkwardness families experience. Anon church members were already headed in that direction with messages like "sex is a gift from God," so there was less negativity associated with sexual acts. Ultimately, hosting a sexuality series at least every three months during the year would provide more opportunities for church members to discuss any questions or concerns they might have such as how to define sex and protect themselves from STIs, and increase the frequency of sexuality discussions overall, thereby increasing the comfort level.

Dani also suggested establishing a mentoring program for young couples to learn about abstinence management techniques from experienced married couples who successfully reached their goal of premarital sexual purity:

And I also believe that um, when a young couple starts dating that they have a, that they partner up with a married couple, or a couple that is very serious. Because it's important that they get advice on how to handle certain situations. It's almost like a couple's [mentoring] another couple. And you can have

those fun moments where you go on dates, but you can also have those moments where you're challenging each other to be better and to like, have a Godly, God-centered relationship.

Young Christians who deal with SHIRA could reap the benefits of a mentoring program that helps them establish boundaries to remain abstinent and hopefully provides some sex education as well. The youth of America need and deserve quality sex education, yet to date few have received it from mentors or educators.

Another potentially effective suggestion was to host a parenting class to pull parents back into sex education. Like most of the study participants, Gina embraced my idea to offer parenting classes:

Yeah, I think a class for parents on how they talk to their children, and resources for them to use to talk to their children would be great, because I think the church does need to talk about it. I think Anon does a decent job of talking about it, but I think it could be better. Ultimately it comes down to the parents to really get into it with their children, so I think the church providing resources for them would be the best route.

Hosting a sex education class for parents every three months in conjunction with the sexuality series would help emphasize parental responsibility within Christian sex education; it would increase parents' awareness of their role in determining a child's ability to become a responsible, sexually healthy adult. A class could provide general information on reproduction, contraceptives, sexual desire and orientation, healthy relationships, and activities to allow parents to practice having productive conversations with their children. Some of the most effective programs provide activities that allow participants to practice communication skills (Kirby 2001).

Nathan, the thirty-year-old church accountant, suggested the parenting class program be sponsored by an inter-faith group, not a specific denomination, so many churches would feel comfortable utilizing the program with less potential for ideological conflict between program content and the individual church's tenets.

Power and Educational Responsibility

Sexuality is constructed and defined in numerous ways: persuasive discourses intersect and “position sexual subjects” (Harding 1998, 20) within a spectrum of sexual identities and expression. “Power is socially ubiquitous, suffused through every aspect of the social system, and psychologically deeply invasive,” (Ortner 2006, 6). Sixty-seven percent of my study participants from Anon church still support premarital abstinence due to compelling discourses, despite contemporary society’s normalization of heterosexual premarital sex.

All things considered, political support has continued for AOUM sex education despite the presence of misinformation and factual errors in many programs. Unfortunately, in America the quality of sex education in schools has suffered because of religious interference and ideologies regarding personal responsibility. Individuals are expected to succeed based on their own skills and hard work, so if a teenager contracts an STI society blames the teen, while ineffective sex education programs that failed to teach teens how to practice safer sex are usually overlooked.

While study participants all believed in the worthiness of practicing premarital abstinence, they also advocated for improved sex education.

By neglecting to teach our youth how to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases we leave them ill-prepared to become sexually healthy adults. [Lindberg and Singh 2008]

Nonreligious children experience sexual illiteracy in the U.S, and this was also the case for my Christian study participants. To make premarital abstinence even more challenging, the age of marriage has increased over the last few decades, extending the amount of time Christians must remain chaste and manage their sexuality (Hales 2014, 3). Some opt to marry early to avoid struggling with desire for an indefinite

amount of time, which may cause them to rush into a lifetime commitment unprepared. Inadequate sex education only compounds the issues.

In the final analysis, if this small case study is indicative of a wider trend, many youth are still being influenced by religious sexuality discourses. Many Christians believe that waiting for marriage is a wonderful expression of their commitment to God and the best method of sexual health management. However, abstinence practices do not have to be rooted in sexual illiteracy and SHIRA. Because we live in a post-sexual revolution society, like people from all faiths or no faith, Christians need sex education that equips youth to manage premarital sexual desires and parents have a responsibility to take the first steps.

Sexuality Study



A master's anthropology student from Texas State University would like you to participate in an interview, and possibly a focus group, to talk about how and what you learned about sexuality at home, church and school. All information will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating in an interview and/or focus group, contact Katherine Barrax at 555-555-5555 or noemail@txstate.edu

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GLOSSARY

The following definitions have been provided by the Advocates For Youth (2008), American Sexual Health Association (ASHA 2018), Center for Disease Control (CDC 2010), the International Society for Sexual Medicine (ISSM), Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS 2018), Planned Parenthood (2018) and the Texas study by Wiley et al 2016.

Abstinence. Choosing not to have any kind of sexual activity. Someone who practices sexual abstinence does not run any risk of contracting a STD/STI or having an unwanted pregnancy. See also selective abstinence. (ASHA 2018).

Abstinence-Centered Education. Another term normally used to mean abstinence-only programs. (Advocates For Youth 2008).

Abstinence Discourses. Institutionalized practices and dialogues concerning chastity that shape sexual expression and give significance to sexual acts and occurrences. They exist as fields of dynamic “relations and interrelations” where power and knowledge are created and disseminated (Foucault, 1979, 1981, 1986).

Abstinence-Plus Education. Programs which include information about contraception and condoms in the context of strong abstinence messages. (Advocates For Youth 2008).

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs. Sometimes called Sexual Risk Avoidance Programs, teach abstinence as the only morally correct option of sexual expression for teenagers. They usually censor information about contraception and

condoms for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unintended pregnancy. (Advocates for Youth 2008)

Birth control. Used to refer to contraception. (ASHA 2018).

Celibate. Choosing not to have sex or abstaining from sex. (ASHA 2018).

Comprehensive Sex Education. Teaches about abstinence as the best method for avoiding STDs and unintended pregnancy, but also teaches about condoms and contraception to reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy and of infection with STDs, including HIV. It also teaches interpersonal and communication skills and helps young people explore their own values, goals, and options. (Advocates For Youth 2008).

Condom. A cover for the penis, worn during sex to prevent STDs and pregnancy.

Only a latex condom is recommended for protection against disease. Female: There is also a female condom that lines the vagina, which is worn by the woman during sex for similar protection. Condoms are highly effective at preventing STDs and pregnancy if used consistently and correctly. (ASHA 2018).

Contraception/Contraceptive. Any behavior, device, medication, or procedure used to prevent pregnancy. Also known as birth control. (Planned Parenthood 2018).

Discourses. Institutionalized practices and dialogues that shape and give significance to social interactions and occurrences. They exist as fields of dynamic “relations and interrelations” where power and knowledge are created and disseminated (Foucault, 1979, 1981, 1986).

Evidence-Based. Evidence-based programs are those that have been proven through rigorous scientific evaluation to reduce risky sexual behavior. (FoSE 2018)

Fear-Based. Abstinence-only and abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that are designed to control young people's sexual behavior by instilling fear, shame, and guilt. These programs rely on negative messages about sexuality, distort information about condoms and STDs, and promote biases based on gender, sexual orientation, marriage, family structure, and pregnancy options. (SIECUS 2018).

Heterosexual. Sexual attraction to people of the opposite sex. (ASHA 2018).

Masturbation. Self-stimulation of the genitals for the purpose of sexual arousal and pleasure. (ASHA 2018).

Orgasm. Sexual climax. (ASHA 2018).

Premarital Sex. Sex between people who aren't married. (Planned Parenthood 2018).

Risk factor. Something that increases the chance of developing a disease. (ASHA 2018).

Selective Abstinence. Many people are sexually active but limit what they do to avoid STD/STIs and/or pregnancy or because they do not feel ready to do some sexual things. Someone who chooses to be selectively abstinent might have some kinds of sex but not others. Someone who practices selective abstinence may or may not run the risk of contracting an STD/STI and/or having an unwanted pregnancy, depending on the activities in which he or she does. (ASHA 2018).

Risky Sexual Behavior. Commonly defined as behavior that increases one's risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and experiencing unintended pregnancies. They include having sex at an early age, having multiple sexual partners, having sex while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and unprotected sexual behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010)

Sex-Positive. Accepting sex and sexuality as a natural, good part of life. (Planned Parenthood 2018).

Sex-Negative. Believing that sex and sexuality are bad or dangerous. (Planned Parenthood 2018).

SHIRA (Sexual Health Information Refusal and Avoidance). The practice of individuals, organizations, and/or institutions of avoiding discussions about sexual health, or refusing to disseminate accurate sexual health information, usually to/with minors. (me 2016)

STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease). Any disease that is acquired through sexual contact. (ASHA 2018).

STI (Sexually Transmitted Infection). Any infection that is acquired through sexual contact. (ASHA 2018).

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