

“Like Warm Apple Pie”: Subjective Interpretations of Sex and Virginity Loss Experiences

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Senior Honors Thesis

Introduction

“Guys, uh, what exactly does third base feel like?” ... “Like warm apple pie.”

After this conversation in the popular comedy *American Pie*, the film depicts its most famous scene in which the questioner, Jim, penetrates a fresh apple pie that his mother left on the kitchen counter in order to better understand what having sex feels like. This “teen sex” comedy centers on a group of high school students obsessed with losing their virginity. The ways in which the different students try to lose their virginity range from the oft-ridiculed guy who is clueless about sexual behavior to the couple that are assessing whether or not they are “ready” to have sex for the first time. Accordingly, the movie constructs virginity loss as a significant life event for older adolescents in a variety of situations. While *American Pie* is obviously meant to be a humorous portrayal of the topic of virginity loss, it still serves as an excellent example of the ways in which the experience is commonly portrayed.

Outside the realm of popular culture, the topic of virginity loss receives a lot of attention in our contemporary society, with frequent appearances in academic papers, media, and casual conversation, even taking a prominent place in policy debates. In fact, discussions of sex and sexual behavior, particularly as relating to adolescents, have always been accompanied with certain weightiness. Eras of sexual repression and liberation have vacillated throughout history – from the repression of the Victorian Era to the excess of the 1920’s back to the conservatism of the 1950’s and the exploration of the 60’s to the backlash of the 1980’s New Right (Carpenter, 2001). Across all of these periods of our history, sexual behavior has been a volatile and highly politicized topic. Even now, our society seems to have a conflicted relationship with sexuality: overt sexual images are prominent in advertising and popular media (it is common knowledge

that “sex sells”), while on the other hand, heated debates about sexual education and pregnancy rates create tensions across the country.

Specifically, virginity loss has held, and continues to hold, a prominent place in the societal obsession with sex because it is seen as the first landmark in one’s sexual journey. The majority of social discussions of sexual education programs are centered on the postponement of first intercourse for young people in the U.S. (Carpenter, 2001, 2002; Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2008; Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000). Such debates are fueled by considerations of pregnancy rates, infant mortality, and teen parenthood –all of which concern health at both the individual and social levels, as well as having an effect on social economy. In these ways, virginity loss represents a significant transition into sexual adulthood and a new level of responsibility at both the personal and societal levels. As such, it is no surprise that it not only plays such a prominent role in policy discussions but also is a popular topic for film and television storylines.

It was this focus on virginity loss due to its being a “gateway” to sexual activity that initially sparked my interest in this research project. I was intrigued by what I saw as the heteronormative nature of virginity loss-based discussions – as many of them centered on the act of penile-vaginal intercourse – and I set out to understand if there might be a way to find a definition of the term *virginity* that would be inclusive of a wider scope of sexualities and personal experiences. However, as I continued in my research, I realized that there were irreconcilable problems with a single, all-inclusive definition of virginity loss, beginning with the diverse ways in which individuals define *sex*. It became clear that one of the most important aspects of virginity and virginity loss was the subjectivity of the experience to each individual, which is often overlooked or disregarded in public discussions. In order to explore this topic, I

conducted through a series of twenty personal, open-ended interviews in the Fall 2009 with students at the University of Michigan. By personally engaging with my interview participants, I hoped to be able to parse out the subtle ways in which individuals might understand *sex* as a concept and how it relates to one's interpretation of their virginity loss moment.

It is worth noting briefly that throughout my work I use and rely on terms such as *subjective*, *personal*, and *social*, which are words that come with their own histories and literatures. For the purposes for this paper, I define these words in the following ways: *Subjective* is that relating to the emotional and psychological processing of a situation that takes place on an individual level. Basically, referring to the manner in which each person interprets a given situation. The *personal* is that which concerns the individual rather than a group. Finally, I define *social* as relating to the environment surrounding and potentially influencing the individual. Here, I am mostly referring to national or Midwest levels of American society.

Over the course of my research and interviews, I did uncover various intriguing nuances in the ways that my participants conceptualized sex and virginity loss. At the core of these findings was the idea that the two terms, *sex* and *virginity loss*, while related, are not wholly congruent. These concepts are strongly related in that one's first experience with *sex* is most commonly considered the criterion for losing one's virginity. However, definitions of *sex* for my participants were often ambiguous and unclear. This was demonstrated in part by the difficulty that many had in deciding where oral sex fit in definitions of *sex*. Such ambiguity can render the virginity loss moment a difficult one to define if only one set of criteria – based on a specific, yet ambiguous act called *sex* – is available. My participants had a number of other ways of interpreting their virginity loss experiences that extended beyond the ways in which they defined this vague term. While physical interpretations of *sex* remained important to my participants, it

became quickly apparent that the emotional and psychological aspects of processing the virginity loss experience were just as, if not more, significant. Further, some participants had an interesting tendency to understand their experiences as existing on two separate levels: the “social” and the “real”. In these cases, the social was defined as being based on how *others* would view the experience and the “real” was rooted in these previously mentioned personal emotional and psychological criteria. Thus my participants demonstrated the ways in which how one defines *sex* may not always correspond to how one defines the moment of virginity loss..

Overall, I show that that which is *sex* to one person may be experienced quite differently by another and such variation plays a role in interpretations of virginity loss experiences. Although my sample is narrow, my findings hint that the various interpretive processes that occur on a personal level are important and should not be overlooked in research or social contexts. While sexual behavior, especially virginity loss, is a fraught topic, considering the subjective understandings of these terms have the potential to reveal some of the problems in assuming that everyone thinks third base feels like warm apple pie.

Methods

Participants

I interviewed 20 respondents who were all students in a university setting at the time. All but one attended the University of Michigan (participant 1006 attended a different 4-year university), and all but one were undergraduates (one participant was dual-enrolled in a graduate program at the UM School of Public Health and School of Social Work). The sample consisted of 14 female and 6 male participants. 2 participants identified as virgins, both of whom were female. In terms of sexual orientation, my sample was not highly diverse: 2 individuals identified as bisexual, and one identified as a lesbian.

In order to find participants, I used a snowball sampling method. My initial round of respondents included friends and acquaintances that I then asked to refer me to others who they thought would be interested. I also asked the leader of a student-run sexual health group on campus to ask the members if they would be willing to be interviewed. From this latter group, I was able to meet many people with whom I was unacquainted and in turn ask these participants, too, for references. This was important as it helped lessen the bias of my sample by creating a wider, more diverse pool, although the scope was still narrow.

There are many distinct advantages to using a snowball sampling for my research. Atkinson and Flint (2001) note that this particular sampling method is often used to access marginal groups that are generally under the radar. Examples of such groups include drug users, prostitutes, and those living with HIV. While my focus was not on marginalized or vulnerable populations, I was worried that the sensitive nature of my topic would limit the number of people who were willing to talk with me. Snowball sampling helped ensure that I was talking to people who were at least somewhat comfortable with the subject matter, and therefore more likely to

answer my questions openly and honestly. There have been many large-scale, random sample surveys of sexuality in which the researchers were able to gather a lot of information with fewer biases (Carpenter 2001). However, because of the limited nature of my project, a large scale randomized survey approach would have been both more time consuming and less likely to produce participants willing to openly discuss my topic. Also, despite interviewing all who were referred to me, snowball sampling allowed me a certain level of control over how much information I would have to code and analyze by limiting the number of respondents and thus amount of data that I had gathered.

On the other hand, there are also many downsides to snowball sampling. Most obvious is that it is far more prone to biases. For example, many of the people I interviewed were friends and acquaintances. As such, they tended to have similar views although I was able to marginally extend the scope of my sample pool by asking for referrals. The fact that I only was able to interview 2 people who identified as virgins may have been due to this bias, although there are other possible contributing factors, such as the age range of my sample, as well as the fact that the respondents were from a large Midwestern University.

Interview

I recorded the interviews using the program, “Audacity,” which allowed me to record sound directly to my computer. From this program, I was able to turn the interview into an MP3 file that I could then open with my iTunes program. I coded each interview with the participant’s alias and a number, starting with participant 1001.

The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions designed to allow the participants the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences while staying on topic. The interviews lasted about a half an hour each, and touched on a variety of questions. Before I began

recording, I informed the participant about confidentiality. They were told that they would be referred to by a false name, which I assigned at random. I made sure they understood that they were under no obligation to answer any given question and that if they became uncomfortable at any point during the interview we could stop immediately. Finally, given the sensitive nature of the some questions, I made sure to have available resources for on-campus services such as the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC), and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), in case anyone might need that information at any point during or after the interview. No one felt the need to end the conversation, nor did any one indicate any level of distress at any point during or after an interview.

I started by asking about demographic information and then moved into how the participant defined various terms. From here, I asked about the participants' current status as non-virgin or virgin. If the individual identified as the former, I inquired about how they defined the transition from virgin to non-virgin for themselves. A list of the questions will be included as an appendix. Overall, interviewees were very comfortable answering the questions. There was only one respondent who hesitated in answering questions, but it was in large part due to confusion about the questions that were being asked.

Data Analysis

The coding process started with transcribing the interviews. I listened to the interviews, which were saved as MP3 files on my computer, and recorded what I heard verbatim. In many of the interviews, there were digressions, which were also transcribed in case they led to an important discussion later in the interview. I then reread the transcription while listening to the recording in order to catch any typos or mistakes.

In order to code the information from the interviews, I used a grounded theory approach.

This particular approach entails looking through transcriptions with no clearly defined expectations of themes or questions to answer. In using this approach, I read each interview multiple times, which allowed me to glean concepts and schema from the information provided me rather than trying to make the information fit pre-existing notions that I may have had. Specifically, after each interview was transcribed into a Word document, I printed each one and read through the hard copy, making notes along the way. I jotted down key words and phrases in the margins in order to be able to make connections between the interviews and recognize common themes. By doing this, I was able to continuously engage with the information in the interviews and each person's story, while also being free to gather valuable information that would be useful in my final analysis.

Findings

In engaging with the interviews, common themes emerged that were highly intriguing to explore and integrate into this project. Although the sample was quite narrow, the qualitative responses added incredible insight to my chosen topic by providing me with a more direct understanding of various definitions of virginity and virginity loss within a specific population. Even among the twenty interviews I had to work with in the end, there was a larger range in understandings of virginity loss than I had anticipated.

Definitions of sex and virginity loss

Many similarities between participants' responses became apparent even before coding the data. First, despite disagreement of what acts defined virginity loss, every respondent noted that loss of virginity required a partner. Beyond this general agreement, the specific definitions of required acts were varied and complicated. Most commonly, virginity was considered the state of being before one has *sex* for the first time. Many of my respondents were aware that penile-vaginal intercourse is widely thought of to be *sex* and thus the deciding factor in one's virginity loss. To assess how pervasive this idea was and its influence on the variation in definitions of virginity loss within my sample, I first asked participants how they defined *sex*. Many participants found the answer to this seemingly straightforward question to be self-evident. Lisa (18, heterosexual, female) demonstrated this idea by responding, "sex is sex, I guess. I mean I'm pretty traditional in my definition." In this response and throughout the rest of the interview, she never fully defines what she means by *sex* but implies that she is referring to the "traditional" act of penile-vaginal penetration. Other participants were a little more explicit – and inclusive – in their definitions of sex but the concept of vaginal intercourse as the "main attraction" definitely prevailed: Jay (18, heterosexual, male) refers to vaginal sex as "the classic;" Annie (19,

heterosexual, female) attempts to include other sexual orientations but concedes, “*obviously* penis in vagina I would consider sex” (emphasis added).

Beyond discussions of penile-vaginal intercourse, opinions differed on whether or not oral sex could be considered sex. Attitudes on the matter were heavily influenced by considerations of sexual orientation. This may have been due in large part to the fact that most of my respondents identified as heterosexual – for whom the heteronormative paradigm of penile-vaginal sex is able to go unchallenged. Many of my heterosexual respondents did attempt to make a space in their definition for those who did not identify as heterosexual, although this was most often done as an after thought. For example, Jay noted, “Obviously there is oral sex and the classic, but if...that’s [penetrative sex] not your personal sexual drive, then it’s obviously not going to be your definition of sex.” Annie said, “...I don’t consider oral sex real sex...it definitely depends on your orientation.” On the other hand, Charlotte (21, bisexual, female) felt strongly that “defining...heterosexual intercourse as the only... form of real sex is something I cannot get behind.” Her given definition of sex was “genital contact for the purpose of giving pleasure” and throughout the interview continually made the distinction between *sex* and *penetrative sex*.

While it is valuable to ask and examine how individuals define what sex is, it does not always line up with understandings of what constitutes virginity loss. For many respondents, the act of sex and virginity were directly linked: Jay said, “For me, virginity is up until you have either penile-vaginal intercourse or if you’re homosexual, the other actions;” Lisa notes that if someone said they were a virgin she would, “assume that someone had not had sex;” Lawrence said that “virginity is not having had sex...like virgin drinks are drinks without alcohol.” Charlotte is a little more abstract in her definition as she said, “I think a virgin is what you are

before you sexually connected with another person.” In my sample, there were many who thought there were more important variables in defining virginity. For example, Harriet (22, heterosexual, female), whose definition clearly included acts other than penile-vaginal intercourse, was adamant that virginity loss required an aspect of choice:

“If you can contract an STI from the activities you are engaging in, you are not a virgin.

Oral sex, anal sex, and vaginal sex all qualify. These activities, **freely engaged in** by both parties, qualify as the crossing point towards lost virginity [participant emphasis].”

Annie (19, heterosexual, female) also believed that virginity loss requires that “both people agree on what the act is supposed to be.”

The presence of ambiguity in understandings of virginity loss

Although many respondents defined virginity as “not having sex” and may have had rigid definitions of how one loses their virginity, they did not always match up. The starkest example is Annie’s virginity loss story. During the beginning part of the interview, Annie seemed sure in her definitions, noting that that virginity is “...depending on your orientation...like for me, if someone’s penis is in your vagina, you’re not a virgin anymore.” She also did not have problem identifying a socially accepted definition for virginity loss (“contact between a penis and a vagina”). However, she displayed the most uncertainty around her own loss of virginity: “It was like...we didn’t really have sex – his penis was in my vagina – but I didn’t consider it sex...I did, but I didn’t, because it was such a short thing.” It was not until her second experience with sexual intercourse that she considered the first her virginity loss moment. Experiences such as Annie’s show inconsistencies in common definitions and personal experience and encouraged me to pay more attention to the influence of subjective experience on defining virginity loss.

This idea was further highlighted after I examined the interview of a woman who identified as homosexual and placed nearly no importance on vaginal penetration. Instead, Daphne (20, lesbian, female) noted that it was almost completely dependent on her emotional connection with her female partner. The physical acts that constituted her virginity loss experience included mutual masturbation and oral sex, both of which she had engaged in with men in her high school years. When asked how she defined the moment of her virginity loss she said,

“I think the moment I lost my virginity would be the first time I slept with my current girlfriend...because it was...in the context of some kind of emotional significance, which was important to me. None of my sexual activity before that had been in the context of any kind of commitment or emotional investment on my part... So, for me it was sort of the emotional investment more than the physical mechanics that defined losing my virginity”

Discussions with her partner were key in the decision-making process she engaged in when processing the experience’s level of personal significance. Interestingly, Daphne noted that had she decided to lose her virginity with a male partner in high school, penile-vaginal intercourse that would have been the necessary criterion for virginity loss. Beyond reinforcing ideas about the heteronormative nature of how U.S popular culture frames virginity loss, such a response complicated for me the idea that virginity loss is dependent on a specific physical act.

Like Daphne, most participants were clear about the moment of their virginity loss. Steven (29, heterosexual, male), Felipe (21, heterosexual, male), Jay, and Charlotte all related a specific moment after their first penile-vaginal penetration experience during which they reflected upon their virgin-status change with a sense of “Hey, I’m not a virgin anymore.” On the

other hand, the situation was somewhat ambiguous for some other respondents. Annie, who I already noted was uncertain about her situation at first, was not the only one who questioned the moment of virginity loss. Monica (20, heterosexual, female) said, “I was confused at first...because I read that most women bleed after and I didn’t bleed...but otherwise I knew I had [sex].”

Understandings of societal definitions and their influence

A possible explanation for the ambiguity that may exist around virginity status for many may be that there is an incongruity between social conceptions of virginity loss narratives and personal experiences. The above quote from Monica demonstrates this possibility – her experience did not follow the script she had learned and thus created confusion for her.

Many participants, when asked, “How do you think U.S. popular culture defines virginity?” responded with little to no uncertainty that virginity is generally considered to be one’s state of being before having experienced penile-vaginal penetration for the first time. Sebastian offered this explanation for why the focus may lie there: “...I think it’s a procreation thing. If you can’t get pregnant, it doesn’t count.” However, while many respondents were aware of the definition, many were also quite dissatisfied with it. Harriet said, “I think it downplays that STIs can be transmitted through oral, anal, or vaginal, and it puts vaginal sex on a stupid, stupid pedestal.” Felipe noted, “U.S. society...defines virginity [loss] as penis into a vagina...insert, penetration, breaking hymen.” His dissatisfaction was that the definition does not account for the entirety of the experience, including the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects, but rather focused solely on the physical criteria.

On this point, many respondents made the distinction between the physical and mental aspects of virginity loss. Jay notes that as he got older he, “started to recognize more that it was

also very emotional...as opposed to something that was done.” This distinction is often seen in the weight of significance that many individuals attribute to the experience of virginity loss. For example, Annie expressed a common attitude when she said, “I knew it was a big deal because of the emotional and psychological impact it could have on a person were they to lose it [virginity].” Lisa notes two distinct stages of understanding her virginity loss, “even though physically I had already given it up, mentally it was more difficult for me to let go of.”

These sorts of responses were common – the individuals I talked with recognized that U.S. media and public discussions generally focus on the penile-vaginal aspect of sex and its role in virginity loss narratives, a tendency that, as mentioned in the intro, has a variety of historical and political roots. But at the same time as expressing their dissatisfaction with this definition, many respondents also admitted that this social definition played a significant role in shaping how they viewed their own and others’ virginity loss. Jay demonstrates this best in saying, “It [U.S. popular culture definition of virginity] sort of bugs me, but at the same time it’s fairly similar to mine...and that also bugs me that it’s influenced me so much.”

Both Charlotte and Sebastian experienced a great amount of discomfort around the dissonance of being influenced by the mainstream definition of virginity loss and attempting to intellectually re-conceptualize the criteria for the experience. Charlotte demonstrates this in her story:

“...I do think that I was not able to escape my cultural conditioning in that matter, because I would be sitting there thinking, “oral sex is sex, this is sex, this is sex”...so even though what I’m doing is sex, in the back of my head there was still that “but I’m still a virgin.” I didn’t consider myself not a virgin until I had penetrative sex, until I had conformed to the cultural expectation of virginity loss.”

Such a story further highlights the importance of individual experiences rather than focusing solely on mainstreamed narratives. While there are many commonalities among responses, the variation that exists is significant and contributes greatly to understanding the range of definitions and attitudes surrounding one's virginity loss experience.

Reframing understandings of virginity loss

Many participants expressed that over time their attitudes and definitions of virginity loss have changed. Interestingly, although Blank (2008) found that it was mostly women who were reevaluating their interpretations of virginity loss in her work, in my sample the ways in which individuals changed their definitions extended to both men and women.

One interesting redefinition of virginity loss that was brought up a few times among respondents had to do with the role of the orgasm during sexual activity. Taylor (18, bisexual, female), herself a virgin, noted that she believed that loss of virginity was based on having an orgasm with another person. When asked if this included self-masturbating to orgasm with another person present, she responded yes. She was not the only person to express the belief that loss of virginity was dependent on orgasm. Two other respondents, Felipe and Jessica, also considered their respective losses of virginity as being influenced by such criterion. Felipe identified two separate instances of his virginity loss. The first was what he considered his "social loss of virginity:" which was the first time he had penile-vaginal intercourse, although the experience did not result in orgasm for him. In thinking about it retrospectively, he noted that he saw the first time he reached orgasm with a woman during intercourse as being his "real" loss of virginity. As for Jessica (21, heterosexual, female), she had, as of the time of the interview, never achieved orgasm, and considered herself a virgin in that respect despite having had more than one intercourse partner. This orgasm-centered idea of virginity loss was not the norm among

respondents, but is an interesting reconsideration of how one may determine one's virginity status.

When asked, "How do you think your attitudes about virginity have evolved?" many of my participants noted that their ideas about what constituted virginity loss had become more complex. Respondents discussed having a firm script for losing one's virginity – often influenced by messages from mainstream media – when younger, but later realizing that there was more to it than could be accounted for in the physical act of penile-vaginal intercourse. Felipe said that whereas once his attitudes could have been summed up by saying "I'm gonna go stick my penis in a vagina and that is it...I'm not a virgin anymore," such views changed: "the more I learned about my own sexuality...the sexuality of others, and sexuality in general, the more it sort of muddies the waters, it is not...cut and dry." He went on to note that his attitudes had "evolved by simply being more confused about what constitutes virginity...I have my personal definition and...my social definition to work off of."

For others, like Harriet, their attitudes were not changed due to personal experience, but a realization that the term virginity did not account for a range of experiences: "Well, as a young thing I used the definition society had given me, but that fell apart the first time I met a lesbian and realized that by society's definition she was still virginal." In these cases, as well as others, respondents felt the need to rethink their definitions and attitudes about virginity due to a growing dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between the social script of virginity loss and personal experiences or beliefs. Annie's story is another example of this tendency towards redefinition after the moment of virginity loss: it was not until she had intercourse for the second time and experienced "something that was to me, something more like what I thought sex was" that she was able to label her first experience as "losing her virginity." Finally, Sebastian talked

about the importance of the subjective nature of virginity loss experiences: “I think...in our culture we have a lot of self-defining stuff...how we define ourselves, and how we define ourselves to other people. I think for a lot of people, you should define virginity for yourself.”

Discussion

The tendency of some of my participants to redefine virginity loss speaks volumes about the subjective nature of the experience. The fact that individuals are *able* to reevaluate their virginity loss experiences at all perfectly demonstrates this and suggests that there is a space for individuals to personally define their sexual selves. This is important because not only do definitions provide a vocabulary for understanding ourselves, they also allow us to communicate with others. In regards to virginity loss, self-definition is significant because loss of virginity is often seen as the first tangible step in the creation of one's sexual self because it is commonly viewed as the first time one has *sex* (Carpenter, 2002; Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2008). It seems from my findings, that some individuals are prone to redefine the experience to suit their own emotional and intellectual needs, which may indicate that widely accepted definitions do not necessarily account for a range of understandings.

In surveys of sexual behaviors and attitudes of adolescents and college-aged individuals, researchers found that when referring to *sex*, individuals most often think of penile-vaginal intercourse/penetration (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Carpenter, 2001; Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2008, Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). There are exceptions to this definition, however. While most people agree that both penile-vaginal and penile-anal penetration both count as being *sex*, (Bogart, et al, 2000; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), the debate becomes most complicated when attempting to classify oral sex. Such conclusions from other researchers were mirrored in my own interview findings. My participants, in their attempts to define the term, most often agreed that penetration – particularly vaginal – was *sex*, but were less clear on what role oral sex played. Overall, it seemed that oral sex did have a place in the definition of *sex* for some, but did not necessarily play a role in virginity loss.

Definitions of sex and virginity loss are not necessarily congruent

This discrepancy led me to consider one of the most significant ideas gleaned from my research as well as the interviews: definitions of sex and virginity loss are not necessarily congruent. In their study of how adolescents define sex, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) allude to such inconsistency among self-definitions of sex. They write that often which acts an individual engages in and classify as sex are not always congruent with their own original definitions. The authors note that an individual may have personal reasons for defining a behavior one way or another and that in many cases, they use additional, personally variable criteria to make their decisions about what acts count as sex and which do not. In their study, there were many respondents who seemed to change their definition of sex due to perceived consequences of taking a certain label. For example, one respondent (classified as #M-46) recounted an incident where he began to have penetrative vaginal sex with a woman, but stopped because he thought, “it was wrong.” Interestingly, he notes that, “if I were a 3rd party, I would say it probably was [sex]” (p. 216). However, the participant still identified as a virgin despite his admittance that the act fit his criteria for virginity loss. Inconsistencies such as this are valuable in that they point to the willingness of some to reframe their sexual identities based on non-physical reactions to the experience. Commonly, it is assumed that sex and virginity loss are inextricably linked and this seems true, to a degree. But once I examined this link further, it seemed that how these two terms are reconciled is a much more complicated process than I had originally assumed.

In my interviews, I found that a participant’s definition of sex – no matter how strict or fluid their definition was in terms of making a space for non-heterosexual orientations – did not always correspond with definitions of virginity loss. Annie’s virginity loss story was a good

example of this: she rigidly defined *sex* as a penis in a vagina but was confused about her own experience in regards to whether she had actually lost her virginity the first time she had sexual intercourse – which had included the criteria of her definition of sex – because it was “such a short thing.” In other words, her experience did not meet her initial expectations of what the experience should have been. Thus, she at first was unwilling to label that first sexual experience as being her moment of virginity loss even while allowing that if she were a third party evaluating the situation, she would have said it fit all the necessary criteria for virginity loss. This suggests that there were more than just physical criteria of her definition at play in her understanding of the situation and a simple definition of the term *sex* could not account for a variety of factors in interpreting her virginity loss moment. It is possible that for her the two terms were indeed congruent and that the rigidity of her definition of sex exists because of her retrospective understanding of her virginity loss experience. This then becomes a chicken or the egg type situation in which it is hard to know if she was following a “sex thus virginity loss” paradigm, or rather “virginity loss thus sex” in processing the situation. On the other hand, despite which came first, her confusion still indicates that there is not always a clear, direct relationship between how one understands sex and loss of virginity. Confusion can exist for an individual even if one is following the commonly understood script of “vaginal intercourse leads to sex.”

The incongruity between definitions of sex and losing one’s virginity is not always the result of confusion over a given situation but can sometimes be the product of a dissonance between one’s belief and the perceived pressure of the common social script, such as in the case of Charlotte and Sebastian. Although both of these participants strongly believed that oral sex should be considered “real sex,” they still defined their own loss of virginity on the bases of

penile-vaginal intercourse, despite having engaged in oral sex previously. This suggests an inconsistency in the straightforward assumption that virginity status is wholly determined by experience with *sex* as an individual may define it. Both participants expressed some distress at the level of influence that the societal definition played on their own in terms of how to lose one's virginity.

These arguments point to the idea that, while it is valuable to ask and examine how individuals define what *sex* is, it does not necessarily line up with understandings of what constitutes virginity loss. In these cases, it is important to take into account the motivations behind definitions, as well as the definitions themselves. It seems that the dissonance between definitions of sex and virginity loss is heavily influenced by assumptions of what acts are *sex* and thus how to lose one's virginity. The common social script for virginity loss is almost exclusively focused on penile-vaginal penetration for a variety of reasons. Explanations as to why this is so involve a complex history lesson – briefly covered in the introduction – but the focus of this paper is more directed toward how some people take this definition and make it work on an individual basis.

Difference between the physical and mental aspects of the experience

From my interview findings, I found that sex and virginity loss, while heavily linked, are two separate concepts and there are myriad of other methods for understanding virginity loss that do not depend on the physical act of sex. For example, many interviewees made the distinction between the physical and the mental aspects of virginity loss, reinforcing the idea that the physicality of the experience is not the only characteristic taken into consideration. Researchers often talk in terms of behaviors (Bogart, et al., 2000; Byers, Henderson, Hobson, 2008) and the most common understanding of virginity loss –the first time one has sex, itself understood as a

series of behaviors –is a physical act that determines the transition from virgin to non-virgin for many people (Carpenter, 2002; Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2008) including a number of my participants. However, there may be multiple understandings of this seemingly straightforward term, such as Daphne’s emotional evaluation of her virginity loss experience, or Felipe’s orgasm-centered definition. Both of these interpretations call upon a different set of criteria that are related to, but extend beyond, the physicality of the act.

In their attempts to define sex, my participants also talked in terms of behaviors and physical criteria. Many respondents’ definitions were notably influenced by the penile-vaginal penetrative paradigm that they pinpointed as being the U.S. societal definition of virginity loss. There are many explanations as to why this may have been so. For example, the majority of my participants were heterosexual and there is a historically heteronormative understanding of sex and virginity in our U.S. culture (Carpenter, 2001). Although many of the participants seemed dissatisfied with this model and its influence on their own definitions, they continued to operate within its structure. This is understandable, as normative definitions are normative for a reason: their portrayal and influence is deeply ingrained in social scripts. By the time individuals are eighteen (the youngest age in my sample), they have had plenty of exposure time to mainstream ideals and influencers. This is not to say that everyone is subject to conform exactly to the images disseminated, only that the message is pervasive and bound to at least have an impact on individual understandings of culturally salient concepts.

While socially constructed narratives of virginity loss influenced many participants, it is not a script that seemed sufficient for many others. In these cases, there was a recognition and emphasis on the mental and emotional aspects of virginity loss rather than the physical acts. For example, Daphne seemed less focused on which sexual *acts* she engaged in with her partner

during the moment of her perceived virginity loss and more focused on the emotional significance of her experience. This interplay between the role of physicality and mental processing is interesting because the physical act is important in the creation of easily communicated definitions, but the processing of the situation – creating one’s overall understanding of the experience – seems to be a predominantly emotional and psychological process. Even in the case of Daphne, there was a physical aspect to the virginity loss experience – physicality and virginity loss are inextricably linked in this way – but the bulk of the significance of the event took place at the mental and emotional level. This was common to many participants and encouraged me to further explore the ways in which virginity loss is and is not understood at various levels.

Interpretations of virginity loss experiences

In order to reconcile social influences and personal interpretations of sex and virginity, my participants had an interesting tendency to use the normative definitions of sex and virginity loss and make them work on a personal basis. For example, some noted a clear distinction between their “social” and “real” losses of virginity, such as when some respondents chose to redefine their virginity loss in terms of orgasm. I interpreted this tendency as a potential desire to reframe one’s own understanding of virginity loss to give the experience personal significance, borne of dissatisfaction with the perceived societal definitions.

Blank (2008) also noticed and wrote about this phenomenon, calling it “process-oriented virginity” because some individuals understood their virginity loss as a process instead of a moment or “instant in time” and that there are “at least two sets of standards” for classifying virginity loss experiences: the social and the “real.” During my interviews, more than one participant made this same distinction in describing their understanding of their virginity loss. It

was defined by the ability of the participants to recognize that their “social” loss of virginity was when they had an experience that would be viewed by *others* to be the moment when they transitioned from virgin to non-virgin, often the moment of first experiencing penile-vaginal intercourse. It seemed that many saw it as indisputable that one would not be able to “get away” with defining themselves as a virgin to peers after having this particular sexual experience. Even if the experience of penile-vaginal intercourse did not feel particularly significant to the individual, the participants who made this distinction seemed to believe that it was so in the eyes of the general population.

On the other hand, although participants seemed to understand the significance of the loss of “social” virginity, many also seemed to be let down by the experience. It was often said that it was “less of a big deal” than they believed it would be. For this reason, some individuals shifted their definition of when they “lost their virginity” to be a moment that held some other, more personal significance for them, one that may have occurred after losing their “social” virginity. Going back to the example of Felipe, he considered this moment to be the time when he first had achieved orgasm with another person, an event that occurred after he had had vaginal intercourse for the first time. He was very clear that the experience of vaginal intercourse was his “social” loss of virginity, whereas his first partnered orgasm was what he believed to be his “real” loss of virginity. What I found most important about this separation was the idea that how the moment of “real” virginity loss is determined seems to be an entirely personally subjective process, dependent on a combination of physical, emotional, and psychological criteria.

However, the separation of these two types of virginity loss was not necessarily a common occurrence among my participants, nor did Blank (2008) and Carpenter (2001, 2001, 2009) encounter it among most individuals with whom they talked. Many of the people I

interviewed saw their “real” loss of virginity as the same as their “social” loss of virginity. In some cases, while there may have been some confusion or discontentment in trying to reconcile their personal experiences with perceived social scripts, ultimately they found that the social script narrative was accurate enough. At the same time, many interviewees, when asked about how they defined virginity, believed that the aspect of choice in the process of virginity loss was just as important, if not more, than the physical characteristics of the act. So while the two levels of virginity loss were not separate for many people, what is most significant about this tendency is its emphasis on the ability to choose when virginity loss really occurs, which, for many, can be empowering.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the variation in definitions of sex and virginity loss with a focus on the importance of examining the individualized nature of processing the experience. When I began thinking about this topic, I sought to problematize the social concept of *virginity* – which seemed to be a historically heteronormative and phallogentric term that excluded a wide range of experiences – and look at how to make the term more inclusive. However, through the course of my research, informed by historical context and individual stories, my focus shifted and I discovered that I was more interested in the diversity of definitions of sex and how they influence understandings of virginity loss.

Over the course of my interviews and outside research, I found that, for some individuals, virginity loss experiences could not always be boiled down to a physical definition. There are times at which concepts of the physical act of *sex* and the experience of virginity loss diverged and how each participant understood this divergence did vary. While many did not express much confusion about how to conceptualize their virginity loss, there were others for whom the processing of the situation was a challenging affair, due in large part to the ambiguity of definitions of sex.

At the core of my research was the idea that sex and virginity loss, while inextricably linked, are not necessarily congruent concepts. The importance of criteria in processing the virginity loss experiences other than the physical act of *sex* was demonstrated in an interesting tendency of some of my participants to separate their interpretations of their virginity loss into two realms: the social and the “real.” Some participants created their social understanding of their virginity loss experiences based on how they believed others would define the experience while the “real” definition was more dependent on the level of personal significance the

experience held. This sort of interpretation varied greatly, the starkest example being those who defined their “real” virginity loss as having occurred upon first orgasm with a partner. Working in tandem, these two interpretations were often reconciled to create a more complete understanding of one’s virginity loss; an understanding that was more rooted in emotional and psychological – rather than strictly physical – criteria.

My findings were limited by the narrow scope of my demographic – white, mostly heterosexual, Midwestern University students – but it was striking to me that even in a small, specific population there was a fair variety of definitions of sex and virginity loss. Taken together, my research may begin to show a potential problem with relying on the generalizability of interpretations of sex and virginity loss in public discussions – especially those pertaining to sexual health. While there has been – and still is – significant reason to focus on heterosexual coitus when discussing virginity loss – such as the effects of pregnancy rates on society – research such as my own here and that of Laura Carpenter (2001, 2002, 2006) may have a positive effect on the future of sexual health discussions and sex education curricula by at least making others aware that definitions of sex may vary and thus have an effect on shared meanings.

For example, if shown to be a tendency that extends outside of my own participants, the idea of individually separating one’s social and “real” loss of virginity may have an interesting effect on public health discussions. The benefit of cultural intelligibility in areas of sex and sexuality is that if everyone has a common language with which to discuss such matters, it makes communicating about sexually transmitted infections and risk of pregnancy a simpler matter. In being able to personally define the moment of virginity loss, there is a chance that individuals will give the socially understood concept of sex less weight and thus run the risk of losing a

shared meaning with a future partner. For example, if a man has never had an orgasm with a partner, but has had penetrative sex, he is still at risk for infection. If he then further defines himself as a virgin because he has not yet experienced what, to him, is the more significant experience, he may misrepresent himself to future partners and thus misrepresent his level of risk. This is not to say that this situation would be a willful lie to a partner, but that the concept of a shared intelligibility breaks down and must somehow be reconciled. Acknowledging that not everyone may mean the same thing when they use the terms *sex* and *virgin* is an important first step in this reconciliation. This is not to say that the focus on penile-vaginal intercourse, and its significance in our society should be lessened, but the very idea that sex and virginity loss definitions do not always line up should be given more consideration.

The topic of virginity loss has been fraught with considerations of pregnancy, adolescent sexuality, and sexual risk-taking, but loss of virginity, for some, is also difficult to understand and process on a personal level. It was for this reason that I conducted these interviews and embarked on this research. I wanted to better understand how other individuals understood virginity loss and defined *sex*. I found that in speaking about my research findings to peers, many individuals who I did not interview were eager to tell me their own stories. There is a space for more open communication about sex and sexuality. The topic has a long history of being volatile and taboo, to be sure. The touchy nature of sex discussions will not likely be remedied in the near future, but I strongly believe that if more individuals were open about their sexual history and how they personally interpreted terms like *sex* and *virginity*, that might do a fair amount of good for risk-reduction and sexual satisfaction on its own. The unspoken can be dangerous and is often what leads to risky experimentation and ruined apple pies.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

Name? Age? Gender affiliation? Year in School?

Major? Occupation? Religious affiliation? Sexual Orientation?

What does you think it means to be sexual?

o Who do you think is sexual?

o Do you consider yourself a sexual person?

o How so? or Why not?

How do you define sexual activity?

o How do you define sex? What's the difference?

o How do you define virginity?

Do you think one can be sexual without being sexually active? Why?

Do you consider yourself sexually active?

Do you consider yourself a virgin?

o If no:

o How did you define the moment when you lost your virginity? How was it significant?

o Can you tell me about the experience?

o Were you uncertain about the moment when you lost your virginity? Was it ambiguous to you?

o How old were you?

o If yes: how do you think you will define the moment when you are no longer a virgin?

What was your relationship with your partner at the time?

o Was your partner a virgin at the time?

How old was your partner at the time?

Did that influence your decision to lose your virginity with that person?

Were you ever insecure about your partner's level of sexual experience?

Did/Do you have expectations for your "first time"?

o What were/are they?

o Did the experience meet those expectations?

Explain the 3 categories: Stigma? Gift? Organic experience? Other? If other, then what?

Did religious beliefs have an effect on your current status as virgin/non-virgin?

o What kind of role do you think religion plays in many Americans' status as virgin/non-virgin?

Do your parents know that you are a virgin/are not a virgin?

o Do you talk to your parents about your sexual activity?

o How do you think your views differ from that of your parents?

o If not a virgin: would you tell your parents?

How do you think popular culture defines virginity?

o How do you feel about this definition?

o What kind of influence did this societal definition of virginity have on your own?

Did/Do you ever feel any sort of pressure based on your status as virgin?

o Example: did you feel like you were pressured to remain virgin or "lose" it by a certain time in your life?

o How so? or Why not?

What do you think about the phrase "to lose your virginity"?

o Can you think of an alternative way to say it?

Have you ever been sexually assaulted?

o How did this shape your attitudes about your virginity?

o Did you still consider yourself a virgin after that experience? Why/Why not?

o Do you think others would define you as a virgin?

o Do you think that people who have been sexually assaulted are still virgins?

Does age make a difference in your answer? Why/Why not? (If someone was assaulted at a young age versus in his or her teens or mid-life?)

How do you think your attitudes about virginity have evolved?

o How do you think they will continue to evolve?