Sexual Without Sex: A Qualitative Study of Single Emerging Adult Evangelical Women

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This grounded theory study investigated how single, emerging adult, evangelical Christian women develop, view, experience, and manage their sexuality in the context of competing religious influences and sociocultural influences. Twenty-four undergraduate women were interviewed about the messages they received regarding their sexuality from their faith community and general culture, and their experiences with their own sexuality amid the resulting dissonance. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory data analysis, themes emerged from the data to reveal a theory that captures how these women integrate and experience their sexuality. It was found that this process begins with the messages received about sexuality, which influence the internalized experience of sexuality for the women, and lead to subsequent sexual exploration and management strategies. The results suggest 3 main factors that contribute to healthy sexuality: accepting sexuality as an aspect of identity, integrating sexuality with other aspects of identity, and maintaining consistency between sexual scripts and sexual experiences.

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Sexuality, as a multidimensional construct, may be understood as an aspect of one's identity that encompasses reproductive physiology, gender identity, relationality, and eroticism (World Health Organization, 2006). Developed throughout adolescence, sexuality is experienced at a minimum through one's sexual beliefs and behaviors and more broadly as a holistic expression of one's biological, psychological, spiritual, and social identity. Because sexuality integrates multiple aspects of the self, all these factors are necessary to consider when understanding the experiences of sexual development and sexual well-being. Neglecting this integrative approach may limit detection of the bidirectional influence of sexuality and overall identity, preventing a clear understanding of identity achievement and overall well-being.

In addition, external influences on sexuality, originating from the social environment and including the broader cultural context as well as specific religious contexts, may have significant effects on one's personal understanding and experience of sexuality including prescriptions for how to flourish as a sexual being. It is likely that these influences become sexual paradigms, which may conflict if their sources have differing beliefs and values. Research in the sexuality of women has largely ignored the experiences of women who abstain from sex for religious reasons (e.g., Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Rosen & Bachmann, 2008), and the small body of research on religion and sexuality has largely

focused on sexual behavior (e.g., Farmer, Trapnell, & Meston, 2009; Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004). The current grounded theory study examines the experiences of single, emerging adult evangelical Christian women to understand more fully how they develop, view, experience, and manage their sexuality.

Healthy Sexuality

What is healthy sexuality for women? No clear answer has emerged, although there have been several attempts to operationalize healthy sexuality in the psychological literature, generally under the terms sexual development, sexual well-being, or sexual health. Conceptualizing sexuality as a multidimensional construct that is a bidirectional aspect of identity, we will use the terms "sexuality" and "sexual identity" interchangeably throughout this study. We distinguish this latter term from its common usage in reference to sexual orientation identity.

The World Health Organization (2006) defined sexual health in part as a "state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity" (p. 6). This seminal definition requires the *possibility* of "pleasurable and safe sexual experiences," and yet specifies that healthy sexuality may be experienced and expressed in a variety of dimensions without the necessary inclusion of sexual behavior. However, this definition lacks specificity with respect to these dimensions. Consequently, and in the absence of an operational definition for healthy sexuality for women, researchers in recent psychological literature have defined and assessed sexual development and sexual health in many different ways.

Some researchers have conceptualized healthy sexuality by purely behavioral (e.g., number of genital sexual experiences, age

of sexual onset, number of sex partners) or functional (e.g., sexual performance) assessments (i.e., Foster & Byers, 2016; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2011). Other researchers expand sexuality as an integrative aspect of identity, yet even these show a heavy reliance on sexual behavior as a necessary part of healthy sexuality. These studies lack conceptual clarity by consistently measuring sexual health (at times under the label "sexual well-being") in terms of sexual satisfaction (Rosen et al., 2009) and positive sexual expression (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Snell & Papini, 1989). Other researchers have expanded the definition of healthy sexuality to include sexual subjectivity (Harden, 2014; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Mastro & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015) and the meta-assessment of sexual identity, such as the cognitive-emotional domain (Rosen et al., 2009; Snell & Papini, 1989) and the sexual self-schema (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Cyranowski & Andersen, 1998; Hill, 2007). However, these constructs are measured alongside the assumption that the participant is sexually active and therefore the measurements consistently conflate sexual well-being with other aspects of sexual behavior. In general, these studies do not explicate how one may attain healthy sexuality apart from behavioral expression. It may even be assumed from this research that sexual health is only achieved through sexual activity and is inconceivable for those abstaining from sexual activity.

In addition, healthy sexuality for heterosexuals has also been assessed through sexual identity development (i.e., Archer & Grey, 2009; Muise, Preyde, Maitland, & Milhausen, 2010; Parent, Talley, Schwartz, & Hancock, 2015; Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008) because of its developmental process as an aspect of identity. Although the results of these studies are consistent with established theories of identity and self-development their underlying assumptions pose a dilemma for those with conflicting sexual paradigms. Specifically, the results imply that healthy sexuality is developed through sexual exploration and consistency of sexual values and experiences, principles that may explicitly conflict with religious beliefs and community standards.

Conflicting Sexual Paradigms

If the process of sexual development mimics that of identity development then it becomes important to understand the cultural paradigms that shape, both covertly and overtly, the experiences of young adult evangelical Christian women. Additionally, because evangelicalism is a conservative form of Christianity that values an adherence to biblically based subcultural norms while maintaining a connection to the broader society (Gallagher & Smith, 1999), it is important to seek understanding of the differing cultural influences from both social-cultural and religious sources.

Sociocultural Influences

Emerging adult sexual culture has been influenced predominantly by the increasing number of individuals, ages 18–25, who are exploring their sexuality, developing sexual beliefs, and remaining unmarried and childless (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006). During this stage of development emerging adults tend to develop more liberal attitudes toward sexuality, are more open to casual sex, and often seek out sexual intimacy (Arnett, 2000; Lefkowitz, 2005). Also, because most individuals have the opportunity for sexual activity, those who are abstinent tend to have strong moti-

vations for this choice. These motivations include fear of negative consequences of premarital sex, desiring a long-term relationship for sexual relations, and religious or moral beliefs (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006; Mbotho, Cilliers, & Akintola, 2013). Other key aspects of recent emerging adult heterosexual culture have been the rise of the *hook up culture* (Heldman & Wade, 2010) and gendered sexual scripts, including the sexual double standard (Crawford & Popp, 2003; McCormick, 2010; Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011; Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, & Lachowsky, 2014; Schleicher & Gilbert, 2008; Zaikman & Marks, 2017).

Religious Influences

The predominant message regarding sexuality from evangelical Christian culture is based upon principles derived from the Bible and historical patterns of understanding the dualistic relationship between one's self and body (Hall, 2010; Helminiak, 1998). Many studies demonstrate the link between religiousness, sexual behaviors, and attitudes for emerging adults (see Farmer et al., 2009 for a review). More specifically, religiosity, as measured through religious attendance, has been demonstrated to predict decreased likelihood of engaging in sex (i.e., vaginal, oral, anal) and decreased amount of "hook ups" that included sexual intercourse among female college students (Penhollow, Young, & Bailey, 2007). In addition, three qualitative studies have suggested that a conservative spiritual upbringing invalidates women's sexuality, contributing to outcomes of unworthiness, shame, denial and repression, and objectification (Daniluk, 1993; Mahoney, 2008; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). These outcomes also demonstrate decreased personal exploration and integration of spirituality with sexuality.

Current Study

The current study sought to investigate how single, emerging adult evangelical Christian women develop, view, experience, and manage their sexuality in the context of competing religious influences and sociocultural influences. It also sought to understand what healthy sexuality looked like for these single women whose religious culture generally teaches against sexual activity until marriage.

Method

Qualitative methodology is ideal for research questions that address nuanced topics and explore the subjective meaning created and expressed by the participants (Hesse-Biber, 2016). In addition, the aims of this study were to construct a model for the current experience of sexuality as well as a theory of healthy sexuality for the population of interest. The data collected would be in-depth and reflect developmental processes associated with the population's status as emerging adults. Thus, Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory analysis was chosen because it is a systemic and iterative process that allows for the development of a theory by constant comparison between processes and themes that emerge from the data.

Participants

After receiving ethical approval, 24 female participants were recruited from a private evangelical Christian university in which

all students sign a declaration of faith and a code of conduct that forbids sex outside of marriage. Participants were recruited through an online database for students to receive extra credit in psychology classes and they self-selected to participate based on meeting the following criteria: (a) unmarried, (b) self-identified as heterosexual, and (c) between the ages of 18 and 25.

Of those surveyed, 11 (45.8%) self-identified as Caucasian/European American, four (16.7%) as Hispanic/Latina, four (16.7%) as Mixed, three (12.5%) as Asian/Asian American, and two (8.3%) as African/African American. Participants ranged in age from 19–22 with a mean (*SD*) of 19.88 (1.23). In terms of year in college, six (25.0%) were freshmen, four (16.7%) were sophomores, five (25.0%) were juniors, and seven (29.2%) were seniors. All participants identified with an evangelical Christian faith and 22 (91.7%) claimed they were raised in a home of similar Christian faith. Of the 24 participants, 16 (66.7%) were single/not dating, seven (29.2%) were dating/in a relationship, and one (4.2%) was engaged. In terms of their lifetime number of romantic partners, the women reported a range from 0–15 with a mean (*SD*) of 2.96 (3.30) and a mode of 1 to 2 (37.5%). In terms of their lifetime number of sexual partners, the number ranged from 0–19 with a mean (*SD*) of 2.58 (4.82) and a mode of zero (50%).

Procedure

Data collection. The women were interviewed individually in a private room on campus; the interviews lasted approximately 90 min. The interviews were semistructured to ask about the participants' personal experience of their sexuality, messages they received about sexuality, and the potential congruence or dissonance the participants have had regarding these messages and experiences. See supplemental materials for interview questions. In accordance with grounded theory, the interview questions were flexible and revised for subsequent interviews based on the emerging concepts with the intent of reaching data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data fidelity. To limit the influence of potential bias and ensure the credibility of the results, analytic memos were utilized as a reflective strategy against researcher interference both in data collection and data analysis (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). The primary researcher consulted with a research group every other week throughout the process of analysis to discuss potential themes, organize the relationships of categories and subcategories, consider discrepant cases, and formulate terminology to best represent the data. This was a women's issues research group that consisted of female, doctoral-level, clinical psychology students (some single and some married) and two married female clinical psychologists. All group members self-identified as evangelical Christians. Biases that may exist within this group regarding women's issues were discussed and internally challenged as they emerged. The inclusion of Andrea L. Canada, a single woman with a doctorate in clinical psychology, provided a different perspective that allowed for additional reflection after data analysis had concluded.

Due to the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research, it is important for the researchers to self-disclose information that illuminates potential biases involved throughout the analytic process. Carly J. Claney is currently a 25-year-old European American, heterosexual, Christian female who over the course of this study married a heterosexual Christian male. Although she self-identifies as a learner of many cultures, traditions, and beliefs, she has been immersed in the evangelical Christian subculture throughout her lifetime, specifically during adolescence and in higher education.

Data analysis. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory analysis. First, *initial open coding* was performed, analyzing word by word and line by line and utilizing process comments or in vivo terms used by participants to form initial categories of the phenomena of interest from each text group. By following each transcript very closely, this step served to extrapolate as many potential themes as possible from each transcript in order to have an overly inclusive assessment of each participant's experience. This process may also make implicit actions, meanings, and processes explicit while revealing hidden assumptions (Creswell, 1998). Examples of these codes included broad topics such as "God," messages such as "sex is for marriage," or evaluative terms such as "feeling unworthy."

After each transcript had been coded in this way, *axial coding* began, which is the process of connecting categories while considering the properties and dimensions of the data. During this step the initial codes were grouped based on themes into four main groups that were constructed around the original research questions (i.e., messages, influencers, coping strategies, emotional evaluation) and were organized into categories and subcategories. A rough model of this theory was presented to the research group for clarification and collaboration. Following consultation the principle researcher continued synthesizing the codes based on the created model through *selective coding*, reviewing codes based on frequency and location in text, and removing extraneous codes due to infrequency, redundancy, or recoding for better explanatory power. It was during this step that the current condensed model was formulated. In conjunction with data analysis, a member check was conducted to explore the credibility and validity of results. Utilizing Birt et al.'s (2016) method for Synthesized Member Checking, a summary of themes was provided to all participants with space for them to respond with resonance, dissonance, and further elaboration. These insights were then incorporated into the results.

Results

The Grounded Theory

The grounded theory model that emerged regarding the development, experience, and management of sexuality for single, emerging adult, evangelical Christian women is demonstrated in Figure 1. This model consists of three general stages that describe the process: (a) the messages that women receive about sexuality, (b) the internalized experience of how these messages interact with the women's sense of sexuality, and (c) the actions women take to explore and manage their sexuality.

Messages About Sexuality

The participants indicated a variety of sources of messages about sexuality including social sources (e.g., family, peers), religion (e.g., church, the Bible, Christian literature), and secular society (e.g., cultural norms, health professionals, and secular
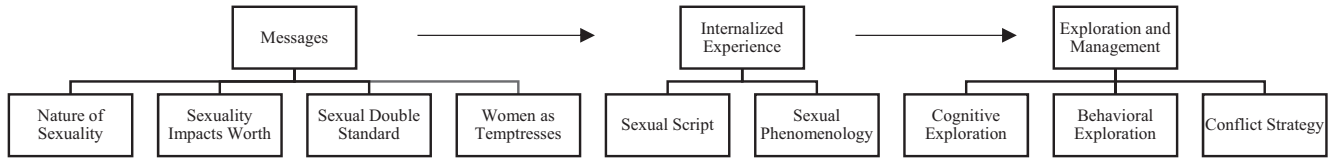
Figure 1. A model of the process by which single, emerging-adult, evangelical-Christian women develop, experience, and manage their sexuality.

media). The majority indicated that they felt a lack of support regarding sexual education, with parents and churches limiting their exposure to sex and lacking openness in talking about sexuality. Participants noted "No one ever talked about it;" "There were no talks about sex or sexuality [at church];" "There weren't a whole lot of open doors for talking about sexuality." The primary messages received included "the nature of sexuality," "sexuality impacts worth," "sexual double standard," and "women as temptresses."

Nature of sexuality. In Christian sources the nature of sexuality was often described with reverence, with words such as "gift" and "blessing." For example, Jamie (all names used are pseudonyms) described the strongest messages she received from her "very conservative Christian family" as follows: "Sexuality; the main messages are that it is something that's kept private and cherished highly." In contrast, messages from society indicated that sex was "not a big deal," and consequently, sexuality was an open topic that is available for public commentary. Women described how these messages fostered an expectation for women's sexuality to be used for promotion or monetary exploitation in the media. Kerry described this publicized sexuality, stating "Women were confined to boobs and that was our [identity]." Emma stated "In popular culture and TV shows, a woman is portrayed as a sex object, not as a person." The contrast between trivializing sexuality and revering it as a sacred aspect of human experience differentiate the messages about sexuality that emerging adult women received.

Other messages, derived from similar sources, continued to be disparate as participants were taught that sex is a double-edged sword. Amber stated:

> So, I have the notion that sex . . . it always went between the tension that sex is something good and sex is something gross. The best way I've heard it [described] is that people view sex . . . as God, gift, or gross.

Comments such as this one reveal a sense that sexuality is not an easily defined experience and, in fact, may have different meanings based on factors external to its phenomenology.

Sexuality impacts worth. Women were taught that there was a particular way of being a sexual woman that was preferred by culture and not reaching these standards had implications for a woman's worth. Jade stated "Women are supposed to be pure and virgins. I remember this one quote I heard [that] said 'Let sex happen and just think of the Queen while it happens.' And it was the idea that only bad girls enjoy sex." Elle said:

> People project sexuality as being dirty. . . . [In Sex Ed in a Christian school] there's a very heavy push for teaching kids that once you have sex you're just dirty and I think that can be really degrading, especially on a young girl who is sexually active. Once you're dirty, you're just dirty; there's no going back.

These harsh implications for one's worth related to sexual desire and sexual behavior indicate how prescriptions for being sexual influence women's developing sense of sexuality from an early age.

Sexual double standard. Messages also emerged about the sexual double standard, which has been written about extensively in other contexts, as reviewed earlier. Our results were consistent with these findings both in demonstrating a between-gender double standard (i.e., men are sexual and women are not; men are expected to express their sexuality without negative consequences and women are not) and a within-gender double standard (i.e., women are either too sexual or too prudish). For example, Kyla emphasized a within-gender double standard by explaining the double-bind that women may experience when attempting to express their sexuality. She said "It feels like women are expected to either be perfectly pure sexually or to have completely given it all up." This sexual script, identified through the contradictory expectations to be "Madonna" or "whore" (Daniluk, 1993) or to "be desirable but not too desiring" (Reid et al., 2011), was evident throughout the present interviews. The messages were disparate based on sources; for example, from one source being sexual is prescribed (e.g., "[Society says to] be very sexual all the time"), and yet from another source being sexual is "bad" (e.g., "My church said . . . anything that has to do with how you feel sexually is a bad thing and you shouldn't experience it until you're married"). These messages are not only contradictory in regards to sexual behavior, but they express different expectations for how a woman is to conceptualize and experience her sexuality as an aspect of self.

Women as temptresses. Many participants indicated that they were also taught in their religious culture that women were predominantly responsible for the sexual temptation of men and that this was the basis for sexual purity. Although the basis of this message may be a negative perception about men's sexual self-control, the women highlighted how this affected women's expression of sexuality, particularly in terms of physical presentation (i.e., modesty). Holly said "I guess there's just this assumption that guys can't control themselves and so it's up to women to dress modestly and do everything that they can do to help the guys out." Ruth referenced how at church the girls would often receive a lecture on modesty and noted that the boys would not. She went on to comment "I think that's definitely an example where men are sexual and they can't control their desires and we have to cover ourselves up so that they're not lusting over us." This discussion of modesty or purity then focuses on how women must literally cover their sexuality in hopes to temper the temptation for men; whereas, because men's sexuality is not a temptation, men may expose

their sexuality to women without concern for its negative impact.

Internalized Experience

In light of the messages that influenced women's sexuality development, how do women experience their sexuality and themselves as sexual beings? The data support a distinction between what participants cognitively believed about sexuality as a construct, and sexuality as an aspect of their own identity. We are referring to these as "sexuality scripts" and "sexual phenomenology" and they will be elaborated upon below.

Sexuality scripts. Sexuality scripts are the cognitive beliefs that participants held about sexuality as a construct (McCormick, 2010). Some scripts for sexuality focused on gendered assumptions about sexuality and reflected how the women internalized messages they received about the sexual double standard. For example, Elizabeth indicated "I don't think women crave sexual things as often as males do," and went on to express how sexual release was not necessary for her unless she was in a sexual relationship. This belief implies that women may only experience aspects of being a sexual being (e.g., sexual desire, desire to orgasm) when in a relationship with a man, minimizing their desire for sexual exploration (e.g., premarital sex, masturbation). This contrasted with women's beliefs about men's sexuality, that men have an innate and compulsive need for sexual release and are expected to explore their sexuality with actions such as masturbation.

Other women identified sexuality as an aspect of their sexual script, claiming that sexuality was normative, holistic, and connected to their sense of worth. For Hailey, it appeared that being embodied sexes, male and female, with physiological and biological qualities, contributed to her sense that sexuality was innate. She recognized this by indicating her gratitude for the pervasiveness of sexual desires, saying:

> I think it's really nice to know that I'm not the only one and that it's very normal to feel those things and that . . . even just learning about the physiology of it, learning that this is a healthy thing, this is a natural thing, this is a good thing to be experiencing.

As previously mentioned, this indication that sexuality is a natural part of human experience may conflict with some of the messages communicated from religious cultural influences which propose that sexuality (and not just sexual behavior) is inappropriate outside of the context of marriage. Kendra identified this conflict by highlighting the God-given nature of sexuality:

> We think "you're a Christian, you shouldn't feel those things." Well, no, you're human. We think, as Christians "we don't want to sin and we don't want to do anything that's against God's will." But, God has given you those desires. He has made you human. And denying that the desires should happen, that's where the issue comes from.

Another common sexual script was that sexuality was holistic and to engage with one's sexuality was to engage with multiple aspects of the self (e.g., physicality, emotionality, spirituality). Holly reflected on the relationship of sexuality to identity by stating:

> The view that I have on sex is that it's very holistic in that we are creatures that are spiritual, sexual, and biological beings. And if you

capitalize on one and demote the others then the person is going to get hurt.

The final way that women discussed sexuality as an aspect of one's being was in terms of how sexuality affects a woman's sense of worth, and it primarily emerged when conceptualizing sexuality as a gift to be given to their future spouse or as an influence on one's purity. Feeling the desire to reserve a part of herself for another person, Alex seemed to struggle identifying exactly what she was waiting to share with her future spouse: "So, I guess just being able to share that with just one person and . . . in a sense it's like giving yourself to that one person." Jade described this while explaining what was unappealing to her about having sex with multiple partners. She said "If you are constantly switching partners and giving little pieces of yourself to someone, you're going to wind up with nothing." These women described sexuality as a part of the self in such a way that sexual activity may actually take something away from another person; this partially implies that those engaging in sexual activity have less than and essentially are less than those who have not participated in sexual activity. The women alluded to the potential that sexuality affects one's worth by potentially damaging one's self and taking away from a person's sense of self. There was a range in this perspective among the women, with Kerry stating "I really adopted the mentality that once you have sex you've already ruined your self-worth," and Hailey stating "I believe that if you do [have sex], obviously it's not who you are. You are not defined by your sex life."

Sexual phenomenology. How do the sexual scripts for sexual identity correspond to the women's own sexuality? Although the women revealed complex sexuality scripts, their own experiences with sexuality remained separate and, at times, in conflict with their beliefs due to various other aspects of the self. Sexual phenomenology refers to this internal cognizance, evaluation, and experience of being sexual. Specifically, it is how aware the women were about their sexuality, what they thought about their own sexual identity, and what, if any, conflict they experienced from any previous messages, beliefs, and experiences.

Awareness of sexuality. Most women indicated an acute awareness of their own sexuality and revealed, to varying degrees, how important their sexuality was to them, which influenced how they experienced their sexuality. For example, Kendra noted how her awareness of personal sexuality is integral to knowing herself and managing other aspects of her life: "It's important to be aware of your sexuality. It's helped me grow and face realities. . . . Realities that I am a sexual being." Her view of sexuality in relationship to other aspects of the self appeared related to valuing introspection about the self in general. This appears relevant to notions of self-development which value knowing and accepting multiple aspects of the self. However, this was not observed in several other participants, as some women struggled to identify or connect with their sense of being sexual. This struggle was due to a perceived irrelevance of sexuality while not pursuing sexual activity until marriage or out of a strong discomfort with this conceptualization of the self as including sexuality.

For example, Lindsay had difficulty applying the term "sexuality" to herself because it appeared reducible to sexual action and produced worry that if she had a "sexuality" then she would automatically be sinning sexually. She explained it this way:

I wouldn't have ever considered myself a sexual woman because the word "sex" for me growing up was related to all sexual stuff. So referring to myself as a sexual woman sounds odd to me because it sounds like it revolves around all that stuff [to] partake in.

Other women endorsed a similar disconnect because of their lack of previous sexual behavior and their belief that one's sexuality was for the future; they anticipated a perpetual lack of sexual awareness until marriage. Emma felt unable to access her full sense of sexuality while being unmarried and described her sexuality by stating "I would say it's never fully—I want to say not fully reached." Krystal, when asked how she viewed herself as a sexual person, responded "only in marriage," and described how she did not feel like a sexual person now because she was not married. This desire to avoid conceptualizing herself as sexual until married impacted Krystal's sexual behavior as well as her knowledge of this aspect of herself. It appears she experienced her sexuality as something that will be "turned on" when she is married because then sexual behavior will be acceptable.

Other women endorsed significant discomfort viewing themselves as a sexual person. For some, the discomfort appeared contextual as demonstrated by McKenzie's feelings toward exposing herself to sexual exploration through observing or talking about things: "It's kinda like the elementary school awkwardness that never went away." For others, discomfort with sexuality was centered around discomfort they had with their own body. For example, in considering different ways of exploring her sexuality Katelyn stated she felt "fear, awkward;" she felt "too uncomfortable to interact with [her] own body, let alone inviting someone else into that process." These patterns of feeling discomfort with oneself as a sexual being seemed to limit some women's awareness about their sexual selves.

Evaluation of sexuality. The women consistently perceived their sexuality as value-laden, indicating that it seemed to be a significant aspect of identity. Consequently, the women also evaluated their worth based on their sexuality. For some, these evaluations were specific to experiencing aspects of being sexual, such as sexual behavior and sexual desire, that contradicted their sexual script. For example, Kyla described her predominantly negative view of her sexuality when asked about times in which her sexuality has seemed like a negative aspect of who she is. She said "I think it would be in any time that I'm lustful or any time that I want [sex] . . . any time I've wanted to do anything going too far." Further, when asked when she has experienced her sexuality to be a positive aspect of who she is, she stated "I honestly don't know that I have one. In my mind it's very, very negative."

In addition to evaluating their sexuality, women also appeared to evaluate their own worth based on their perception of their sexuality. This was demonstrated by Erica's fear that she lacks worth and may not be valued in Christian relationships, due to her evaluation of her sexuality. She stated:

Right now I feel too much guilt and fear of screwing up, and I feel [like I am] left not knowing what to do with those desires. I'm left with a lot of concern about what this means for future relationships . . . if I'm still worthy since I'm already messed up . . . how I would be viewed in the eyes of other Christians.

It appears that because this participant has engaged with her sexuality in a way that contradicted her sexual script and continues to experience unwanted sexual desire, she subsequently fears that her worthiness in future relationships has been tainted. This connection between sexual behavior and worth is strong and reveals the evaluative nature of these women's sexual phenomenologies. Due to past sexual behaviors, several women endorsed a sense of feeling "impure" and "dirty" with Elizabeth indicating "I know that I'm damaged," Katelyn stating, "I'm broken," and Kyla:

After being treated the way I was treated after I said "no" to sex, I was thinking "Is that really all my worth?" . . . Feeling like maybe that's all I'm good for, like I am trash, like I'm not worth anything else.

These quotations reflect how deeply one's sexual experiences may influence one's evaluation of self and self-worth. It is important to note that while not every woman had a negative evaluation of worth based on her sexuality, positive or neutral evaluations of worth were less specifically influenced by personal assessments of one's sexuality. Instead, they were conflated with notions of being female, feeling appreciated for one's beauty, or having no experiences of sexual violence. The self-assessment of sexuality, which was predominantly discussed in negative, value-laden terms, reveals the ways in which women perceive their sexuality to be unwanted and damaging to their overall sense of worth. Associating a negative sexual identity with a negative self-worth reveals the integrated nature of sexuality and influence of sexual phenomenology on overall well-being.

Sense of conflict. Lastly, sexual phenomenology was comprised of the experienced sense of conflict that women identified between their cultures and internal identity. Not every woman experienced conflict in the same way. Some experienced conflict between two external factors (i.e., religious culture and secular society). For example, Molly noted her difficulty understanding external teachings about morality:

It's really irritating; I feel like it's a magnifying feeling that I have felt throughout my whole life of being torn between what's right and what's wrong. I know what God wants, and what he doesn't want; what my friends are doing, and what God wants me to do. It's really frustrating, and I get really fed up internally.

Identifying the contrast between God's teachings and peers' influence, Molly experienced a conflict of morality and, subsequently, strong internal frustration. Others' conflict was between external factors (e.g., media, biblical standards) and internal factors (e.g., sexual script). Some women reported feeling conflict between their sense of self and the external expectations placed on them as a Christian woman, particularly by not being taught how to be a sexual being when it is not permissible to have sex. Emphasizing this conflict with timing, Hailey noted "As a single person I am unaware of a good way to experience [sexuality]" and went on to state:

It's discouraging and disappointing and also frustrating, because it is a part of me and therefore it's not something I can get away from, it's not something I know how to turn off or stop, but at the same time I do not know what to do with it so it gets very frustrating.

Conflict was also experienced between multiple internal factors (e.g., Christian morals and sexual desire). Elle referenced her internal struggle by identifying her sexual identity as inherently sinful. When asked if she experiences different aspects of herself

as being in tension she described two distinct parts: "There is the spiritual part, that I want to foster and go with, and there is this more secular sinful part that's having those urges . . . which is not something I should act on." Erica's confusion regarding her sexual script added to the conflict she felt internally. In regards to her sexuality she said "I feel like there's a volley back and forth in my head of 'It is damaging, it's not damaging.'" She went on to describe the emotional impact of having conflicting messages internally by stating "It's how I live every single day. It's really frustrating and it's really exhausting [because of] the back and forth constantly I'm dealing with in my head."

A minority of women denied experiencing conflict or tension within their sexuality. For some this was related to avoidance of their sexuality due to the tightly held sexual script that sexuality was for marriage. For example, Lindsay endorsed feeling "no tension" between her sexuality and her faith: "I'm always saying no to sex because I've known for so long that I don't want to do it outside of marriage. I don't have any problems saying no." Lindsay's lack of tension appeared to be contingent on the relationship between her sexual script and sexual behavior; she did not seem to reflect upon how other aspects of her sexuality (e.g., sexual desire, sexual preferences, sexual thoughts), may or may not conflict with her sexual script.

Exploration and Management of Sexuality

Women responded to their phenomenological experiences of sexuality in a variety of ways, demonstrating individual differences in cognitive and behavioral exploration of their sexuality and in the use of conflict management strategies. We note here that use of the term "management" suggests a kind of distancing of the self from the phenomenological experiences of sexuality in order to "do something" with these experiences. This word captures well the stance taken by these young women toward their sexual phenomenology.

Cognitive exploration of sexuality. The concept of exploring one's sexuality was both a way of developing and managing sexuality as a part of identity. We observed a wide range of verbal and behavioral engagement with exploration among the participants. Cognitive exploration of sexuality appeared to be primarily related to the goal of developing and interacting with sexual development.

Some women evidenced an attitude of "approach" to engaging with the development of their sexuality. When first exposed to confusing aspects of sexuality, this included a "self-taught" mentality as they engaged in Internet research, observed movies and books, and spoke with mentors to glean a variety of opinions about sexuality. As some women stated, this type of exploration was an important part of developing as an emerging adult and growing in self-insight. Natalie highlighted the applicability of cognitive exploration while single:

It starts as a single person: being okay talking about my body and being okay knowing what I like and do not like at an emotional or sexual level . . . I do not feel the need to go around and have sex with someone to figure out how I feel; there are other ways that I need to think [and] talk well about it, and things that I need to reconcile in my own space.

These descriptions of patterns of exploration contrasted with women who avoided exploration of their sexuality, either out of discomfort or moral conflict. While this appears dependent on other factors, particularly individual response patterns to engaging in conflict and sexual phenomenology, it is notable that some women endorsed refusing to explore. These women said things like "I have tried not to expose myself . . . I haven't put myself in those situations;" "I don't think it's a big deal going into marriage and not knowing anything. I feel it's probably best to keep my mind from those thoughts and influences;" and "I'll just leave [my sexuality] untouched and I'll figure it out later."

Behavioral exploration of sexuality. In contrast to the aims of cognitive exploration which focused on developmental identity processes, behavioral exploration appeared to occur primarily in response to physical sexual desire. Many women indicated exploring their sexuality through sexual behaviors including individual (i.e., masturbation, pornography) and partnered activities (e.g., "sexting," intercourse). Other women intentionally refrained from sexual behavior. It was also found that when the women's sexual experience conflicted with their values, it often led to a cycle of guilt or other negative self-appraisals. These included feeling "dirty," "frustrated," "hopeless," and "a weird void; like a distance from everything." Some women, whose experiences of sexual behavior were consistent with their beliefs, reported positive emotional appraisals of this outcome, like Jamie, who specified a sense of contentment: "I didn't do every single thing perfectly, but I think it's worked out. It's good. I'm satisfied."

Conflict strategy. In response to the conflict that women experienced between the influence of their sexual development, sexual scripts, or sexual phenomenology, many utilized behavioral or cognitive conflict strategies. Behavioral conflict strategies including seeking social support, utilizing a partner as support, avoiding men and relationships, setting up boundaries for sexual behavior, avoiding conflict through busyness or suppression, and prayer. The purpose of these strategies was to lessen the dissonance felt from conflict either by minimizing conflict or by minimizing sexual desire. Women also employed intentional cognitive processing such as deprioritizing one's sexuality (e.g., "there's more to life than just sex;" "my focus is somewhere else") and compartmentalizing one's sexuality from one's religious identity (e.g., "I've been able to sever them . . . they feel like very different ideas of who I am"). For example, Kyla described her coping strategy for processing her sexual desire similarly to mindfulness techniques that emphasize awareness without judgment. She stated:

Participant: It was good to acknowledge the desire because I feel like if I didn't acknowledge, it would just progress. Like I wouldn't be paying attention and it would just happen and I would just have sex and not be thinking about "oh I am desiring this, I can't go that way, I have to keep on my path."

Interviewer: So acknowledging it became then a part of identifying that you do not want to go there. . . . When you acknowledge it was there any kind of emotional value you put on [your sexual desire]? Good or bad?

Participant: Probably neither. It's just acknowledging that I have that desire and it's natural so I was not mad at myself or upset or anything like that. I think it's good I did acknowledge it because I feel like you have to be aware to acknowledge it.

Discussion

This study investigated the development, integration, and management of sexuality in single, emerging adult, evangelical Christian women through a grounded theory framework. Considering that the sexual paradigms from which these women drew were conflicting, it was the intent of this study to understand how these women were influenced in the development of their sexuality, how they conceptualized their own sense of sexuality, and how they managed their sexuality. Although the findings of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations, the results have revealed a three-part process-oriented theory. The first part of this process outlined the messages that women receive about sexuality during their upbringing that influence their sexuality development. Next, women internalize the messages into their own conception of sexuality which includes ideations about sexuality (i.e., sexual scripts) as well as their personal sense of sexuality (i.e., sexual phenomenology). In response to their experiences of sexuality, women manage it through cognitive and behavioral exploration and conflict-reduction strategies.

These results inform our understanding of what healthy sexuality looks like in this population. Specifically, how can single, emerging adult, evangelical women interact with their sexuality in a way that leads to well-being? The results suggest three main factors that contributed to positive outcomes in this sample: accepting sexuality as an aspect of identity, integrating sexuality with other aspects of identity, and maintaining consistency between sexual scripts and sexual experiences.

First, it is important for women to accept sexuality as an aspect of identity because it functions as such. The results support the notion that sexuality, more than a reduction of sexuality to sexual behaviors and sexual beliefs, is an aspect of identity and its development is a multidimensional process that evolves over time. Further, the shaping of sexuality emerged as a contribution to sexual phenomenology, which includes self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-evaluation, features that are related to identity. This shows that sexuality functions as an aspect of identity because it is inseparable from other aspects of the self. Consistent with the work of Worthington et al. (2002), it follows that if sexuality is identity-laden, the first part of experiencing healthy sexuality is to accept it as such. This acceptance is necessary in order to permit achieving the highest identity status (Marcia, 1980), that of identity achievement (Muise et al., 2010). Identity achievement is also dependent on engaging in the developmental process through exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1980). Thus, applying this concept of identity development to sexual development, whereas accepting one's sexuality as an aspect of identity is foundational for achieving healthy sexuality, it is not enough.

Consequently, healthy sexuality for single, evangelical Christian women must include the integration of sexuality with other aspects of identity, which is the process of sexual identity development. First, this means exploring and engaging in the multidimensional-

ity of a woman's personal sexuality, including a woman's physical sexual embodiment (i.e., sexual organs, sexual desires, sexual sensations stimulated by activities, sexual pleasures), sexual script (i.e., cognitive beliefs about appropriate sexual behavior, values deriving from culture), and sexual phenomenology (i.e., sexual subjectivity, awareness and evaluation of the sexual self, experienced conflict as sexual being). In this context, exploration and engagement with sexuality may be accomplished either behaviorally (i.e., self-stimulation, partnered activity) or cognitively (i.e., personal contemplation, research of literature, discussions with others).

Exploration and engagement must be consistent with other aspects of identity in order to lead to good outcomes. Exploration, and in this population particularly behavioral exploration, that is experienced as being in conflict with another aspect of the self may not lead to healthy sexuality, but may in fact lead away from it (Harden, 2014). Worthington et al. (2002) have noted the variety of aspects of the self that may need to be considered in the process of integrating sexuality with other aspects of identity: biology, microsocial context (e.g., family, peers, Christian subculture), gender norms and socialization, culture (e.g., ethnic background; mainstream society), religious orientation, and systemic homonegativity, sexual prejudice, and sexual privilege. Several studies (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Mahoney, 2008; Muise et al., 2010; Worthington et al., 2002) suggest that attending to any one aspect of sexuality, such as physiology, without holistic integration likely limits well-being because it disregards the existing relationships with other aspects of the self. Instead, engaging with these complexities in an integrative way promotes flourishing and overall well-being.

The final aspect of experiencing healthy sexuality for single, evangelical Christian women appears to be fostering consistency between sexuality and the self. This proves difficult, as demonstrated by the experience of women who endorsed a sense of conflict between diverse cultural messages, and their own sexual scripts and sexual phenomenologies. Specifically, this particular population of women experienced tension in attempts to reconcile being an evangelical Christian (i.e., religious identity) with being an unmarried, sexual being (i.e., sexual identity). Despite their experiences of conflict, many of them also articulated strategies that effectively reduced the negative effects of conflict while maintaining sensitivity to the integration of sexual identity and continuing sexual identity development. For example, whereas some women worked to avoid negative aspects of sexuality (i.e., sexual desire, conflict, guilt), other women implemented positive mental strategies such as deprioritizing sexuality with respect to other matters of personal importance, or prioritizing future (i.e., long-term) motivations over momentary desires or experiences. These mental strategies reduced the intensity of conflict or enabled women to make decisions that maintained internal and external consistency. Others managed their experiences of sexuality by utilizing social support from peers, family, and God as a source of strength throughout the entire process. Social support reduces feelings of isolation and increases women's sense of agency and self-acceptance, leading to higher experiences of well-being.

Current research on sexuality generally emphasizes the importance of integrated sexuality for the development of sexual health (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Harden, 2014; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Hucker, Mussap, & McCabe, 2010); however, as

noted earlier, it lacks a holistic perspective on the effects of conflicting sexual paradigms on the integration of sexuality, sexual development, and sexual experience for single, emerging adult, evangelical Christian women. Further, this literature primarily measures healthy sexuality for women by assessing sexual well-being for the sexually active, with a focus on sexual satisfaction and pleasure (Rosen et al., 2009), positive sexual expression (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Snell & Papini, 1989), or sexual subjectivity (Harden, 2014; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Mastro & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015). This literature also proposed sexual health for all women without considering cultural factors that are inextricably related to sexuality, such as religiosity. The present theory utilized the cultural factors outlined by Worthington et al. (2002) to better understand the sexual development, sexual scripts, and sexual phenomenologies for this population of women.

Some research suggested that healthy sexuality required an internal congruence of the self (Muise et al., 2010) as well as the exploration of sexual identity with an integration of one's self-construct (Archer & Grey, 2009). Initially, it appeared as though these findings posed a dilemma for single, evangelical women because of the incompatibility of pursuing behavioral sexual exploration and consistency with religiously derived sexual values. However, the present theory confirmed the importance of both integration and maintaining consistency of sexuality and the self while illustrating how sexual exploration and identity commitment are possible in this population.

It is important to note the limitations of the present study. Primarily, the generalizability of the conclusions of this study are particular to the population of interest: single, heterosexual, emerging adult, evangelical Christian women. More so, this study's sample utilized participants with lifelong exposure to the evangelical Christian subculture, most of whom were raised in homes of similar faith as their own, and all participants attended the same Christian university. In addition, most of the women were comfortable with discussing their sexuality and sexual experiences and all of them self-selected into the study with at least a minimal interest in exploring this topic. This contributed to the depth of insight elicited during the interviews, but the results may not represent the experiences of those who are not as insightful or comfortable discussing sexuality.

Future research should acknowledge Lefkowitz et al.'s (2004) encouragement to measure multiple aspects of religiosity when assessing the impact of religiosity on sexuality, particularly during emerging adulthood. This may better elucidate how religious identity or religious culture impacts sexual development as well as its influence on current sexual management. Similarly, it is recommended that future research attend to the complex multiplicity of sexual identity: clearly identifying and assessing sexuality holistically, while attending to its physical, spiritual, psychological, and interpersonal elements. Additionally, we found that women were generally aware of their sexuality, which required them to work actively to incorporate it into their identities. However, there was a subgroup of women who seemed to be less aware of their sexuality overall and consequently had limited opportunity to engage with it in identity-forming ways. In the absence of quantitative research, it is unclear whether this lack of awareness is detrimental, or whether it constitutes an adaptive strategy for handling sexuality in this population. Thus, it is recommended that future research utilize quantitative methods to identify what strategies for sexual management lead to positive and negative outcomes for the individual, with emphasis on identity formation, flourishing, and well-being. Lastly, future research should seek to understand how other subgroups of female, emerging-adult populations develop and experience their sexuality, with the intent to better understand how unique cultural factors influence sexual health on a broader scale.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing understanding of evangelical Christian women's sexuality. It provides an in-depth review of how conflicting sexual paradigms influence sexual identity development and explores how these emerging adult women live into their sexuality. This study expands current literature of healthy sexuality that overemphasizes sexual behavior and provides an integrative theory for how this population may pursue sexual well-being while being single. Further consideration of how the nuances of sexuality and spirituality interact will contribute to a better understanding of how this population may flourish, while also providing better insight for how cultural systems may help in this developmental process.

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