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Identifying Women's "Sexual Agency" in their Reports of First Sexual Encounters: A

Qualitative Study

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16 April 2008

Abstract

"Sexual agency" is the ability to make sexual choices according to one's will, free from coercion. Experiencing oneself as a sexual agent means feeling in control of one's sexual decisions and experiences. However, little psychological research has focused on this new construct. Further description of sexual agency will help researchers to recommend improvements to sex education programs and therapeutic interventions. Feminist perspectives advocate equality in gender relations and sexual relationships. Positive Psychology encourages an examination of normative subjective experience. Drawing upon these perspectives, it is assumed that American women struggle to represent themselves as sexual agents due to cultural scripts emphasizing passivity. To explore women's variations in agency, a qualitative method was used to examine how women portray their internal experience of agency in their first sexual encounter. Participants ($N = 21$) were asked four open-ended questions to elicit reflections on their first sexual encounter (e.g., "Following your first sexual encounter, what were your initial thoughts and feelings about the experience?"). Participants' narrative responses were coded as to the level of sexual agency depicted (e.g., fully agentic, partially agentic, fully nonagentic) based on three dimensions: connection/disconnection, activity/passivity, and interaction/isolation. Responses were also coded for the specific feelings described. An interpretive analysis yielded the finding that fully agentic women display connection with their experience, interaction with their partner, and activity in the encounter; these women also describe their encounters as positive. The elaborated concept of sexual agency can be used to improve intervention programs by empowering women to be sexual agents.

Identifying Women's "Sexual Agency" in their Reports of First Sexual Encounters: A Qualitative Study

Sex. This three letter word seems to be pervasive in our society today. The topic of sex seems to be a central theme in everyday life. Strong, Yarber, Sayad, & DeVault (2008) demonstrate the prevalence of sex in our society when they say, "images of sexuality permeate our society, sexualizing our environment" (p. 3). There are sexual education and sexual self-help sections in bookstores. There are television shows devoted to discussing sexual questions and problems and therapy for people who are experiencing sexual difficulties (Strong et al., 2008). Because sexuality is such an integral part of life and human development, psychologists from all perspectives have studied sexual behavior and its effects. Most of the research conducted to date has focused on the problematic aspects of sex, such as sexually traumatizing experiences.

Research has also focused on social and public health aspects of sexuality such as condom use, demographic factors, risky behaviors and safe sex practices (Luster & Small, 1994, as cited in Woody, D'Souza, & Russel, 2003). Further research has explored motivations for adolescents to decide to engage in their first sexual encounter and found that there are a number of factors that influence this decision (Woody, et al., 2003). Some of the factors identified as extremely influential include peers, parents and the media (Woody, et al., 2003). Woody et al. (2003) also found that emotional motivators such as "I did it to feel more feminine or masculine" and "I wanted to please my partner" strongly influence when adolescents choose to begin having sexual intercourse. Other facets of sexual research have included topics such as attachment and sex and how these affect relationships (Brassard, Shaver, & Lussier, 2007). Brassard et al. (2007) found that not only do peers, parents and the media influence adolescent decisions in regards to

sexual intercourse, but also attachment styles in relationships. These influences can greatly impact the decision to engage in sexual experiences, namely the first sexual encounter.

According to Woody et al. (2003), “there has been little...study of the first experience of sexual intercourse” (p. 35). Of the research that has been conducted, one related study by Moore and Davidson (1997) examined guilt and regret college women feel after their first sexual encounter. According to Moore and Davidson (1997), “...one’s first intercourse experience may lead to emotional turmoil or sexual dysfunction later in life” (p. 30). They also state that negative outcomes related to the first sexual encounter can be barriers to intimacy, especially for women (Moore & Davidson, 1997). Different reasons for negative outcomes could possibly be rooted in their sexual behavior which is “highly influenced by a person’s ‘sexual scripts,’ a complex network of interacting variables within the individual and the relationship” (Moore & Davidson, 1997, p. 30). Although these studies address some aspects of women’s experiences, there are many aspects of the experience of the first sexual encounter left unexplored.

An area less examined by researchers until recently is that of positive psychology. A study by Seligman, Steen, and Parks (2005) say:

The aim of positive psychology is to catalyze change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life. The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about positive subjective experience: well-being and satisfaction (past); flow, joy, the sensual pleasures, and happiness (present). (p. 410)

In addition, positive psychologists also advocate moving away from the negative aspects of human qualities and focusing on the positive (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). By examining positive aspects such as satisfaction, sensual pleasure, and happiness, positive psychologists can assist individuals in having healthy sexual experiences.

Some positive psychologists have explored positive aspects of sex and how they affect the majority of our society. This research focuses on how sex affects the majority of people, those who have not had sexually traumatic experiences. It also addresses the positive impacts that sex can have on those who are experiencing it. Recent research under the umbrella of positive psychology has examined sex and sexuality in terms of what goes right in sexual situations, relating to sexual wellness and sexual health. A study by Rye and Meaney (2007) uses positive psychology to focus on attaining pleasure in sexual experiences, contributing to sexual wellness. Positive psychology has been incorporated in other areas of psychology, such as therapy and interventions. Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006) found that positive psychology has been instrumental in developing positive psychotherapy (PPT), which focuses on increasing positive emotions, engaging with others, and meanings. This approach might be useful to both therapy and sex education programs by empowering women, which is a main goal of the feminist perspective.

The feminist perspective addresses women's sexuality as a phenomenon that is misunderstood, somewhat misrepresented and strangely taboo in society (Wyatt, 1994). Feminist theories focus on men and women working together for equality among sexes (Strong, et al., 2008). Feminist theory also illustrates sexism in our culture and how this sexism leads to power inequities in the bedroom (Strong, et al., 2008). Due to power inequities in relationships between men and women, women are usually viewed as sexually passive. Dunn (1998) states that women experience sex as "something [they] went along with" (p. 479). Strong, et al. (2008) explain that women's sexual scripts influence them to be sexually passive, whereas men's sexual scripts encourage them to initiate and to be in control in sexual situations. One feminist approach argues "that societal and cultural factors—especially those related to power and status—impact men and

women in very different ways” (McAdams, 2000, p. 473-74). According to Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson (2000), traditional “femininity constituted an unsafe sexual identity, and that conventionally feminine behavior was putting young women at risk” (p. 222). They found that traditional feminine behavior such as deferring to men in sexual situations and sexual decision-making could be considered risky and sexually unhealthy when men refused to practice safe sexual habits.

One feminist theorist stated that “there was a need to develop therapies that would support a positive model of women’s mental health and functioning; a model capable of empowering women living in a patriarchal society” (Israeili, 2000). This model could be incorporated into sexual education programs so as to empower women in their choices regarding intercourse. According to Moore and Davidson (1997), when women do not feel they are empowered, they are prone to feelings of guilt afterward and are unlikely to practice safe sexual habits in the moment. If women do not feel that they have power in sexual situations, they will be passive, allowing their partners to control the situations. If women are taught to be sexual agents, they will “perceive themselves as having a choice and... [as] empowered” (Moore & Davidson, 1997, p. 41). Feminist therapy focuses on “empowering individuals to make positive and proactive changes in their lives” (Worell, 1996). This type of therapy might be beneficial in helping women develop a sense of positive, active, and healthy sexual agency. By seeing themselves as agents, these women would be empowered to make healthy choices (Moore & Davidson, 1997).

Many feminist researchers have embraced qualitative methods because it allows a certain type of flexibility when conducting research (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). According to Patten (2005), qualitative studies are most helpful when the area of research is new or there is little

known about the topic of interest. Since the feminist movement and feminist research is relatively new, qualitative methods have been instrumental in examining new and potentially sensitive topics of research (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). It is also helpful to employ qualitative methods when the topic of inquiry is of a sensitive nature (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). In some instances, quantitative methods can be “severely limiting and counterproductive for the development of knowledge that is relevant, useful, and theoretically sophisticated (Harding, 1991, as cited in Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, a qualitative method will be used to examine how women describe their thoughts, feelings and reactions to their first sexual encounter and the degree to which they describe their agency.

In their qualitative study, Hamby and Koss (2003) formed focus groups in order for the participants to talk about the meanings of the terms “unwanted”, “voluntary”, and “forced against your will” in relation to sexual experiences (p. 247). Participants discussed the “overlap of ‘unwanted’ with ‘unplanned’ or ‘unexpected’” and also claimed that “‘voluntary’ might imply ‘didn’t actively resist’” (Hamby & Koss, 2003; p. 248-249). Their analysis brings to light the importance of psychologists’ terminology when studying sexual experiences. Further, there is a range of sexual experiences: thus, we need to ask women about their psychological experience of sexual activity. The exploration of these terms and ideas led Hamby and Koss (2003) to describe sexual coercion as being seen on a continuum from the most coerced situation on one end to a completely consensual situation on the other. In the most coerced situation, such as rape, one person has all of the control and agency in the sexual situation. In the completely consensual situation, both individuals share control in the situation and are full sexual agents.

While a large amount of research (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Flanagan & Furman, 2000; Harned, 2005) has been completed focusing on the most coerced end of the continuum,

experiences that fall in the middle of the continuum have been neglected (Lewin, 1985). Many women have normative or typical, non-pathological sexual experiences falling in the middle ground of the continuum that they feel are out of their control. Since these normative experiences have rarely been studied, little is known about how women act as sexual agents in the typical first sexual encounter. Experiences on the completely consensual end of the continuum have also been somewhat neglected, due to the positive nature of those experiences. Should participants in this study report completely consensual first sexual encounters, examining their descriptions of sexual agency in those experiences will be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the concept of sexual agency. A qualitative study exploring the meaning of sexual agency in relation to normative sexual experiences, namely the first sexual encounter, is essential in order to gain a better understanding of the construct of sexual agency. A few recent studies have chosen to examine normative sexual experiences that are worth examining in the study of sexual agency.

One such study by Crown and Roberts (2007) examined the characteristics and consequences of undergraduate women's "nonagentic" sexual experiences (p. 386). They say that "any sexual interaction that occurs in the absence of partners' choice can be understood as potentially consequential" (Crown & Roberts, 2007, p. 388). The researchers found that negative sexual experiences can have psychological implications, even when only minimal coercion was present (p. 388). They also claim that sexual agency, or being able to take control in sexual situations, is an important part of sexual health and psychological well-being (p. 389). Crown and Roberts (2007) operationalize a "nonagentic" sexual experience as one that is self-reported as occurring against one's will. This is an either-or formulation.

Clearly, "nonagentic" sexual experiences, or a lack of sexual agency in those experiences, can result in negative psychological consequences for the "nonagentic" individual.

The subjective experience of the individual is of the utmost importance. Crown and Roberts (2003) indicate that a qualitative study would be useful to subdivide this either-or definition. Such a study could expand the notion of sexual agency and would be useful in “uncovering all of the varied and nuanced ways” in which women describe agency in their experiences (p. 403). Knowing that “nonagentic” sexual experiences can be harmful, it is pertinent to study sexual agency to better understand it in the context of sexual experiences, and more specifically, the first sexual encounter.

First sexual encounter will be operationalized however the participants define it for themselves. However, it may generally have involved genital contact, loss of virginity, or other sexually intimate acts as defined by the participants. Since little research has been completed exploring homosexual women’s definition or experience of their first sexual encounter, using this definition will allow all orientations to participate in the study. Including homosexual women will also facilitate the exploration of homosexual women’s reactions to their self-defined experiences of the first sexual encounter.

The term agency is defined as “one that acts or exerts power...a person responsible for [her] acts” (Webster, 1975). This definition implies that an agentic person is an active, decision-making individual. When examining the more specific definition of sexual agency, previous theorists slightly stray from explaining agency as active. Phillips (2000) as cited in Crown and Roberts (2003) defines sexual agency as “the possession of control over one’s body and sexual choices” (p. 389). Crown and Roberts (2003) also define sexual agency as “the ability to act according to one’s will in a sexual realm (p. 386). These definitions imply that an individual who experiences herself as a sexual agent is able to make choices and shares control with her partner in her sexual decision-making and sexual experiences. While the individual may

possess the ability to do so, this leaves the question of how women actively enact sexual agency in their real life experiences. When reflecting on sexual experiences, and more specifically their first sexual encounter, what do women say about themselves in terms of their sexual agency? This leads to the research question: How do women portray themselves as agents in their reflections on their first sexual encounter?

Method

Study Design

The study was an online survey consisting of four open-ended questions designed to elicit women's accounts of their first sexual encounter. The participants read a brief description of the study (see Appendix A) then electronically signed a statement of informed consent (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that the study should take approximately half an hour. Demographic questions inquired about sex, age, year in school, sexual orientation, country of origin, religious affiliation, and race (see Appendix C). Participants then were directed to the Sexual Agency Questionnaire (see Appendix D) which consisted of four open-ended questions, debriefed upon completion of the questionnaire (see Appendix E), and thanked for their time.

Participants

The participants were women ages 18 to 25 ($N=21$; $M=20.2$). With the exception of one Asian woman, the participants were all Caucasian. The women all reported being heterosexual except for one bisexual, who shared her sexual encounter with a man. The narrow age range is a reflection of the fear that a broader age range might be affected by different generational variables and norms, threatening cohort effects. The age range of 18 to 25 is beneficial because this group grew up with same societal values. These women were more likely to experience up-to-date sex education programs and to be influenced by societal norms that are prevalent today.

The study allowed responses to be gathered from women regardless of their sexual orientation. Since previous research has excluded homosexual women, it was thought to be beneficial in contributing to current knowledge about sexual agency.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a list of enrolled females at a small Midwestern college. The names of the enrolled females were randomized in an Excel spreadsheet. Four e-mails containing a brief study description and a link to the survey were sent to potential participants. The first e-mail was sent to the first 25 names on the randomized list. The second e-mail was sent to names 26-50 on the randomized list. A third e-mail was sent to names 51-75 on the randomized list. A fourth and final e-mail was sent to names 76-85 on the randomized list. The overall response rate was 24.71%. The data included 84 responses from 21 participants (see Appendix J). The length of the responses ranged from a few words to a paragraph in length.

Following the link to the online survey, the participants read a brief study description and electronically signed a statement of informed consent. Both the e-mail and the study description included a disclaimer that if participants had experienced any sexual trauma, i.e. rape, date rape, and/or sexual assault, they should discontinue participation. By the researchers' definition of sexual agency, women who had experienced sexual trauma could not have been agents in their sexual encounters. Following the informed consent, participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire and the Sexual Agency Questionnaire. Upon completion of the Sexual Agency Questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

Content Analysis

In order to analyze the data, two separate coding schemes were developed: Sexual Agency and Affective Content (see Appendix F). The Sexual Agency coding scheme included

connection/disconnection, interaction/isolation, and activity/passivity. Since little is known about the portrayal of sexual agency, these dimensions were examined along continua in order to capture the variety in the women's talk. Connection was defined as attachment or bond with the experience, whereas disconnection was defined as detachment or disengagement from the experience. Interaction was defined as attachment or bond with the partner, whereas isolation was defined as separation from the partner and lack of interaction between the partners. Activity was defined as making and asserting decisions and participating by one's own will, whereas passivity was defined as being submissive and receiving the partner's actions.

The Affective Content coding scheme examined feelings described in the responses. The codes included in this coding scheme were positive experience, positive self, negative experience, and negative self. Positive experience was defined as feelings describing the sexual encounter as good, favorable, or satisfactory, whereas positive self was defined as feelings describing the self as agreeable, favorable, or satisfactory. Negative experience was defined as feelings describing the sexual encounter as bad, unfavorable, or detrimental, whereas negative self was defined as feelings describing the self as unfavorable, unsatisfactory, or displeasing. Normative views were also included in the Affective Content coding scheme and were defined as judgments related to norms or cultural expectations of sexual encounters and sexual scripts.

Participants' responses were printed in two sets: the first for the Sexual Agency codes and the second for the Affective Content codes and normative views. Each response was used as the unit of analysis, since codes were not assigned multiple times within each response. All of the responses were first coded for sexual agency, and then on the clean set coded for affective content (see Appendix G). After reading each response, the number corresponding to the appropriate code was written in the left margin next to the response. When coding for affective

content, feelings described were first circled, and then codes were assigned. Normative views were underlined and assigned the code for later interpretation. All codes were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet that contained participant responses (see Appendix H). All of the feelings mentioned by participants were entered into an Excel spreadsheet (see Appendix I).

Interpretive Analysis

Once all of the responses were coded, patterns in the codes were examined across all of the responses. Consistency across responses and variety in affect were examined. Regret, guilt, and ambivalence were all identified and described. The construct of sexual agency was elaborated based on the levels of sexual agency portrayed by the women in their responses.

Results

Connection, Interaction, and Activity

Responses that were coded as agentic included connection, interaction, and/or activity. Joni displays connection when she says, "I felt intrigued and somewhat mesmerized by the whole experience." Joni is connected to the encounter because she represents having an emotional attachment to it. Marie experienced interaction in her encounter and describes it when she says "I was happy to have shared it with the person that I did. It made me feel close to the person as though we had some type of connection between the two of us." Marie's encounter was qualified by her relationship with her partner, saying that the encounter strengthened their bond. Marie also displays activity in her account when she says, "I felt as though I had showed my love for this person." In her encounter, Marie actively showed her feelings to her partner.

Connection, interaction, and activity are often seen in the same accounts. If a woman experiences her first sexual encounter as agentic, she often represents all of these codes. Katie exhibits all three codes when she says, "I don't regret it and I wouldn't change anything about it.

I'm happy with the choice I made knowing it was with the right person and at the right time." She represents sexual agency in this account through connection, interaction, and activity. When all three agentic codes are not present, connection and activity are seen together. This means that women who are active in their encounters might feel connected to the experience. Carly's response illustrates connection and activity when she says "I am comfortable with my decision because I only had sexual experiences that I was OK with. If I was not ready for something I would not continue on with these acts." She was an active agent in her encounter and felt connected to her experience.

Interaction and activity are never seen together without connection. This indicates that women who interact with their partners and are active in their encounter feel connected to the encounter. Only a few accounts display connection and activity, but not interaction. The relatively small amount shows that connection and interaction generally occur together. Christine displays the two codes when she says, "I was really happy. It was with someone that I really loved and I felt like the moment was perfect." Describing her encounter, she emphasizes her feelings toward her partner in making her feel connected to the experience. When connection or interaction is present, activity is always present as well. Activity is rarely seen on its own without connection or interaction.

When activity is seen on its own in two accounts, the participants indicate later regretting their encounters. Beth indicates activity without connection or interaction when she says, "I was acting irrationally on feelings dealing with pleasure and not with love...I wanted to feel more mature so I decided to follow through with it." Beth later says, "I am sure I completely regret what I did." While Beth indicated being active at the time of her encounter, she later regrets the experience. Farah is the other participant who displays activity without connection or

interaction when she says, "Did I just do 'it'???" Farah seems to be in disbelief about her activity, and does not indicate feeling connected to her encounter or interacting with her partner.

Disconnection, Isolation, and Passivity

Responses that were coded as nonagentic included disconnection, isolation, and/or passivity. Anna displays disconnection from her encounter when she says, "My first thought was wow. Then I started to think so this is what it's all about? First time wasn't magical and awesome, so I thought maybe sex is a bit overrated." Anna was disengaged from her encounter, citing that it did not live up to her expectations. Cathy experienced isolation in her sexual encounter. She displays this by saying:

"I felt bad guilty. It was not sex just hand contact. However my boyfriend at the time said we should not have done it that God did not approve. He was the one who wanted to try it in the first place. I was very confused."

In Cathy's encounter, she experienced a disconnect from her partner. She was confused and did not indicate discussing her feelings with her partner. Passivity is expressed by Brandy when she says, "Looking back my regrets aren't about the act itself but about my passiveness in the decision. He decided and I went along." Brandy was passive in her encounter, saying that her partner was in control, while she just went along with it.

Responses that only included disconnection, isolation, and passivity in the sexual encounter were coded as fully nonagentic. Judy is fully nonagentic in her response when she says, "It was a very uncomfortable and forced experience because the guy I was with only wanted to fool around and by doing so I thought it would make us closer." Judy experienced disconnection from the encounter, isolation from her partner, and passivity in the encounter. The pairing of disconnection and passivity without isolation is seen together more often. This might

indicate that women who are passive in their encounters feel disconnected from the experience. Jenna displays disconnection and passivity in her account when she says:

"In my particular instance I was very disappointed and horrified by my own lack of self-control. My biggest fears following the encounter were that sex would always be like that and that my friends would find out about it (they still haven't)."

Since Jenna was not connected with her experience, she did not tell her friends about it.

Disconnection is rarely present without isolation or passivity. Beth exemplifies disconnection and isolation when she says, "The difference being that now I am sure I completely regret what I did. I don't even tell people who or when I lost my virginity."

This points to the idea that women describing being disconnected from their encounter often explain it by expressing isolation from their partner.

Partially agentic

Women whose accounts were coded as representing less than three of the agentic codes were considered to be partially agentic. Women whose accounts were coded as representing three or less agentic codes and one or more nonagentic codes were also considered to be partially agentic. Some participants showed both connection and disconnection in the same account. Cathy experienced both connection and disconnection and displays this when she says:

"I thought I was ready for it, but looking back I wish I would have been more emotionally mature. But it has taught me to grow and learn from it. I am still getting over the guilt and feeling associated with my whole experience, but it has made me a stronger person."

While participants indicated being both connected and disconnected from their encounters, participants did not indicate interacting and feeling isolated in any account. Therefore, interaction and isolation were not seen together in any of the participants' responses.

Passivity and activity rarely occur together, and when they do, the accounts are not striking. Cathy displays activity and passivity occurring simultaneously in her account when she says:

"I believe that everyone needs to really evaluate themselves before they engage in sexual activity it can really change a relationship and a lot of us are not emotionally ready like we think we are. My experience taught me that I personally need to wait until marriage to have sex and I am in no way ready emotionally to take on that responsibility with my boyfriend right now."

Although she was passive during the initial sexual encounter, she states that she has learned from it and is now actively choosing to abstain from sex. These findings lend to the idea that women often feel both connected and disconnected to their encounters, and can also display both activity and passivity in their accounts, characterizing these women as partially agentic.

Affective content and agency codes

All of the participants who only talked positively about their encounters and themselves were fully agentic. Only one of these participants also had a nonagentic code of disconnection. All of the participants who only talked negatively about their encounters and themselves were fully nonagentic. Only one of these participants had an agentic code of activity. About half of the time, participants only talk positively and include no negative talk about the experience and/or the self. The other half of the time, participants talk both positively and negatively about the experience and/or the self. These accounts were coded as ambivalent. Brandy displays ambivalence when she says, "Now I'm glad that I have such a painful memory with someone that I don't really care about anymore." The use of conflicting feeling words illustrates the ambivalent nature of the experience. While she experienced pain from the encounter, she states that she is happy that she has the memory.

When participants indicate connection, interaction, and activity and no nonagentic codes, they talk positively about the experience and themselves. Katie says:

"I was mostly happy with the choice I had made. The experience was a good one with the one I'd loved for a long time, my best friend for seven years. I was pleased with the experience being with him. We did talk about these things and he quickly showed me that any fears I had were unfounded. It was ultimately a comfortable, happy experience with a loving partner."

Katie was fully agentic in her encounter, and described the experience as positive.

Only one account is fully nonagentic and talks negatively about the experience and herself. Jenna says:

"Horror, shame, disappointment, fear (it was a drunken one night stand and I do not suggest that for a first time)...I have come to accept it as just a mistake that people make while growing up but I still feel pretty much the same way about it. I am not comfortable with my choice, and I do not even remember the part of the night when I first chose to let things go to that point."

She was the only participant to be coded as fully nonagentic, and she talked very negatively about the experience. However, her account was unique in that she was the only participant who indicated any kind of substance being a part of the experience. This aspect may have lent to her nonagentic experience and the negative feelings she uses to describe the encounter.

Accounts that have all three agentic codes and any nonagentic codes talk positively about the experience and themselves, but also include negative talk about the experience and/or themselves. Deb displays the three agentic codes as well as disconnection when says:

"It happened how I think it would be best and I have no regrets. I believe as a woman that losing your virginity is not a pleasant experience because it is so painful the first time so I don't think there is anything that can be done about that part of it. However, I was in a committed relationship at the time and did not feel forced or convinced to engage in sexual activity. It was my own decision and if I were to do it again, it would have probably happened in much the same way."

While Deb was agentic in her experience, she also experienced disconnection from the encounter and described the encounter as both positive and negative. Her interaction with her partner seems

to justify her positive feelings, while the painful, physical aspect of the encounter lends to her negative feelings.

Feelings

Feelings described in the participants' accounts were varied. The most common positive feelings used by participants were comfortable, happy, loved, close with partner, good, special, perfect, not worried, and excited. The most common negative feelings used by participants were guilt, regret, uncomfortable, wish had waited longer, emotionally unprepared, hurt, painful, pissed, disappointed, bad, and apprehensive.

Discussion

Fully agentic

Women whose accounts are coded as representing connection, interaction, and activity and not representing any nonagentic codes are considered to be fully agentic. The interpretive analysis indicates that connection, interaction, and activity often occur in the same accounts. If a woman experiences her first sexual encounter as agentic, she often represents all of these codes. It could therefore be deduced that sexual agents feel connected to their encounter, interact with their partner, and actively engage in the experience. Phillips (2000) as cited in Crown and Roberts (2003) defined sexual agency as “the possession of control over one’s body and sexual choices” (p. 389). Crown and Roberts (2003) also define sexual agency as “the ability to act according to one’s will in a sexual realm (p. 386). These definitions imply that an individual who experiences herself as a sexual agent is able to make choices and shares control with her partner in her sexual decision-making and sexual experiences.

While the individual may possess the ability to do so, this leaves the question of how women actively enact sexual agency in their real life experiences. Revisiting these definitions following the interpretive analysis, it is clear that activity is an important aspect of sexual agency

that has been previously neglected. When connection, interaction, and activity do not occur simultaneously, connection and activity are usually seen together. This points to the idea that women who are active in their encounters experience connection with the experience, further implicating the importance of activity.

Most of the participants who are fully agentic only talk positively about their encounters and themselves. When describing their positive feelings about their encounters, women most commonly use the words comfortable, happy, loved, close with partner, good, special, perfect, not worried, and excited. Positive talk including these positive feelings indicate that women who are fully agentic in their sexual encounters describe their encounters as positive. This finding reinforces the idea that sexual agency is important, since enacting sexual agency can allow women to have more positive sexual experiences.

Partially agentic

Women whose accounts were coded as representing less than three of the agentic codes are considered to be partially agentic. Women whose accounts are coded as representing three or less agentic codes and one or more nonagentic codes also are considered to be partially agentic. Interaction and activity are never seen together without connection, which indicates that women who interact with their partners and are active in their encounters experience connection with the encounter. This finding supports the relevance of examining the relationship with the partner in the sexual encounter as well as activity during the encounter.

Only a few accounts display connection and activity without interaction, which generally means that connection and interaction occur together. This seems to point to the idea that women place great importance on entering into sexual encounters with a partner to which they feel emotionally connected. By doing so, they might feel more connected to their encounter. One

participant experienced the opposite with a partner to whom she was not attached. Jenna said, "It was a drunken one night stand, and I do not suggest that for a first time".

When connection or interaction is present, activity is always present as well. This means that women who are active often experience connection with their encounter or are actively interacting with their partners. In either case, activity is of the utmost importance to a woman's sexual encounter. This finding is further reinforced since activity is rarely seen on its own without connection or interaction. When activity is seen on its own in two accounts, the participants indicate regretting their encounters later. The participants who only indicated activity might be faulting themselves later for the occurrence of the experience. The women later signify remorse, which shows that they are unhappy the experience happened.

These findings seem somewhat contradictory. In most accounts, activity was positive and occurred alongside connection and/or interaction. However, when activity was seen on its own, it seemed to be described by participants as negative. One woman, Farah, seemed to be in disbelief regarding her activity, saying that she felt was not mature enough at the time. In her case, she displayed activity that was not positive because she did not feel ready for the encounter. The other woman who only indicated activity, Beth, felt that the encounter was a mistake. She attributes her activity to her sexual desires and not rational thinking. For Beth, this activity was also negative.

Women whose accounts were coded as representing three or less nonagentic codes and one or more agentic codes also are considered partially agentic in the sexual encounter. It was found that isolation always occurs with disconnection and/or passivity, which indicates that women can feel connected to their partners despite feeling disconnected or passive. Women that are seen as partially agentic express a range of feelings, both positive and negative, when

describing the experience. Approximately half of the women only talk positively and include no negative talk about the experience and/or the self. The other half of the women talk both positively and negatively about the experience and/or the self. These accounts are coded as ambivalent. According to Harry (1983) as cited in Eitzen and Zinn (2006), “males are socialized to engage in sexual behaviors both with and without affection while women are expected to combine the two” (p. 293). By describing their sexual encounters in both positive and negative terms, women are vocalizing the inner conflict (ambivalence) occurring as a result of the conflicted message society is teaching women.

Fully nonagentic

Accounts that were coded as fully nonagentic display disconnection from the experience, isolation from the partner and passivity in the encounter. They also did not include any agentic codes in their responses. From further analysis it was found that these three codes generally occur together. When a woman is nonagentic in a sexual encounter, she talks about the encounter in a disconnected, isolated, and passive way. If a woman does not consider herself to be an agent with equal status and power in sexual encounters, she may not feel as though she can participate actively, which can lead to nonagentic expressions such as isolation and passivity. This could be the result of a lack of connection to the experience. When a woman is disconnected from the experience, she may feel that she is either unable to be active or interact with the partner. This feeling is expressed by Brandy when she says, “Looking back my regrets aren't about the act itself but about my passiveness in the decision. He decided and I went along.” Brandy expresses passivity in the situation because she did not feel connected to the experience and “went along” with the encounter as a result.

Women's' responses that are coded as fully nonagentic talk negatively about the experience and/or themselves. This supports the idea that if women are nonagentic in the sexual encounter, they will not have a positive experience and therefore will talk negatively about the encounter. A possible explanation for the interaction between nonagentic experiences and negative talk could be explained through the socialization that occurs in American society and the way women and men are socialized to experience sex (Harry, 1983, as cited in Eitzen & Zinn, 2006). Women are expected to enter into a sexual encounter with affection (connection with the experience and/or the partner). When women do not experience sex with "affection," they talk negatively about it due to the social expectations surrounding the topic.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the results from this study may help to elaborate the description of sexual agency, there are some limitations to the research. One limitation is that the study was conducted on a small, Midwestern campus with a population that is mainly homogenous. Due to the lack of ethnic variability in the population, the results are restricted to generalizing across the population from which it was taken. Another limitation is the lack of diversity in sexual orientations of the participants. Of the twenty-one participants, twenty reported heterosexual orientation with only one woman reporting a bisexual orientation. It is important to note that although this woman indicated her sexual orientation as bisexual, she reported that her first sexual encounter was with a man.

The researchers noted that nineteen of the twenty-one participants included talk about normative views in their responses. It is thought that these normative views held by the women in this study potentially could affect how women react to their first sexual encounters. While this was an interesting aspect of how women talked about their first sexual encounter, due to

time constraints, the researchers were unable to fully investigate the impact normative views had on the women. In the future, the researchers feel that it would be beneficial and insightful to fully investigate normative views women hold in regards to sexual encounters and investigate how these normative views influence the way women talk about their sexual encounters.

In order to understand how women talk about their sexual encounters, it would be interesting to investigate more fully the feelings women use. Women used stronger feeling words, both positive and negative, to describe the emotions felt in regards to the sexual encounter and neutral feeling words were seldom used in the women's accounts. This may occur because many women attach greater significance to their first sexual encounter and therefore would describe it using strong feeling words. A greater understanding of how women describe their sexual encounters would result from investigating this concept more fully. It would also be interesting to investigate whether women talk differently depending on the sexual act that occurred. By specifying the sexual act, the researchers would be able to identify if and how women talk differently across sexual acts.

In the future, the researchers believe that a more ethnically diverse population as well as women of all sexual orientations would help to elaborate the concept of sexual agency. Additionally, it is believed that a more diverse population would contribute to a better understanding of how women of all races and sexual orientations talk about their sexual encounters.

Conclusion

We expected to find shades of gray in women's accounts of their sexual agency and came up with three levels of sexual agency: fully agentic, partially agentic, and fully nonagentic. Women who illustrated connection with their sexual encounter, interaction with their partner,

and activity in the encounter were fully agentic. Generally, these women talked positively about their first sexual encounter. Since fully agentic women describe their encounters as positive, it is apparent that women would benefit from learning about sexual agency. Due to this, these findings will add to previous research exploring the meaning and enactment of women's sexual agency. It is hoped that the elaborated concept of sexual agency will provide a base upon which to improve sex education programs as well as psychoeducational programs by teaching women about sexual agency and empowering them to take control in their sexual experiences.

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Appendix A: Study Description

This study is designed to examine women's thoughts, feelings and reactions to their first sexual encounter. The study will be conducted online and will consist of an informed consent, a brief demographic questionnaire, four open-ended questions, and a debriefing form. The study will take roughly half an hour to complete. There are no known risks involved in the study, beyond those of everyday life. Due to the nature of the study, the responses given will be completely anonymous.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

This research is being conducted by Rachel Pittard and Rachel Robertson, senior psychology majors at Hanover College. The experiment in which you have volunteered to participate is designed to understand your thoughts, feelings and reactions to your first sexual encounter. When we say "first sexual encounter", we are looking for your first encounter as you define it that might have involved genital contact, loss of virginity, or other sexually intimate acts. We are not looking for explicit detail of your sexual experiences; we are interested in your internal (emotional) experiences.

Because of our specific research question, we ask that you do NOT continue with this study if you have experienced any kind of sexual violation in your life. Sexual assault, sexual abuse, date rape, rape, and other victimizing experiences are very important to learn about. However, for this particular study, if you have experienced any of those types of sexual violation at any point in your life, please do not continue with this survey.

Assuming you are an adult college student and have not been ruled out by the above criteria, please read the rest of this description, indicate your consent, and go on to the following screens. There, you will fill out a brief demographic questionnaire and four open-ended questions. After you have finished responding to the questions, you will be brought to a debriefing screen. You may print that page off as evidence of study participation if you would like extra credit in your psychology class (0.25% credit for professors who allow this).

The study is expected to take approximately thirty minutes. There are no known risks involved in the study, beyond those of everyday life. A possible benefit of the study may be helping you to think about your experiences generally. The responses you give to the questions are completely anonymous and will be kept confidential. Only our research group will have

access to the raw data, which will not be associated with your name since we will not know who has filled out our survey.

If you have any questions after the study which the debriefing screen does not address, please contact Rachel Pittard at pittardr@hanover.edu, Rachel Robertson at robertsonr@hanover.edu, or our faculty advisor, Michelle Mamberg, Ph.D. at mamberg@hanover.edu. If you feel any discomfort during or after participating in this study please contact one of the following counselors located in Lynn Hall: Katie Dine Young, Psy.D, x6842, kdineyoung@hanover.edu, or David Reetz, x7399, reetz@hanover.edu. You may also contact the Chaplain, Rev. Dr. Carter Aikin, x6738, aikin@hanover.edu.

Acknowledgement of Informed Consent

I have read the study description and I acknowledge that I am participating by my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time during the study. If requested, a copy of this consent form will be provided to me.

Date

Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the following as accurately as possible.

1. Sex? Female Male
2. Age? _____
3. Year? Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
4. Sexual Orientation: Lesbian Bisexual Heterosexual
5. Country of Origin: _____
6. Religious background: _____
7. Race: _____

Appendix D: Sexual Agency Questionnaire

Instructions to participants: When we say "first sexual encounter", we are looking for your first encounter as you define it that might have involved genital contact, loss of virginity, or other sexually intimate acts.

1. Immediately following your first sexual encounter, what were your initial thoughts and feelings about, or reactions to, the experience?
2. Looking back on that first experience now, what are your thoughts and feelings about, or reactions to, your first sexual encounter?
3. How do you currently evaluate your *choice* to engage in your first sexual encounter (i.e., are you happy with that decision?)
4. Having reflected on your first sexual encounter, do you have any thoughts and feelings about, or reactions to, the experience?

Appendix E: Debriefing Form

“Sexual Agency” in First Sexual Encounters

Rachel Pittard and Rachel Robertson

The study in which you have participated was designed to examine the types and levels of agency women describe having felt during their first sexual encounter. Women’s reactions to their first sexual encounter will be examined in the attempt to better understand sexual agency and to contribute to the currently limited literature regarding the concept. We also hope the finding of this study may contribute to the empowerment of women by providing educators with a deeper understanding of the concept of sexual agency in order for them to encourage women to feel in control of their sexual decisions. Ultimately, we hope all women will make healthy decisions for themselves and learning about women’s actual emotional experiences may lay the groundwork to reach that goal.

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants until the semester has ended. Because this is a small community, and because participants’ previous knowledge of our study might skew how they answer our survey, it is important for our results that you not discuss this study with others. If you would like to read about the results of the study, feel free contact one of the researchers. Again, if you felt any discomfort during or after participating in this study, please contact one of the following counselors located in Lynn Hall: Katie Dine Young, Psy.D, x6842, kdineyoung@hanover.edu, or David Reetz, x7399, reetz@hanover.edu. You may also contact the Chaplain, Rev. Dr. Carter Aikin, x6738, aikin@hanover.edu. If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact Rachel Pittard at pittardr@hanover.edu, Rachel Robertson at robertsonr@hanover.edu, or our faculty advisor, Michelle Mamberg, Ph.D. at mamberg@hanover.edu. Thank you for participating; your time is much appreciated!

Appendix F: Coding Manual

Level of agency Coding scheme #1

I. Agentic

1. Connection:

- Definition: Attachment or bond with the experience.
- Example: "I felt like the moment was perfect."

2. Interaction:

- Definition: Attachment or bond with the partner. Reciprocal action, effect, or influence; being in sync with the partner.
- Example: "It was someone I had been with for a very long time and there was a very deep and loving connection between the two of us."

3. Activity:

- Definition: Making and asserting decisions and participating by one's own will.
- Example: "I decided to have sex."

II. Somewhat agentic - Part of interpretation

III. Nonagentic

4. Disconnection:

- Definition: Discontinuity or disengagement. Talking about being distanced, detached, estranged, or isolated from the experience.
- Example: "I thought 'that's what I had been saving my virginity for?'" "It was a very uncomfortable and forced experience."

5. Isolation:

- Definition: Separation from a person; no interaction; feeling alone; not feeling heard by partner.
- Example: "I didn't feel that I could tell him I didn't want it to happen."

6. Passivity:

- Definition: Inactivity, submissiveness, lack of initiative; being the object of action rather than the causing action or receiving another's actions.
- Example: "It was something I went along with." "I kind of just let it happen." "In my particular instance I was very disappointed and horrified by my own lack of self-control."

99. Uncodable - This gets used for any blank or confusing cells for which 1-6 cannot be assigned.

Affective Content Coding scheme #2

V. Feelings

7. Positive:

(a) Experience

- Definition: Normative experience. Talking about the experience as favorable, satisfactory, fortunate, agreeable, pleasing, and/or optimistic.
- Example: "It was ultimately a comfortable, happy experience with a loving partner."

(b) Self (esteem)

- Definition: Talking about oneself as favorable, satisfactory, fortunate, agreeable, pleasing, and/or optimistic.

- Example: "I feel I handled the situation well." "It was my own decision and if I were to do it again, it would have probably happened in much the same way."

8. Negative

(a) Experience

- Definition: Bad experience. Talking about the experience as unfavorable, contrary, detrimental, rejecting, and/or pessimistic.
- Example: "It was a bad experience." "I'm unhappy that it happened."

(b) Self (esteem)

- Definition: Talking about oneself as unfavorable, unsatisfactory, unfortunate, disagreeable, displeasing, and/or pessimistic.
- Example: "I feel like I am a bad person now."

9. Normative views: Coding scheme #3 - code any time you see a comparison or judgment.

Appendix G: Coded Responses

Response:

246-I thought I was ready for it but looking back I wish I would have been more emotionally mature. But it has taught me to grow and learn from it I am still getting over the guilt and feeling associated with my whole experience but it has made me a stronger person.

Sexual Agency Codes: 1 3 4 6

Affective Content Codes: 8a 8b

Response:

766-It was a very uncomfortable and forced experience because the guy I was with only wanted to fool around and by doing so I thought it would make us closer.

Sexual Agency Codes: 4 5 6

Affective Content Codes: 8a 8b 9

Response:

887-My first encounter wasn't planned but I still feel like it went well. I am happy that I waited until I found the right person. Even if my relationship doesn't last I know that he was my best friend and that we loved each other.

Sexual Agency Codes: 1 2 3

Affective Content Codes: 7a 7b

Appendix H: Screenshot of Excel Spreadsheet with Participant Responses and Codes

Question1	Codes	Question 2	Codes	Question 3	Codes	Question 4	Codes	Overall Codes
756-Regret	3 4 7b 8b 9 10	018-I wish I w	1,2 7A 10	791-Yes I am	1 3 7b	846-I regret c	1 3 7b	1, 2, 3, 4, 7a, 7b, 8b, 9, 10
793-My first	4 8a 9	752-Thinking I	1 2 7a 7b 9 10	830-I am com	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	345-BLANK	99	1 2 3 4 7a 7b 8a 9 10 99
811-I felt lik	3 4 5 6 8a 8b 9	928-I think I f	4 5 6 8a 8b 9	099-I am com	3 4 8A 8B 9	976-During I	4 5 8a 9	3 4 5 6 8a 8b 9
766-It was a	4 5 6 8a 8b 9	046-I do not i	8a 7b 10	588-I was not	1 4 6 8a 10	173-I feel tha	1 2 3 7a 7b	1 2 3 4 5 6 7a 7b 8a 8b 9 10
149-I was m	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	656-Looking l	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	081-Reflectir	1 2 3 7A 7B	1 2 3 7a 7b 9
458-I was h	1 2 3 7a 7b	710-I still fee	1 2 3 7a	861-I am very	1 2 3 7a 7b	471-No	99	1 2 3 7a 7b 99
339-I felt ba	4 5 6 8a 8b 9	294-I still fee	4 5 8a 8b 9	246-I thought	1 3 4 6 8a 8b 9 10	425-I wish I w	3 4 5 6 9	1 3 4 5 6 8a 8b 9 10
832-horror	4 5 6 8a 8b 9	123-I have co	4 8A	449-I am not	4 5 6 8a	747-In my pa	4 6 8a 8b 9	4 5 6 8a 8b 9
497-I was ur	1 2 4 7a 7b	105-I think m	6 8A 9	714-I am com	1 3 7a 7b	181-I feel tha	9 99	1 2 3 4 6 7a 7b 8a 9
446-My hea	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	055-It is wha	1 2 3 7A 7B 9 10	897-i'm conte	99 7a 7b	207-BLANK	99	1 2 3 7a 7b 9 10 99
989-It hurt	4 8a 8b 9	917-I think m	1 3 7a 7b	615-I am very	1 3 4 6 7a 7b 9	286-BLANK	99	1 3 4 6 7a 7b 8a 8b 9 99
283-THe fir	1 2 3 4 6 7a 7b	278-I don't re	1 2 7a	174-I think I	1 3 7a 7b 9	251-No comr	99	1 2 3 4 6 7a 7b 9 99
235-wow th	4 6 8a 9 10	367-i wish i h	4 6 8a 10	570-i am com	1 3 7a	131-it is defir	1 3 7A 9 10	1 3 4 6 7a 8a 9 10
333-It was p	4 6 8a 8b 9	254-In some	1 3 7a 7b 9	023-I am com	1,3 7A 7B	498-I was in	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	1 2 3 4 6 7a 7b 8a 8b 9
997-I was su	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	834-No... I fe	1 2 7a 7b	125-I am com	1 3 7A 7B 9	420-When I t	1 2 3 7a 7b 9	1 2 3 7a 7b 9
138-It was a	99	360-I do not f	1 2 3 4 7a 7b 8a 9 10	636-I'm comf	1 2 3 6 7a 9	482-I've actu	99	1 2 3 4 6 7a 7b 8a 9 10 99
180-'Did I ju	99	545-Yes defir	4 6 8a 8b	338-Uhh...rig	1 3 9	923-I think re	9 99	3 4 6 8a 8b 9 99
270-I was ju	4 8a 9	717-Now I'm	1 4 5 7b 8a 10	590-Looking l	4 6 8a 8b	814-I do wish	5 6 8b	1 4 5 6 7b 8a 8b 9 10
216-I felt gc	1 2 3 7a 7b	648-I still fee	1 2 7a 7b	214-I am com	1 2 3 7a 7b	887-My first	1 2 3 7a 7b	1 2 3 7a 7b
203-I thoug	1 3 4 8a 9	070-I don't fe	4 6 9	293-I was full	1 3 7a 7b	787-BLANK	99	1 3 4 6 7a 7b 8a 9 99
330-excited	1 4 7a 10	520-probably	4 6 99	650-it was so	1 3 99	800-environr	4 6 8a 8b 9	1 3 4 6 7a 8a 8b 9 10 99

Appendix I: Excerpt from Feelings Table

Positive	Negative	Most common positive	Most common negative	Most common neutral
pretty good	emotionally unprepared (4)	comfortable (16)	guilt (8)	no regret (10)
no regret (10)	uncertain	happy (10)	regret (7)	not coerced (4)

Appendix J: Participants' Responses

Charlotte

756-Regret that I hadn't waited longer relief that I finally got the 'virginity' thing out of the way

018-I wish I would have waited longer but I'm still with the same guy so I feel pretty good about it.

791-Yes I am comfortable with the decision I made

846-I regret doing things other than sex before I actually had full intercourse such as oral sex. I regret those actions more because the people I chose to do them with were not the best... Or possibly because at the time I thought they weren't actually sex so I was safe but now I understand that oral sex is a type of sex.

Anna

793-My first thought was wow. Then I started to think so this is what it's all about? First time wasn't magical and awesome so I thought maybe sex is a bit overrated.

752-Thinking on it now I wish I would have waited a bit longer since I was only 15 at the time. But now I'm still with the same guy but the experience itself has gotten much better over time. I think I reacted as any normal person would after their very first time. I have no regrets.

830-I am comfortable with my decision because I knew I wasn't messing around with a guy that would leave me a day later. I spent months with the guy before doing anything with him and now a few years later we are still together.

345-BLANK

Beth

811-I felt like I had made a big mistake because I was acting irrationally on feelings dealing with pleasure and not with love. I knew that I was making a mistake but I wanted to feel more mature so I decided to follow through with it.

928-I think I feel almost the same way. The difference being that now I am sure I completely regret what I did. I don't even tell people who or when I lost my virginity. I think now my morals mean a lot more to me and that losing my virginity just to appear older was a stupid reason. I am honestly pissed off at myself every time I think about my first sexual encounter.

099-I am completely uncomfortable with my decision and completely pissed at myself for going through with it. I hate the fact that I decided to be such a rebel and had to do ignore all the rules that my elders had given me.

976-During I thought to myself I am just another girl to this guy not special at all. This was not how I pictured losing my virginity.

Judy

766-It was a very uncomfortable and forced experience because the guy I was with only wanted to fool around and by doing so I thought it would make us closer.

046-I do not regret my decision but I realize now that I was emotionally unprepared for the situation.

588-I was not initially comfortable with my decision but as I look back it was truly a learning experience.

173-I feel that experience opened my eyes to what I wanted in a serious relationship. I also learned that I should be comfortable with my decisions and that 'no' is a very powerful word and decisions are respected if you are with the right person.

Katie

149-I was mostly happy with the choice I had made. The experience was a good one with the one I'd loved for a long time my best friend for seven years. I was pleased with the experience being with him. I was a little uncertain afraid that he might think differently of me and also a little...disbelieving I guess of what we'd done though not in a negative way necessarily. We did talk about these things and he quickly showed me that any fears I had were unfounded. It was ultimately a comfortable happy experience with a loving partner.

656-Looking back now I'm still happy when I think about the encounter. I feel much more comfortable with my relationship and my sexuality now over a year and a half later than I did then I suppose though I still have insecurities about sex--mainly the crap that society feeds young girls: 'good' girls don't want sex let alone have it premarital sex is immoral guys will lose respect for you if you have sex before marriage etc. Again my boyfriend and I discuss these insecurities and fears as they come up and gain comfort and closeness through our discussions. Ultimately I'm still happy when I think about the encounter.

758-I don't regret it and I wouldn't change anything about it. I'm happy with the choice I made knowing it was with the right person and at the right time.

081-Reflecting on the memory has made me appreciate my relationship a bit more and also realize that so many people aren't as fortunate as I am in having had a loving supportive partner who was patient and careful with me. I'm grateful that I waited for the right person and the right experience rather than going along with experiences that were initiated by others in the past.

Marie

458-I was happy to have shared it with the person that I did. It made me feel close to the person as though we had some type of connection between the two of us. I felt as though I had showed my love for this person.

710-I still feel the same about the experience because I am still with this person in a close relationship. I plan to marry this person and had I not had a very close relationship to this person in the first place no encounter wouldn't have happened.

861-I am very comfortable with my decisions because it was something that brought me closer to someone I care very deeply about and always will.

471-No

Cathy

339-I felt bad guilty. It was not sex just hand contact. However my boyfriend at the time said we should not have done it that God did not approve. He was the one who wanted to try it in the first place. I was very confused.

294-I still feel guilty for doing it. I wish I would not have. It hurt me emotionally. This was my junior year in high school. To this day I still feel guilty whenever I do anything with a man. This year my freshman year in college I once again got 'fingered' as you would say it for the first time since my experience my junior year. I cried during it. I felt so guilty. My boyfriend stopped immediately and has been very respectful of me and we never do anything if I feel uncomfortable. I however cannot get the idea out of my mind that doing sexual things is wrong. My first boyfriend would do stuff with me in the moment and want me to be happy and experience the sensations but the next day he would say how horrible we were for doing it and how I should not enjoy it and how I pressured him into things. I cannot get over the idea that I am a bad person when I do that stuff.

246-I thought I was ready for it but looking back I wish I would have been more emotionally mature. But it has taught me to grow and learn from it I am still getting over the guilt and feeling associated with my whole experience but it has made me a stronger person.

425-I wish I would have told people about what he put me through and how he made me feel. I am glad I can more openly talk about it now and I feel this will help. I believe that everyone needs to really evaluate themselves before they engage in sexual activity it can really change a relationship and a lot of us are not emotionally ready like we think we are. My experience taught me that I personally need to wait until marriage to have sex and I am in no way ready emotionally to take on that responsibility with my boyfriend right now.

Jenna

832-horror shame disappointment fear (it was a drunken one night stand I do not suggest that for a first time)

123-I have come to accept it as just a mistake that people make while growing up but I still feel pretty much the same way about it.

449-I am not comfortable with my choice and I do not even remember the part of the night when I first chose to let things go to that point.

747-In my particular instance I was very disappointed and horrified by my own lack of self-control. My biggest fears following the encounter were that sex would always be like that and that my friends would find out about it. (they still haven't)

Carly

497-I was unsure of what to think after my first sexual encounter. After my first sexual encounter I felt closer to the person and had a more intimate relationship with the person.

105-I think my first sexual encounter made it easier for me to continue doing these things with going further and having them more often. I felt that it was okay to continually go further as long as both parties were comfortable with it. Looking back I think that there was pressure on me to do these things because I was in a relationship.

714-I am comfortable with my decision because I only had sexual experiences that I was okay with. If I was not ready for something I would not continue on with these acts.

181-I feel that each sexual encounter needs to be special and have meaning to it. If you continually do the same thing day after day it will not be special to each other and you will not be as close.

Joni

446-My heart was beating so fast. At first I felt very criminal because I had a very strict upbringing where pre-marital sex is frowned upon. Yet I felt intrigued and somewhat mesmerized by the whole experience. The topic of sex was always so taboo during my years growing up that once I had my first encounter with it I wanted to explore more and try new things with my partner.

055-It is what it is. I'm glad it was with someone I loved and who loved me back. I don't really see what the big deal is now with sex. Sometimes people talk about it like it's the best thing in the world. Sex is sex. Nothing more nothing less. I don't see why people have to wait for marriage to have their first sexual experience. Yes it would've been nice if I had waited for my marriage but in retrospect no I'm glad I took the chance.

897-i'm content.

207-BLANK

Mandy

989-It hurt so I thought if this is going to hurt like this every time I can't do it! I was also thinking that I was a terrible person because I have always been brought up to value abstinence before wedlock. I initially thought it was a mistake.

917-I think my first experience was normal. Now I think that my first sexual experience has taught me a lot about myself and helped me grow as a person.

615-I am very comfortable with my decision to engage in my first sexual encounter because I have learned a lot from it and life is all about making mistakes and learning from those mistakes.

286-BLANK

Brittany

283-The first time I allowed a man to do anything sexual towards me I basically discovered the point of the clitoris. Sorry if that is too explicit. I guess I didn't pay much attention in sex ed or something because before then I didn't understand sexual feelings. There were times when I thought that I just wasn't a sexual being. I discovered instead that I just didn't know how to activate intense sexual feelings. As far as my thoughts about it I honestly don't completely understand what type of response you are looking for. I did not have any moral problems with it. I was... maybe excited but apprehensive feeling that I would not react. I only really remember being surprised. I think that I was completely astounded by the ability of parts of my body to activate the feelings that I experienced.

278-I don't really have much to say to this question. I don't feel any differently about whether or not I should have done it. I do not regret the experience. The man I was with then I am still with and we are planning to get married after graduation.

174-I think I already answered this question... The sexual encounter was not actually intercourse so I wasn't worried that I was doing something that might ruin my life or anything. I first time I had intercourse I really don't remember how I felt about it but I do not think that I was worried about pregnancy because of preventative measures taken and I was not worried about religious concerns because I abandoned my Christian faith shortly before I got together with my boyfriend. I still do not have any religious beliefs that cause me to regret my behavior. However I have since wondered whether it was wise to begin having sexual intercourse because of the potential to become pregnant. I am not sure whether or not I made the correct decision (at the time I was pretty certain that I had) but now it is not something that I am willing to give up and I think that the possibility of pregnancy occurring is too remote to cause me to abandon having sex.

251-No comment

Tara

235-wow that was not needed but my friends do it so whatever I guess.

367-i wish I hadn't done certain things at the age I did them. I feel differently because I know different things now than I did then.

570-i am comfortable with everything I choose because I choose it from personal opinion with more knowledge of what I am doing.

131-it is definitely an interesting experience to look back on. I don't regret anything yet I wish I would've waited longer before it happened. but I do feel like my experiences can help others understand certain things (others being my little sister etc.)

Lynn

333-It was painful and I just kept thinking that I should feel different since I was no longer a virgin but I didn't.

254-In some ways it seemed like a reaction against everything I had be raised to be: virginal until marriage. But for me it was a chance to decide for myself how and when I would lose my virginity and not a choice made by my family. So it was in a way 'liberating' beyond just being sexually active but given me control over the decision to engage in sexual intercourse.

023-I am completely confident that I made the right decision at the time

498-I was in a monogamous relationship at the time and had been for almost 2 years. we decided together when we wanted to have sex and it wasn't until we were both comfortable with the decision that we decided to engage in sexual intercourse. I think this fact is important because it certainly has influenced how I look back at the choice decision and my feelings about it: I wasn't pressured I wasn't 'used' or 'violated' but it was a choice that my partner and I made together.

Christine

997-I was surprised that it didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. I was really happy. It was with someone that I really loved and I felt like the moment was perfect. I also felt like I had finally been let in on this big secret that everyone else know about. It was a little anti-climatic. I had always been proud that I was a virgin and I did not take losing my virginity lightly. After I did though I realized that it I don't think it was as big a deal as I made it to be.

834-No... I feel the same. I don't regret it at all. I think it was perfect the way it happened and I really can't imagine a better situation for me. Even if this person and I break up I really think I will always be happy with the way it happened.

125-I am comfortable with my choice. I think I made the right choice to wait until then but I'm also glad I didn't wait any longer. I do not believe in waiting until marriage to have sex and having sex only reinforced that belief for me.

420-When I tell other people ask about my experience I always say that it is most important to feel good about the decision when you do it. There is no way to know if you are going to stay

with this person forever-- even if you wait until marriage there are no guarantees. You just have to feel ready and want to have that connection with this person. That's what I did and I definitely don't regret it.

Deb

138-It was a while ago and I cannot recall my emotions directly after it.

360-I do not think about my first sexual experience very after. It happened how I think it would be best and I have no regrets. I believe as a woman that losing your virginity is not a pleasant experience because it is so painful the first time so I don't think there is anything that can be done about that part of it. However I was in a committed relationship at the time and did not feel forced or convinced to engage in sexual activity. It was my own decision and if I were to do it again it would have probably happened in much the same way.

636-I'm comfortable with it. I think I was more sexually active at a younger age than many people with my background. However the friends I hung out with were sexually active so the idea of having sex was normalized to me at a time where many people were not engaging in these activities. I think I was a little naive thinking I was going to have a huge commitment from my boyfriend at that young of an age however he believed the same thing.

482-I've actually had to think a lot to even remember specifics about my first time. I was just having the conversation recently that I don't vividly remember it so I can only talk about it in theory and my reaction to my situation I was in when I had the experience.

Farah

180-'Did I just do 'it'???'

545-Yes definitely. I feel like I should have waited til I was more mature or until I was fully committing myself to him.

338-Uhh...right now I am practicing celibacy because when I think the time is right I want to have that indescribable feeling not just 'oh I had sex that was great!' type of thing.

923-I think religion plays a major role in our daily decisions well for those who believe in a deity of some sort but in my situation I wasn't really brought up on religion.

Brandy

270-I was just relieved for it to be over with.

717-Now I'm glad that I have such a painful memory with someone that I don't really care about anymore.

590-Looking back my regrets aren't about the act itself but about my passiveness in the decision. He decided and I went along.

814-I do wish that I had made him wait longer and that I had made him take my feelings into account more often.

Hannah

216-I felt good about my decision. I knew that I loved the person that I was with and I felt that we were in a good place in our relationship.

648-I still feel the same way about my first experience. I know that I was with a person who I loved and that they loved me as well. I don't regret what happened.

214-I am comfortable with my decision. I waited until I found that one person that I wanted to share the moment with. I don't think I would have changed it.

887-My first encounter wasn't planned but I still feel like it went well. I am happy that I waited until I found the right person. Even if my relationship doesn't last I know that he was my best friend and that we loved each other.

Lindsay

203-I thought 'I can't believe I just did that.' This thought was not about regret but I had thought for most of my life that I would never have sex so this whole experience was an awakening. And I also thought 'wow that was it? I've been waiting for so long to have sex and that was it? Why did I wait for that?' I had hyped it up in my mind to be this huge thing and it wasn't nearly what I had made myself believe it was.

070-I don't feel any differently about it although I do wish that there had been no alcohol involved. I think the experience would have been different had there been no alcohol consumption. Also looking back I am surprised in myself that my first sexual encounter was sexual intercourse. I had always thought that you 'work up' to having sex by engaging in other sexual activities such as oral sex and the such.

293-I was fully aware of what I was doing and am comfortable with my decision to engage in sex at that time.

787-BLANK

Nancy

330-excited nervous 'did that really just happen?'

520-probably wouldn't have gone as far as I did

650-it was something I wanted to experience

800-environment definitely played a role in my first encounter as well as peer pressure