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Rachel Keener Killam

University of Colorado at Boulder

Heather Davediuk Gingrich

Denver Seminary

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Sexuality Among Evangelical College Women

By Rachel Keener Killam and Heather Davediuk Gingrich

Abstract

While some studies have examined the attitudes and perceptions of women with regard to their sexuality, none have investigated evangelical, female college students. This study explored attitudes and perceptions among eight evangelical Christian college women attending an evangelical university in the Western United States. Qualitative interviews were conducted and transcripts analyzed to determine underlying themes. Themes that emerged were (a) shame, (b) (c) fear, (d) ambivalence, (e) ignorance, (f) lack of sexual subjectivity and agency, (g) presence of sexual subjectivity and agency, (h) same-sex attraction, (i) female sexuality as God-given and natural, and (j) the importance of open dialogue regarding female sexuality. Results indicate a need for counselors and the evangelical community to contemplate renewed understandings of female sexuality including a re-examination of biblical interpretations on this topic. The potential positive role of Christian psychotherapists, pastors, professors and mentors with respect to the development of healthy sexuality for young women is discussed.

Sexuality Among Evangelical College Women

While a few studies have investigated female sexual attitudes and perceptions, none have specifically addressed the sexual attitudes and perceptions of evangelical college women. In the current study the authors set out to examine what messages women were hearing from church, family, and culture regarding female sexuality, and what themes emerged surrounding the attitudes and perceptions they had with regards to their own sexuality. We will first briefly summarize the literature in this area, after which we will discuss the method and results of the current study.

Attitudes and Perceptions of Females towards Sexuality

A number of themes regarding attitudes and perceptions of women about their sexuality can be found in the literature. The themes of shame, fear, ambivalence, ignorance, importance of open dialogue, sexual subjectivity, and sexual agency are described below.

The subject of shame has sundry meanings and understandings. McClintock (2001) defined shame in relation to sexual 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. (p. 21)

Shame in relation to female sexuality can also be understood in terms of theological shame, meaning that some Christian theology asserts that being female is shameful (Barger, 2003; Neal & Mangis, 1995). Shame has also been induced when female sexuality is defined as dirty, dangerous, bad, sinful, and even abnormal (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Harrison & Heyward, 1994; Lamb, 2001).

Another prevalent theme is fear. In educational settings (schools and churches), popular culture, and family environments, female sexuality often has been associated with unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STDs, and victimization from male predators, which could inspire a fearful sexual self-concept (Fine, 1988; Teitelman, 2004). Fear in relation to female sexuality also has emerged when females have been labeled negatively regarding their sexual feelings, behaviors, or self-expression (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Finally, some women have experienced fear of losing a relationship if they do not have sex with their partner (Walker, 2007).

Researchers have also reported that some females feel ambivalent about their sexuality (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Lamb, 2001; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Rosenau & Tan, 2002). This has been explained as women being excited about their sexuality, while at the same time feeling anxious and worried because of the fear associated with it (Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005). Ambivalence may also be experienced when women want to be sexual or sexually aroused but believe that they must have permission from males or be seduced into experiencing these desires (Lamb, 2001). Finally, some Christian women may experience ambivalence because sexuality and sexual desire, though normal and natural, may be understood as sinful (Rosenau & Tan, 2002).

Another existing theme in the literature on female sexuality is ignorance. Some studies suggested that there is an extant, misinformed understanding of sexuality in regards to desire: that males have insatiable, uncontrollable sex drives and women are non-sexual and must be coerced or manipulated into sexual activity (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). Other studies have recognized that females experience sexual desire and emphasize that females are created with the clitoris, the only human body part whose sole function is pleasure (Angier, 1999; Stayton, 1996). Researchers have suggested that there are a lack of venues that teach or discuss the full spectrum of female sexual desire and that there is silencing of meaningful discussion regarding female sexuality (Shoveller, Johnson, Langille, & Mitchell, 2004). It seems that misinformation and lack of information perpetuate a sense of ignorance surrounding female sexuality.

Several studies mentioned the importance of open dialogue for females regarding their sexuality. Almost 20 years ago, Fine (1988) conducted a groundbreaking study on the missing discourse of desire in public education when discussing female sexuality. This study emphasized the notion that female sexuality was taught negatively, without addressing the positive aspects of sexual desire. Amidst this discussion was the recognition that females need safe, open spaces to dialogue about their sexuality.

More recently, female sexual desire has not been so much ignored as exploited in that “Images and discourses of young women’s sexual desire are commodified and sold back to them through fashion, beauty and lifestyle products, music and accessories” (Harris, 2005, p. 40). Open dialogue, in a safe environment, is therefore still needed in order to allow women to experience normalcy and obtain guidance in relation to their sexuality (Lamb, 2001; Tolman, 2002).

The literature also revealed that women often lack a sense of sexual subjectivity. Sexual subjectivity has been defined as the “ability to acknowledge, accept, and take pleasure in the feelings associated with one’s body” (Teitelman, 2004, p. 1293). In other words, a female who demonstrates sexual subjectivity recognizes that she is the subject of her own life and desires. She takes ownership of her sexual feelings instead of being the object of male sexual desire and only acting on what he defines as sexual.

In a study examining feminist theory and Christian tradition, Harrison and Heyward (1994) summarized the lack of sexual subjectivity that has been experienced among Christian women. They cited the idea that in Christian history, women are meant to live for others; women did not always have body rights, did not have moral claim that their bodies were their own, had no authority as to where they put their bodies and how they used them, and no say in with whom their bodies were shared. In essence women did not belong to themselves, but to men. This concept bred the idea that while women may experience longings, desire, and sensuality, they must submit in obeisance to another's desires.

Sexual agency is a related, although distinct concept from sexual subjectivity. Teitelman (2004) defined sexual agency as "being able to make active decisions about one's body and to control, shape, and change one's sexual practice" (p. 1293). The cultural message that women often receive is that females are the objects of male sexual desire. As a result of this message, many females feel disconnected from their own desire (Harrison & Heyward, 1994). The disconnection from their own desire can make it difficult for females to assert volition in their sexual relationships, hindering them from telling their partners exactly what they do or do not want (Tolman, 2002). The sense of sexual objectivity, that is, the belief that a female is an object to be enjoyed and used on someone else's terms, can lead women to feel a lack of control and confidence with regards to expressing what they want and do not want in a sexual relationship or in expressing their sexuality (Teitelman, 2004).

The theme of same-sex attraction also came up in the literature. There is some evidence that women's sexualities and sexual orientations are complex and couched in a socio-cultural framework that leads to variations in female sexual orientation that do not necessarily exist among men (Garnets & Peplau, 2000). For example, early attachments to several different types of people, along with physiological functioning that differs from males, can allow females to have same-sex attractions without viewing themselves as lesbian or bisexual (Peplau, 2001). Emotional dependency often precedes same-sex attraction between women (Howard, 1991).

Young Christian women can sometimes become confused about their sexuality when they experience same-sex attraction (Howard, 1991). A number of authors have suggested ways to be of help to these young adults as they attempt to sort out this aspect of their sexuality (c.f., Gagnon, 2005; Hallman, 2008; Howard, 1991; McMinn, 2005).

Additional Issues Related to Christianity and Sexuality

While some of the literature on evangelical Christianity and sexuality has been addressed above, there are some additional relevant areas that bear mentioning. Church attendance, for example, has been found to affect the sexual choices Christians make, and is related to lower levels of sexual permissiveness, including first coitus or cohabitation (Bassett et al., 2002).

Negative conceptions of sexuality, particularly female sexuality, have appeared in the writings of some influential Church fathers who perceived sex as a vice and understood female sexuality to be inferior and a liability (Stanton & Hostler, 2001). For example, St. Augustine averred that women were not made in the image of God; Aquinas suggested that the female gender was some sort of mistake; and Tertullian purported that a woman caused the Fall of man and is the reason Jesus had to die on the cross (Neal & Mangis,

1995). These views have remained implicitly imbedded in much of the evangelical tradition, particularly in the area of inducing shame upon female sexuality (Runkel, 1998).

Currently, there are Christian authors, theologians, and mental health professionals who are contributing a more positive, hopeful, and informed framework for female sexuality. Some of these include redemptive and egalitarian views of the female body (Barger, 2003; Kidd, 1996; World Council of Churches, 2004), holistic understandings of female sexuality that include a full range of sexual desire and sexual self-definition (Friedman & Irwin, 1996; Heyward, 1996), and renewed questions that help Christians positively relate their sexuality with their spirituality (Barton, 1996; LaCelle-Peterson, 2008; Nelson, 1996).

Current Study

As mentioned earlier, some studies have been conducted with regards to women's attitudes and perceptions with regards to female sexuality. However, to our knowledge no such studies have been conducted using evangelical college women. In this qualitative study, eight evangelical college women were interviewed in order to determine what themes would emerge around the attitudes and perceptions they held about their own sexuality.

Methodology

Participants

General information about this study was presented in two Psychology classes at an evangelical university in the Western United States. Thirty women expressed interest in being interviewed and provided contact information. Each potential participant was sent a preliminary questionnaire asking for basic demographic information that assisted in selecting a sample of women whose histories were as different from each other as possible. Informed consent was obtained from the eight single women selected for participation.

The participants, six juniors and two seniors, ranging in age from 19 to 23, were self-identified evangelicals and signed a Statement of Faith (the same as that of the National Association of Evangelicals) in order to attend their university. Six were non-denominational, one had a Nazarene affiliation, and one was affiliated with the Assemblies of God. Several had backgrounds in other denominations including Southern Baptist and Catholicism, but identified most closely with a non-denominational affiliation. Seven participants identified themselves as Caucasian and one identified herself as a combination of Swedish, Portuguese, Norwegian, and Mexican. Their parents had annual incomes ranging from below 25,000 dollars to above 200,000 dollars. Six participants had not experienced sexual abuse and two had. Five had not engaged in sexual intercourse, two had engaged in consensual sexual intercourse, and one participant experienced non-consensual sexual intercourse. All had engaged in some type of sexual activity exclusive of sexual intercourse (including kissing, breast fondling, genital fondling, and oral sex). Finally, seven of the participants were Psychology majors and one was an English major.

Interview Format

The interviews, ranging from one to two hours, were semi-structured and based on the *Listening Guide* method (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). This qualitative approach to data collection and analysis recognizes that people's experiences and self-understandings are "embodied in a culture and in relationship with oneself and others" (Gilligan et al., 2003). Instead of a directive, researcher-centered interview, the *Listening Guide* method allows for the researcher to follow the lead of the person being interviewed. It allows the participant to disclose her story, letting any themes emerge so that the person's voice is not overridden by the researcher (Gilligan et al.). This method is not a simple analysis that categorizes and quantifies, instead it is attuned to "the story being told on multiple levels and to experience, note, and draw from the listener's resonances to the narrative" (p.159).

The open-ended interview questions were designed to facilitate an atmosphere where women could share stories about their sexuality, their perceptions of female sexuality, and be a springboard for women to talk about how they have experienced their sexuality (see Appendix A). The interview questions were developed by the researcher with input from authors who have conducted research in this field and/or have used the *Listening Guide* method (e.g., Sharon Lamb, Ed.D, personal communication, April 5, 2006; Deborah Tolman, Ed.D, personal communication, March 30, 2006). Feedback was also obtained from professors, graduate students, and practice interview participants to help clarify the structure and comprehensibility of the questions.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the *Listening Guide*. Analysis involved a four-step process that required several listenings/readings of transcripts of the each interview. The process allowed the researcher to listen for several different voices (themes) emerging from an individual's narrative (Gilligan, et al., 2003). The first step is listening for the plot of the narrative. The second step requires the researcher to listen for the first-person pronoun, "I," in order to understand how the participant spoke about herself. The third step is recognizing different themes that emerge in the narrative, and the fourth step is a synthesis of the data gathered in the first three steps.

Results

Themes that emerged from the data were (a) shame, (b) fear, (c) ambivalence, (d) ignorance, (e) lack of sexual subjectivity, (f) lack of sexual agency, (g) same-sex attraction, (h) female sexuality as God-given and natural, (i) open dialogue regarding female sexuality, and (j) the presence of sexual agency and sexual subjectivity. Examples from interview narratives are provided below to illustrate each of these themes. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality.

Shame

The theme of shame emerged in every interview from many different contexts in each participant's narrative. Shame was identified approximately 45 times, whether it was described as a participant's own shame, or shame she identified in relation to female sexuality in general. Other words related to shame were *untouchable*, *silence*, *abnormal*, *embarrassed*, *uncomfortable*, and *hidden*.

The theme of shame emerged in several different narratives in relation to the fact that female sexuality even exists. Many participants reported that messages they received about female sexuality in and of itself, or in relation to sexual desire, lust, masturbation, or pornography, was that it is not talked about or is a topic that should not be talked about. Below are excerpts from the transcripts of several participants that are representative of many of the other narratives connected to shame.

Beth:

I've heard of something too in the Christian world. I think girls experience this more than guys. It's sometimes seen as such a shameful thing, um, I think it's more shameful, like, I think girls experience it more, like you can't talk about it, you can't feel this way, like girls don't struggle with lust, girls don't struggle with masturbation, stuff like that, and girls who do can't talk about it...girls don't go through those things.

Jessica:

... like it's an embarrassing thing almost for girls to talk about the fact that they have—just don't mention the word sex...maybe that's because we all live in this society that it's okay for guys and not okay for girls.

Shannon:

...we don't talk about women who masturbate or we don't talk about women who struggle with pornography or we don't talk about women who lust, but they do, and um, we don't talk about those kinds of things...but women don't do that [struggle] because women don't lust because we are emotional and we care about people and its not about sex[said with a tone of sarcasm].

Fear

Fear was identified approximately 50 times and was reported by all of the participants. Other words associated with fear were *detached*, *uncomfortable*, *abnormal*, and *dangerous*. The following illustrate a number of ways in which fear emerged. These examples represent several participants' experiences.

Megan reported fear related to victimization: "When I think of sexuality and when I think of sex, I think of having been abused, and so it's like something that automatically for me has a bad connotation." She also stated that, "I have correlated the abuse with being feminine, and like, if I weren't a girl, then it wouldn't have happened." Jessica expressed a fear of being negatively labeled:

...females are viewed first of all, not really open to, what's the word...are just not naturally sex-driven, everyone knows guys want sex and girls are supposed to not and not really be a sexual person because if they are they they're viewed negatively.

Lydia shared her fear of losing her relationship:

...he told me that if I didn't have sex with him or something, that if a girl came up to him and was like, messing with him, he probably wouldn't say no (to sex)...

I actually started thinking about having sex with him because I was like, well you know, I don't want to, I would like to wait until marriage, so I don't want to lose him.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence was identified in only six instances within the contexts of three participants. The following narratives demonstrate ambivalence:

Shannon explained that though she enjoyed being sexually aroused, there was also a negative aspect to her arousal:

I love it [being sexually stimulated]. It's awesome; it feels great because it's super enjoyable...I think I feel cheap, and I feel easy, and I feel really ashamed of that, like I let that happen or I wanted that to happen...I guess in my head, at some point, I wanted to be touched.

Pam's description is similar to Shannon's:

It (sexual activity) was always something I enjoyed but, um, I feel guilty about it, and I just remember, honestly I didn't think I was doing anything wrong, but there was something about it that I was like, I don't feel right, like I feel dirty... but I knew it was wrong, but because I enjoyed it, I would do it anyways.

Ignorance

In some interviews participants expressed a recognition of ignorance regarding what women know and do not know about their own bodies and sexuality. Participants tended to be quite aware of the ignorance expressed in messages about female sexuality and typically did not believe the messages they heard. A total of fifteen examples of ignorance were expressed in the interviews from the narratives of 7 of the 8 participants.

When asked to define sexuality, Pam used ignorance as part of her response: "...when I think sexuality and women, I think of an expression in Christian women of like the ignorance, or maybe like, we don't know much about our sexuality." Megan stated, "...everybody tells us that it's okay for men to be sexual, but women aren't."

Sara:

"I think I always get a guy's perspective because typically guys are the pastors, so I think they use universal concepts of sexuality for both guys and girls. And so girls are getting this teaching of what is coming from a guy....I'm hearing from a female professor who has experience in this area, like dealing with people in this area...just seeing how things can be twisted just from the perspective from the pulpit."

Lack of Sexual Subjectivity and Sexual Agency

Though participants did not explicitly use the terms *sexual subjectivity* and *sexual agency*, narrative contexts were used to identify the presence of this theme. Lack of sexual subjectivity was expressed in three of the interviews within a variety of contexts. Lack of sexual agency was expressed three times, represented in two interviews. Shannon spoke of what women do to please men, demonstrating her awareness of a general lack of sexual subjectivity among women at her university:

I think boys are like, 'see, they care about us' [when female students dress modestly], and I'm like, no they don't, it's just another ploy as a matter of, like,

pleasing you [boys]... and like the secular world, it's like wear a mini-skirt because they [boys] want that, and here [evangelical university], wear jeans and a hoodie...I feel like, in the Christian world we think we're getting through to women if, like, they dress more appropriately, or like they act more this way...I still feel like it comes down to a cultural norm of what's acceptable or desirable, you know, in the secular world, it's the same.

Shannon also expressed an experience of lack of sexual agency:

I have this hard time saying no to boys, but I'm like, this is a good idea, this is a bad idea, like saying no isn't really an option...how can I say no? Like, I got myself to this point, like, I just don't get to be like, 'no,' like basically I asked for this, I put myself in this position, but now I'm suddenly backing out of it, like it ['no'] doesn't feel like an option really.

Presence of Sexual Subjectivity and Sexual Agency

While the participants demonstrated a lack of sexual subjectivity and agency, they also expressed the presence of sexual subjectivity and agency. Sexual subjectivity appeared in only two interviews, once in each interview. However, sexual agency appeared 19 times and was present in all but one interview. Words associated with sexual subjectivity and agency were *journey, exploration, learning, empowerment, value, confidence, discernment, awareness, informed, and, redefining*. The following statements represent how participants exemplified sexual subjectivity and sexual agency.

The following two statements represent sexual subjectivity in relation to sexual activity. Jessica said: "I wanted him to know that I wanted it as much as he did and that I enjoyed it as much as he did." Lydia made a similar statement: "I do want him, I do think about us, I do think about us doing stuff."

The next three statements demonstrate sexual agency. Shannon said: "My way of saying no is by not putting myself in the situation" Beth described her sexual agency this way:

There were times when he wanted to go further and I'm like, no, I'm not okay with it...I've just been kind of strong as to like where my boundaries are, and like my boundaries have shifted in some areas because there are some things that I am comfortable with that I thought I'd be uncomfortable with and things that I thought that perhaps I wouldn't be uncomfortable with that I was.

Jessica stated:

It's something I did because I wanted to not because I had to, the very beginning of my change from just giving my life to God then all the changes, my sexual life is not the only thing that's changed...but it's all been joyously changed, like, please, change me, and I actually feel awesome about it, I love it. I love that I haven't had sex for two years.

Same-Sex Attraction

Another theme that emerged was same-sex attraction. The two participants who disclosed same-sex attraction initiated dialogue on the subject, did not specifically identify themselves as homosexual, and have different experiences from one another. Shannon explained that her experience with same-sex attraction was due to intense intimacy that started becoming sexual:

Like, um, everything's like super intense, like intimate relationships among women...at some point, that like breeds an attraction...and dealing with that understanding, wondering myself, where it comes into play in the Christian world, and I wonder if other women experience it.

Sara shared her experiences with same-sex attraction, reporting gender identity struggles that began in elementary school:

So growing up masculine things were easier to praise than feminine. Feminine stuff like dressing up and wearing make-up and everything was more of like an obligation than just something fun or just something part of growing up, you know, and so for me with older brothers, I'm like I'm going to go play sports; I'm going to do all this other stuff; I don't want to be dressing up and whatever, um, actually so the first time I was asked if I was gay, I was in 3rd grade from a girl from church...I kind of grew up with people questioning me.

Sexuality as God-given and Natural

All but three participants mentioned the idea that sexuality is God-given and natural at least once, and it was mentioned seven times among five participants. The following are a few examples of how this theme emerged in the narratives. Shannon simply stated: "...my understanding or belief is that the Lord has designed us this way, we are sexual beings."

Jessica said it like this:

I definitely think that women aren't allowed to express themselves as much. I think they should be able to. I think God made us both sexual creatures, men no more than women. Women should be allowed to embrace that.

The Importance of Open Dialogue

All but one participant, in some way, expressed the need and importance of open dialogue regarding female sexuality. Participants expressed that their lives became healthier when they were able to talk about their sexuality. The importance of open dialogue was mentioned 17 times. The following statements represent the overall nature of open dialogue expressed in the narratives.

Shannon:

In my head a step closer to a healthy sexuality is let's talk about it, like right or wrong let's talk about it, and let's discuss it and let's be honest about it and let's be real about it. So I guess that to me is a step toward a more healthy expression of sexuality and just that it's being brought to the surface.

Beth made this statement about the importance of open dialogue:

Things have to be talked about, we have to be open about these things or else people are just going to go, you know, in crazy directions because they don't know or no one's willing to encourage them in any way.

Finally, Pam talked about the importance of open dialogue in relation to the church:

I think it should be something that um, it should be talked about a lot more than it is. I think, um, and especially the, going back to like masturbation and stuff, a lot of girls put a lot of guilt and shame, including like, myself, um, 'cause it's

never talked about and we never really know like what to do with it, you know, or just anything we experience sexually...So, I mean, with the church I just think it should be talked about in order for us to formulate opinions on it, like we need to talk to others about it.

Summary and Discussion

The identified themes regarding sexuality in a sample of evangelical college women were (a) shame, (b) fear, (c) ambivalence, (d) ignorance, (e) lack of sexual subjectivity, (f) lack of sexual agency, (g) presence of sexual subjectivity and sexual agency, (h) same-sex attraction, (i) the importance of open dialogue, and (j) sexuality as God-given and natural. These themes emerged implicitly and explicitly in each participant's narrative.

With the exception of the viewing of sexuality as God-given and natural, all of the themes that emerged from the data of this study are also themes that have been reported in published studies, mostly within non-evangelical contexts. The ways in which these themes were expressed in the participant narratives of the current study were also similar to what has been discussed in previously conducted research. Therefore, there appears to be considerable similarity between the perceptions and attitudes of this sample of evangelical Christian college women and reports of women in general. Overall, the results demonstrated both healthy and unhealthy perspectives, positive and negative themes, summarily revealing a complex, paradoxical, and realistic representation of female sexuality among this sample of evangelical women.

Of particular significance was the presence of sexual agency. All but one participant expressed sexual agency in their narratives. This finding is important because it suggests that although the participants at times demonstrated a lack of sexual agency, they were also finding ways to assert their will and make their own choices. Many shared that they were in the process of defining their own sexuality, a process which included renewing their understandings of Scripture, learning that their sexuality is good and valuable, and developing a sense of discernment regarding misinformation that they had received from culture or some evangelical settings. Finally, several participants shared stories about Christian professors, mentors, and counselors who have helped them become agents of their sexuality. As the participants asserted, defined, renewed, developed, and discerned their sexuality, they demonstrated sexual agency.

One theme that was unique to these participants as compared to reports in the non-evangelical literature, was that several viewed their sexuality as God-given and natural. They recognized that if God created them female and sexual, there had to be something good about their sexuality—that their sexuality was integral to their personhood. In this way, these participants made a connection between their sexuality and spirituality, making this theme particularly noteworthy.

Implications for the Counseling Field and Evangelical Communities

Evangelical participants in this study conceptualized their sexuality similarly to those in the extant, secular literature in both negative and positive ways. In negative terms, this could imply that evangelical college women are influenced by distorted understandings in culture. It is also possible that some evangelical contexts have integrated distorted cultural understandings of female sexuality and misused the Bible and Christian history to justify those understandings. For instance, some popular evangelical literature

suggests that males are active pursuers—people of agency, while females are portrayed as passive receivers, helpless, in need of being rescued—lacking agency (Eldredge, 2001). Some participants expressed concern surrounding the messages they have received from the church, and some literature suggests that our ecumenical history does not shed realistic or redemptive light on female sexuality (c.f., Neal & Mangis, 1995; Runkel, 1998; Stanton & Hostler, 2001). If the participants in the current study represent other evangelical, Christian women, then this amplifies the need for Christians and counselors alike to be agents of restoration and encouragement in relation to female sexuality. The findings of this study could help evangelical theologians, pastors, Christian education curriculum writers, and counselors recognize and address false assumptions about female sexuality that are present in scriptural interpretations and teachings.

Although, as mentioned above, some of the Christian literature related to sexuality is negatively distorted, there is also a great deal of Christian literature that speaks redemptively on behalf of human sexuality (Barger, 2003; Kidd, 1996; LaCelle-Peterson, 2008; McClintock, 2001; Sayers, 1971; World Council of Churches, 2004). It seems that there may be a gap between scholarly insights and evangelical praxis in that the findings of the research being conducted in the area of sexuality may not be reaching the leadership within evangelical communities. Fortunately, as this study demonstrated, some women are taking the responsibility to understand, discern, and define their sexuality. They are dialoguing with Christians who are offering renewed perspectives, and they are living as agents of their own sexuality. As evangelicalism tends to place a lot of emphasis on purity with regards to sexual behavior, development of the presence of sexual agency could be seen as particularly important.

The importance of open dialogue with regards to female sexuality within Christian circles was emphasized by participants in this study. Church leaders including youth pastors, mentors, Christian education directors, and Christian mental health professionals would do well to intentionally create opportunities to discuss female sexuality in small group settings, as well as one-on-one.

A number of participants discussed the positive influence of older, respected Christians, such as mentors and professors. This finding should serve as even further encouragement for Christians in these positions to address these issues, recognizing that their input could contribute not only towards healthy views about female sexuality, but increased sexual agency. Further research studies would need to be conducted to determine if open dialogue can be successfully programmed into Christian education curricula (e.g., in churches or schools), or whether it is dialogue within the context of personal relationships with respected Christian mentors (whether lay people, counselors or pastors) that is the most powerful.

Same-sex attraction was identified by two out of the eight Christian college women in this study. Although the extent of this theme is not possible to determine through a case study approach using such a small sample, this finding does suggest that Christian counselors and the Christian community at large need to be willing to not only acknowledge that the issue exists, but also recognize the need for Christian women to address their experiences in this area.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the small sample size and qualitative nature of this study, results are not generalizable to either other evangelical college students or other populations of women. The use of predominantly Caucasian, psychology majors further limits external validity, as does the use of participants who were comfortable enough discussing their sexuality to volunteer. Also, due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and interview questions, it is possible that some participants may have resisted full disclosure.

Due to the small population of the evangelical university there is a chance that participants knew each other and may have discussed interview questions prior to the interview. The possible sharing of information may have allowed participants to engage in the interview with prepared or edited comments.

Although using the *Listening Guide* as the qualitative method for data collection and analysis was an attempt to make the process as objective as possible, the method may seem too subjective for some readers. In its defense, the researcher went into the interviews expecting to find mainly negative themes, but instead found a mixture of positive and negative themes.

Conclusion

Despite some of the negative perceptions and misconceptions regarding female sexuality, and the seemingly slow rate of cultural and ecclesiastical change, at least some young, single, Christian women are refusing to accept distorted understandings of their sexuality and are embracing their God-given sexuality. The challenge for Christian mental health professionals, pastors, and lay leaders, is to find ways to positively influence young women with regards to their perceptions and attitudes about their sexuality, as well as help them develop a sense of sexual agency with regards to their sexual behavior.

Rachel Keener Killam is a Career Counselor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She received a B.A. in biblical Studies from Colorado Christian University, and she holds a MA from Denver Seminary.

Heather Davediuk Gingrich, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Counseling at Denver Seminary. She obtained a B.A. from Carleton University in Canada, an M.A. from Wheaton Graduate School, and Ph.D. from University of the Philippines

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