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The Experience of Evangelical College Women in Disclosing Taboo Sexual Practices Among Peers

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THE EXPERIENCE OF EVANGELICAL COLLEGE WOMEN IN DISCLOSING
TABOO SEXUAL PRACTICES AMONG PEERS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Taylor Ehrhard

May 2012

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Taylor Ann Elizabeth Ehrhard

entitled

The Experience of Evangelical College Women in Disclosing
Taboo Sexual Practices among Peers

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

The current research aimed to better understand young women on Christian campuses who struggle sexually. The following research question guided the study: What is the experience of young women on Evangelical campuses who establish transparency regarding their taboo sexual practices within their peer relationships? The researcher interviewed seven students at a small, private, faith-based institution for the study. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews and analyzed them using a grounded theory approach. Through the interviews, results emerged under five major themes heard in each story and five minor themes that proved significant in some stories, though not communicated by each participant. Major themes emerged as the following concepts: unapproachable topic, experience before being open, experience after sharing, relationships, and safe-spaces. Minor themes emerged as responsibility, reciprocity, accountability, verbal processing, and unsafe spaces. Despite many difficulties surrounding this topic in general, these stories evidenced openness about sexual struggles as both desired and beneficial within the right context. The right context for these conversations entails that of a well-established friendship with already present and follow-up support available.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Sexuality on Evangelical Campuses

Students on evangelical campuses today face a different set of sexual standards than those around them in the media and secular world. These standards come from traditional Christian sexual values, centered on abstinence until marriage and held firmly by the majority of evangelical students (Lastoria, 2011). A recent broad study found sexual permissiveness decreases as religiosity increases (Lastoria, 2011). The same study found kissing as the only sexual behavior widely seen as acceptable before marriage on evangelical campuses; other behaviors studied included breast fondling, genital fondling, dry sex, mutual masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, and sexual intercourse (Lastoria, 2011).

Within evangelical universities exists a shared value system that makes the “connection between spirituality and sexuality very public” (Lastoria, 2011, p. 13). This strong, strict, and public sexual ethic can put anyone found breeching sexual parameters in a difficult position. However, the entirely opposing sexual standards of mainstream media and culture make breaking evangelical sexual parameters commonplace, even among the best intentioned (Lastoria, 2011).

Divergent Sexual Values

Even a brief look at media sexuality and Christian sexual customs reveals a substantial conflict. While the media pushes sex as casual, individual, entirely divorced

from commitment, and highly public, Christian values teach sex as intensely committed, unique to the marriage context, and private (Lukas, 2004; Winner, 2005). Values within the church and the media appear deeply at odds, leading to much confusion as “students are challenged to make meaning of their sexual lives and find themselves adrift in a sea of competing views” (Lastori, 2011, p. 19). Regnerus and Uecker (2011) described the confusion as follows:

[Young people] feel the powerful pull of competing moral claims upon them: the script about what boyfriends and girlfriends in love want or are supposed to do for each other, and the script about what unmarried Christian behavior should look like. They want to satisfy both but find themselves rationalizing. (p. 35)

As reported above, the widespread belief on evangelical college campuses maintains the reservation of sexuality for lifelong, committed relationships (i.e. marriage) (Lastoria, 2011). In the same study, the majority of evangelical college students reported that “contemporary culture’s message to young people is that one cannot necessarily expect to have one lifelong, satisfying and committed relationship” and that “many young people today are confused about how to build a relationship that can turn into a satisfying lifelong commitment” (Lastoria, 2011, p. 22). Again, the confusion of divergent sexual messages seems evident.

Sexual Shame

With Christian sexual values so contrary to mainstream sexuality, sexual shame becomes a major concern for Christian communities today. Young adults receive mixed messages from culture, media, and the church that leave them confused and vulnerable. A person who has overstepped the bounds of Christian sexuality can easily, within

evangelical communities, become viewed as “damaged goods,” with less “value” in a relationship than a virgin (Lastoria, 2011, p. 20). This reaction happens in part due to viewing the act of sex as the seal of a traditional Christian marriage (Lastoria, 2011). Any misstep in an area as emotionally and physically charged as sexuality seems destined to create a state of shame:

Shame can be our own internal disappointment at not achieving our ego ideal, or it can be absorbed from family and community values. Shame takes place within the individual and also within the community...*Shame can be understood as that feeling that creates a need to hide or cover up.* (McClintock, 2001, p. 21)

[emphasis added]

Shame and Student Development

The perceived need to hide oneself can prove detrimental at any age but, experienced in college, can damage essential personal and interpersonal development. A student attempting to hide a behavior cannot successfully navigate even the basic developmental theories acknowledged by student affairs professionals today. To move through Chickering’s (1969) vectors requires self-awareness, mature response to emotions, and an open nature in interpersonal relationships. A student experiencing sexuality that goes against community taboos but who does not willingly face this reality could remain indefinitely in Marcia’s (1980) moratorium.

Clearly, hiding or covering up in shame cannot benefit development. Not surprisingly then, a need for open dialogue emerged as one theme in the study by Killam and Gingrich (2011). Despite shame that forces silence and the possible hostilities of Christian communities, women desire the opportunity to openly process their sexuality.

Conclusion

Killam and Gingrich (2011) conducted research on sexuality among evangelical college women to identify themes in women's attitudes and perceptions towards their sexuality. As a result of eight interviews and an intensive data analysis designed to pull voices (or themes) from the narrative of interview, the researchers found shame and fear as two of the most common themes. With such a negative view of the sexual self discovered, the topic necessitates deeper exploration to begin to uncover the factors that influence sexuality among evangelical college women and the ways in which these women approach their sexuality.

In light of shame, media influence, the desires of Christian women, and the perceived need to hide, understanding the experience of those who choose not to hide becomes important. Based on the voice of those in the study by Killam and Gingrich (2011) and the literature surrounding Christian sexuality, the current study addressed traditional, evangelical, college women who have discussed their taboo sexual practices openly. Specifically, women who have practiced sexuality in the forms of masturbation, pornography, dry sex, genital or breast fondling, and pre-marital sex, both intercourse and oral sex. If higher education practitioners do not begin to understand the interaction of secular and Christian sexual values in today's college students, "we run the risk of our students becoming vulnerable to considerable anxiety over appropriate sexual expression" (Lastoria, 2011, p. 21). A single research question guided the present study: What is the experience of young women on Evangelical campuses who establish transparency regarding their taboo sexual practices within their peer relationships?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Sexuality and Student Development

In any research impactful to students, one must understand its influence on student development. As research has grown in the area of student development, its importance has become increasingly accepted. A topic as personal and influential as sexuality seems undoubtedly impactful to the development of students during their college years. With that in mind, the following paragraphs explore some influential research and themes in student development that stand out as highly impacted by the sexuality discussed in the current study.

Understandably, the environment in which students find themselves proves crucial to development. Sanford (1966) became one of the first to make this link between environment and development (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn, 2010). Sanford (1966) identified readiness, challenge, and support as key factors in environmental influence. Readiness addresses the personal standing of the student, while challenge and support offered by the environment serve as the causal factors in development. Clearly, if sexuality impacts the self but must remain hidden from the environment and secret from the influence of challenge and support, development could reduce dramatically.

Astin established the idea of involvement in student development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Astin's definition of involvement is "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 31). Development depends on a student's active involvement in the college environment. If a student's sexual practice creates a feeling of shame or a desire to hide, she less likely will engage actively in her environment, which consequently will stunt development.

Theories put forth by both Marcia and Chickering have also proven instrumental in today's approaches to student development. Marcia's theory centers on times of crisis and commitment that move a student towards identity achievement (Evans et al., 2010). As students face times of crisis, large or small, they have the option of commitment. Depending on various combinations (crisis/no commitment, no crisis/ commitment, etc.), development can take different directions, though ideally aiming toward identity achievement. Multiple areas of a student's life can change and grow towards achievement at one time, with different crises and forms of commitment. A student in crisis with no commitment will enter the stage of identity moratorium, rather than achievement (Evans et al., 2010). If shame-ridden sexual practices can serve as crises, the need to hide or cover up can easily become an avoidance of commitment, thus prohibiting development.

Chickering's theory of development moves through seven vectors, beginning with developing competence and ending with developing integrity (Evans et al., 2010). In the process, one establishes and grows personal values and skills—emotional, interpersonal, intellectual, and physical. Chickering also identified seven environmental influencers, including friendships and student community (Evans et al., 2010). According to Astin (1993), "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth

and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 7). Anything such as hidden sexual shame that negatively impacts these influencers, particularly relationships within the peer group, could negatively influence development.

Issues Surrounding Female Sexuality

Lukas (2004) discussed a pendulum swing that has occurred with regards to female sexuality. The sexual revolution may have had some significant benefits for the cause of female liberties, but some begin to see that too much of a good thing never becomes a good thing (Durham, 2008; Lukas, 2004). Lukas (2004) reported a “new ethic of silence” surrounding the possible pitfalls of casual sex (STDs, emotional baggage, unplanned pregnancy, etc.) or any benefit that can come from sex inside a faithful relationship (p. 3). This silence connects to the pendulum swing that occurred as society became all too focused on freedom in sexuality. In order to protect the freedom of women in making their own sexual choices, few have willingly discussed the possible negative outcomes of those free choices. The following sections discuss some major issues surrounding female sexuality that are seen in the literature today.

Feminist, media, and cultural cues. Women seem bombarded on a daily basis with strong (and often mixed) sexual messages from feminist propaganda, media, and cultural norms around them. One reason for this bombardment comes in the fact that, in today’s society, sex sells. This fact has become abundantly clear, even in a brief glance into a popular magazine or television programming. Sex sells everything, from food to movies to sports. In this sex-saturated pop-culture, secular society’s influential voice in forming sexual standards should come as no surprise.

While many of the messages conveyed appear renounced by a wide array of groups—from fundamentalist Christians to dedicated feminists—they maintain a significant amount of power. Of the television shows viewed most often by teenagers, 83% contain some sexual content (Kunkel et al., 2003). Of television shows in general (excluding news, sports, and children's programming), 64% contain sexual content. Of that 64%, an average of 4.4 scenes per hour depict a sexualized message. Those statistics address only the television shows. The advertising world, both televised and print, has become full of its own use of sexuality. In today's highly connected world, to disregard the impact that these frequent media messages can have would prove negligent.

Lukas (2004) spoke of the general feminist link between abstinence and oppression. In any number of popular movies and television shows, a period of sexual inactivity seems highly abnormal and garners much sympathy (Lukas, 2004). This finding suggests to anyone watching that sexual promiscuity has become entirely standard and even highly desirable. While perhaps not reality, this perspective speaks through mass media, offering a mixed message to anyone trying to navigate sexuality in accordance with traditional Christian values.

This abstinence/oppression link emerges in many women's studies texts as well (Lukas, 2004). Many women's studies experts claim any desire to save sex for within the committed relationship as a bowing to the controlling and oppressive patriarch (Anderson, 2000; Lukas, 2004; Ruth, 1998). These predominant feminist teachings, while perhaps necessarily liberating initially, have created a culture in which women find it nearly impossible to practice sexuality with a healthy control. A woman not experimenting sexually, not engaging in sexual acts with multiple partners, and not

willing to divorce in her mind the ideas of sex and commitment can very easily get the message that she fails as a liberated woman (Lukas, 2004).

Radical feminism has taught that personal liberation cannot come without sexual liberation. Sexual liberation cannot come without many disengaged sexual encounters and a view of sex as entirely personal, having little to do with anyone else—even the one with whom one has sexual relations. Society has grown, taught, and propagated this idea with little regard to emotional fall-out, to the physical and emotional connection that sex brings, or to the experiences of actual women (Lukas, 2004).

Durham (2008) referred to the sexual messages regarding women found in the media today under the collective title “the Lolita Effect.” In her work, Durham outlined a number of myths prevalent in media today. These myths, disguised as sexual freedom, actually perpetuate the idea of women as sexual vessels for men. They remove sexuality from the woman herself and turn it into something for someone else and defined by someone else. This message comes through in a unique way within the Christian community of women taught to save their sexual selves for marriage. If a young woman fails to save her sexual self for her spouse, she can very easily feel shame and a lack of worthiness coming both from breaking a Christian standard and from giving away a part of herself that she does not view as her own to give away.

Women’s reaction to sex. Despite the clear media message that promiscuity has become the new norm, very little attention addresses the emotional reaction that many women have after sex. Lukas (2004) warned that “young women should be aware that while pop culture and even some women’s studies texts suggest that casual sex will be exciting and empowering, women often experience feelings of confusion and shame” (p.

18). When engaging in consensual sex at a young age or outside of a committed relationship, women in particular often experience negative emotions afterward (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011).

Since women more often desire an emotional connection through sex and less often prevent the connection from happening, they more often experience feelings such as guilt, regret, diminished self-esteem, or a sense of having been used or having used someone else after a sexual encounter (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Other common adjectives described in another study include awkward, confused, and hurt (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). More extreme reactions can entail depressive symptoms, frequent crying, and extreme anxiety over the future of relationships (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011).

McIlhaney and Bush (2008) explored the physical reactions of the brain to sexual contact. These reactions serve to create a connection to and build trust in one's sexual partner. These reactions occur in the form of hormonal releases and physical, neural connections. Some can occur in women after just 20 seconds of physical contact, such as a hug—not necessarily even sexual contact. Reactions begun and connections made with a sexual act can be extremely powerful and difficult to reverse. These physical reactions, proven to bond two people and build trust, undoubtedly stand responsible for much of the pain felt after uncommitted sexual encounters.

The Evangelical Norm

According to Winner (2005), “Christian tradition has historically articulated a threefold purpose for sex: sex is meant to be unitive, procreative, and sacramental” (p. 65). McClintock (2001) defined good sex in the context of the relationship: “Good sex is communication, affection, forgiveness, honesty, vulnerability, dependency, and a sense

of humor” (p. 54). While great debate rages in some areas of sexuality and the church (e.g. homosexuality), certain regularity exists in most Christian ideas on sexuality.

Christians should practice sex within the bounds of a marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Christians generally view such as pornography and masturbation as negative, though debates do address both sides of this stance. The recent study conducted by the Association for Christians in Student Development (Lastoria, 2011) collected the perspectives of evangelical college students towards many sexual behaviors. As expected, the majority of students expressed that sexual acts between two people, beyond kissing, should take place expressly in marriage relationships. Regarding masturbation, a majority of students either saw it as morally wrong or felt unsure as to its moral implications. The majority viewed masturbation as a self-centered act and believed compulsive masturbation can represent intimacy problems; a high majority saw masturbation with the use of pornography as morally wrong, and a very low percentage believed “masturbation is fun and harms no one” (p. 27).

Special Issues Surrounding Evangelical Female Sexuality

Killam and Gingrich (2011) studied sexuality among evangelical college women and found ten themes: shame, fear, ambivalence, ignorance, lack of sexual subjectivity, lack of sexual agency, same-sex attraction, female sexuality as God-given and natural, open dialogue regarding female sexuality, and the presence of sexual agency and sexual subjectivity. The first themes—all negative, all detrimental to development and growth—run through most modern literature surrounding sex and Christianity (Killam & Gingrich, 2011; Lastoria, 2011; McClintock, 2001; Winner, 2005). Clearly, female sexuality in the church remains shrouded in confused standards and often uncomfortable silence.

Historically, the church has placed a great amount of negative stigma on sins of the body (Albers, 1995; McClintock, 2001). Various forms of sexuality have ranked among the gravest of sins, far above those against another human such as envy, hatred, or slander (Albers, 1995). Gnostic traditions, the celibacy of early church fathers, and reaction against current secular pop-culture seem most often cited for the state of Christian sexuality today. Both McClintock (2001) and Albers (1995) place much of the blame for sexual shame on this unbalanced perspective from the church.

In addition to abovementioned messages within mainstream media, additional perspectives affect evangelical partakers of media. Winner (2005) wrote of sexual beliefs conveyed through mainstream media that specifically stand in opposition to evangelical sexual values, such as, “Sex can be wholly separated from procreation” and “Good sex can’t happen in the humdrum routine of marriage” (p. 64, 77). These perspectives circulate through mainstream media, yet prove detrimental to the Christian view of sexuality. Faced with such a dichotomy of values and messages, young, evangelical women can end up confused, misled, and hiding in shame.

Differing gender standards. Inherent in these cultural, media, and religious cues lies a sexual double standard that proves both demoralizing and harmful to women. Many authors discuss this standard that approves of a man as a player, augmenting his allure, but deems the same actions from a woman as considered improper, with the woman becoming undesirable (Durham, 2008; Winner, 2005). Women often seem perceived as not having their own sexuality, but serve as the object (or victim) of man’s desire (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). This message, at least, comes through much modern media and historically Christian tradition (Durham, 2008; Fine, 1988; Winner, 2005). Juxtaposed

with feminists' sexual freedom messages outlined by Lukas (2004), this concept generates much confusion that can make defining or living out female sexuality difficult.

Shame. McClintock (2001) spoke of shame in the healthy sense as corrective and fleeting. However, sexual shame, particularly when related to “taboo sexual experiences in the home, church, or community” proves far more emotional and difficult (p. 24). Zaslav (1998) described the individual engulfed in shame as “an exposed, vulnerable, devalued self being scrutinized and found wanting in the eyes of a devaluing other” (p. 155). Along with an intense self-consciousness and distress comes feeling “filthy or unworthy, accompanied by urges to hide or disappear” (p. 155).

Shame, which every participant reported in the study by Killam and Gingrich (2011), emerged as one of the leading difficulties faced by those who experience sex outside the norm. Notably, shame does not equate with guilt. Guilt brings a feeling of regret towards an action, realizing that one can seek repentance and not lose self-worth. With shame comes a feeling that the action somehow decreases worthiness. Shame becomes internalized and devalues the self (McClintock, 2005).

Need for Open Dialogue

Though over 20 years old, the study conducted by Fine (1988) shed light on the need for women to have safe and open conversation about their sexuality. The research of Killam and Gingrich (2011) confirmed this need; their study mentioned the “importance of open dialogue” 17 times (p. 48). In general, the study found that an open attitude with regards to sexuality positively impacted the lives of participants. Though practitioners often understand this need and women desire this discourse, many barriers remain to overcome, particularly within the culture of Christianity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, young women experience much confusion in healthy sexual development. Young women within Christian communities face increased difficulties when social religious taboos come into consideration. From the promiscuity represented in mainstream media that often leaves young women empty and hurt to the silence of the church, these women seem left on their own. However, a small pocket of women within Christian communities has made the decision to begin dialogue surrounding their own sexual experiences. With this in mind, the current study explored the experience of those women who practice this open dialogue.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

In order to better understand the experience of women in these situations, the present study used a grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory developed in the 1960s with the idea of allowing a theory to come from the research, rather than using the research to support a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A theory arrived at in this manner both fits and works. A theory that fits the situation has categories “readily (not forcibly) applicable to and provided by the data under study” and a theory that works will be “meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior under study” (p. 3). With research into the area of female sexuality on Christian campuses new and undeveloped, the researcher chose grounded theory to let the voices of the participants guide the framework. To enter the research with a theory in an area as new, personal, and emotionally involved as this topic, could have proven detrimental to the results.

Within grounded theory research exist slightly different designs to use. The present study used the emerging design. Described by Glaser in 1992, this design allows even more for the emergence of theory from the research, relying less on the formal structure of categories and descriptions. Categories still emerge and undergo discussion, but the focus within this design remains on the relationships of the categories and the ways in which they influence the emerging theories (Creswell, 2008). Ideally, through

this methodology, the voice of the participants guided and determined the beginning of a framework with which to approach sexual openness within evangelical communities.

Participants

The researcher interviewed seven women from a small, private, Christian university. The researcher recruited the women by word of mouth, residence halls, and Women's Programming events on campus. Each participant received a gift card of their choice (Starbucks, the campus coffee shop, or the Campus Store). The women were all full time, undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 22 who had previously practiced or do currently practice an aspect of sexuality generally considered taboo by the Christian population. All participants made the decision to speak openly about this practice within at least one peer relationship.

Procedure

The semi-structured interviews involved "warm up" questions and five open-ended research questions posed to each participant. The researcher asked follow-up questions to gain clarification and deeper understanding (Appendix A). The researcher conducted the interviews on campus in a private room. Each participant signed an informed consent before the recorded interview. The researcher assured participants that the researcher would transcribe the recording, remove identifying factors, and destroy the tape.

After transcription, the researcher read each interview carefully before beginning the coding process. To ensure the voice of the participants remained clearly understood and represented, coding proved a multi-step process. The researcher first identified all themes in each interview. After this step, the researcher reviewed and combined the

themes as appropriate. The researcher then studied the interviews again to pull supporting quotes and identify any themes or sub-themes potentially missed the first time. Finally, the researcher arranged quotes under certain themes and then organized the quotes within that theme to ensure the quotes fit in the appropriate spot and accurately told the stories represented. The researcher also utilized outside checks to ensure the researcher accurately interpreted results. Three participants and two outside researchers confirmed the themes and sub-themes chosen.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

Throughout the interviews, a number of themes emerged, many of which proved evident in each story. The researcher identified these themes as major themes, breaking down each major theme into two or three sub-themes to better express the stories of these women. The researcher outlined the major themes outlined below: (1) unapproachable topic (2) experience before being open (3) experience after sharing (4) relationships and (5) safe spaces. After the major themes, certain themes emerged that seemed important in individual stories or in a few stories but not evident in all: (1) responsibility (2) reciprocity (3) accountability (4) verbal processing and (5) unsafe spaces.

Major Themes

Overall, participants did not regret their openness. Only two women mentioned times of openness that they later viewed as a mistake. However, these two women still view their experiences with speaking openly as positive and vital to their personal development. The following themes, heard from all participants, emerged most strongly throughout the process of interviewing.

Unapproachable topic. Surrounding the experience of openness, the women spoke at length to the factors that made openness difficult. What they shared proved consistent with previous research—this topic seems closed and the behaviors taboo,

particularly within Christian communities (Killam & Gingrich, 2011). This general theme of inapproachability easily divided into sub-themes: (1) closed topic and (2) taboo sins.

Closed topic. The women expressed difficulty in discussing the topic due to the fact that most people simply do not discuss the topic at all. For instance, Rebecca shared, I think throughout my life there have been a lot of things that I've struggled with that I don't think the church does a great job of addressing, things that not just the church, but Christian institutions in general don't do a great job of addressing... It's almost falling through the cracks because people aren't necessarily willing to address those issues or when they do they may take a very flippant approach to it.

Taboo sins. The women also expressed that Christian communities often view sexual struggles as worse than other sins and struggles. This perspective makes openness and sharing within a Christian community quite difficult. Abby, for example, stated, "I know [all sins] are the same in God's eyes, but we are not God and we don't have that kind of complete love and forgiveness." Also, Gloria reported,

It is out of embarrassment. Like, you can say I just lied, I just hit someone. That is so easy to say, but to say I struggle with my, like, sexual life – I struggle with pornography, I struggle with masturbation – it is so taboo. Like, people don't want to hear it.

Experience before being open. The women spoke at length of their feelings and experiences before opening up about this area of their life. Within this theme, two sub-themes emerged: (1) feelings of shame and guilt and (2) fear of condemnation.

Feelings of shame and guilt. Participants expressed feelings of shame and guilt surrounding this area of their experience clearly and often. Each participant felt shame powerfully, and, as a result, spoke of feeling dirty, embarrassed, and scared.

Regardless of someone being your best friend—it doesn't really matter—just because it's something so shameful. Like, I don't even want anyone to know that, so it was just loneliness and carrying quite a burden on your own, which is really kind of destructive. (Sarah)

Similarly, Gloria shared, “I was, like, super embarrassed, I thought I was the worst person in the world—I thought that no one else dealt with it.” Sarah said, “It was really suffocating not to tell anyone—I can't express how shameful that is.”

Fear of condemnation. The intense feelings of shame and guilt described above can easily create an atmosphere in which women fear judgment and condemnation. The following quotes paint the picture of fear revealed in the stories of these women. Bridget stated, “Everybody just has this fear of being open because they don't want to be judged.” Abby said, “I don't want people to think negatively about me—I don't want them to have a bad impression about me. I don't want to be judged.”

Experience after sharing. The women spoke incredibly highly of their experiences after sharing. These themes stood in stark contrast to the negative themes identified before openness. Three sub-themes emerged within this category: (1) increased perspective of self (2) a general sense of relief and (3) personal growth.

Increased perspective of self. The women expressed that sharing this area of their life increased their ability to believe forgiveness and relieved their feelings of shame and

guilt. In general, openness gave these women an ability to view themselves in a healthier light, without feeling overburdened with shame and guilt.

[The shame I feel is] something that didn't change until I was open about it. And then I realized, yes this is a struggle and I can feel ashamed of different things that have happened, but I don't need to feel shame about myself and who I am because I have this struggle and so I think her not uh judging me or um just making judgments about who I am as a person because of that struggle, um almost gave me the permission to do the same thing, to not make over-arching judgments about who I am as a person based on a struggle that I am having. (Rebecca)

General sense of relief. The women also expressed a general sense of relief after openly talking about their experiences. For example, Abby stated, “[After you share with someone] it is like exhaling. It is like you've been holding your breath for a long time and then you can breathe again—it is just a weight off your shoulders . . .” Similarly, Gloria shared,

Once I said it—it was like, a huge weight lifted off and like I had been told so many times—every time you don't confess something, it is just like having a stronghold on you and I had—until like this sin—I had never felt such a grip let go when I confessed it to someone.

Personal growth. Finally, the women spoke of experiencing personal growth after sharing. April said, “I think [being open] has helped spiritually—I think that anything you go through, conquer, helps you become a better person—a stronger person . . .”

Relationships. The women spoke at length of relationships changing once they had opened up about their experiences. Aside from one instance mentioned by one

participant, all participants spoke highly of the effect of openness on established relationships. Two sub-themes emerged in this category: (1) deeper relationships and (2) being fully known.

Deeper relationships. In nearly every instance, the women communicated more meaningful, true, and open relationships after sharing. Gloria said, “There has been an incredible level of trust and a deep friendship in [sharing].” Sara recalled, “Like with my best friends it was really good that I opened up to them – I couldn’t have had a really, just, open pure relationship with them if I wouldn’t have told them.”

Being fully known. The women expressed that openness in this area brings a feeling of being fully known. Friends with whom they shared could understand them far better once these struggles came out in the open. Sarah stated, “My whole story would fit better; they would understand why I struggle with guilt. I can say I struggle with guilt, but until you really know why, it’s hard to be like ‘Oh, I understand that.’” Gloria said,

It’s a big part of my past, . . .so at [a deep] level of friendship, then it’s an appropriate thing for me to share. So like, if it involves like, me letting someone know more about me – that is why I [want] to share it. It was—the friendship is already established and I want you to know me more—more of where I’m coming from.

Safe spaces. The idea of safe spaces emerged as the final theme heard from every participant. The interviews clearly evidenced certain contexts and relationships in which openness becomes or does not become appropriate in this area. Additionally, certain reactions prove necessary and helpful. Two sub-themes emerged in the area of safe spaces: (1) level of relationship (2) helpful reactions from peers.

Level of relationship. The women spoke often of the importance of openness in the right type of relationship, using the key words of *time* and *trust*. Participants spoke of relationships grounded in trust that have taken time to develop safe places in which to open up. Gloria recalled, “In relationships with other people I just felt like I was hiding something from them but I knew I had to keep myself safe until I built that trust with them, that I could tell them that.” Also, Rebecca shared, “There’s a lot of testing and figuring out if this person is trustworthy and what their general character is and what their response might be . . . all of those things that I talked about being a successful response.”

Helpful reactions from peers. Each participant also discussed what constituted a positive reaction on the part of those peers with whom they shared. These helpful reactions all centered on understanding and support. For instance, Abby defined a positive reaction as “just accepting me – feeling accepted and loved even though I have made mistakes and done stupid things.” Similarly, according to Rebecca,

. . . [W]hen you handle [being told of a sexual struggle]. . . you don’t immediately respond, or if you do it’s in compassion or understanding or something like that . . . being understanding, not passing any judgment at all, just being very open to trying to understand everything that went into that struggle and where I was.

Minor Themes

The following themes proved important in many accounts, though did not span each story. These themes spoke to reasons for openness, benefits of sharing, and inappropriate contexts in which to share..

Responsibility. Of the seven participants, four spoke of sharing this area of their life out of responsibility for helping others. Through their sharing, they could help others

in similar situations. For example, Abby shared, “[T]hrough [my being open] people who made the same kind of mistakes that I have can be able to talk about it with other people and be able to maybe learn from it.”

Reciprocity. Three women explained the idea of reciprocity in sharing. One person sharing something deep in her life opened the doors for others to share. Participants viewed the exchange as a positive experience within the context of true relationships. Abby stated, “Because she was being so open with me, I felt like it was time for me to be open with her—and it was hard, but it is good that she knows.”

Verbal processing. Three women expressed a need to discuss and work through these struggles verbally. Not sharing made verbal processing and feedback impossible. Gloria said, “I’m processing it a lot more easily when I say it out loud—getting feedback.” Susan shared, “I’m an external processor—I don’t understand anything until it’s said out loud. Since I prefer not to talk out loud to myself, I usually tell people.”

Accountability. For four women, sharing proved necessary for accountability’s sake. When faced with temptation to fall back into the struggle, these women needed friends who knew and understood. Without sharing with their closest friends, they could not go to anyone for help to avoid these temptations.

There’s a certain amount of accountability that comes with [openness] too then because now that it is not just your own you can express it, talk about it, and again seek guidance and, like, when you are having I guess a temptation moment or feeling, you can go talk to somebody and they can again just be that other voice that is not just your own...reasoning. (Bridget)

Unsafe spaces. Three women spoke of unsafe contexts in which to share. Susan spoke about this concept at length. While the women did express some regret in sharing outside of safe spaces, they reported an overall positive experience with openness. Susan said, “You can’t have that deep relationship with the whole [community].” She continued,

. . . I feel like a trust prostitute. . . everyone knows and no one comes back to you and is, like, how are you doing. . . they don’t know you and they feel awkward – they don’t feel like they have this relationship with you. . . . So, if you don’t have an open field of communication afterwards it just gets crazy awkward.

Conclusion

Ideally, the ways in which these themes seemed influential, interconnected, and highly meaningful has begun to emerge. These results revealed a far more positive and hopeful situation than suggested by the confusion and negative emotion seen in much of the literature. While participants did acknowledge and discuss much of that negativity, they did not focus on that aspect when relating their experiences. Based on the positive experiences revealed, these results stand to begin the process of constructive change in the culture of sexuality on Christian campuses. The following section discusses these themes and connections in greater detail, while also making suggests for both higher education practice and further research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The themes gleaned from these women's stories confirmed much of the confusion, shame, and fear seen in previous literature (Albers, 1995; Killam & Gingrich, 2011; Lastoria, 2011; McClintock, 2001). They also revealed much positive information that should inform practices in higher education and faith communities. Lastly, they showed the need for further research to better understand young women and their sexuality. The section below discusses the study's results and offers suggestions for both practice and further research.

Discussion

Shame appeared in nearly all literature surrounding female sexuality in Christian communities. Killam and Gingrich (2011) reported shame as one of the strongest findings in their study. In defining shame, McClintock (2001) linked shame and the perceived need to hide. Women in the current study reported shame surrounding much of their experience with their sexuality. Shame resulted from the taboo nature of sexual sins and the generally closed nature of the topic. For these women who stepped outside the bounds of acceptable Christian sexuality, shame functioned as a major part of their experience and a great barrier to openness. However, openness in a safe context relived shame. Likely unnecessary in the first place, shame undoubtedly grew by remaining closed.

Killam and Gingrich (2011) also highly reported the theme of fear, also reported by participants in the current study. More specifically, these women reported a fear of judgment and condemnation. This fear makes sense in light of traditional Christian values still held firmly by most college students, as reported by Lastoria (2011). This fear increases due, again, to the taboo nature of these sins and resulting shame. Participants reported an intense fear going into conversations about this area of their life. However, much as with shame, openness within the right context always served to relieve this fear. As relief always came with openness, the issue seemingly did not lie in that students would receive judgment but that current Christian culture made them think they would.

For all the negative stigma and emotion surrounding female sexuality in the Christian culture, the present study's findings proved extremely positive. If women can openly speak about their sexual experiences in the right context, they stand to grow and develop, both personally and in relationships. Participants' stories revealed safe spaces for openness that seemed to shift slightly with time and distance from the struggle.

The initial stages of openness necessitate deep friendship. The personal and relational growth that happened after openness resulted from meaningful conversations and follow-up support that could only happen within an established relationship. As women first approached the idea of openness and faced their fear of judgment, they needed to do so within a safe relationship that eased the fear of judgment. The women spoke often of time and trust—time to build the relationship to a point of trust in which they no longer feared judgment. The idea of reciprocity also emerged a number of times from the responses. As relationships deepened and friends shared their experiences, trust slowly grew through reciprocity in sharing. As one friend shared, the other felt able to do

the same, an exchanged that continued until it existed clear safety to share something even as personal as a sexual struggle.

However, the need for follow-up support and close relationships in which to share seemingly diminished with distance from the struggle. As women shared within close relationships, grew, and moved away from the struggle, they began to share for the sake of responsibility. This type of sharing still happened in relatively close communities (i.e. residence hall floors or Bible studies), though not born of a need for support or accountability. Rather, this sharing directly resulted from a desire to help women possibly in the same position. Harkening back to the idea of reciprocity, these women knew full well the ease of sharing with someone who has already opened. They therefore wanted to offer openness so those around them felt safe sharing their own struggles.

For the participants in the present study, sharing in a safe context always brought deeper relationships. The women spoke at length of their relationships improving in general and of feeling fully known. They felt that their friends could not fully know or understand them without knowing and understanding their sexual struggles. This result does not prove surprising, considering the personal nature of one's sexuality and the intense emotions that accompany sexual struggles. The stories revealed that deep friendships reach a point at which not sharing no longer remains an option. Participants expressed feeling that full openness became the only way for the friendship to stay true and the support available in the relationship to prove real. As stated before, participants always reported openness in this context as positive.

Some participants saw sharing as highly valuable for accountability's sake. This finding proved true for women who shared while still struggling in an area of sexual sin

(as opposed to sharing about a sexual sin in the past). Sharing openly with a close friend allowed the friend to ask questions and the participant to seek help from the friend in the midst of temptation—an exchange participants reported as both necessary and positive.

Sharing also proved highly beneficial to certain women who identify as verbal processors. The ability to speak their thoughts aloud and receive feedback helped them tremendously in overcoming the struggle and developing personally. While not all self-identified as verbal processors, for those who did, this ability to discuss their struggle seemed vital to their story.

The only reported negativity surrounding openness came from openness in the wrong situations. The shame and fear surrounding the topic kept most women from sharing openly in large groups or with people they did not know well, but a few women chose openness in this context. Only two women reported this openness first-hand, but the revelation seemed powerful in their stories. One participant spoke of openness in the wrong context due to a desire to create an emotional bond. The other reported naivety and immaturity causing her to share openly in a discussion group that could not offer the right type of support. These women did not know how or in what context to seek help, so they did so in the wrong places. As all the stories revealed the incredibly closed nature of the topic of sexuality, these women—not surprisingly—did not know where to turn.

The common thread in unsafe spaces emerged as the lack of relationship. Without an established relationship, there remained no ability to know someone for anything other than sexual struggle and no room for follow-up support. Sharing in unsafe spaces proved of no benefit and often left the situation quite awkward.

Overall, there appeared tremendous positivity in these women's stories, especially considering the extreme confusion and negativity often surrounding the topic. The conversations clearly showed both the detriment of hiding in shame and the growth and healing from openness. For these women, openness in the right context provided the key to establishing healthy views of their sexuality and their own self in general.

Implications for Practice

The interviews clearly indicated that openness proves necessary for personal development and growth and that women face many barriers to openness. Thus, opening this topic for discussion on college campuses becomes absolutely necessary. To address sexuality in a holistic manner on campus could help break down those barriers to openness. Christian institutes of higher education should create programs that present Christian sexuality in a healthy manner and offer hope and support to those who have made mistakes in this area. The programs should strive to educate students on healthy Christian sexuality and to create a campus culture of forgiveness and acceptance without condoning sexual struggles themselves.

Campus programming can also communicate the ideas of safe and unsafe spaces. Students need to learn how to deal with and process such weighty topics. They need to know that there exist certain contexts in which it is safe, beneficial, and even encouraged to deal with these struggles. They also need to understand the inappropriateness of discussing the topic in other contexts—and they must know the inappropriateness does not stem from shame but from the personal nature of the discussion, which deserves a private context in which to process.

Student development personnel can, themselves, serve as safe spaces for sharing. By communicating an openness, willingness, and availability to their students, they can become the relationship in which sharing proves safe. While this relationship does not look identical to a peer friendship, the elements of trust, lack of judgment, and follow-up support can exist. A professional in this situation must understand and remember the need to communicate support. Students confessing these struggles needs to know that the professionals do not judge them or see them as any less valuable and that the professional will remain a source of support throughout the process of dealing with this struggle.

Furthermore, student leaders, particularly in residence halls, should receive training in how to guide peers in healthy sharing. These leaders should know how to respond to students who share these struggles with them. They should also know how to guide students in supporting friends who share and understand how to foster a healthy community culture in which students don't feel the need to hide in shame and fear.

Directions for Further Research

The current research revealed certain areas in which further study could prove particularly valuable. One such example comes with the need to understand differences in experience based on differences in particular struggles. Do experiences of young women differ depending on their particular struggle (masturbation, pornography, pre-marital sex, etc.)? Certain practices, such as premarital sex, possibly feel easier to share than others, such as masturbation. If so, certain aspects of campus programming might look different to open lines of communication. Further research into this facet of the topic could prove beneficial in knowing how to approach these discussions.

Future research could also address the experience of openness with people other than the peer group. For example, do women experience the same relief and growth after sharing openly in the context of counseling? What benefits does openness in counseling provide that openness in a peer group cannot? What does openness in a peer group provide that counseling cannot? These questions could prove beneficial to understanding how best to help those who struggle.

The researcher intentionally framed the present study within the Christian worldview. However, female sexuality does not remain unique to the Christian worldview. To what extent would this type of research apply outside of Christian communities? Do students at non faith-based institutions desire more open dialogue? Does the topic seem difficult to discuss outside of Christian communities? How do young women experience sexuality in these contexts?

Finally, campus programming on sexuality, while present, remains rather un-researched. Studies into the effectiveness of various campus programs and policies could prove highly beneficial to higher education practitioners. To understand how various programs affect women—both those who struggle in their sexuality and those who do not—would better equip higher education practitioners to create meaningful programs to address many of the issues apparent from the present research and other studies.

Limitations

While the researcher carefully planned the current study to fully understand and represent the voice of the participants, some limitations affected the research. Participants volunteered or self-selected entirely. Despite the assured confidentiality of the interview, a portion of women who fit the criteria likely felt unwilling to participate given the

sensitive nature of the topic. These women less willing to discuss this topic may have different experiences than those represented. Furthermore, the scope of the study remained small, with the participants all from one university. While many spoke of similar experiences within other Christian communities, the small-scale sample may not represent the whole. Despite the above limitations, there remains great value inherent in the voice of these women. This information can provide a starting point for practitioners and future researchers to broaden the information available on this topic.

Conclusion

The current research provided a great deal of meaningful insight into the experience of young women who often struggle in silence. While these women experienced detrimental emotions and perspectives before they can share openly, once they shared in the appropriate context, this negative experience became positive and healthy. The understanding and support that came from sharing within committed relationships dispelled the intense shame and fear of judgment felt before sharing. When done in the right context, openness brought immense relief, healing, and growth. As those in Christian higher education look to support and develop their students in holistic ways, they must regard this topic highly. Without understanding students' sexuality, higher education communities cannot begin to address the whole person.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

The questions themselves are the numbered five, the sub-points are examples of follow-up questions used.

1. Warm up questions
 - a. Where are you from?
 - b. What Year are you?
 - c. Why did you choose this institution?

2. Tell me about why you were interested in participating in this study.
3. Have you always been open about your sexual practices?
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. How did you or did you see this effecting other areas of your personhood?
 - c. What feelings did you experience regarding your sexuality before you were open?
 - d. Did you see this affecting your relationships (either romantic or platonic)?
4. Tell me about your decision to be open about this area of your life.
 - a. What specifically guided you in this decision?
 - b. With whom did you share first?
5. What has the reaction of your peers been?
 - a. Did this surprise you?
 - b. What do you think caused that reaction?
6. How have you changed as a result of this transparency in your life?
 - a. Do you think this is a good change?

