

BECOMING ‘DAMAGED GOODS’

A qualitative study on sex education and its effects on sexuality

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Abstract This study examines how sex education performed at a Christian private school in Oregon (USA) affects female students’ sexuality. The study collected data through the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews which were then analysed using a thematic data analysis. The results show a handful of detrimental effects on sexuality caused by abstinence-based sex education including sex guilt, shame and fear. Additionally, findings demonstrate evidence of homophobic feelings perpetuated by abstinence-based sex education. Although abstinence-based sex education propagated many of the aforementioned harmful effects, it was not the only instigator. Institutionalised religion and religious pressure play a large role in one’s perception of abstinence as well. For further research, it is suggested to continue research on one’s development of sexuality in a hyper-religious context.

I Introduction

Sex education is one of the most controversial topics of the 21st century (Dastagir, 2018). It is political, religious, and it has the potential to leave long lasting effects on its students. The United States (US) is an excellent example of the diversity of approaches taken to this controversial topic; each state legislates its sex education differently (University of Southern California [USC], 2017). As a conservative wave has flooded the US since the presidential election of 2016, we have once again seen a push for abstinence-based education. Although abstinence-based sex education is back in the public eye, it has quietly remained unquestioned in American school systems for many years. Because it is still a common sex education program, it is important to understand its effects, specifically on the sexuality of those who receive it.

This study focuses on sex education at a Christian private school¹ located in the Willamette Valley in Oregon. While it is well known for its academics and athletics, there has not been much commentary on the quality of its abstinence-based sex education. Hence, our research aims to answer the question: How does ‘Valley High School’s (VHS)’ approach to sex education affect female students’ sexuality? Sexuality in this sense ranges from sexual activity to body image and beyond. The research is exploratory, as we are trying to answer this question avoiding any preconceptions about the sex education at VHS and its effects.

While many sources concerning sex education and its effects exist, they fail to delve deep enough in the analysis. A majority of these studies are statistical and superficial. Through our own research, we hope to contribute to this apparent knowledge gap by providing provide a deeper understanding of the different ways in which this type of education affects their sexuality. This study contains a literature review connecting the previous research to our ethnographic study, the methodology employed, the analysis of our gathered data and lastly, the discussion of the results.

2 Literature review

There have been a handful of studies conducted over the years regarding sex education, specifically in the United States. Data gathered by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health discusses how sex education affects

¹ To ensure anonymity, the school will be referred to a ‘Valley High School (VHS)’.

surface level aspects of students' sexuality, such as contraceptive use, frequency of intercourse, and likelihood of pregnancy (Sabia, 2006). Sabia (2006) suggested that the implementation of atypical programs (long-term, intensive, comprehensive-based sex education) may have a stronger effect on students' sexuality as opposed to the typical short-term, abstinence-based strategies. Similarly, a study by Kirby (2012) discussed different sex education programs and their impact on one's sexual behaviour. Many of these programs took place in the United States and reportedly focused on delaying sex rather than educating students about sex. There is a failure to address the programs' effects on students at a deeper level by looking at how their sex education affects their feelings and emotions. Consequently, our qualitative study sexuality will contribute to the gradual completion of the aforementioned knowledge gap.

Sexuality is an important part of one's identity and healthy sexual activity provides many different benefits; some being physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and social (Jannini, Fisher, et. al., 2009). If one's sex education is lacking vital information such as how to consent or use protection, it will have consequences on one's sexual experience and sexual behaviour (Sprecher, Harris, & Meyers, 2008). Each American state decides its requirements for sex education. This choice of sex education is highly dependent on the current legislation; therefore, sex education programs are prone to change (USC, 2017). In 2017, only 13 states required sex education to be medically accurate and in almost all cases, the states which are not required to deliver medically accurate information are the states which stressed abstinence (USC, 2017). This lack of necessary information can negatively contribute to one's sexuality (Sprecher, Harris, & Meyers, 2008).

Within the realm of abstinence-based sex education, there are two main categories employed in the United States. The first type is known as comprehensive sex education, which encourages students to be abstinent yet provides them with information regarding different contraceptive methods amongst other important topics, such as communication or consent (Hauser, 2004). The second type is called abstinence-only-until-marriage which is in favor of leaving out useful information necessary for the development of relationships and sexual intercourse (USC, 2017). Necessary information in regard to one's sexuality are viewed as contradictory messages to abstinence which would undermine its impact. Therefore, the second type provides no information on contraception, consent or any other topics that could assist sexually active students or students who want to initiate sexual interaction in achieving safe sex (Hauser, 2004). Moreover, in the early 2000s some programs taught that premarital sex would induce harmful physical and psychological damage (Dailard, 2002).

As ‘Valley High School’ is a conservative Christian school, its curriculum, including sex education, heavily relies on biblical morale according to information on their website. Studies have shown that institutionalised religion can be quite influential when it comes to sexuality. The views a religious group has on issues such as sex outside of marriage or homosexuality significantly influences the opinions of those who identify with said group (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). Further, a study by Mosher and Cross (1971) looks into sex guilt as a personality disposition. The study claimed that sex guilt as a personality disposition must be learned or acquired. Although some may have a natural disposition to the feeling of guilt, this does not determine what they feel guilty about. The study argued that sex guilt is not a natural feeling; it must be learned (Mosher & Cross, 1991). This relates to Cochran and Beeghley’s (1991) study as in the case of our study, sex guilt is likely encouraged by religious pressure which tends to foster negative attitudes towards premarital sex.

3 Methods

3.1 Study design

Although many previous studies regarding sex education were quantitative, this study was conducted in a qualitative manner. Because the subject is delicate and personal, the data gathered should include detailed content including emotions, body language and experience. The data was collected through in-depth interviews. These interviews were semi-structured as sex education and sexuality are sensitive subjects often requiring prompts from the interviewer(s). Furthermore, we intended to leave room for the participants to bring about points that we perhaps failed to consider in our questions. The interviews occurred over video chat as interview subjects are all residents of Oregon in the United States.

3.2 data collection and categorisation

The participants consist of nine female students ranging from the age of sixteen to twenty-one. All students attend or have attended ‘Valley High School’ in the past, participating in its sex education. At the beginning of each interview, the question was asked: “Imagine yourself on a scale going from conservative to liberal. This scale can be your values, politics, etc. Where would you place yourself and why?” This question helped us to better interpret the subjects’ answers to certain questions. We have categorised the participants into two main groups depending on their own description of themselves on the scale as well as the codes found throughout the interviews. These two groups are labeled: conservative leaning/conservative (three subjects) and liberal leaning/liberal (six subjects).

These group titles will be used often throughout this research though they are not fully exclusive as answers widely vary from participant to participant.

4 data analysis

4.1 'Damaged goods'

Throughout this study, we have come to the conclusion that abstinence-based sex education does have profound effects on the sexuality of 'Valley High School's' female students. According to the more liberal interviewees, the sex education did not include vital information regarding contraceptives, protection or sex itself. Rather, it was focused on the risks involved in sex before marriage which therefore stressed the importance of abstinence. According to Hauser (2004), this type of sex education does not work in terms of preventing sex before marriage. Without an in-depth sex education, students will more likely engage in unsafe sexual activity, for example without the use of contraceptives (Hauser, 2004). Our results show that although our participants did in fact refrain from engaging in sexual behaviour *during* high school, more than half of our interviewees did become sexually active once entering higher education.

Similar to Hauser's (2004) study, the sexually active students in our research were highly misinformed when first engaging in sexual activity. This demonstrates the ability of abstinence-based sex education to stunt one's sexual activity through a lack of education. This was a recurring pattern found throughout almost every single interview. Firstly, it appears that the abstinence-based sex education used at 'Valley High School' created a taboo surrounding sex. A clear indicator of taboo was the avoidance of certain vocabulary. Most interview subjects struggled to say the word 'sex' often replacing 'sex' with 'doing it/that/stuff'. Although literal taboo was evident through the evasion of certain vocabulary, we also witnessed taboo through bodily discomfort. When topics such as sexual activity or pornography were brought up, many subjects became visibly uncomfortable. This could be seen by sudden flushed cheeks and awkward movement such as constant fidgeting, long pauses, stuttering and giggling. When interviewing 'Chloe', she often laughed, fidgeted and hummed. For example:

Becca: So, how do you feel about masturbation then?

Chloe: Uhm... [laughing] I don't talk about it a lot. [laughing] That's how I feel about it. Uhm [long pause], see this is me being uncomfortable, uhm, [laughing and constantly running fingers through hair], yeah.

Another example of how abstinence-based sex education influences one's sexuality can be seen through the fear subjects associated with sex. Many interview subjects reported a fear to engage in any sexual behaviour after receiving their sex education. The fact that at 'VHS' sex is portrayed as a dangerous activity and categorised as sinful if it occurs outside of wedlock, has great effects on these students' perception and relationship with it (Fine, 1988). Interviewees confirmed that this fear-based message was evident in their sex education at 'Valley High School' and all respondents reported that their sex education created negative connotations of sex often based upon the fear of the unknown. Accordingly, the relationship between students' fear and the fear-based was studied by Fine (1988). They noted a discourse driving sex education over the course of classroom observation known as *Sexuality as morality*, which is "...infused by Cartesian and Judeo-Christian moral ideals such as self-control, willpower, and purity" (Fine, 1988, p. 65). These are known for being fear-based narratives. Furthermore, a study done by Dailard (2002) explained how the current standards for abstinence-only programs must teach that sex or any sexual activity outside of marriage will induce both harmful physical and psychological damage. One respondent describes her fear of being labeled "damaged goods" after partaking in certain sexually charged activities. This is due to the fact that her sex education emphasised that the outcome of any sexual activity outside of marriage would lessen her worth as a woman. When 'Mia' was asked how she felt about sex in general, she responded:

Mia: I think it's like, I don't know [long pause]. I think... hum... it's an amazing thing [purity] I get from God. (...) Also in my view, like I don't think of anyone else differently if they have sex. I don't necessarily think it is wrong to have sex before marriage, it is just a way that I can respect myself because I have disrespected myself in so many other ways. It's, like, the one thing I have left kinda thing [long pause] and it is not necessarily because of biblical views at all. I am just trying to keep this one thing I have left.

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Mia: For a while I was scared to even hang out with boys because it kinda felt like... it really actually felt like once you had done this you were just like, impure, and like somehow outcasted and there was like no turning back. Once you are not a virgin you are like damaged goods almost. I don't know, I hated that, so like becoming damaged goods, that really goes against the whole belief of Christianity like everyone, no matter what you have been through is worthy of God.

This moment of reflection that 'Mia' shares is strikingly relevant. She is primarily trying to clarify that religion is not influencing her desire to stay abstinent.

However, she simultaneously expresses a strong desire to ‘respect herself’ by staying abstinent. It is apparent that ‘Mia’ subconsciously carries out this strong detachment and completely separates her decision of saving sex for marriage from religion. She often reiterates this disassociation throughout the interview as a mechanism to gain control over the decision of staying abstinent. ‘Mia’ wants to believe that this is an act of free will. Nonetheless, her decision regarding abstinence indicates learned sex guilt and the influence of a religious community (Cochran & Beeghly, 1991). ‘Mia’ expresses a fear of having sex because she associated sex outside of the wedlock with a lack of respect for herself and God.

The idea of abstinence has been established as a core part of their sexual identity, which is why ‘Mia’ feels like her worth as a woman has been lessened after engaging in sexual activity. Disregarding this set of core values leads our participants to internalise feelings of guilt and shame. It is important to note that guilt on the basis of sex is not a natural feeling, but it is rather attained through conscious development (Mosher & Cross, 1971). Thus, it is likely derived from an educational source, be it bible studies or sex education classes. Guilt and shame were themes evident in nearly all interviews. In an interview with ‘Sophie’, she shares that for most of her life she planned on saving sex for marriage, but things changed when she began attending college. She realised that she had only been abstinent as she was raised in a community where it was normalised and pressed through her sex education. Her decision to abstain was not at all a personal decision, but one influenced by her surroundings. At college, she had sex for the first time and reported feelings of guilt and shame for nearly two years until the present. As explained by Mosher and Cross (1971) this sex guilt may very well be a self-mediated but unconscious form of punishment as she idolised the concept of purity for so long. She explained that even though she knows her worth is not defined by virginity, her sex education and religious leaders are always in the back of her mind.

Throughout the analysis of our data we came to the realisation that purity as a reflection of one’s worth appears to be a recurring issue. All participants described virginity as precious and sacred. When their virginity is questioned, for example when we ask ‘Are you sexually active?’, their identity as a woman is questioned as well. This is because abstinence-based sex education effectively interlinks identity with virginity. The concept of purity resembles cleanliness and desirability and when a woman loses her virginity, she is no longer pure; she identifies herself as dirty, damaged and undesirable. This is why our interviewees express shame and guilt over any sexual activity regardless of whether or not it was penetrative. Therefore, it appears that abstinence-based sex education uses fear and shame-based narratives to keep students abstinent. The idea of virginity

or purity as a reflection of worth impressed upon young women is damaging and has long term consequences.

4.2 The problem with memory

Although a majority of the subjects reported that they remain abstinent due to fear or guilt, those who remain on the conservative side have also chosen abstinence. These subjects interpreted their academic sex education quite differently than the aforementioned liberal-leaning subjects. To explain, the conservative subjects reported much more positive descriptions of ‘Valley High School’s’ sex education. The more liberal-leaning subjects often reiterated that their sex education was unmemorable aside from the pressure to stay abstinent. In contrast, the more conservative-leaning participants were able to recollect many details such as exercises to improve body image, specific videos and literature (all videos and literature mentioned focused on abstinence and its benefits). This would appear to be an example of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is evident when conservative subjects interpret their experiences so as to confirm or justify their own set of beliefs (Nickerson, 1988). To clarify, motivated confirmation bias is not always a conscious decision (Nickerson, 1988). For example, ‘Abigail’ regularly makes unprompted comments about there only being two sexes. Additionally, she claims homosexuality, or any preference outside of heterosexuality, to be wrong. Multiple times, she supports these bold claims using examples from her high school sex education at ‘Valley High School’.

Becca: [10:23] That’s good. Okay, we’re kind of going to go into your general sex education now, but before, I want to go over a term. So, the term sexuality, what does that mean to you?

*Abigail: Mm, it means [pause], what you are I guess. **What parts you’re born with.***

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Becca: [11:12] Okay, so to start, can you just tell me about your sex education? What kind of sticks out to you that you can remember?

*Abigail: It was always with biblical standards which was good because that’s how I was raised too. **There’s a female and a male and that’s it. You’re born with what you’re born with and you’re attracted to that, and that’s how I am, so that’s what I believe is right. And, so, that’s what they kind of, that’s kind of what was taught at [Valley High School] too.** [cont. 12:45] We learned, yeah, you’re born with female parts or male parts and men are always stronger than*

*girls they're built differently, their hormones are different, they go through different puberty, they're just made so differently. So are women and **that's who we are and we're supposed to be and, yeah, that's what I learned as a kid and it was reiterated later and in high school too.** I don't know what else.*

Strangely enough, no other interview subjects mentioned this topic without being prompted and when asked, many explicitly disclosed that homosexuality (or anything non-heteronormative) was not discussed within their academic sex education, rather it was a topic deliberated over in bible classes, home or church. It would appear that 'Abigail' is experiencing motivated confirmation bias in order to justify her own feelings of discomfort regarding homosexuality and gender fluidity. Confirmation bias occurred in the interviews of other conservative interview subjects as well. In addition to this, it is also important to examine the reflective process of 'Abigail' when answering these questions. First of all, she reduces, or rather focuses the meaning of sexuality to "the parts you are born with". This is already very telling of 'Abigail's train of thought when it comes to this topic, as that is the first and only thing that comes up in her mind when trying to define what sexuality is. Moreover, she reaffirms this opinion when asked about the highlights of her sex education and she then elaborates more by bringing up her opinion on gender roles. Last but not least, when giving a general answer on her sex education she stresses the fact she is happy about how biblical standards were always considered, as she was also raised by those.

All six liberal subjects reported the feeling that abstinence was forced whereas all of the conservative subjects argued that it was not. Instead, they claim that abstinence was offered as a healthy alternative to sex before marriage. Further, those who have personally chosen abstinence did not feel pressured during their sex education. This is likely because they agreed to remain abstinent beforehand. It would seem that because of their previously developed choice to remain abstinent, they perceived the pushing of abstinence which occurred at 'VHS' as simple reinforcement to what they already knew. In contrast, those students who had not agreed to remain abstinent beforehand did feel the pressure forced upon them to stay abstinent outside the wedlock. At the same time, the liberal leaning participants could also be stretching the extent to which abstinence was forced upon them which may be another example of confirmation bias. Nevertheless, the observations gathered throughout this study thus far lead us to conclude that the liberal-leaning students' perception of their sex education may be more reliable.

5 Discussion

Although our research focused on the effects of ‘Valley High School’s’ abstinence-based sex education, we have found that there is another more significant factor which encourages and often leads to guilt, shame and inhibited development of sexuality. This underlying factor that we failed to seriously consider is religion. It is true that not all participants consider themselves religious and many times, participants made clear attempts to dissociate religion from their feelings of guilt and shame. These blatant attempts to separate religion from their feelings only encouraged us to probe deeper. After carrying out a thorough analysis of our data, we came to the realisation that religion acts as the underlying cause behind all of the aforementioned issues. Moreover, sex education, upbringing and social environment (norms) are the three main mediators in this relationship which ultimately affect these female student’s sexuality in different ways (figure 1). We believe that without religion, sex education, upbringing and social environment would have led to a different outcome regarding our participants’ sexuality. Thus, religion has allowed for these three factors to play a crucial role in the development of our participants’ sexual identity.

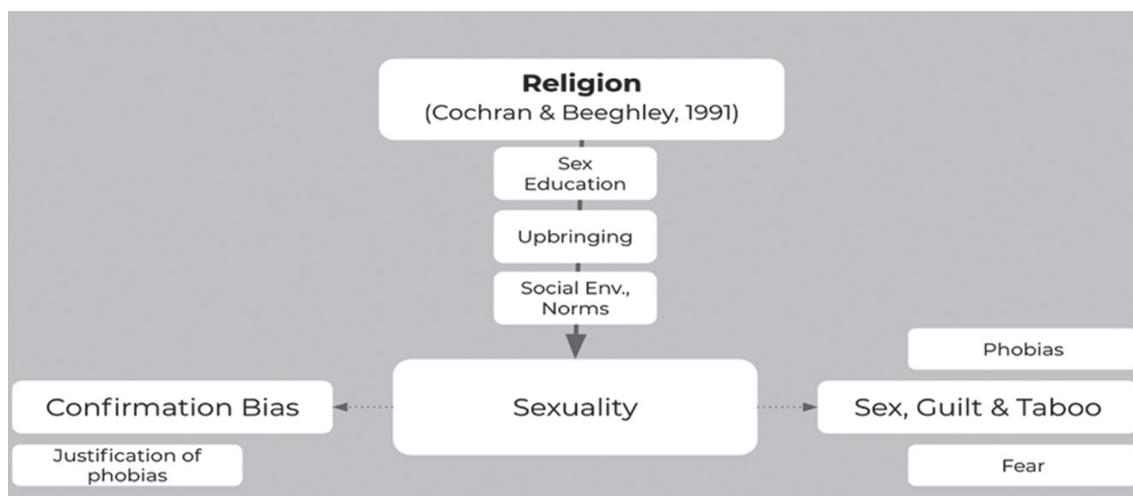


Figure 1 Image depicting relationship between sexuality and the aforementioned variables

Moreover, towards the end of our interviewing period, we came across an outlier which further supported our argument that religion is the underlying factor. One of our participants, ‘McKayla’ belonged to the liberal-leaning side of our categorisation and was one of the most open-minded participants. When comparing all of our participants, we realised that ‘McKayla’ was different; she was the only participant who had been raised outside of a conservative community, and most

importantly, in a non-religious home. For this reason, she did not develop a fixation with purity from a young age. She never experienced feelings of guilt surrounding sexual activity. She did not avoid the word 'sex', in fact she boasted of her sex positivity. This is important as it made clear the relationship between religion and sex education. With the help of 'McKayla', it became evident that religion plays a crucial role in the internalisation of fear, guilt and shame during ones' sex education.

6 Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that religion is the reason that abstinence-based sex education is enforced in the first place. Throughout our interviews, it is apparent that those raised in a traditional Christian home experience their sex education on a more personal level. According to the results given by the one participant who was not raised religiously, a religious upbringing, environment and sex education, participants are crucial to the aforementioned negative effects. Sex guilt is not a natural development; it must be attained through conscious development (Mosher & Cross, 1971). It was only once the more liberal participants broke out of their religious environment that they came to question this strict set of values that forced abstinence upon them. Only then did they question this concept and consider sex outside of marriage as a possibility.

For further research, it would be interesting to look into the breaking point of those who have experienced strong abstinence-based sex education: What makes them crack? When do they start questioning the values they had been raised to put on a pedestal? We began to see these cracks in a few of our participants when they started questioning the intentions of abstinence-based sex education and pondering why they experienced such profound feelings of guilt and shame. The detrimental effects of religion roused sex education have been explained throughout this research. However, it is necessary that the research does not end here. There is a need for deeper understanding concerning the development of sexuality in a religious context. With today's intensifying issue of sex education in the United States, this research should prompt change regarding abstinence-based sex education.

No one deserves to feel like damaged goods.

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