DESIRED SEX: HOW WOMEN'S FIRST EXPERIENCES SHAPE SEXUAL ATTITUDES LATER IN LIFE

by

Mary J. Barber

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Middle Tennessee State University

October 2020

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Ashleigh McKinzie, Chair

Dr. Jackie Eller

Dr. Vicky MacLean

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While writing this thesis, I received a great deal of support, assistance, and encouragement from a variety of individuals. I would first like to thank my thesis chair and supervisor, Dr. Ashleigh McKinzie, without whom I would never have achieved this academic feat. Your invaluable instruction, time, and patience pushed me to new levels of thinking and brought my work to an exceptionally higher standard.

I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Jackie Eller and Dr. Vicky MacLean, who encouraged me from my first day of graduate school to work hard and explore the possibilities of research in sociology.

In addition, I would like to thank my parents for supporting my decisions and pushing me to do my best in the face of difficulties and frustrations. I love you both immeasurably.

To my cousins, Thaddeus Matney and Lily Malcomb: I would never have thrived without the countless hours you sat with me while I worked and wrote my research. You both have encouraged me more than you realize, and you are incredible moral supports.

I want to thank all the women who participated in interviews and sat with me for hours answering personal questions and sharing honestly your experiences. This thesis could never have come to fruition without you and you are now a part of important research on women's experiences. I enjoyed learning about each and every one of you and appreciate your contribution of time and energy.

Lastly, to my dog Ruthie, I cherished your wet nose and unending cuddles that gave me solace when I was otherwise feeling overwhelmed and anxious—I love you, girl.

ABSTRACT

Women's sexual lives have been under scrutiny for centuries but have only recently been a subject of research in the sociological community. The idea of consensual sex is widespread while the idea of desired sexual experiences are less common. In this thesis I asked women to describe their first *desired* sexual experience and how their early desired experiences shaped their subsequent sexual attitudes and experiences and sexual satisfaction. I interviewed and examined the experiences of older millennial women between the ages of 30 to 39, who did not have self-identified sexual trauma prior to their first desired sexual encounter. In-depth interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. Previous research focuses on women with early traumatic sexual experiences, or otherwise limits and/or distorts in-depth understanding of women's experiences by utilizing quantitative methods. Drawing from feminist standpoint theory, I identify five themes related to women's attitudes and experiences: (1) guilt and shame, (2) impact of first sexual experience on confidence and self-esteem, (3) sex as obligation, (4) sexual experiences within relationships, and (5) negative consensual experiences. I conclude that although women have different initially desired individual experiences, collectively the generalized attitudes, experiences, and dispositions in response to these early sexual experiences are similar. Future research should continue to give voice to the variety of women's sexual experiences, particularly those that fall outside of the framework of abuse and trauma.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Throughout modern society and in most Western cultural contexts, women's lives have been controlled by men and dominated by the patriarchy—from what they wear to how they perform their roles in society. This is especially true with sexual relations, even after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s (Hills 2014), and women gaining rights and protections in particular social institutions, such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and education.[1] Examples of men seeking to control women's bodies include attempting to pass legislation to prevent abortions, making birth control difficult to obtain, banning same-sex adoption, and anti-transgender bathroom bills. Other measures include funding abstinence-only education and 'slut-shaming' women who exercise or attempt to exercise sexual agency (Taylor 2012). Due to socially constructed ideas about gender, men and women often experience the world differently; this includes the attitudes and performance of sexuality and gender roles (Butler [1991]2016:317). The goal of my thesis is to understand women's consensual, desired sexual experiences and women's retrospective telling of the impact on their subsequent sexual encounters. In particular, I sought to understand whether a woman's first sexual experience has an impact on subsequent behaviors or responses, both positive and negative, and if so, how the initial experience impacts later encounters. In this study, I examine women's personal reflections on their past sexual experiences and focus on what shapes their views and attitudes surrounding those experiences (Fahs 2016; Barnett, Fleck, Marsden and Martin

[1]Encyclopedia. 2020. "Feminism and the Sexual Revolution." *Enclyclopedia.com.* Retrieved September 26, 2020. https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/feminism-and-sexual-revolution#:~:text=women%2C%20including%20equal%20pay%2C%20childcare,Court%20decision%20in%20Phillips%20v.

2016; Haderxhanaj, Leichliter, Aral and Chesson 2010; Le Gall, Mullet, and Shafighi 2002).

While many gains have been made for women in the legislative area, too often for every two steps forward, there is a step backward. Especially in the area of "abstinence-only" education which is often steeped in Judeo-Christian purity culture, women's lives and sexualities are highly controlled and regulated through policies, religious ideologies, and other cultural logics.

The U.S. government and patriarchal structures play an important role in the development of young Americans' sexuality. First, it must be noted that comprehensive sex education is not a federal requirement, and in fact, sex education is only mandated in 24 states, rather than all 50. Hence, a large portion of America's youth are not being educated on the risks of sex, and in many cases, if they receive education, it is geared toward abstinence-only (AO), rather than a more comprehensive approach to safe sex practices. In 1981, lawmakers introduced legislation promoting AO, and this has persisted through the decades and affects what kind of sex education can be taught in schools (i.e. abstinence-only or comprehensive, see Block 2005). While several sex education programs have since been cancelled, changed, or renamed, the Title V Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage program still has the most federal funding in the country. In 1996, President Clinton passed the Welfare Reform Act which included abstinence-only education and defined it by eight points, including that it's "exclusive purpose [is] teaching the social, psychological and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity" and that it "teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity" (Block

2005:111). One point in this act that points to religious purity culture is that abstinence education "teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society" (Block 2005: 112). Such federal policies blatantly create a stigma surrounding children born out of wedlock, individuals who have children and do not want to be married, same-sex couples, and anyone who falls outside of the heteronormative societal gender roles ascribed to them.

In addition to U.S. legislation being highly biased towards abstinence education and the heteronormative social standards, the religious side of American culture also participates in these conservative and outdated ideals by promoting "purity culture," or the promotion of "a biblical view of purity (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8) by discouraging dating and promoting virginity before marriage, often through the use of tools such as purity pledges, symbols such as purity rings, and events such as purity balls" (Carter 2019).[2] Purity culture attempts to encourage young women (and men, although not nearly as obviously) to wait to have sex until they are married and to remain sexually "pure" until that time. Unfortunately, purity culture also leads to shaming women and places a high emphasis on the value of a woman based on her virginity status. In Natalie Collins' article about purity culture, she explores the negative aspects of purity culture, including that women should not want sex, should not enjoy sex, and should be ashamed of their bodies (2015). Collins concludes her article by saying, "[t]he irony is that purity culture is

[2] Carter, Joe. 2019. "The FAQs: What You Should Know About Purity Culture." *The Gospel Coalition*. Retrieved Sept. 19, 2020. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faqs-know-purity-culture/.

anything but pure. It is woven with oppression and lies. It is yet another weapon of patriarchy to control and marginalize women" (Collins 2015).[3]

Education and religion should not be muddled together. However, in the United States it is difficult to separate church and state owing to the vast number of Evangelical voters. The combination of purity culture and abstinence education negatively impacts teenagers, doing the opposite of its goal to promote positive sexual experiences. Another factor that compounds with the religious ideology of purity culture is that of the Madonna-whore dichotomy, or sexually pure versus sexually impure (Baraket, Kahalon, Shnabel and Glick 2018).

While the slut-prude dichotomy is present in other research, I found it particularly salient in my own, making it clear that the compounding of multiple disadvantages can negatively affect women's experiences—from having no sex education, to being categorized as either a slut or a prude, to feeling guilty and ashamed for some combination of these things. Consistently with previous literature, I found that several women have felt the weight of little to no comprehensive sex education on top of purity culture, as these components of growing up affected their sexual experiences, generally in a negative way.

Statement of the Problem

Previous research on women's sexual experiences, while incredibly insightful for the field, is problematic for a number of reasons. There has been an overreliance on quantitative methods, the elision of lived experience, disproportionate focus on sexual

[3] Collins, Natalie. 2015. "7 Lies That Purity Culture Teaches Women." *CBE International*. Retrieved Sept. 19, 2020. https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/7-lies-purity-culture-teaches-women.

assault and rape, and relatively no focus on first sexual experiences that are consensual. In general, I argue that there must be women's narratives and stories to provide context to quantitative research on this topic. Moreover, quantitative research forces dichotomies such as consensual and non-consensual that sometimes don't match the lived reality of experiences and subsequent labeling. Similarly, many women may not have the language to understand their experiences, and thus, have trouble labeling them.

Magnusson, Nield, and Lapane, (2015) found the average age of women's first sexual intercourse was 17-years-old. It is most common for women to have between two and nine sexual partners over a lifetime, with this number usually plateauing in women's 30s after settling down with one partner (Haderxhanaj et al. 2010). Many studies do not specify if women who were raped considered their rapist as a sexual partner, nor do they report what kind of sexual experience women considered to be their first—whether the woman desired it or it was forced. Based on these statistics, women's sexual partnerships happen primarily in their twenties and tend to level off with age. The aforementioned studies gave no indication as to why sexual partnerships leveled off with age, but based on marriage statistics, it makes intuitive sense; as individuals age, they settle down with one person.

There is ample quantitative research about sexual behavior in general, and women in particular, which mostly concludes by offering statistics based on race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and a multitude of other demographics which can be utilized to draw inferences about individuals' sexual patterns. However, the research explaining the nuances behind these statistics is relatively sparse. There are few studies in which researchers ask women when they first *wanted* the sex they were having,

or the context in which these encounters occurred. This is problematic because when simply looking at statistics, it is easy to draw conclusions that may be somewhat erroneous, because they may not match lived experiences. For instance, while it may be true it is more likely that a 17-year-old will have sexual intercourse than a 13 year old—it omits other truths such as whether that 17-year-old girl enjoyed the sex or desired the experience at all. The possible truths behind each lived experience are numerous and sometimes they *are* simple, but not always. This omitted information could be impactful on how society views sex. For example, the information could include whether sex was coerced or done out of love, if sex was non-penetrative but still considered sex by the participating parties, and so on. It excludes the lived experiences of the women who make up the statistics. While quantitative data is useful for health purposes and general knowledge, it does not always lend a voice to women.

Women's lived experiences surrounding sexual partnerships and sexual encounters are important because they add context to the extant quantitative work and could add nuance to what social scientists know about women's sexual realities. For instance, if a 17-year-old woman had sexual intercourse for the first time, later regretted it and chose to wait to have sex again until marriage, this complex experience and her changing attitude is not reflected in the statistics, and distorted conclusions may be drawn about her sense of self-worth, purity, and morals. Thus, quantitative studies on sexuality provide a great deal of knowledge on the topic, but we do not know the *why*—namely, the details behind each women's sexual experiences. It is important to research the stories behind statistics if we want to more fully understand human sexual behavior, particularly in women; that is, the context and decisions surrounding a woman's first sexual

experience. I do not mean to imply that these women are voiceless or that the quantitative data do not matter, I simply conclude that based on previous research, it is crucial for social scientists to get a better understanding of why women begin having sexual experiences, and what drives them to continue, change, or stop their sexual behaviors.

As previously stated, women's bodies and women's experiences are often shaped in relation to men's experiences in Western society. This persists through the reliance on androcentric ways of knowing and what counts as "truth," such as the overwhelming tendency to use quantitative data to explain women's sexual behaviors. Moreover, social scientists need to know more about how women's sexual behavior changes with age and how age and subsequent sexual experiences alter women's attitudes and views on sex. I also contend that most research on sexuality tends to, mostly implicitly, reproduce heteronormative ideas about sex. My research lends voice to women whose sex lives do not exist around men—such as lesbians or asexual women.

Moreover, as feminist sociologists we must know more about sexual coercion and unwanted sex (that is not conceptualized as assault by participants) and lack of sexual satisfaction. Hearing the stories of women can help explain the aforementioned phenomena which are harder to quantify. Sexual coercion, the lack of sexual satisfaction, and unwanted sex are prevalent in society and social scientists must address these topics in order to begin rectifying patriarchal rule over women's bodies and sexualities—not just rape and violence, but also how patriarchy affects the everyday, common sexual experiences of women.

For this study, I collected women's sexual histories. I interviewed women between the ages of 30 and 39 using open-ended questions that asked how women

perceived their first sexual experiences, how this shaped their sexual history, and current sexual relationships. The purpose of this research is to better understand how women view their first desired sexual experience, and how that sexual encounter shaped their subsequent experiences and attitudes surrounding sex. Previous literature finds that sex is still stigmatized for women, therefore it is crucial to understand women's attitudes surrounding sex and try to understand what ideologies underlie these attitudes (Fahs 2016; Kreager and Staff 2009; Morgan and Zurbriggen 2007; Mullaney 2001).

Ultimately, my research investigates how first sexual experience impacts the quality of women's sex lives and their satisfaction in their later relationships. This study is meant to use women's lives and their experiences to help move research towards a more feminist perspective that does not box them in to a solitary category. My research illuminates how women's experiences do not necessarily fall into particular categories and are much more complex than simply being consensual or non-consensual (rape), pleasurable or not pleasurable, or other dichotomies. Women experience sex differently but do not always have the vocabulary to comprehend what they go through or understand what is or is not "normal." Some women are comfortable sharing they were raped, or at least admitting it to themselves, if not to others. Some women do not consider what happened to them to be sexual assault, where another woman might consider the same experience as such (Boyle and McKinzie 2015).

My overall goal is to add to the literature on women's sexuality and hopefully expand feminist knowledge on this topic. The results of this research will be used by sociologists to better grasp the importance of in-depth research on women's sexual lives and work

towards identifying what constitutes “normal,” that is to say, common, sexual experiences including the positive, the negative, and the neutral.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory stresses emancipation and social justice, the importance of subjugated and situated knowledges, intersectionality, and grapples with epistemological questions of knowing, truth, and how these questions influence methodological considerations about the researcher's positionality and the merits and downfalls of insider/outside research. Feminist standpoint theory adheres to the idea of subjugated knowledge and advocates using the lived experience of women to create knowledge and highlight women's standing in the social matrix of domination. Feminist standpoint theory does not claim one objective knowledge and rejects positivism, or the idea that there is one absolute, objective truth.

The general consensus among feminist researchers is that feminist research "is a tradition of inquiry that seeks knowledge for emancipation" (Jaggar 2014:x). This means that feminist research is not one particular method or theory, but that women's viewpoints, experiences, and partial knowledges must be incorporated into the academy not only to do justice to research participants, but also to recognize that in sociology, women were left out of the theoretical canon for over a hundred years and their subjected positions *could* yield important theories and knowledge about the social world. Standpoint builds on the Hegelian master/slave metaphor that understands that the master's view of the slave will always be incomplete, and namely, subhuman. The slave, conversely, sees not only his [her] own life, but also the life of the master; it is a fuller understanding of that social relation (Harding 2014:333). Similarly, marginalized positions can illuminate social relations in a society marked by hierarchies.

Feminist standpoint means a few related things. First, it is a necessary corrective to the androcentric frames that permeated much of science and academia until very recently. As Harding states:

> The standpoint of some particular marginalized groups can point the way to less partial and distorted conceptual frameworks, methods, rules, and procedures of inquiry. What the standpoint of any particular group consists in must be determined by empirical observations and theoretical reflection. A standpoint is an objective position in social relations articulated through one or another theory or discourse… (Harding 2014:333)

Feminist standpoint is also attentive to the lived experiences of women and other subjugated groups as producers of knowledge. Along these lines, Harding states that "[t]hose who are exploited by social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought" (2014: 334), which focuses on subjugated individuals as having more complete pictures of the true social layout and realities of society. In a different way, Haraway (1988) argues for incorporating 'situated knowledges' as a method for achieving feminist objectivity. That is, there is no truth with a capital 'T', but many truths. Indeed, Haraway states, "[while]subjugation is not grounds for an ontology, it might provide a visual clue" (1988:586). Ultimately by understanding situated knowledges taken together, standpoint theory can provide a framework and an epistemology that seeks liberation through a more wholistic understanding of truths. This is what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as 'pivoting the center' among communities with specific situated knowledge (2000:44).

For the purposes of this thesis, it is imperative that I give voice to women who have been excluded from the production of knowledge about women's consensual sexual experiences. That is, when dominant, masculinist frames are always used, and voices excluded, the result is a distorted understanding of social life. Smith states, "the only way

of knowing a socially constructed world is from within," (2014:42) meaning that marginalized voices can shed light on being in the world in ways that privileged voices are less well-suited to do, or by way of their privilege, fail to do so.

Similarly, feminist author Joey Sprague (2016) talks about privileging certain types of research, and my review of the literature shows that particular types of knowledge and research have been privileged. The privileged groups tend to be marginalized groups who produce subjugated knowledge, which is the aim of this study—to allow marginalized individuals, namely women, to voice their experiences and have the opportunity to add to the subjugated knowledge of women. It seems that social scientists have focused mostly on traumatic experiences, perhaps because consensual sexual experiences are not as eye-catching as traumatic ones— i.e., salacious stories make the news; normality often does not. For instance, the literature tends to focus on women with sexual trauma, often times prior to their first desired sexual experience. While these data are doubtless valuable and add to the feminist knowledge about women and their sex lives, it ignores women without a history of sexual trauma.

Although I was not attempting to practice insider research, my mostly equal position to the people I interviewed, and my similar demographics point to my insider status as a researcher. An inside researcher is someone who shares the social characteristics, life experiences, and statuses of those they study (May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000:81). Feminist and other critical thinkers have debated the epistemological advantages and disadvantages of insider versus outsider research (May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000). One of the disadvantages is that insider research has potential to be problematic, because insiders may identify too much with the participants and have

similar biases (due to their related positions and experiences). This can mean that important cultural, linguistic, or social nuances may be overlooked by the researcher which may be identified by an outsider researcher as important or impactful. It is crucial for a researcher to maintain reflexivity throughout the research and writing process (Sprague 2016:49).

Sprague claims that "all knowledge is constructed from a specific position and that what a knower can see is shaped by the location from what that knower's inquiry begins (2016:47)." It is difficult to put it any simpler or more pointedly, but standpoint epistemology emerges from the researcher having a sense of reflexivity in their research by understanding their location in the matrix of domination and how their location can impact how they research, what they research, and their outcomes. For instance, it is imperative that a researcher try to be as cognizant as possible about how their subjective positions impact the process of research and knowledge production.

Intersectionality, the multiplicative experience and social location of intersecting privileges, disadvantages, or a combination of both is also critical to consider (Crenshaw 1989:140). Hence, a woman who is a lesbian and black might have a different lived experience than a straight woman who is white. Indeed, standpoint and feminist theorists argue that power is a commodity and the more one has, the more influence they have over epistemology.

> Using an intersectional lens also means recognizing the historical contexts surrounding an issue. Long histories of violence and systematic discrimination have created deep inequities that disadvantage some from the outset. These inequalities intersect with each other, for example,

> poverty, caste systems, racism and sexism, denying people their rights and equal opportunities. The impacts extend across generations.[1]

For example, Western ways of knowing were androcentric and women and people of color's voices were not included or were understood by the academic community as biased (Jagger 2014: 305; Collins 2014: 315). Additionally, power and authority can influence the outcome of research and knowledge because researchers who are in a powerful position in society, such as an educated white male, views life differently than, for example, an uneducated Latina woman. This does not mean one has a more valuable life experience, but, that a man studying a group of women may come up with different results than if the women were being studied by someone closer to her on the matrix (May et al. 2000). It is prudent for any researcher to be aware of how their privilege affects their research and their knowledge. This idea was important for me when conducting research as I was not studying down or studying up but studying other women of similar demographics and education. The power dynamic was lessened and my lateral social position with most of these women might have decreased the possibility for inaccuracies, but of course, does not mean that similar subject positions eliminates them.

Feminist research then strives for objectivity but does so with the understanding that all knowledge is socially constructed, and that knowledge is situated, fluid, and dependent on context (McKinzie and Richards 2019). Though, researchers should always strive for objectivity through self-reflective practices, each human experience is different, rendering the "truth" as highly contextual. The knowledge and understanding of

[1] UN Women. 2020. "Intersectional feminism: what it means and why it matters right now." *UN Women.* Retrieved September 26, 2020. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters.

different types of epistemologies was helpful while conducting research; I strove to be as reflexive as possible about my own position in society, and how it potentially affects the research process and outcomes.

Literature Review

When reviewing the previous literature on women's sexual experiences, there are two prominent themes: first, the impacts of sociocultural values on sexual attitudes and second, consensual and non-consensual sexual experiences. My review of literature also revealed many subthemes: the ideas of how sexual language is ambiguous when talking about sexual experiences (i.e. what an individual considers "sex" or what defines rape), and differences in experiences based on religious upbringing, race, and education. As mentioned, previous research also explores sexual experiences which are dichotomized by consensual and non-consensual, as well as one study I found that examined sex that might be technically consensual, but unwanted (Katz 2015). In the aforementioned section, I noted that research on this topic was not as extensive when dealing with the more nuanced sexual experiences and focused primarily on sex that was considered either fully consensual or fully non-consensual. I reiterate this information because these themes were also present in my own research and provided a baseline upon which I was able to build the foundation of my research and expand on previous studies.

Impacts of sociocultural values on sexual attitudes

The first major theme was that of sociocultural values and their impact on women's sexual attitudes. When researching sex, language is of utmost importance because it contributes to the overall narrative of how sex is perceived and performed. In order to understand women's experiences, sexual definitions are integral to explaining

and understanding experiences. Sexual definitions are the equivocal descriptions of sexual acts which can range from heavy kissing to sexual intercourse. For example, "hooking up" is a sexually ambiguous term that can have different meanings depending on circumstances and individuals. Hooking up may be intercourse, outercourse, or it may be as unobtrusive as kissing (Barnett et al. 2016:204). The definitional ambiguity is paramount in making sense of the research surrounding sex. There is a lack of literature specifically addressing desired sexual experiences. Instead, much of the literature focuses on rape, sexual assault, and virginity and abstinence. Women's attitudes of sexual experiences are seen widely throughout the literature regarding the above-mentioned focuses, but the specific focus of *desired* first sexual experiences tends to be omitted.

Much of the literature on sexual attitudes and experiences deals with the differences between individuals, such as socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, age, religiosity, and sexual identity. These sociocultural differences are key to understanding how some women cope with sexual assault, sexual regret, and then how they move forward into sexually satisfying relationships.

In particular, the way different racial and ethnic groups experience sex based on sociocultural values may differ from whites. Wyatt and Dunn (1991) studied 248 women in Los Angeles County to find that "contrary to previous reports, black women had higher levels of sex guilt than their white peers" (471). As Wyatt and Dunn found, sex guilt or shame following a sexual encounter is part of women's sexual experiences and can impact the desire to engage in further sexual experiences as well as affect the level of satisfaction of a particular sexual experience. Beyond the binary of black and white racial differences, Heinemann, Atallah, and Rosenbaum (2016) examined "the impact of culture

and ethnicity on sexuality and sexual function." Heinemann et al. compare a multitude of countries, but focus specifically on the United States, and they contrast the differences between Latinx culture and mainstream culture in terms of defining sexuality and gender roles, how language affects sexual ideals, and how media, such as pornography, has changed the perspectives of all cultures across the world. They claim that sexual dysfunction can even be attributed to social pressure depending on country and culture (Heinemann et al. 2016:147). While this study was broad in scope, it gives a basic understanding about how sex and sexuality differ within cultures in the United States (and to a lesser degree, other countries outside the U.S.).

Negy, Velezmoro, Reig-Ferrer, Smith-Castro, and Livia (2015) examine how views about sex vary based on generation both in the United States and abroad. The researchers compared the current sexual attitudes of adult children in the United States, Spain, Costa Rica, and Peru to their parents' views on sex—making it an intergenerational study. They found that in Spain, sexual attitudes were liberal and permissive, while in the United States, they were the most conservative and restrictive (Negy et al. 2015:477). Though across the four countries, the adult children's views tended to be more permissive than those of their parents, which shows the generational gap of attitudes across the four geographic locations.

In addition to racial, ethnic, and generational differences, religion can significantly impact the beliefs about sexual performance and virginity. Burdette addresses how religion impacts sexual attitudes, from virginity to the termination of an unwanted pregnancy (2015). She claims that "religion appears to influence both attitudes towards sexual activity and sexual behavior" (Burdette 2015:350). She found that the

more conservative and religious that people are, the more stigmatized sexuality was in a particular community (Burdette 2015:350). Level of religiosity tends to affect individuals beginning at puberty all the way through adulthood. Burdette found that these attitudes not only impact individuals, but how the individuals perceives others. For instance, religiosity influences whether someone "agrees" with another individual being part of the LGBTQ community, whether they believe abortion is morally wrong, with whom and when they have sex, their willingness to participate in sexual education, and their views on HIV/AIDS (Burdette 2015:350-351). Religion appears in the literature to be as impactful as any other sociocultural value on people's sexual attitudes.

Davidson, Moore, Earle, and Davis (2008), studied four universities throughout the United States to see if there were differences in sexual attitudes by region, religion, and race and found that in one capacity or another, these things did explain some variation. The four universities included in the study were a historically black college/university (HBCU), a "predominantly white, Southern university with a religious heritage," another public university in the Southwest, and one in the Midwest. The men and women at the HBCU tended to have sex more often and with more partners than the other three universities, but also tended to base their sexual decisions off personal values and preference rather than societal values and sexual norms more often than the other universities. Another notable result is that the HBCU also had the lowest mean age of first sexual intercourse, but a fairly high rate of heterosexuality (Davidson et al. 2008: 201:211). Taken together, the conclusions from the reviewed research show that there are cultural, regional, and racial differences in views and performance of sex.

While the aforementioned differences are crucial when studying sexual behaviors, there are also more specific factors that can lead to certain attitudes and behaviors. Le Gall et al. discussed five factors that are influenced by age and religious beliefs on adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors: (1) permissiveness, (2) instrumentality, (3) communion, (4) sexual practices, which they divide into: (a) pleasure and (b) responsibility. The researchers also found two more sub-factors that came to the forefront: (5) self-centered sex and (6) others-centered sex (2002). The researchers found that the older and less religious an individual is, they were less permissive and instrumental in their sexual behavior and attitudes. Unexpectedly for Le Gall et al. (2002), an individual's gender was more indicative of differences in attitudes among participants than was the level of religiousness or age, which did not match the original hypothesis of the study. Ultimately, Le Gall et al. results aligned with other researcher on religion and sexual attitudes. Sociocultural values play a significant role in women's formation of their attitudes and performance of sex throughout their lives and especially in their early experiences.

Sexual experiences (consensual and non-consensual)

Researchers have extensively investigated sexual abuse and rape as a sexual experience, whether or not considered by victims to be their first sexual experience. Gunby, Carline, and Beynon (2012) conducted a focus group of college students in the United States at a public university in order to have an open discourse on rape and sexual abuse. Participants were split up by gender to foster open communication and researchers perceived that students thought that in the case of intoxication of both parties, sex is less likely to be considered rape and more likely to be perceived as a regrettable decision.

Students came to a general consensus, however, that when one party is intoxicated and the other is not, this would unequivocally be considered rape (Gunby et al. 2012). The concepts of rape and sexual assault tend to influence the victims' ideas of their own sexual "purity" and what they considered to be their first sexual experience. Some may state that their virginity was forcefully taken, other rape victims claim to still be virgins so long as they did not willingly "give up" their virginity.

Exemplifying the slipperiness of definitions of sex, the term virginity is also ambiguous, as ideas of what virginity means vary from person to person (Barnett et al. 2016), and more broadly, between sexes. Bersamin, Fisher, Walker, Hill, and Grube write, "[m]ales were more likely than females to indicate that less risky sexual behaviors (e.g. genital touching)" counted as having sex, "whereas females tended to think of sex as sexual experiences" regardless of whether penetration occurred (Bersamin et al. 2007).

In another study, Barnett and Moore utilized two scales to explore virginity. They found the idea of virginity as a gift is more common among religious individuals—that one's virginity can only be "given" one time to one person and is therefore perceived as special. This is a commonly held social view that women typically, rather than men, must maintain virginity because it is a gift. By assigning meaning to virginity and sex in different ways, respondents' attitudes and behaviors tend to vary widely depending on where they fall on the scales and tend to be predictive of future behaviors (Barnett et. al 2017). In addition, Mullaney studied the "construction of identities based on 'not doings,'" which primarily affects women based on their sexual actions, or lack thereof (2001). The idea of "not doings" essentially means that women have not had sex, or not had multiple partners—it is a way to construct an identity based on things not done rather

than things done, such as penetrative intercourse. Taken together, these studies clearly show how sociocultural considerations are paramount, as they impact how individuals and society view sex.

General sexual attitudes and sociocultural values are not the only influencers of sexual attitudes. Sexual experiences (both negative and positive, consensual and non-consensual, wanted and unwanted) heavily impact the behaviors and attitudes relating to sex. Reissing, Andruff, and Wentland (2012) researched topics similar to my research, however, due to the quantitative nature of the study, they focused more on factors determining future sexual adjustment, such as age of individuals when they first had sex, race, and whether orgasms occurred. The researchers used a questionnaire to learn about the participants' (both women and men) first sexual experiences. Additionally, this study followed similar research conducted in an Eastern Canadian university and polled only heterosexual Canadians of both sexes (Reissing et al. 2012). Reissing et. al (2012) found that first consensual sexual intercourse affected the sexual adjustment of young adults. This study is unique in that it focuses on first sexual experiences that were entirely consensual. I argue, however, consensual sexual experiences are not the *only* gauge of sexuality development. Reissing et al. (2012) examined similar themes in other literature, except that rape and sexual abuse were excluded. Furthermore, they did not ask the participants questions about sexual definition.

Moreover, consensual sex is defined broadly in the literature and many times researchers do not offer solid definitions. The inability to define negative occurrences and events, such as rape or sexual abuse, leads to a lack of definitions in the literature, which typically ends up leaving room for women to blame themselves for their own sexual

abuse, hence why women often consider being raped as a sexual experience rather than violence against them (Fahs 2016).

Sexual experience is such a broad concept that it is not always clear regarding whether an experience was consensual or not, or wanted or not. Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose (2016), studied thousands of posts on different social media platforms to compare women's experiences of sexual assault and *how* they felt about these instances, and then *why* they felt that particular way about their assaults. Their analysis clearly shows that women tended to place blame somewhat on themselves and consider the rape, whether by a stranger or someone familiar, a sexual experience (Keller, et al. 2016).

Previous literature focuses on sexual abuse and rape (primarily against women), and whether sexually abused women considered their rape as a loss of virginity (Fahs 2016). In one study, the researcher focused on identifying women's first sex, worst sex, oral sex, and sexual trauma and found that these anecdotes from interviewees tended to overlap. The conclusion was that in many cases, worst sex and sexual trauma have the most commonalities making them more similar than what the social norm might lead someone to believe (Fahs 2016).

Another study, similar to Fahs,' focuses on "memorable first-time sexual experiences," using the dichotomy of positive or negative (Orbe, Johnson, Kauffman, Cooke-Jackson 2014). The negative category included experiences linked with undesirable consequences, rape and abuse, regrets, and "unpleasurable to terrible experiences." On the other hand, the positive experience categories included "great experience," thoughtful, good decision, special experience, and positive communicative experience. Orbe et al. (2014) also mention how relationships and sex tend to create

memorable experiences for those involved, whether those experiences are negative or positive, which is consistent with my research.

Moreover, Thomas, Stelzl, and Lafrance studied how women fake orgasms to end sexual encounters (2016). They found that women tend to fake orgasms in order to maintain the hegemonic, patriarchal sexual discourse within their own relationships so as not to challenge the masculinity or sexual performance of their partner (Thomas et al. 2016:283). Thomas et al. (2016:284) exemplify the complex nature of sexual experiences for women, and they take a feminist approach by stating that "as interviewers and allies, we heard women's struggles to express and articulate 'what happened' in the absence of adequate social vocabularies" (Thomas et al. 2016:285). The researchers aimed to find ways to express the ambiguous and inherently sexist ways of talking about sexual experiences, specifically for women who seemed to have experienced unwanted but consensual sexual encounters. These experiences shaped how the women viewed their sex lives and how their attitudes affected them based on emotional and sexual labor, desire, and consent (Thomas et al. 2016:287).

Relatedly, researchers Senn and Carey (2011) utilize quantitative methods and focus on women's early sexual experiences and how those experiences affected their sexual histories. This study was concerned more with the women's age and sexual encounters rather than the experiences themselves. As the authors note, most research on the topic looks only at sexual trauma and how those experiences impact risky sexual behaviors later in life and note instead that they focus on general sexual experiences and age differences between partners (Senn and Carey 2011:61). Senn and Carey found that "greater partner age difference may be associated with sexual risk behavior […] because

of a power imbalance in these relationships" (Senn et al. 2011:64). This study highlights the necessity for feminist-focused research specifically on women's first sexual experiences because age difference between partners does make a difference in sexual adjustment and attitudes later in life. Women who tend to become sexually active with someone their own age versus someone much older showed a higher rate of positive sexual adjustment—therefore it is important to understand why particular women choose an older partner and how that plays into their subsequent sexual experiences.

Finally, in a research note, Dynette Reynolds examines the influence of religion on premarital sex from a theoretical perspective on what she calls the "validity of a relationship" (1994:3). Reynolds argues that research must look into the relationship between religion and premarital sex using relationship validity—the desire for both parties to participate in the relationship sexually, rather than participating out of obligation. Similarly to Reynolds, I seek to understand circumstances surrounding sexual experiences *before* drawing conclusions regarding them by utilizing a feminist standpoint and lending voice to the women I interviewed.

The reviewed literature deals with sexual experiences ranging from positive consensual sex to violent rape experiences. The focus of my study is to fill in the gaps where consensual and desired sex is concerned, mainly regarding the retrospective perception of first desired sexual experience. The literature primarily focuses on first sexual experiences that women perceived as negative or were sexually abusive and non-consensual. In my research, I sought to understand the impact of good experiences on sexual development. Although there is no such thing as "normal" sex, my study aims to find the normative experiences that women desired at the time of sex. Rather than

focusing on how involuntary first sexual experiences shapes sexual attitudes, it is important to understand how the majority of women who have no significant sexual abuse have experienced and continue to experience sex. When it comes to sex, the bad, the weird, and the kink have been studied, but “normal” sexual experiences have not been fully examined, leaving gaps in the literature and ignoring the common experiences of most women.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Understanding how women's sexual experiences shape their attitudes about sex and intimacy begins with understanding *how* to study them. I utilized a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with women, either in person, over FaceTime or the phone. I chose this method to lend voice to these women and allow them to interpret their own experiences for me, rather than utilizing a quantitative method which does not usually generate rich detail and intricacies like qualitative research can. Based on my feminist theoretical framework, giving women a platform from which to tell their stories of sex and intimacy appeared the most fitting to the research topic and questions.

In-Depth Interviews

I conducted in-depth interviews with 17 women between the ages of 30 to 39. One interview was disqualified, leaving 16 women participants in the study. The interviews were structured with general questions and probes falling under each broader question (see Appendix A). I chose women ages 30 to 39 because this gave older millennials a chance to share their experiences, as so much research is focused on college-aged women or young and emerging adults. Having a time minimum of five years since the woman's first sexual experience gave these women enough time to have developed their views on sex since their first sexual experience. The interviews allowed for a more open dialogue with participants requiring building rapport and explaining my research. I sought to understand their subjective experiences within their sexual histories and also to allow them to explain any life details that tied back to their first sexual experiences. Before interviewing the participants, I asked them to complete the prescreen questionnaire which essentially established that they were in their thirties, that it had been

at least five years since their first desired sexual experience, and finally, that their first sexual experience was not predated by any forced sex or ongoing abuse. There were also demographic questions and exclusion questions (i.e. to make sure that participants had not experienced sexual assault prior to first desired sexual experience).

On average, interviews lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes. I obtained oral informed consent from all of my participants. I did this so that their names would not appear on any documents because of the sensitive information shared during the interviews. Each woman agreed to audio recording the interview. Each woman was also given or emailed a copy of the informed consent for her records. I gave each woman a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. I transcribed each audio interview and coded for different themes in order to better understand similarities and differences among participants' narratives.

Feminist Methodology

I endeavored to eliminate any power dynamic between myself as the researcher and the participant by using empathy when participants shared their stories with me, particularly those that might have been negative or emotional. Often times if a participant had difficulty understanding how to answer a question, I would share what other participants had said so they could get a clearer idea without inserting my own preferences for the answer. I would also normalize their experiences by letting them know whether I had heard others share similar experiences. This likely affected responses later in the interview in a positive way, as participants appeared more at ease with the idea that they were not alone in their experiences, and therefore, were willing to share more details about their sexual histories.

I transcribed the audio that I had recorded of the interviews, and after I completed transcription, I analyzed and coded the data, searching for salient and recurring themes which resulted in some overarching themes and minor themes. I sought to make sense of my data by linking the findings to previous research, while also searching new ideas that (to my knowledge) scholars have not explored in extant literature.

Through the interview process, I tried to be as self-reflective as a I could, as a white woman in her late 20s, who grew up middle class. I am also educated and have a range of life experiences and struggles that shape my biography. I attempted to think about how these life experiences and my social position impacted the process of research. I tried to keep the interviews as systematic as possible by using the interview questions and keeping my participants on track when they strayed too much from the question[1]. At the end of each interview, I let participants know they could add information they may have forgotten and offered to share excerpts from their interview that would become part of the thesis. Some declined, and others accepted and asked me to send their quotes to ensure that they were adequately represented and that they felt comfortable with their anonymity. This allowed participants to be part of the research process. By adhering to feminist methodology, I tried to provide a platform for women to speak about their experiences and reflect on their views of sex.

Demographics

I asked every woman I interviewed their age, race or ethnicity, sexuality, religious affiliation, education level, whether they had kids, were married or partnered. The largest

[1] Initially, this proved difficult because I did not want participants to feel that they needed to omit details, nor did I want to lose any potential data, but eventually was able to discern what was an unimportant "rabbit-hole" and what was useful data.

variation was age, with women ranging in age from 30 to 38. The majority of participants self-identified as white or Caucasian, with one noting her Jewish ethnicity and another stating that she had Irish ancestry. I interviewed one Black woman and one woman who identified herself as South Asian. Nine women identified as either straight or heterosexual, while five identified as bisexual (or pansexual or both). Two women were lesbians, although one identified as more bisexual, but as married to a woman. The answers to the religion question were varied, from a church-going Methodist to "spiritual but not religious." One woman was a non-practicing Muslim, four were non-practicing Christians, and nine did not have any current religious affiliation.

The participants' level of education was higher than the general population—nine women had their Masters' degree, one was working on her Ph.D., and one woman had a J.D. Five women had their Bachelors degrees, one woman had a high school diploma, and another had attended vocational school. Six participants had children and ten did not, while eight were married, three were partnered, and five were neither married nor partnered.

The women willing to participate tended to identify as not actively religious, white, straight, and holding a Masters' degree. Considering these demographics quite closely match my own, it is not surprising that these appear in my study. Half of the interviewed women were married, but if non-marital partners are included, then those who were entirely single were overshadowed. I try to make sense of my sample as more straight than queer, highly educated, and having a religious background (but not practicing) by delving into the importance of how these particular demographics may have shaped the women I interviewed and their sexual lives.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes emerged from analysis of the transcribed interviews. The three main themes include (1) guilt and shame in sexual experiences, (2) the impact of first sexual experience on confidence and self-esteem, and (3) sexual experiences within the context of relationships, which includes the expectations for future sexual encounters. Two minor themes include (4) sex as an obligation, and (5) negative experiences with consensual sex.

Guilt and Shame

When participants mentioned guilt and shame, it was almost always brought up in discussions about religious upbringing. Participants expressing these emotions overwhelmingly fell into the category of former or non-practicing Christian, with a few exceptions. For instance, Claire, who is a 31-year-old woman married to a man and identifies as straight, was taught in her Christian private school that sex is for marriage only. She mentioned that the school negatively skewed her ideas about sex.

Although Claire identified her first sexual experience as occurring with a partner with whom she was in love, she did not have *penetrative* sex with him, owing to the guilt and shame she felt from her religious upbringing. Claire stated that, "I regret not having sex with him. Like retrospectively, looking back […] I think the only reason we didn't was because we felt like we would feel really bad about it or that […] he'd be obligated to marry me." Another participant, Dani, also attended a conservative Christian high school and had "religious, heteronormative parents" who influenced her feelings towards sex and sexuality.

Similarly, Julie, 36, felt "Catholic guilt" when enjoying sex in her youth. Although Julie stated she has never been deeply religious, it played a part in the guilt she felt while having sex with her first partner, sharing, "that's how I was raised. And as a good Catholic girl, you don't tell people when you're having sex, but you still have sex anyway." Similarly, Ellen, a 30-year-old lesbian who is neither partnered nor married, also reported the "Catholic guilt" she felt initially having sex, both because of her sexual orientation and because of the stigma placed on having sexual relations in Catholic teachings. Ellen told me that, *"*I'm not religious, but I still get that Catholic guilt because, you know, it's what you do." Lilly, 33, and married to a man, claimed that she had a "stunted desire for sex" owing to her religious upbringing as well. Her repressed feelings on enjoying sex also came from her first marriage, which she identifies as sexually abusive. When she got out of her marriage, she felt having sexual experiences was laden with guilt and shameful. Tanya, who is 39 and married, recalled that her first sexual partner was religious and made her feel guilty for having sex with him, sharing that:

> He was super religious and that's why we were in a church. And he made me feel horrible for it, like I was a slut. I spent a lot of time worrying about Heaven and Hell and sinning. […] but he still wanted to do things.

Tanya's experience could also be considered sexually abusive, though she does not identify it as such. It's unsurprising that purity culture taught in religious institutions in the U.S. contribute to guilt and shame for the women who have sex premaritally (Block 2005). It can also be attributed to things like victim-blaming for rape and sexual abuse. While these experiences were desired and consensual, they nevertheless felt emotions of guilt or shame. For instance, Joyce shared that, "I still felt like that, you know, from my brainwashed upbringing that you needed to live together in order to be having sex…and

be married to be having sex." Similarly, Claire stated that "going to like a Christian high school definitely negatively affected [sexual attitudes]".[1]

Another pattern I observed in my research was the dichotomy of the "slut" and the "prude." Historically, a woman who does not have sex is prudish and a woman who has sex, even once, is a slut or a whore (Baraket et al. 2018). Men do not face these stigmas regardless of their choice to have sex or not to have sex (Kreager and Staff 2009).

One of the more incisive comments participants made about the slut and prude dichotomy was mentioned by Joyce, Dani, and Claire. Claire said,

> That was like the main thing you talked about in like Bible groups and in chapels and things like that was basically like, hey, don't have sex or you're a bad person and you're going to Hell and you will never be in a successful relationship and nobody will love you.

While Dani was talking to me and said the following: "There was a guy, too—I mean, I had a lot of like—it makes me sound so slutty, but I had a lot of, like, oral sex given to different guys."

These three women all pointed out that they had no sex education at school or at home. Claire mentioned that her school taught something called CPR: creating positive relationships, which was a curriculum used to teach young people to be abstinent and focused on "creating a positive relationship with Jesus." Claire spoke about the fact that her school went over the anatomical parts of men and women but that's where it stopped; that is, for Claire, she was not taught anything close to comprehensive sexual education. Claire felt that this was a subtle way to slut-shame individuals who wanted to have sex outside of a Christian marriage. She noted, "I believed that if you are a good Christian,

[1] I must note that my research specifically excludes studying rape and sexual abuse because I want to focus on desired and consensual experiences, but that this research certainly cannot be inferred to have completely excluded these traumas from individual narratives.

you did not have sex before you get married." Joyce briefly mentioned that her school did not have sex education, taught abstinence, and her mother did nothing to teach her how to have sex safely, and instead, ignored the subject: "I never had any good sex education other than about, like, my period. And I never talked to boys about, you know, anything related to sex." This added to Joyce's guilt when she did choose to become sexually active, because it was a taboo subject in her life at the time. Dani stated briefly that her schooling did not include sexual education, that her parents were religious, and did not teach her anything about sex either. The simple fact is that many of the participants had to learn through experience what was "good" and "bad" regarding sex and had to learn through trial-and-error. These three women, all of whom attended a religious school, felt that because the subject was taboo, women who had sex were sluts. Joyce even said she was "brainwashed into abstinence" by not having sex education and felt guilty when she chose to engage in sex. Claire felt similar, recalling "that was like my preconceived notion coming into a romantic relationship. If I have sex, like, it's not gonna work out. Like, they won't love me anymore."

Not surprisingly, the slut and prude dichotomy heavily saturated the narratives of these three women with fundamental Christian religious backgrounds. Claire mentioned that it took her a long time to realize that sex was not just about a man's pleasure, as she felt that was an idea taught to her in her Christian school. Another woman, Jade, who is 38 and single, announced, "I also didn't realize that I was allowed to require pleasure reciprocated to me." She did not understand that pleasure is okay; it seemed that sexual pleasure was how sluts reacted to sex.

Claire revealed a powerful story illuminating how guilt and shame dovetail with the ideas of slut and prude.

> He kept trying to finger me and I kept swatting his hand away and I kept saying no. And I mean, I probably said no or swatted him away, I mean, at least five […] times. Eventually he was going for it again and I thought to myself, what the hell. It's been a while. I don't want […] to fight with it. So, I mean, I just let it happen. And then eventually, like not too long after, like, it did not happen very long, and I was like, okay, you need to stop. Like, this is too far for me, and that's when he got aggravated and was like, 'Are you kidding? Like, you don't want to finish?'

Her feelings of prudishness were exacerbated by partners like this to whom she said she owed nothing but felt guilty both for not having sex and for letting them have sexual contact with her.

Guilt and shame in these narratives seems to be related to negative emotions when sex was pleasurable, and also related to having sex when they did not desire to do so. The women who were comfortable having sex for pleasure early in their sexual histories never mentioned the idea of slut or prude during the interviews. This contrast led me to conclude that for many, sexual pleasure is tied with the idea and feeling of sluttiness, which leads some individuals to feel guilt and shame when having sexual encounters. From these narratives I conclude that these women felt guilt and shame regardless of whether or not they drew pleasure from the encounters because of how they were raised or how their partners reacted to their decisions regarding sex.

The final subtheme relates to participants' past and current guilt resulting from a different sexual encounters—both consensual and coerced/forced. Lilly stated that in her current marriage, she no longer feels the shamefulness of having sex or gaining pleasure from sexual encounters. Although she did not overtly state what changed, she seemed to

attribute decreasing feelings of shame to the positive experiences she had following her abusive marriage and religious past. Conversely, Dani told me that she regrets sexual relationships ~~everyone~~ before her husband. Dani was engaged in relationship after relationship up until her husband, all of whom she had sex with, starting with her first love. She admitted that she may not have found her husband were it not for the past relationships, but she regrets having had sex with them. Dani then felt obligated to date or become engaged to a number of them, owing to her religious upbringing, because she felt that if she had sex with someone, she needed to be in a relationship that would eventually lead to marriage (because sex outside of marriage was shameful). The conglomeration of her past relationships led Dani to where she is today and how she views sex, but she still holds on to past guilt and shame, however, does not feel shameful having sex with her current husband. Differently from Dani, Jade feels more guilt now from her behaviors of the past than she did at the time they were occurring.

> I look back at it. I have more shame now than during […] that time period. I have more shame. I feel more shame and regret now because of that, that because of the evolution and growth at me as a person.

Jade mentioned she used sex transactionally to get what she wanted—typically love or attention from men, rather than enjoying sex as part of a relationship. She states that although she is single, she is happier with her sexual choices now than in retrospect and has been able to diminish the shame component because of later self-reflection.

Even though guilt and shame seemed to mostly stem from religious upbringing, surprisingly, only a few participants ever mentioned actually regretting any experiences. Though they weren't proud of their past behaviors, most participants expressed that they had no regrets, believing they grew from their experiences both sexually and personally. I

argue that although guilt and shame are not solely the result of religious background, fundamental religious ideologies riddle these participants' lives with negative emotions both in the past and present. This plays into the idea that women are not "supposed" to be sexual or feel sexual pleasure or desire, lest they be a slut, but should also feel guilty if they *do not* participate in sexual encounters. This is an untenable position. It's worth mentioning that participants discussed guilt and shame in subsequent sections. For instance, that they no longer feel those emotions because they have grown from their experiences to generally learn that sex should be enjoyable.

The Impact of First Sexual Experience on Confidence and Self-esteem

Though my analysis touched on both positive and negative aspects of first sexual experiences, confidence stood out as a positive theme in relation to partners, performance, and communication.

Partners played a significant role in the formation of these participants' experiences. Around half of the women I interviewed mentioned that in their early experiences, they focused on their partner's pleasure more than they allowed their partner to focus on theirs. This could be, like Joyce stated, she did not like to get "eaten out" early on, but now she does. This is possibly due to negative experiences, pressure to give pleasure that was not reciprocated, or issues with self-esteem. Joyce mentioned that the way her partners treated her in the past versus how they treat her now has changed, which has likely boosted her confidence in the bedroom. Joyce shared that there has been an ebb and flow of her sexual confidence over the years, "So my first sexual encounter, I think, boosted my confidence quite a bit and I grew, then that negative attitude like diminished it again." Of the women who talked about their confidence levels, most

mentioned the necessity of sexual reciprocation (i.e. fellatio and cunnilingus, or taking turns doing the "work"). Several women reported having been relatively reserved in early sexual experiences (e.g. receiving oral sex) but became more confident and now allow and enjoy that reception. As I mentioned in the guilt and shame theme, some women reported not thinking they should feel pleasure during sex, or that they did not early on, but the same women tended to change their mind. Joyce said,

> I can't even tell you how much guilt there was. And now I like sexual encounters where it's less about me and I'm focused on my partner. Let me tell you, it is balanced. There are definitely just as many instances where it's all about me or about both of us.

Jade even mentioned that because of her past, she is now lazier in bed and wants to receive more pleasure than she is willing to give; "Before, like I said, like I was I thought it was all about my performance just to please them. And now, like, I […] have a right to receive pleasure, too." She, along with others, now report that they firmly believe that pleasure for themselves is equally as important for the partner.

Orgasms played an important role in women's confidence and their partners. The women I interviewed who were partnered with women, or identified as lesbian, tended to eschew the idea that they needed to have an orgasm every time, because sex is more than just physical pleasure. Annie, who is married to a woman, said that she has learned to be patient with her body, and if she does not orgasm that it is okay. She said that "not feeling impatient with myself, with my wife, because it's not easy for me to have an orgasm. I think with other women […] I didn't want to take too long." Shelby, also married to a woman, said similarly that sex is not just about orgasms for her and her wife, and sometimes it is okay to focus on one or the other during a sexual encounter: "I expect a

give and take some and also times where we can […] just be about one of us." Many of the women partnered with men echoed this idea but reiterated that it must not always be about one person or the other. The confidence these women built tended to be in relation to a partner (or partners from their past) who helped them understand a more egalitarian way to perform and enjoy sex, rather than focusing on their partner every time, particularly, in contrast to sex earlier in their lives.

Related to confidence was the idea of sexual performance. Confidence and sexual performance likely meant different things to the women, due to ideas from society or their upbringing (or both). Ria, a 38-year-old single mother, mentioned that she is more confident in her abilities than initially, but will still use alcohol as a means to enhance her sexual confidence. She was the only person who reported this, but it is important to note, as alcohol was a part of many women's sexual experiences. Leah, a 33-year-old woman who reported not being married or partnered, but in a relationship, spent a significant portion of her interview sharing about how her sexual abilities and performance have increased and she has more confidence in her abilities now than ever. "I feel like the confidence boost was the biggest part of it. [I] was feeling appreciated and feeling sexy and feeling like I can sit on your face and not suffocate you … I guess I've kinda gone from really trying to impress somebody to being like, I want us both to have a good time." Women also reported their present self-worth being higher than during their first sexual encounters. Increased self-worth was likely a direct result of both past experiences and the passing of time to process and learn from the past. Ellen told me she felt more confident because she was able to move past the idea of "sexy lesbian sex that you see in

porn" and realize that "people fart during sex" and there is no perfect script, especially for lesbian sex. Ellen continued:

> The things I saw, it always had to be like so sexy and so, like, setup and so whatever. But now it's just kind of like it's not—not that it's not sexy. But like there's a lot of pressure put on women, especially to be like, okay, you have to wear the perfect lingerie. You have to light candles. You have to have your legs shaved. You have the perfect orgasm face. But in reality, that's like bullshit.

Across most interviews, women agree that over time and through both good and bad experiences, their self confidence in their performance increased, and they do not spend as much time worrying about if they are performing well or not but focus on enjoying the experience.

A less overt subtheme that emerged is the importance of communicating with one's partner to build confidence. Julie said now she feels that "I'm allowed as a female to like want sexual interactions as well, whereas I feel like in society we're not supposed to want them … I think because I'm much more comfortable in myself and my own body, that [now] I tend to know what I like. And I'm […] no longer afraid to ask for it. So, sex has gotten better for me throughout the years." Dani's experiences prior to her husband helped her learn that she needs to communicate with her husband about what is and is not okay. Lilly also mentioned that her husband always asks for consent prior to engaging in sexual activities and makes sure what he is doing is alright with her. Some women, like Lilly and Dani, gained confidence through communication and as a result of negative and traumatic experiences, and some, like Shelby, Julie, and Allison, have had more positive experiences with partners who taught them to talk about sex. Allison told me the following, especially pertaining to casual sex: "I think that I tend to remember, like, the

two really good casual experiences … One really stands out because the person kept in touch with me and it sort of wrapped up positively emotionally as well as physically."

Allison and her current partner have explicit conversations about sex because they are in an open relationship, and she stresses that communication is key, stating that "I'm not necessarily looking for a deep connection with somebody but it's definitely important for me to feel a positive friendly connection for it to be a good experience."

Caroline also is in an open marriage, and she and her husband have communicated strict guidelines about the rules for having sexual encounters outside their marriage. While communication in and outside of the bedroom seem to be an ongoing theme, communication is not always practiced by all women and their partners. For instance, Claire has a hard time with her husband because she feels that he does not listen to her, which affects their marriage negatively.

Overall, communication added to the confidence of women, as most reported being comfortable asking for what they want and sharing what they do not want with their partners. However, many stated that this was a difficult part of developing sexually because they did not want to overstep an invisible boundary, but with age and experience they developed more confidence.

Sex as Obligation

Importantly, I found that although these women desired many of their sexual experiences, they still had sexual encounters in which they felt obligated to participate. These experiences were identified as technically consensual but done out of a sense of obligation for a variety of reasons, rather than a participant's desire to have sex. The theme of sex as obligation can be broken into the three following subcategories:

relationships, behavior ending, and social pressure. Some excerpts included in this subtheme have been mentioned in others. However, the themes and the women's experiences are not mutually exclusive.

The primary way I found women engaged in what they felt was an obligatory sexual encounter was within romantic relationships. Joyce stated that, "I still felt like that […] you needed to live together in order to be having sex and be married to be having sex. And so, I think that's why I've kind of pushed for [marriage]." This particular narrative is not as much about obligation, as her feeling the need to solidify the sexual relationship with something more permanent. Dani also mentioned a similar life story. She felt the need to date someone she slept with, which then made her feel obligated to have sex with the person she was dating—a vicious cycle that she claims to have eventually broken with the man who is now her husband.

Claire told me that she has sex with her husband mainly because he wants it, rather than because they both want it. She considers this to be consensual, but that she feels obligated to have sex because he is her husband, and just because she does not want to have sex does not mean he should be forced to abstain. Similarly, Shelby's first sexual experience was charged with the idea of "sex as obligation," although she states that it was desired. "My very first sexual encounter… it was literally a gift to him." Shelby, who identifies as pansexual (and married to a woman) shared that during some of her past sexual encounters, she would have sex with men she was dating because that is "what you're supposed to do" as opposed to having sex because she wanted to.

Sex as an obligation was mentioned by some women I interviewed as a way to get their partners to "shut up"—namely, their partner's undesired and annoying sexual

advances. Julie mentioned that one time she had sexual intercourse with a partner because he kept asking and she wanted him to "shut up" about it, saying that she was "always used to […] sex, being affectionate and touching each other and […] trying to please each other and things like that. And he was just like he was trying to get off, you know what I mean? And I was just like … this feels gross and degrading and very unpleasurable for me." In Dani's narrative, this was a more prevalent theme, as she said she would perform oral sex on men (she did not want to have penetrative sex with them for several different reasons). She spoke about when she would get male attention and they wanted sexual contact; she would give them blowjobs as a means to avoid having penetrative sex.

> I was trying to get out of sex the entire time and still please the man. That sounds fucked up a little bit. But it was literally just about pleasing the man so they didn't hate me, so they didn't end up like raping me essentially.

This part of Dani's story could also fall into the prude and slut dichotomy, as she claimed she did not want to be seen as a slut or a prude, and this was a "happy" medium for her. She said none of her partners forced her to do anything, but she felt the pressure to do something sexual, and settled for oral sexual contact.

Additionally, mentioned prior, Claire let a partner finger her because she wanted him to stop pressuring her.[2] Other women who experienced similar encounters tended to categorize them as coercion or forced sex, rather than consensual obligatory sexual experiences, which is why they are not discussed. While *prima facie,* these experiences may seem similar, to the women who experienced them, they are not necessarily consensual or non-consensual (likely based upon their social-psychological

[2] The reason I do not consider these experiences to be of a non-consensual nature is owing to the women stating that they were consensual experiences, although not necessarily desired.

understandings of what constitutes rape, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment). For instance, engaging in undesired sexual encounters to stop the partners unwanted sexual advances, were common in the participants' narratives, but the participants defined these experiences differently—whether they viewed sex as coercion, rape, or consensual.

Sex as an obligation walks a thin line between consensual and non-consensual, but ultimately those individual experiences must be determined as one or the other by the women who experienced them—not by a researcher. Generally, when the participants were recalling encounters where they had sex to "shut up" their partner, they tended to view it as consensual but obligatory.

The final subcategory is social pressure. The concept of pressure takes a variety of forms: pressure women put on themselves and pressure from their partners or their peers, rather than because the participants desired sex and/or they were ready to have sex. Because I interviewed women who are now lesbian-identified or partnered with a woman, it was important to make social pressure its own subsection. Shelby and Annie, who are both married to women, had sex with men because of social pressure. This lends to the narrative of compulsory heteronormativity, as women are expected to enjoy sex with men as a default. Jade claims she had sexual intercourse for the first time because she felt it was part of what she was supposed to do, whether as a rite of passage or, in her words, as a transactional experience. While all the experiences I focused on were desired *at the time*, the women have had time to reflect and realize that their first sexual experience may have been more about social pressure than actual desire. Even women like Ria, who was in love and waited on purpose, had sex because she was "in love" and sex in that case seemed to be an obligation, although desired.

Sex as an obligation was not always reported as a negative experience, but was reported overtly by some women, and more subtly implied by others. The women who have stated experiencing sex as an obligation (rather than coercion) tended to call it "consensual sex," even if unwanted, whereas on the other hand, women who experienced this phenomena without overtly identifying it as obligatory in nature tended to refer to those experiences as sexual trauma. These differences highlight how each woman who was interviewed saw her sexual history in a different light, depending on her personal growth since their self-defined obligatory experiences. The women who identified these obligatory sexual experiences, for the most part, report not engaging in obligatory sex any longer, as sex is something they believe should be desired by both parties.

Sexual Experiences within a Relationship

The relationship between sex and emotion is prevalent throughout the narratives both in a positive and negative way and tended to be within the confines of a relationship. As mentioned, this theme tends to overlap with other themes but highlights the role emotion plays in sexual experiences for these women, particularly while they were in relationships. I present this theme using the emotions that participants mentioned as a way to make sense of their sexual experiences. I categorized the idea of relationship sex into the following five categories: healthy relationships, detachment, desire, friendship, and negative emotion.

As is nearly everything in this research project, "healthy" relationships are somewhat of a social construct. I identified the following experiences by whether the participant had positive things to say about the sexual relationship, or if she outright stated that the relationship was healthy.

Ria mentioned that her first sexual experience was penetrative and "losing" her virginity to her boyfriend at the time. She shared that the relationship was healthy, and she waited until she loved him to have sex with him. She stated that even from a young age, she knew she wanted to have sex in the confines of a committed and loving relationship and was able to fulfill that goal. Along similar lines, Julie stated that her first sexual experience, also what she considers the loss of her virginity, was full of "silly teenager emotions," but that she felt at the time like she was in love with her boyfriend. Julie went on to share her subsequent experiences and concluded that in general, she adheres to the idea that having feelings for a sexual partner makes the sex more enjoyable. She and Jade both mentioned that having a connection outside the bedroom also makes the sex better.

The correlation of sex and love was not only brought up by Julie, although she overtly stated it, but by other participants, such as Michaela, a 34-year-old straight married woman, who felt that with love comes better and more enjoyable sex. Michaela not only mentioned that sex is deeper and more intimate when done in a loving relationship but also shared about her first sexual experience with her now-husband: "It was cosmic, almost, I can't even describe it. I've never once in my life had that connection that I had." Ellen claims that having emotional attachment in a sexual relationship "adds another layer" of intimacy, a sentiment echoed by several women. She added that, "again, I feel like a lot of my before and after. It's like a lot of like these stupid preconceived notions that you see in like literature or you see in media. That's not like how real life this happens."

Along the lines of love, respect was mentioned by several women as a necessity for a healthy sex life. Lilly and Joyce both explicitly stated they expect respect from their sexual partners both in their sexual relationship and their romantic relationship. Dani spoke to the idea that respect and trust were congruent. She said she and her husband have established trust and respect in the bedroom as part of their communication skills. Likewise, Lilly noted the importance of trust, respect, and the need for her partner to be as emotionally invested in her as she is in them.

Two participants expressed the importance of their partners looking them in the eyes as a way to show respect while engaging in sex acts—anything sexual, ranging from touching to actual intercourse. Shelby, who is married, added she expects to be told she is loved as part of the respect between herself and her wife. Although Jade is not currently married or partnered, she claims she has grown in her expectations, and that regardless of relationship outside the bedroom, it is important to have a connection and eye contact is one way of doing that. Each woman identifies a healthy relationship a bit differently, but it seems that respect, trust, and love were the building blocks of such a relationship.

While healthy relationships may, to many women, include love, to some the idea of emotional detachment from sex seemed to be important. Caroline, who is in an open marriage, stated that she has to keep her emotions separate from sex particularly outside of her marriage. She told me a story about having sex with someone from her past after she and her partner decided to have an open marriage, and it did not end well, as he wanted her to leave her husband. For this reason, she stressed the point that it is best to remain emotionally detached. Hannah, who identified as mostly asexual shared her first sexual experience, “I don’t really think that I want to. I was already feeling some, like,

asexual vibes for myself […] I was thinking about going to college and I like, didn't want to like, have to approach being a virgin in college." Hannah subsequently agreed that emotional detachment is personally better for her. "I think that because none of my experiences are really like wrapped with love around them, they just kind of are different to me…I think that maybe because my first sexual encounter was more of just like let's just get it over with." Claire, who is married and has engaged in penetrative sex with only her husband, told me that while she used to think emotional connection was necessary for sex, she no longer sees it as ideal, likely because of the lack of communication she has with her husband.

Emotional detachment was also prevalent in the other stories that participants shared with me. These tended to happen when a participant was engaging in sex with someone whom they were not dating or emotionally invested. They talked about hookup stories where the participants admitted not having feelings towards their sexual partner were emotionally detached from the experience. In the cases of women who preferred emotional detachment, it was more for self-preservation from emotional distress and emotional attachment (for instance, Caroline, does not want to have an emotional affair, just to engage in sex outside of her marriage). Additionally, some just preferred the pleasure of the physical experience, like Claire, free from emotional constraints.

Since the word "desired" was in my "call for participants," I expected desire to be a major theme. However, the women who talked about desire tended to focus more on the idea of being desired and desiring their partners in a sexual and physical way, rather than having "desired sex." Due to Michaela's experiences with sex in the past and now currently, she stated that she felt it was important to feel desire and feel loved by her

husband. She recounted to me several experiences in which she did not feel wanted or desired, and that those experiences were emotionally impactful in a negative sense.

Joyce talked about her first husband not wanting her sexually after years of being together, and that experience helped her realize that being desired and wanted was an important part of sex to her, in terms of even enjoying sex or even a desire to engage in sex. In a similar anecdote, Dani spoke about how she had had several relationships and sexual partners because they were good people, but not because she was attracted to them. She felt wanted and desired but has now come to terms with the idea that she, too, needs to desire and want her partner and be physically attracted to him in order for the relationship to work. Dani stated that she was able to learn this with her now-husband, and it has been a huge change from her past engagement and relationships.

The next subtheme within the broader theme of relationships and sex is that of friendship. While not many participants spoke about it, the three who did were adamant in the importance friendship plays in a sexual relationship. Julie's current relationship began as a blind date and was a long-distance friendship for a couple of months. She said,

> We were forced to get to know each other without the physical part of the relationship […] I think looking back, it's really nice because we kind of developed this friendship and this stable ground and this trust in each other before, like, physicality could really even play a role.

Although Julie said her current boyfriend is not the "best sex" she has ever had, she claims it is the most intimate. For Julie, emotionally intimate sex has become preferable to sex that is simply for physical pleasure, and she attributes her happy sex life now to the basis of friendship that she and her boyfriend established prior to dating.

Caroline and her husband also began as friends and she said his interest in her was present prior to her reciprocation of it. She said that they became friends and when she went out of the country for a while, she "started to miss him" and came back and they dated, then got married. Caroline said that, "we've always had this one problem. Our whole lives, our whole marriage. He has a lower sex drive than I do," which has led to an open sex policy in their marriage, sharing that "even though our sex is good, it's not often enough." While their marriage is open, she still claims that they maintain a friendship and ultimately, he is her sole partner and their relationship is good because it was built with a strong foundation, like Julie, of trust and respect.

Joyce, however, mentioned that her ex-husband treated her like a platonic friend and wanted to stay married as platonic friends rather than as sexually and emotionally invested individuals. She did not say friendship as a foundation was undesirable, but she did not enjoy the idea of being with someone who saw her as just a friend. The contrasting ideas of how friendship plays into sexual experiences is important, as it influenced the relationships and growth of the women who mentioned them. For example, Ria talked about having sexual encounters with some of her friends with whom she was not romantically invested, but did not state one way or another how this affected her: "I tried to hang out with him and be his friend, like I said, I appreciated him not killing me. He can't be my friend; he always wants to have sex." Ria stated that she met this particular person in a club under the influence and that is why she joked about him not killing her. Lilly also had her first desired sexual experience with a trusted friend, and she claims it was pivotal in how she views the intimacy of sex, but also did not state one way or another whether or not friendship was important prior to a sexual relationship.

Friendship plays into this theme of relationships by exhibiting the importance of a prior emotional connection—whether romantic or not, when choosing a sexual or romantic partner. In some cases, friendship prior to sex was beneficial for the women I interviewed, and in some cases, it was undesired when the component of sexual desire was left out, as in Joyce's case.

The final subtheme to discuss is that of negative relationships. Negative relationships tainted the experiences of the women I interviewed both in their desired, consensual, and non-consensual experiences. Eleven of the women I interviewed mentioned some variation of the idea that to them, sex is less fulfilling without some kind of emotional connection. The others who did not agree either made no mention of this or were the women who preferred emotional detachment. Tanya stated that "[sex] should not hurt mentally, physically or emotionally unless you want it to." Many of these women's ideas of positive emotion as part of a sexual experience come from their experiences where emotion had either not been part of sex, or there has been a negative emotional tie with their partner at the time. Several participants also stated some variation of the idea that if love is not part of the relationship, they feel used. To sum, when negative relationships were involved, the sexual experiences tended to be negative—whether consensual or not.

Negative Consensual Experiences

The idea of negative relationships leads to the next major theme: negative consensual experiences. Again, some participants explained their negative experiences as rape or sexual abuse, while other, with similar experiences, considered them to be consensual, but negative. Similar to previous research (Fahs 2016; Gunby et al. 2012;

Katz et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2017), I expected to find that most, if not all, participants would have some experience which they considered consensual but had a negative view in retrospect, or even at the time. Indeed, most participants had some negative experience which they also considered consensual. I divided negative consensual experiences into three subthemes: physical, emotional, and a combination of the two.

Specifically, negative consensual sexual experiences that were primarily physical seemed to be the lesser of the three categories as the women in this study tended towards more emotional sexual connections. Simply put, "bad sex" still was prevalent for these women. Allison had a long-distance romantic relationship with whom she had a brief sexual relationship stating that "we did have sexual encounters, but they weren't very pleasant. They weren't very, like, mutually comfortable... that sort of thing." She did not report these experiences to be particularly emotionally distressing, simply that the sex was not enjoyable for her. Tanya, who reported multiple hookups, said that one encounter was a bad experience because the sex was bad. Ria, too, had experienced bad sex with a partner, but reported that the partner was a good person and she liked him. She said, "he was a really sweet guy. He was a really nice. I mean, he couldn't hit it from behind […] He wasn't a bad guy, I just didn't like his sex." Ellen dated a girl with no previous sexual experience and found that the sex was "awful" because of this. Shelby reported dating a man in college who was aggressive about wanting sex, but he never forced anything on her.

> He was pretty aggressive about wanting sex. I wanted it. It happened a couple times, but I think I was more hesitant with him. I don't think he ever forced anything. But you know, it wasn't like a every time we had sex I wanted it kind of thing.

She did not specifically say this was physically negative but did not share any details that led me to think the experiences with this man physically pleasurable.

When these five women reported "bad sex" to me, they did not go into nearly as much detail as when an emotional aspect was involved. This leads me to the conclusion that bad sex physically is just that—bad sex. Forgettable and unsubstantial. However, when delving into the emotional side of "bad sex" or negative consensual experiences, the women had much more to say.

In some cases, participants glossed over the more traumatic negative experiences. Occasionally, they went into great detail. Ria's narrative tended towards a less emotional side of sex and focused on the more physical aspects, but she still briefly mentioned a negative sexual relationship. Ria was in a relationship with the father of her children for some time and he cheated on her openly, which caused her emotional trauma and ongoing distrust of her partners. Ria also had a relationship which was only briefly sexual, but emotionally draining to her because the man she was partnered with lied to her about where he lived and what he was doing with his life. While the sex they had was what he called "cuddlefucking," she felt more emotionally invested and then found she got hurt later. Ria said about the father of her children and the second mentioned man that "Sergio caused me emotional trauma and so did Jimari. They both upset me deeply… continue to upset me."

Julie spent some time in another country teaching English, and she said after not having a relationship for the first stint of her time there, she had sex out of loneliness and used it as an "emotional Band-Aid," which resulted in a negative consensual experience, as it hurt her emotionally, more so than she anticipated. Michaela shared that she briefly

dated one of her friends, essentially out of pity for him, and that the sex was "sad sex" for both of them, and instead of being emotionally fulfilling, it was not a pleasant experience. Michaela had a number of stories that fell into this category, such as one that she considers to be consensual with a manager where she worked who ostensibly got her drunk to have sex with her. She said it made her feel worthless and she hated herself. As Michaela did not discuss this experience as physically negative, I put it into the emotionally negative category. She shared the following:

> I felt like he literally just wanted me to come there because he wanted to sleep with me. And then I was like, 'that's shitty' and then I was like, 'damn, I slept with him.' You know, I felt horrible. […] The experience made me feel like I have no self-worth whatsoever, that he thought he had this, you know, preconceived notion about me.

Joyce's first marriage was filled with negative emotion around sex because he refused to have sex with her, stating that she was no longer attractive to him. This was crushing for Joyce's self-esteem. I chose to include this in the emotionally negative subtheme, because it negatively impacted her sexual experiences and self-confidence after her marriage ended. Claire told me about being at a college party and was shamed for not having sex. Similar to Joyce, Claire felt emotionally impacted in a negative way because she chose not to have sex with someone who was interested in her.

Dani's past with sexual trauma affected her experiences, even though she described them as consensual, they were riddled with guilt and shame. As mentioned before, Dani performed oral sex on partners in order to avoid penetrative sex, but she also had a long-term boyfriend who was into BDSM which made her feel negatively about herself and harmfully impacted the relationship. Additionally, Dani stated that she would have sex with people she dated whether or not she really desired it, because she had

already had sex with them and felt obligated to do it, and she felt obligated to stay in the relationship. Shelby talked about a woman she dated and that it was an “emotionally crappy sexual relationship” because of problems both in and out of the bedroom.

Though several women experienced sexually negative encounters that could be isolated as either physical or emotionally, the majority of the negative encounters could be categorized as both. For the first example, Tanya got pregnant and was forced to get an abortion, stating that “our parents and him coerced me to get an abortion,” which though not directly sexual, was a negative experience for her because of her partner and the circumstances at the time. She did tell me that she has “mistakes but not regrets” in her sexual history, regarding her consensual sex, as she was raped at one point following her first desired sexual experience. Tanya implied that there were both negative physical and emotional aspects of certain encounters, but her partner who got her pregnant was the most impactful.

Julie recounted sexual experiences that she said were unwanted and undesired, but consensual. These could also have been under the theme of obligatory sexual experiences but owing to the fact that she did not specify, I placed these data in this thematic section. Julie told me that in one relationship, “if I wanted to be left alone so I could sleep or so I could watch the movie, or I could do whatever the fuck I want, I would just be like, alright, let's just have sex. Okay, but just do it and get it over with.”

Similar to Tanya’s experience, Caroline had a partner with whom she had a pregnancy scare. She had decided if she were to be pregnant, she would get an abortion. She said that she was scared of him because he became physically dominant when she

told him this, and his subsequent reaction were the impetus for that sexual relationship to end. Caroline recounted the story by sharing the following:

> You know, he came over to the apartment. I don't even know what he really wanted to know, he wanted me to have an abortion, too. He was angry […] I can't remember why he was angry. What I do remember is him holding me down on the bed and not letting me go.

Caroline also told me that the man with whom she hooked up outside of her open marriage complained about wearing a condom, and that made the experience less pleasurable for her because she felt like he was not respecting her wishes. Caroline said that, "it was three-fourths good […] I knew we had good sex back then and I trusted him." Beyond that, she said that "the craziest thing about it is he decided that he thought it was okay to tell me he was like, literally in love with me […] So it was awkward because we had sex that night […] He said it literally like four times that night." Considering she is happily married and simply sought sexual satisfaction with the consent of her husband outside of their marriage bed, she classified this as a negative experience.

Michaela told me an incredibly disturbing story about a man she dated prior to meeting her husband. She described him as "Ted Bundy-esque" and the experiences she had with him were unpleasant overall, but she identified them as consensual. He wanted her attention after she stopped seeing him, and he became jealous. He poisoned her dog with antifreeze and killed him, which she recalls being one of the worst emotional experiences of her life. She reported that:

> Looking back, after all that happened, he was so weird in bed. He was the weirdest sexual partner I've ever had in the sense that like he you know, I mean, he would […] be like, 'call me daddy.' But not like, 'oh, daddy.' Like, it was just weird… 'Tell me you love me' constantly. And it was disgusting. That is the one sexual experience in my life, I don't know if it's

> because of what happened, but like looking back on it, that was part of it. It makes me feel disgusted.

I chose to include this in the category of negative physical and emotional due to the nature of her entire narrative regarding that particular partner.

Claire shared some negative experiences with me, both past and present. Mentioned in another theme but also relevant here, Claire let a man in college finger her because he kept asking and essentially, she did not want to continue saying no, and she resigned herself. This was physically and emotionally negative because, while reported consensual, was undesired. Claire also talked to me about how she and her husband have unprotected sex, and she is not currently on birth control. She said she has asked him countless times not to ejaculate inside of her, but that he does anyway. Claire told me that she feels that while it breaks her trust, it is okay because they are married, even though she does not want children and birth control makes her physically ill. She does not consider the sex aspect of it as non-consensual but that she feels badly after he finishes inside of her because she has repeatedly asked him not to do that, yet he continues to break that boundary.

Jade was one of the participants who did not go into great detail about past partners but shared with me that she has had several negative experiences as a pattern in her life and uses sex transactionally. She also admitted that she has "weak boundaries" when it comes to sex, which has had a negative impact on her emotional well-being over time. Another participant who reports having used sex transactionally in the past is Shelby, telling me, "I wanted their attention. I wanted their affection. I wanted their… wanted something from them, I guess. So, [I] used it pretty transactionally, but also like I

mean, I loved sex." She shared a story about a boyfriend dated on-and-off throughout college, and at one point they had sex when she did not want to engage. She told me, "I don't think the word 'no' ever happened," but that it was bordering on rape regardless, especially because she would cry into her pillow while he was performing sexual acts on her.

As evidenced by these anecdotes, sexual experiences are, generally speaking, seen as much more than simple physical acts of pleasure for the participants I interviewed. The consequences of negative sexual experiences have impacted some of these women for over a decade and continue to be points of trauma and distress in their lives. While negative physical experiences are not pleasant, the emotionally negative ones appear to be more detrimental to the mental health of the participants and their outlooks on sexual encounters. In many ways, both physically and emotionally negative experiences are inextricable from one another for a large portion of the participants for this study. The intertwining of emotions with sex for the women interviewed is apparent and the clear impact that an emotional attachment can have on sex is tremendous and paramount to women's attitudes.

To summarize, the women who shared their sexual histories were vulnerable and open with me about their life experiences. Although not noted in the themes, many of these women have experienced sexual trauma in their lives and have had to deal with social pressures about women and girls' sexual development. The themes of guilt and shame, confidence, sex as obligation, sex and relationships, and negative consensual experiences shaped the majority of these women's sexual histories. Some women were

more open and detailed about their pasts than were others, but all contributed to the identified themes in one way or another.

The themes were not initially expected to have so much negativity surrounding them, but once data collection commenced, it became clear to me that just because a woman does not begin her sexual history negatively does not mean it will not include bad experiences. It is also important to note that women experience things differently from one another, no matter how objectively similar they seem on the surface. Several women I interviewed had experiences that I would consider non-consensual but identified them explicitly as consensual. This is similar to previous research. (Fahs et al. 2016; Gunby et al. 2012). Women need to learn sexual language education in order to facilitate identification of sexual experiences, rather than simply assuming bad experiences are their own fault, or that they are somehow to blame for not enjoying unwanted experiences. Women tend to blame themselves for their negative experiences by calling them "negative but consensual," rather than understanding that it *is* possible those encounters may be non-consensual, even if the woman did not openly resist the encounter. Conversely, there were women whose experiences I would perhaps not have considered non-consensual, but the women experiencing them identified them as such, and it is not my place to discredit them based on their responses to these experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this study, I sought to find how older millennial women experienced sex from their first desired sexual experience to their present sexual experience or relationship through in-depth interviewing. Based on my analysis, I found five themes that were notably present throughout the interviews: (1) guilt and shame, (2) the impact of first sexual experience on confidence and self-esteem, and (3) sexual experiences within the context of relationships. The two minor themes are (4) sex as obligation, and (5) negative experiences with consensual sex. These five themes were undeniably linked back to women's upbringings and early sexual experiences and impacted their sexual histories and personal attitudes.

The theoretical framework from which I conducted my study aims to lend a voice to women to tell their stories about their sexual experiences. Standpoint theory illuminated how subjugated knowledge can be created by some individuals and not by others, regardless of their marginalized status in society. I noticed this during a couple of interviews where the women were particularly self-aware and able to take their experiences and apply them to the larger social context. These women helped me understand how it is possible to recognize one's own experiences as a culmination of sociocultural values and social impacts and realize there are social problems surrounding these. On the other hand, some women did not have the same level of self-reflection that I witnessed elsewhere and appeared to view their own experiences as isolated and particular to their lives and not necessarily as a larger social issue. This study adds to feminist standpoint theory by taking women's stories and using the themes that emerged to highlight social issues that have arisen due to patriarchal domination of the way sex

should be experienced and performed by women. The execution of this study not only adds to the literature about women's sexuality, but particularly uses women's voices to explain the impact of a larger social issue.

While I sought to avoid first sexual experience that was due to assault, rape, or involving other violence, the degree to which participants touched on this topic, is important and deserves more attention on its own merit, particularly from a feminist standpoint perspective. While the idea that standpoint should not essentialize, reify or fetishize experience, what's striking to me is the common experience of one or many negative sexual encounters, whether or not the participants considered them to be consensual. Feminist Andrea Dworkin famously declared that all heterosexual sex was rape (1994). This polemic was misconstrued and taken far too literally by Dworkin's critics because, to distill her point, she was simply arguing that in a patriarchal society, sex between women and men cannot be egalitarian. My point is that a perspective such as standpoint theory, even though it's often misused or has been used to falsely claim homogeneity among women, remains an incredibly important theoretical perspective particularly on topics about women and sex. In short, what I am arguing is that a feminist standpoint orientation remains quite powerful, particularly to understanding women and their sexuality, and sexual experiences in a male dominated society.

I worked to engage in ethical data collection and analysis by protecting the women's identities and asking for clarification so I could represent their narratives as accurately as possible. I continuously utilized self-reflexivity to prevent my own biases, and I ensured that each woman had the opportunity to share her story entirely and thoroughly. Some women shared more than others without prompting, but at the end of

each interview, I asked each woman if there was anything that she felt she wanted to add. I also debriefed with each participant following the recorded interview, so she had time to ask questions and feel that she fully understood the process of my research. I did all of this in order to adhere to the feminist standpoint theory framework and feminist methodology so that the women are more than just a statistic in social research—that they are a voice and they are heard.

My research adds to the current literature by beginning to fill in the gaps regarding consensual sexual experiences, including the positive and negative aspects. It does not only focus on negative or non-consensual but includes more nuanced sexual narratives from women. Some previous studies indicated that women's attitudes and experiences were formed in relation to their cultural values, whether those were religious, educational, or ethnic and racial. In several instances, it is a conglomeration of two or more values intersecting to form how women view sex both prior to and after having engaged in it. Based on the previous research, I expected that sociocultural values would impact how women viewed their own sexual histories and that any changes in values may also have altered their current views. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was indeed the case. As in previous research, I found in my study that women tended to mention sexual experiences in the confines of a relationship. In some cases, women stated that they experienced guilt or shame after their first experience, while conversely others felt liberated by the experience. My conjecture based on previous research was that sociocultural values and life experience would affect women's perception of their own sexual histories and current attitudes on sex.

While this study focused on cisgender women, future research should include the experiences of cisgender men, transgender men and women, and non-binary people. The attitudes and experiences of cisgendered women are undoubtedly different than those of men or people of other gender identities. In order to create a more substantive body of knowledge, conducting similar research with fewer parameters on demographics may yield new and exciting results that provide important insights into the nuances that can help social scientists understand human sexuality more comprehensively. This ever-changing field of study is necessary in the justice work for a more inclusive society and to combat social injustices that individuals face based on their gender identities, sexuality, and unwanted sexualized and gendered experiences.

I cannot generalize my findings beyond the women interviewed, but I can conclude that based on those with whom I spoke that the first desired sexual experience influences the formation of particular attitudes about sex and sexual encounters later in life. In some cases, it was a pattern that emerged after the first experience, while in others it was the opposite, or an entirely different pattern that emerged. Although a pattern of behavior was present in several cases, it was not a primary finding, contrary to what I expected. Moreover, just because these women did not experience sexual trauma prior to their first desired experience, most were the victims of sexual harassment, abuse, or assault at one point or another. Almost all of the participants noted at least one unpleasant experience even if it was considered to be consensual, which leads me to conclude and concur with previous research that consensual sex does not always mean the experience was desired or enjoyed.

I argue that my research is important because it shows that while some things may be quantified about women's sexual experiences, there likely is more to the story that cannot be illuminated with quantitative aggregation. For instance, women tend to tie emotion and sex together; they have experienced guilt or shame surrounding sex and have ever-changing confidence in themselves and their sexual abilities. This study reveals that women's sex lives and attitudes are dynamic and constantly changing.

To sum, I sought to give women a platform to share their sexual experiences. I hope my study and future research will begin normalizing women's sexuality and enhance the deeply complex knowledge women have to offer social science.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you experienced sexual trauma, including sexual abuse (ongoing or one-time) or rape prior to your first desired sexual experience? If so, you will be excluded from this study because of the risks associated with triggering past traumas.
2. Demographic questions
    a. How old are you?
    b. What race or ethnicity are you?
    c. What is your sexual identity currently?
    d. Do you participate in any religious institutions?
    e. What is your highest level of education?
    f. Do you have children?
    g. Are you married or partnered?
    h. Who are you?
        i. How do you identify yourself in a broad sense?
3. Tell me about the first sexual experience that you personally wanted to participate in and that was fully consensual.

    Probes:

    - How old were you?
    - What was your relationship to the other person or people involved?
    - Were there romantic feelings involved and to what extent?
    - What regrets, if any, did you experience?

4. Please share your subsequent sexual experiences as you remember them, positive or negative, up to the most current experience or sexual relationship.

    Probes:

    - What stands out and why?
    - What has sex been like since your first experience?

5. Do you think that your initial desired sexual experience had an impact on your sexual history or even your current sex life? If so, how?

    Probes:

    - How did you see yourself then? Now? How do you view yourself then in retrospect?
    - How do you identify your sexuality?
    - How do your more recent experiences relate back to your first?

6. What factors played into the development of your sexuality?

    Probes:

    - Did religion play a role and if it did how did it affect you?
    - What was the social pressure surrounding you?
    - How do you perceive that your level of education at the time or level of education now impacts your sexual development?
    - Have any of your jobs since your first sexual experience made a difference in how your sexuality has developed?

7. Have your views on how sex should be performed changed since your first sexual experience?

    Probes:

- How would you tie where you are now back to your initial experience?
- How do you perceive your sexual performance has changed? How is it better or worse?

8. Do you have different expectations of your sexual partner now than you did before your first sexual experience?

    Probes:

    - What were your initial expectations of a sexual partner?
    - What are your expectations now regarding sexual performance and the emotional aspect?

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Challenges

One of the most difficult things I faced in conducting my research was finding participants. My original goal was 25 to 30 women, but I ended up only getting 17 and only included 16 interviews. Part of the difficulty in finding women to interview was the prescreen question about having no sexual abuse prior to their first sexual experience. This was discouraging both for conducting research and understanding how common early sexual abuse is for women.

I experienced other difficulties such as a private place to conduct the interview (because of the sensitive nature of the information shared). Often times, we would resort to FaceTime or a Skype regardless of being in close geographical proximity because of the lack of private spaces in the community. Several interviews were conducted on the Middle Tennessee State University campus in a private room in the library, but it was also difficult because non-students had to pay for parking or wait until parking was free (generally after work hours or weekends). However, the virtual interviews allowed me to interview women living in other states or other parts of the state. I argue that my experiences with the difficulty of finding private places to do in-person interviews has methodological implications for qualitative research on topics like sex in general. Perhaps in-person interviews are not always the best way to glean information.

Sex as Obligation

In my personal life, every woman with whom I have had intimate conversations about their sex lives have all admitted to engaging in sexual behavior as an obligation at one

point or another, so this theme did not surprise me when analyzing my data, and I do not believe it will surprise any of my readers, either.

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation	Religious or not?	Education	Kids	Married, partnered, or single?
Allison	32	White / Jewish	Pansexual/ Bisexual	No	Bachelors	No	Partnered
Tanya	39	White	Bisexual	No	Vocational	Yes	Married
Ria	38	Black	Straight	No	Masters (2)	Yes	Single
Julie	36	White	Straight	Non-practicing Catholic	Masters	No	Partnered
Caroline	39	South Asian	Bisexual	Non-practicing Muslim	Masters	Yes	Married
Leah	33	White	Straight	Non-practicing Christian	Bachelors	No	Single
Hannah	30	White	Straight	Methodist	Bachelors	No	Single
Michaela	34	White	Straight	No	High school	Yes	Married
Lilly	33	White	Bisexual hetero-normative	Absent Catholic	Masters	No	Married
Annie	34	White	Lesbian/ gay	No	Masters, JD	No	Married
Joyce	38	White	Straight	No	Masters	No	Partnered
Ellen	30	White	Lesbian/ gay	No	Bachelors	No	Single

Dani	31	White	Straight	Non-practicing Christian	Masters	Yes	Married
Jade	38	White	Straight	Spiritual	Bachelors	Yes	Single
Claire	32	White	Straight	No	Masters	No	Married
Shelby	30	White	Pansexual	No	Masters	No	Married