

**We Need To Talk: Evangelical College Students' Perceptions on Positive, Orthodox Sexuality and Pedagogical Implications for Church Leaders and Parents.**

Adam Mearse, PhD.

[amearse@napervillechurch.org](mailto:amearse@napervillechurch.org)

(630) 414-1090

**Abstract:**

Evangelical college students were asked to reflect on the development of their own understandings of sexuality, as well as for their perspectives on how parents and church leaders should consider teaching sexuality. Theoretical influences of Peter Berger and Christian Smith are applied to a model for socialization of evangelical young people, specific to sexuality. The model emphasizes the need for teaching and socialization to be *relational, honest, consistent, and redemptive*.

The author of this paper holds copyright protection of his work. This paper is shared with you in a spirit of collegial collaboration. You do not have permission to copy, disseminate, or quote extensively from it, without the expressed, written permission of the author.

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	1
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY .....	2
RESEARCH DESIGN .....	7
FINDINGS .....	8
FOUR CRITICAL THEMES IN TEACHING SEXUALITY .....	12
Relational .....	12
Honest .....	14
Consistent .....	15
Redemptive .....	16
Practical Recommendations for Teaching Sexuality .....	17
PEDAGOGY OF THREE STRANDS .....	17
Interpersonal Strand .....	18
Environmental Strand .....	21
Incarnational Strand .....	26
Incarnational Discussions of Sexual Orientation .....	28
CONCLUSION .....	30
REFERENCES .....	32

*This paper reflects the research conducted for my dissertation. I've attempted here to give you enough that you are able to understand the project, without having to sift through the entire publication. You may find it in its entirety through ProQuest, or by contacting me directly.*

The first time I taught a course in sexuality for teens in my church, I had two fathers of those teens approach me at separate times, slap me on the back and say something to the effect of, “You’re teaching about sexuality? Better you than me!” That encounter inspired me to ask the teens in the youth group to describe their experience in learning about sexuality in their homes – the answers were uninspiring. In most cases, the communication was either described as none at all, or a one-time, painfully awkward version of “the talk” that only served to reinforce their feelings that they would never again want to talk about anything sexual with their parents.

Sexuality is perhaps the most salient topic of conversation and thought among American teenagers, evangelical Christians included. It saturates every form of media, is a constant thread in conversation at school and in social media, and looms for many teens as a vast and wild frontier opening up to them in their adolescent years. In families and churches across America, teenagers are trying to navigate this frontier of sexuality – many of them feeling largely abandoned or isolated in their efforts to do so. Sexuality continues to be one of the most difficult topics for parents and churches to handle effectively.

#### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to discover self-identified influences on the development of positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality among single, evangelical college students. It also presents their suggestions for parents and church leaders interested in the development of positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality in their own children. Positive, orthodox sexuality is described as an understanding of sexuality that is true to traditional evangelical interpretations of the Bible, while also a positive force in the life of the individual. The study did not attempt to establish a definitive definition of biblical sexuality, but to gather students’

perceptions on how parents and church leaders might approach the subject in local contexts.

Influences such parental communication, mentors, media, and peers are discussed in reference to respondents' own experiences and implications for church leaders and parents.

Berger and Luckmann's ideas about the social construction of knowledge and Christian Smith's subculture identity theory are employed as an interpretive framework by which evangelical church leaders and parents can think about a holistic approach to teaching and living out biblical sexuality. Habermas' theory of communicative action helps guide the discussion on effective communication across the myriad difficult conversations included in the broad topic sexuality.

Four themes emerged in describing teaching that promotes positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality. Teaching and nurture in this area should be *relational*, *honest*, *consistent*, and *redemptive*. A three-stranded pedagogical proposal that includes *interpersonal*, *environmental*, and *incarnational* elements is also described for teaching positive, orthodox sexuality.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In the past, research into teens and sexuality has taken an almost exclusively behavioristic approach, delving primarily into questions surrounding age at first intercourse, the frequency in use of contraception, and teen pregnancy rates in an effort to better understand the facilitating factors and the antecedents associated with these behaviors and events. This research has been useful in describing behavior patterns and the factors that most seem to influence a teen's sexual behavior.

Within that research, a strong link between sexual behavior and religiosity has been well established. Strong religious convictions and frequent religious behavior generally

predict a more orthodox, Christian view of sex (Ahrold et al. 2011; Fehring et al. 1998). The local church holds great influence in the manner in which its young people come to understand and live out sexuality. It's messaging, both explicit and implicit, shapes the conscious and unconscious narratives about sexuality and sexual behavior that its children generally adhere to throughout their adolescence.

A subset of the church or religious influence in the lives of evangelical teens that many have been a part of is purity pledge movements such as True Love Waits or Silver Ring Thing. These movements have drawn on pop-culture celebrities and concert-style presentations to relay their message of purity. The relative success of such movements is a complicated area of inquiry and has met with mixed results in the literature. In the end, most Americans, including those who have taken purity pledges, have sex before they are married – around 90% of men and 85% of women, with the likelihood increasing with age (Chandra et al. 2005; Finer 2007; Bruckner and Bearman 2005).

Parents play perhaps the largest role in their children's sexual behavior. Parents' attention, values, and supervision have a strong mitigating effect on sexual behavior (Kirby 2002; Manlove et al. 2008; Miller and Sneesby 1998). Parental communication is of particular importance, though it is a topic that has proven difficult for researchers to come to a consensus. This discrepancy may not be surprising given the limitations of quantitative research when it comes to describing the situation behind the behavior and is one reason to consider a qualitative approach to the topic. Still, there is little doubt that parents have the strongest opportunity to influence their children's understandings about most topics, sexuality included. Particularly with communication that is open and takes place over the course of time, parents' attitudes are not only understood, but have probably the strongest voice in the psyche of teens.

Recently, qualitative studies have become somewhat more common, investigating sexuality via interviews with adolescents and emerging adults. Regnerus points to the importance of the church and the family in creating plausible definitions of sexuality to pass along to their children. He also points out the dire need for churches and families to generate a system of support for teens to live out those definitions (Regnerus 2007, 159). This perspective resonates strongly with experiences I have had in teaching sexuality to teens, as they typically report little or no previous opportunity to explore sexuality with their parents and other church leaders. One particularly common complaint is that there is a sense that whatever the church does teach about sexuality is a “teen thing” – the church at large never discusses the issue. Teens seem to have an inherent sense of their church’s and parents’ general ideas about sexuality, but almost no opportunity to discuss or inquire with church leaders or parents about the topic.

Gardner offers an analysis of the rhetorical structures of evangelical chastity pledge movements. She points out that these movements do have some impact on students who participate in them (although their efficacy is the subject of some debate). However, they tend to rely on a fairy tale metaphor that Gardner believes leaves students with potentially destructive understandings of sex and marriage (Gardner 2011, 71).

Evangelical students have been particularly susceptible to developing an understanding of sexuality that is orthodox, without being particularly healthy. In that kind of situation, a student may have the understanding for their entire adolescent life that they are supposed to ignore or suppress their sexuality, and then somehow turn it on after their wedding ceremony, which causes many great problems. Or, they may come to think of marriage essentially as the step you take in order to validate having sex with the person with whom they

are in love. This tends to reduce the idea of marriage to the act of sex and creates distorted ideas of what marriage is and all that it takes to maintain it.

Regnerus claims that many parents are still largely uncomfortable talking with their teens about sexual subjects. A relatively large number of respondents in his study talked very little, if at all, about sex with their teens. He also points out that parents often over-rate communication with their teens, especially in the area of sexuality – reporting higher levels of conversations than do their teens. This is likely a result of communication events in which parents feel as though they are having significant discussions, while their children are either not listening or the discussion makes no real impression on them (Regnerus 2007, 64-71). For parents and churches interested in forming a coherent and effective strategy for helping their children navigate sexuality, communication must not only be a foundational part of the strategy, but it must be done effectively.

Sociology has insight to offer into this topic. In fact, it parallels the concept of Christian discipleship in many ways. Both describe more than just teaching facts, but helping members of a group assimilate beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors so that the individual eventually accepts them personally, leading to changes in worldview and behavior. Berger's ideas about *legitimations* and *plausibility structures* are of particular value. A legitimation is piece of “socially objectivated ‘knowledge’ that serves to explain and justify the social order” (Berger 2011, 29). Plausibility structures on the other hand are “specific social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question” (Berger 2011, 45). Berger argues that for any kind of socialization to take place, a group must have a very clear message (legitimations) and plan in place to keep reinforcing that message (plausibility structures) frequently and consistently over time. Adapting Berger's ideas about

socialization could aid churches and parents in the process of trying to create a strategy for helping their children come to grips with sexuality as Christians by offering a framework for the pieces of the socialization process that must be in place.

An additional voice from sociology that is of benefit to this discussion is that of Christian Smith. His subculture theory of evangelical strength suggests several important ideas. First, evangelicals have historically found great strength in their identity as a subgroup, which is in ideological conflict with the larger American society. At the core of the evangelical identity have been values such as cultural engagement and witnessing (Smith 1998, 75). This kind of thinking has provided some of the strength for purity pledge movements. Unfortunately, when it comes to discussing sexuality both with their own people, and in the public sphere, evangelicals seem to largely abandon these very characteristics that have allowed them to thrive otherwise. Instead of engaging cultural narratives with more redemptive offerings, they tend to withdraw and hide on the topic of sexuality with their own children (Freitas 2008; Gardner 2011; Regnerus 2007). Subculture identity theory should be considered when churches and families are planning their strategies for helping children understand sexuality.

The influence of the home and the church can be quite profound in guiding the development of sexual understanding, identity, and behavior in their children. Qualitative studies have pointed to families and churches as under-emphasizing and under-communicating about sexuality with teenagers, leaving them largely on their own to generate those understandings by assimilating messages from pop-culture, their friends, the internet, and whatever other sources they happen upon.



## RESEARCH DESIGN

The Research Questions below flow from, and support, the inquiry of the purpose statement: this study will seek to discover influences on the development of positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality among single, evangelical college students.

RQ1: How do single evangelical college students conceptualize the idea of positive, orthodox sexuality?

RQ2: What have been important influences in the development of positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality among evangelical college students?

RQ3: In what ways would evangelical college students advise that parents and church leaders contribute to developing positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality among teens?

With the above Purpose Statement in mind, a qualitative study design was most appropriate. Qualitative research seeks to understand how others interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences, as well how they construct their views of the world (Merriam 2009, 5). Qualitative research is based on a constructivist understanding of reality which holds that objects possess no inherent meaning, but “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty 1998, 43). A basic qualitative design served the goals of this study by allowing college students to reflect on their experiences in learning about sexuality across all contexts of their younger years. They were able to consider what experiences, ideas, people, etc. most helped them make meaning of sexuality as Christian young people. As the researcher, I then had the opportunity to look for patterns in their collective experiences that can be of value to parents and teachers in considering their own work in helping children understand sexuality.

A basic qualitative design served the goals of this study by allowing college students to reflect on their experiences in learning about sexuality across all contexts of their

younger years. They were able to consider what experiences, ideas, people, etc. most helped them make meaning of sexuality as Christian young people. As the researcher, I then had the opportunity to look for patterns in their collective experiences that can be of value to parents and teachers in considering their own work in helping children understand sexuality.

As the present study was concerned specifically with the development of understandings of sexuality that are both positive and orthodox, the population was also limited to students that displayed these characteristics. This is not to say that these students had spotless sexual behavior histories. A positive, orthodox understanding of sexuality implies that they thought about sexuality from an evangelical Christian worldview, and that they viewed sexuality as a positive part of the human experience and of their own lives.

## FINDINGS

My conversations with respondents began with questions aimed at gaining insight into how they had come to understand the idea of sexuality in their early years. Those seeking to proactively teach positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality to their own children need first to understand the frame of reference those children are bringing to the discussion. The respondents' perspectives on the topic of sexuality offer a valuable perspective on the manner in which young people currently conceptualize the topic.

When asked what comes immediately to mind when they consider the topic of sexuality, some of the responses were exactly as expected. The majority of respondents immediately mentioned intercourse. Abby candidly said of sexual desires:

When you're a teenager, that's around the age where boys are starting to explore more, and I guess a little bit younger for girls, but that seems like the age when really that's the biggest thing that's happening in your life - everything revolves around that.

This is to be expected, as the robust topic of sexuality is often reduced to intercourse and desire in societal and church and family discourse.

Gender roles were another strong theme in the respondents' understanding of sexuality. These were often mentioned in the context of marriage and reflected a strong complimentary perspective. The understanding that sex is for marriage, and that sexuality is to be expressed in prescribed gender roles, was a strong undercurrent of much of the respondents' discussion throughout the interview process.

The most surprising insight gleaned from the interviews was the frequency with which respondents cited sexual orientation. Surprisingly, this was the concept most often mentioned by respondents when asked what came to mind when the topic of sexuality was brought up. Many respondents expressed very strong opinions that this is an area in which the church and family have failed to offer necessary guidance and teaching to young Christians. As one young woman pointed out that, "It's more about social issues than traditional things." This insight points to the fact that as the cultural narrative has grown increasingly in favor of alternative sexual orientations, young Christians feel very strongly the importance of open conversation and biblical perspective on all issues of sexual identity.

I next asked respondents to describe from where they believe an individual's understanding of sexuality comes. The respondents again offered a mix of answers one would expect, along with a few that might not be so obvious. The most common response was a combination of environmental factors, beginning with parents and immediate family members. Commonly, respondents mentioned that parents were a strong source of modeling and influence, but that their own parents' influence was actually quite limited, with little or no intentional teaching or conversation around topics of sexuality.

The influence of media and culture was described as strong, and generally counterproductive to Christian understandings of sexuality. Referring to illicit sexual images and messaging, Brian pointed out, “It’s everywhere. It’s hard to go anywhere and not see it.”

Eric added that the cultural message about sex is something like this:

As long as whatever you're doing...you're comfortable with. You don't feel like you're being taken advantage of. It doesn't matter too much what happens as long as there's trust between the people that's happening and there's no physical harm or emotional harm.

Christian young people are, like the rest of the population, continually bombarded with the myriad unrealistic messages about body image. Specifically that, “Everyone is supposed to look like a model,” as Luis described. The respondents consistently described the messaging about sexuality that is seen in mainstream media as unrealistic and strongly contrary to mainstream evangelical teaching.

The final component of my probing into conceptualizations of sexuality involved asking respondents to describe what is included in a distinctively Christian understanding of the topic. These answers offer insight into the manner in which the respondents’ churches have framed sexuality. Most commonly, respondents suggested that a Christian understanding of sexuality was drawn from the authority of God and the Bible. As Joni put it, “We are created to be sexual – it’s part of God’s plan for us.” Most respondents who cited God’s authority included a reference to sex being intended as part of the heterosexual marriage relationship. Derek offered a particularly articulate description of marriage, describing it as “a picture of the gospel, reflecting the way Christ views the church.”

A common pattern that emerged from the interviews involved respondents making a statement to the effect that Christians should understand sexuality as a positive part of life, but that their personal experiences in their churches was generally negative. Respondents

mentioned that the understandings of sexuality they inherited from their churches (which nearly always corresponded with those from their homes) were limited to the promotion of chastity until marriage and modesty in how young women should dress. Brittany described what seemed to be the common understanding that the respondents gleaned from their churches and homes when she said, “You’re supposed to suppress lust until you find someone, and then you get married – and then you figure everything out.” While she made this statement lightheartedly, it does seem to reflect the limited understanding about Christian sexuality that most respondents were offered in their teen years.

The second phase of the interview, based on RQ2, investigated the influences that college students identified as significant in the development of their understandings of sexuality throughout childhood. This line of inquiry began with asking respondents to describe when they recalled first becoming aware of sexuality in any way. The chronology of awareness was surprisingly uniform. A high number of respondents (one third) mentioned the fourth grade specifically as the year they remembered coming to awareness of sexuality. Most others who mentioned a specific timeframe identified late elementary school or sixth grade.

The most frequently mentioned influences in the development of understandings of sexuality were parents, church, and media. The influence of parents was reported with equal frequency as positive and negative. Regardless of how they felt about their parents’ efforts at introducing the subject, most respondents claim that their parents’ initial efforts occurred some time after they had already been exposed to sexuality in some other way. Peers, health class, or media exposure had already broached the subject.

The influence of media was described as nearly always negative, and frequently quite powerful. The church was considered largely innocuous and uninvolved in shaping respondents' views of sexuality throughout their childhood.

A final influence of significance was the presence of other important adults in the lives of respondents. Nearly half of the respondents described a significant relationship with an adult other than their parents as being important in their development in general, and in their understanding of sexuality specifically.

#### FOUR CRITICAL THEMES IN TEACHING SEXUALITY

The portion of the interviews related to RQ3 shifted in focus from asking respondents to reflect on their past experiences, towards considering ways in which they would recommend church leaders and parents approach the topic of sexuality with their children. Respondents were asked to consider themselves as “consultants,” offering the benefit of their experience and perspective to those who desire to pass along positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality. Their collective responses were quite insightful, as well as consistent – especially given the widely varied paths by which they have arrived at their present understandings.

Responses from this portion of the interviews can best be understood as falling into four major themes. These themes indicate that teaching (formal, informal, and non-formal) in sexuality should be *relational, honest, consistent, and redemptive*. These are not discrete themes – they all build and rely on one another to a certain extent.

##### *Relational*

As respondents considered how they would advise church leaders and parents, the first overwhelmingly common theme was that teaching on sexuality should be done in the

context of relationship. Many expressed disappointment that their own attempts to understand as a child and teen were marked by feelings of isolation. In speaking of her struggles with sexual temptation, Margaret recounted, “For the longest time it was me alone, so I was kind of like, ‘Yeah, I’ve got no one to tell.’” Ken described his sense of isolation as particularly acute in relation to the onslaught of sexualized information coming his way as a teen. “It’s confusing to have all these different looks at it coming from all these different directions and not really knowing at the time what to do with it.”

Commonly, respondents made passing statements much like Nicole’s: “My parents didn’t really feel comfortable talking about it. I kind of just had to piece it together on my own.” While not often named overtly, the negative effect of feelings of isolation was a very consistent undertone throughout the interviews. Some of this sense of isolation may be inherent in the topic itself. Sexuality, while universal, is also intensely personal and embodied. It is natural for young people to feel as though the thoughts, emotions, and feelings coursing through them are entirely unique and personal. A relational approach to helping young people understand sexuality can help negate the negative power of isolation and normalize the experience for individuals.

Given the discomfort most young people feel in discussing sexuality, particularly early on, the support of positive and trusted relationships as context for those discussions is invaluable. Forming relationships that can bear the strain of highly sensitive discussions, like those the topic sexuality necessarily includes, requires the strength that only time can produce. For this reason, parents, friends, pastors, and mentors are all ideal relationships for such discussions if those relationships are well established as environments of honesty and safety.

One of the most frequent suggestions for powerful relational contexts was the establishment of mentors – significant adults other than parents. These commonly include youth pastors and their spouses, family friends, members of the family’s church, professional counselors, etc. Often, these relationships may be formed in church ministries as small group leaders, or volunteers, form close relationships with students.

### *Honest*

A second theme that bubbled clearly up to the surface throughout this study was honesty. Respondents expressed great frustration with past experiences in which they believed their parents and church leaders had squelched conversations and questions they would like to have had growing up. Honesty, as I use it in descriptions of the data from this study, is a multifaceted concept. Respondents called for teaching about sexuality to include open and direct conversation; vulnerability on behalf of adults attempting to teach; space for questions to be asked and answered plainly; a normalizing of sexuality as a topic of conversation; and a robust biblical rationale for orthodox sexuality. These concepts will be woven into the discussion below.

When asked how church leaders and parents should address sexuality with their children, a statement about honesty was the most frequent first idea that was brought up by respondents. Often, this was a short statement: “Go right at it.” Or “Don’t be afraid of it.” In listening to their responses, it was clear that the respondents were passionate about the need for open communication on topics of sexuality. It should be understood that the honesty respondents called for was always in the context of relationship. There were no calls for books or lectures, but for vulnerable discussion coming in the context of trusted relationships.



Lily, a young woman with obvious passion for greater dialogue on topics of sexuality, remarked:

I'm just sick and tired of it being fake. Being vulnerable in sexuality, and in other things too ... that's where people are going to open up and where the church body is going to be able to be formed. Let's talk about people that are ... what do you do if you're addicted to sex? Maybe not what do you do, but let's talk about it because those things are real too. Those things are the things you can close behind doors and keep so secret and the devil can just keep attacking you.

A further advantage of honest dialogue and teaching is the diffusion of pressure that sexuality tends to build in the minds of young people. Multiple respondents mentioned the belief that, without outlets in the church and home, teens tend to build sexuality up in their minds so much that it becomes overwhelming for them. Honest discussion at home and at church was clearly seen as a means by which sexuality could be normalized in the minds of teens.

### *Consistent*

The third major theme that rose from responses to RQ3 is consistency. This includes both repetition of the same messaging over time, as well as harmony between sources of input. For this theme, there was less direct advice for parents than for church leaders. Much of the commentary that led to the identification of this theme was subtle. None of the respondents specifically declared that teaching on sexuality needs to be consistent, but it was clearly an important part of the way in which they were conceiving productive teaching and discussion of sexuality.

One of the commonly expressed ideas that emerged from respondents was that teaching about sexuality should begin early on in childhood. Many respondents specifically recalled their first ideas and questions about sexuality arising in late elementary school. It was the experience and opinion of most respondents that parents and church leaders wait too long in

bringing up topics of sexuality. Margaret expressed that discussions of sexuality should be initiated early, because “if you wait until high school, you’ve already missed it.”

Related to this, respondents recommended multiple iterations through discussions about sexuality. It seems preferable for church leaders and parents to initiate such conversations as soon as they can. That way, talking about sexuality becomes normalized, and the worldview theological stance of the family and church are reinforced throughout the child’s life.

Another valuable recommendation from respondents is that parents, church leaders, and other adults should all speak of sexuality in harmonious ways. Margaret commented, “It’s important for everyone to be on the same page, to create consistency about what sex is and why.” When children hear the same values and messaging from numerous important influencers, they have the opportunity further internalize those values.

### *Redemptive*

The critique that parents and church leaders often present very negative views of sexuality, implicitly or explicitly, was quite common. In contrast, every respondent made some reflection on the need for teaching sexuality in ways that I have labeled *redemptive*. I use the term redemptive to imply qualities that lead an individual toward the grace and love of God and the sanctification of the Spirit, rather than toward fear, guilt, etc. Respondents’ ideas about redemptive teaching on topics of sexuality focused largely on the church environment.

Respondents had much to say on the topic of how parents and church leaders should frame discussions of sexuality, leading toward a redemptive narrative being presented to children and teens. Three ideas that recurred consistently among respondents, and ultimately led to the conceptualization of this theme, are that teaching about sexuality should be biblical, positive in tenor, and grace-oriented.

### *Practical Recommendations For Teaching Sexuality*

The following table is a snapshot of respondents' recommendations parents and church leaders to help develop positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality in their children. The full dissertation contains extensive discussion of these recommendations.

Figure 1. Practical Recommendations for Teaching Sexuality

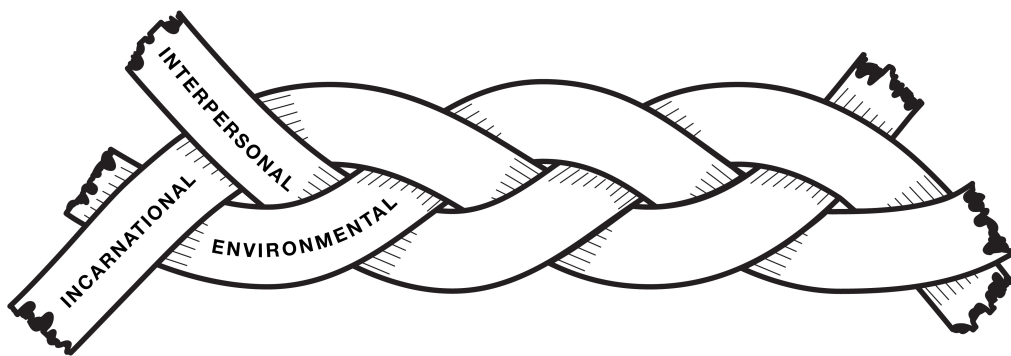
<b>Relational</b>	<b>Honest</b>	<b>Consistent</b>	<b>Redemptive</b>
Speak to young people as though they are competent.	Address difficult topics directly.	Offer teaching to youth at regular intervals.	Use grace and love, rather than fear and guilt as motivators.
Your vulnerability begets young people's vulnerability.	Welcome questions and answer them honestly.	Offer training for parents. Parents, seek it on your own.	Position sexuality within the broader Christian narrative.
Allow conversations to rise out of life experiences.	Acknowledge girls' struggles as equal to those of boys.	If teaching in the youth group, inform parents of content.	Teach God's good purpose for sex and sexuality.
Start having conversations early, so it seems normal.	Supply good information to offset rampant confusion.	Use multiple iterations for topics, going deeper each time.	Discuss the grace and love behind God's prohibitions.
Proactively bring up important topics -don't wait.	"Normalize" sexuality so it is not too much or too little.	Initiate the conversation early on so the foundation is solid.	Make a clear path to restoration for those who fail.
Consider the use of small groups to promote sharing.	Avoid any air of suspicion in conversations and questions.	Set and discuss boundaries in media, friends, dating, etc.	Create a non-threatening environment for those who sin.
Involve like-minded adults in the life of the child.	Share your own struggles as you discuss sexuality.	Include the entire church community in discussion.	Normalize singleness and chastity.
Offer testimonies from peers and Christian adults.	Handle Scripture honestly. Do not over-generalize.	Sr. Pastor should offer sermons and teachings.	Discuss sexual orientation issues directly and graciously.

### PEDAGOGY OF THREE STRANDS

Taken with previously published research in the area of sexuality and religiosity, the present study points to a widespread lack of teaching and communication about sexuality between children, their families, and church communities. It is my hope that the following pedagogical suggestion might help bridge that communication gap. I am not proposing a

curriculum, but a high-level perspective. These are crucial considerations for church leaders and parents to account for in their approaches to sexuality. I offer the metaphor of a three-stranded cord, with each strand being means by which teaching in sexuality should be considered. As depicted in figure below, the three strands I propose are *interpersonal*, *environmental*, and *incarnational*.

Figure 2. Pedagogy of Three Strands



The Teacher of Ecclesiastes makes the claim that, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” In the same way, I believe teaching on sexuality that accounts for these three strands will be strong enough to give a young person something she could grasp as an anchoring point through the tumult of adolescence in which she is constantly bombarded with disparate ideas and imagery.

### *The Interpersonal Strand*

The interpersonal strand of teaching on sexuality includes careful consideration, and thoughtful nurturing, of the relationships surrounding a child as she comes to understand sexuality. At the core of the interpersonal strand of teaching is effective communication. One respondent in this study, Ken, stated that, “It’s very important that the church actually talk about

it. I mean, you have to really get in there and talk about it.” What I believe Ken, like many other respondents, was trying to articulate is the need for church leaders and parents to commit to open and direct communication about sexuality. Research indicates that when parents communicate consistently over time, their children are substantially more comfortable discussing sexual topics as they age. They are also more likely to adopt the understandings of sexuality and sexual behavior their parents espouse (Pluhar and Kuriloff 2004, 316).

Habermas’ theory of communicative action offers a valuable paradigm for communicating well, particularly about sexuality, a topic that cannot be reduced to the mere transmission of information<sup>1</sup>. Communicative action is “oriented toward others and their understanding and is designed to express one’s meaning” (Knoblauch 2013, 301). This involves two parties engaging in communication that is relational, dialogical, and constructive in nature. It is not a matter of a parent or youth pastor disseminating information. Instead, it is rooted in such things as trust, mutual vulnerability, sharing of story and experience, honest questions and honest answers. Communicative action relies on long-term relationships, and often bubbles up out of the situation at hand, rather than from curriculum or a book.

Respondents in this study repeatedly used descriptors like “safe,” “trusted,” “sharing struggles,” and “vulnerable” to describe the kind of environment in which communication around topics of sexuality should occur. Conversely, they spoke often of the oppressive feeling of isolation that comes when young people believe they must wrestle with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Habermas, Jurgen. 1984. *The theory of communicative action, volume 1: Reason and rationalization of society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 1989. *The theory of communicative action, volume 2: Lifeworld and system*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon.

feelings, ideas, and temptations of sexuality on their own. The use of communicative action as a template for communicating about sexuality can diminish this sense of isolation.

While Habermas certainly did not ground his theory in a biblical worldview, it certainly can be applied as such. When we consider it theologically, communicative action can be seen as a means of loving our neighbor well. When one approaches a relationship through the lens of communicative action, the desire for the well being of the other is paramount. Conversations are no longer just about conveying information, but helping children develop personal understandings from biblical teaching. The trepidation many feel in handling topics of sexuality is overcome by the desire to offer a fuller version of life. The inclination to “get it over with” is replaced with a long view of discussing sexuality as it emerges in situations lived out together over time.

Christ himself may be held up as an example of how to pass on important ways of understanding in this lived-out manner. Hunter states that our ability to truly bless and impact people we engage “begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh in us, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks” (Hunter 2010, 241). We will speak further of this when we discuss the incarnational strand below, but it is valuable to consider here that Christ did not content himself with handing out information, particularly to those he knew well. He helped his followers make Kingdom-oriented meaning out of the normal details and events of life.

While this is obviously a high bar, it should be the example we follow as we pursue the idea of teaching sexuality to our young people, as well as in our considerations of how we communicate important truths and ideas on these topics. This represents a rather profound cultural shift for many church leaders and parents. The *modus operandi* has been to skirt topics

of sexuality when possible and to handle them with sterility when they cannot be avoided. In stark contrast, sexuality is possibly the most embodied, lived-out topic in the minds and lives of young people. As such, church leaders and parents who would concern themselves with helping their children understand well, must bring to bear strong interpersonal work and communication that is grounded in mutual relationship and sacrificial love.

### *The Environmental Strand*

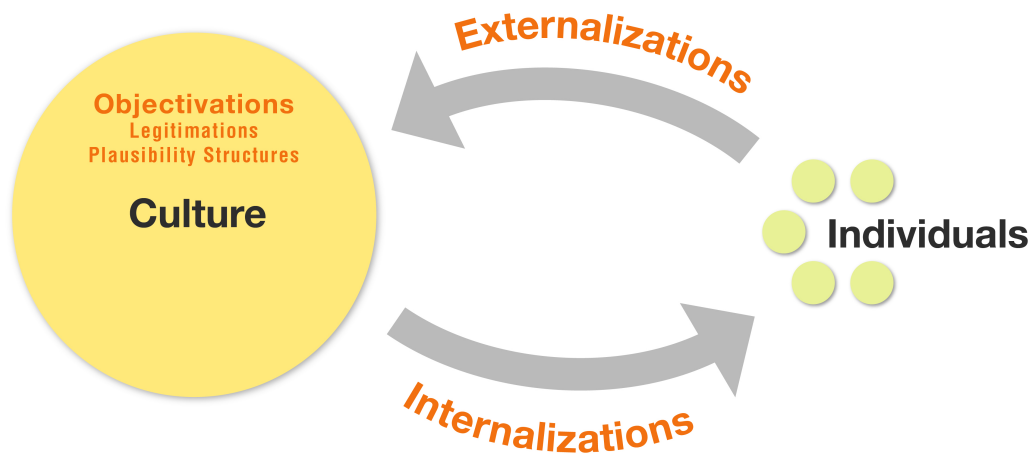
The interpersonal strand above speaks to the relationships and the communication that a successful transmission of positive, orthodox sexuality relies on. The environmental strand accounts for the social and educational structures that would ideally be in place to support a child as she tries to navigate sexuality, particularly in contrast to the dominant culture's narratives.

I offer an interpretation of Berger and Luckmann's model for the social construction of reality, adapted for what I call the Christian Environment. My use of the term Christian Environment is not technical, but simply a means of referring to the totality of forces in a child's life that point them toward an evangelical worldview. Much of what I believe is missing in evangelicals' typical approach to helping young people understand their own sexuality is a sense of helping them "become," rather than simply "do." The theories presented here are a means of discussing this; their use has been shown to be holistic, transformative, and lasting.

Berger, publishing independently as well as with Luckmann, offers foundational principles for understanding how to best educate teens about sexuality in a way that is expressly outside the mainstream of society at large. Berger views all worlds (i.e. a local church, school, or family) as being socially constructed – they come to have substance and reality by being

worked out over time by those participating in them. Figure 3 presents a very simplified version of Berger and Luckmann's model for the social construction of reality<sup>2</sup>.

Figure 3. Berger and Luckman's Social Construction of Reality (Simplified)



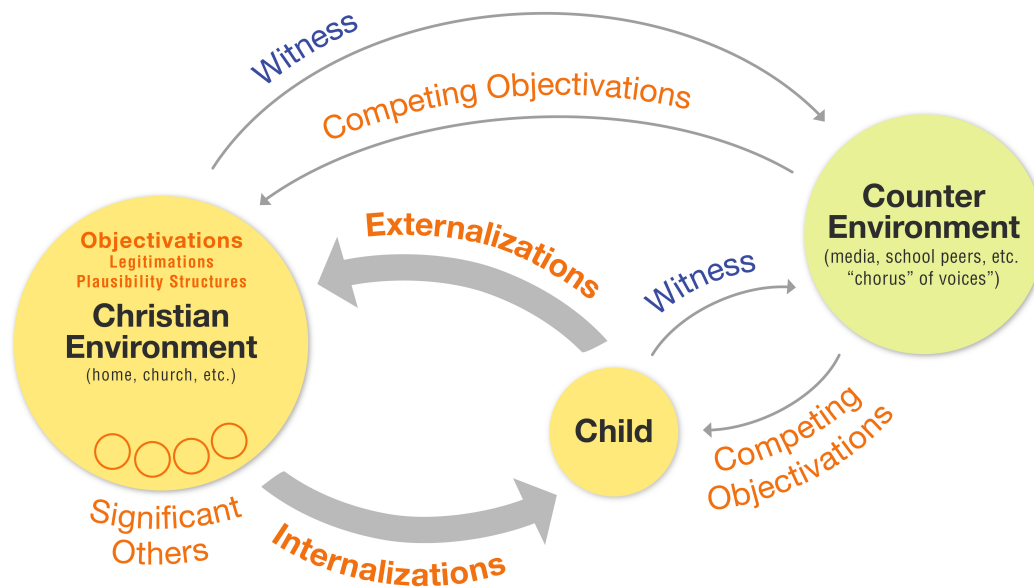
Berger and Luckmann's model for the social construction of reality offers insight into the desire of churches and parents to socialize their children about sexuality. In order to further apply their work to the task of teaching positive, orthodox sexuality within evangelical churches and homes, I've adapted their work on socially constructed reality in Figure 4. This may be especially useful in considering to topics of sexuality given their sensitive nature and the strong counter-arguments from western secular culture.

---

<sup>2</sup> Berger, Peter and Luckmann, Thomas. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor.



Figure 4. Adaptation of Berger and Luckmann.



The Christian Environment in the above figure represents the influences involved in promoting a Christian worldview in a child's life. Ideally, all these entities hold and promote the same core beliefs about how sexuality should be understood and lived out (objectivations). The higher the number of voices, the greater the congruence among those in the Christian Environment, the stronger the influence will be on the child.

The Christian Environment is not a closed system. It, and the individuals that comprise it, are agents of witness to the world. They offer their orthodox understanding of biblical sexuality as a healthy, fulfilling approach to living. Through their witness, they push back against the dominant societal narratives with grace and with an invitation to a better way of living through Christ. This will be further detailed in the discussion of the incarnational strand below.

The Christian Environment will provide the specific teachings that the child will encounter about sexuality (legitimations). These teachings are made exponentially stronger with repetition. If all the participants in the Christian Environment are teaching the same things – whether explicitly via classes, sermons, discussions at home, etc., or implicitly via relationships with parents, pastors, or other mentors in the child’s life – then the child is increasingly likely to accept the teachings as true.

The Christian Environment is also responsible for providing the processes and structures that communicate, and can help perpetuate, the teachings (plausibility structures). In the Christian Environment, these include regularly planned teaching and sermon series, curricula, the use of small groups, etc. Teens that are imbedded in strong church and family plausibility structures are “more likely to make sense of their developing sexuality in religious terms, using distinctly religious motivation to ride out the storm of the adolescent religion-sex culture collision” (Regnerus 2007, 159).

Internalization is the ultimate goal of socialization. An educational analogue to internalization might be character development, as it is the process by which a child takes on the lifestyle and beliefs of the parents and church. It is vital to remember that internalization of an objectivation is not inherently permanent. The individual is constantly renegotiating these in her own mind, taking into account the endless stream of input from all the cultures she is part of (school, team, work, kids on the bus, etc.). This again points to the need for churches and parents to constantly reiterate, and further explain, their beliefs.

For evangelical Christians, internalization, or character development, is not the *only* goal. As a believer, every individual child is called to provide witness to others. The

child's beliefs and behaviors, like that of the Christian Environment, are intended to provide a living testimony to the *Counter Environments*.

For many children and teens, the strongest Counter Environments are the school and media. It is here that they most directly encounter a proposed “reality” about sexuality that contradicts the one set forth by the Christian Environment. In Figure 4, this contradictory input is given the label *competing objectivations*. When churches and parents fail to provide the kind of consistent teaching and modeling needed to solidify and perpetuate a Christian understanding of sexuality, they essentially hand that task off to health class, locker-room conversations, and the collective “wisdom” of pop culture.

This adaptation of Berger and Luckmann's model helps delineate the key factors that parents or church leaders must consider in thinking strategically about how they can help their children understand and live a Christian sexuality. While no model or method can guarantee that a child will fully internalize the objectivations of a culture, this offers a means of thinking strategically about the socialization process. In this way, parents and churches can help their children become true members of their church's culture – believing and living accordingly.

The child who is well supported by a Christian Environment comes to understand her own sexuality not just as a battle raging wildly within her, but as part of the narrative of her own faith community and of the historical stream of the Christian faith. This is certainly not the norm in the evangelical world. Creating this kind of supportive environment, particularly in reference to topics of sexuality, does not feel natural or comfortable for most parents or church leaders. I echo Hunter's call for intentionality in creating environments in which positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality are supported and maintained.

### *The Incarnational Strand*

The final portion of my proposed pedagogical approach for teaching positive, orthodox sexuality is what I describe as the incarnational strand. This strand takes into account the inherent call for evangelical Christians to present a redemptive message and a gospel-centered invitation to the broader culture. Via this third strand, the message of positive, orthodox sexuality exits the mind, home, and church building to engage with real people and with the cultural expressions of sexuality.

Christian Smith offers a sociological analysis of evangelicalism, describing its relative success in the United States. His subcultural identity theory is based largely on what would be theologically labeled “witness.” Smith’s idea of subcultural identity starts with defining “us” relative to “them,” but ultimately seeks to invite “them” to join in conversation with “us” toward a better way of being in the world. Evangelicals have been successful leveraging the strength found as a sub-group in order to faithfully engage the broader culture for God’s glory.

Subcultural identity theory highlights the shortcomings in the way many evangelicals have approached the topic of sexuality. One of these is in failing to create a sense of “us” and what “we” believe about sexuality. This has stemmed from a failure to present a robust, biblical understanding of sexuality and an environment in which it can be safely questioned and explored. Instead, evangelicals have often sat out discussions about sexuality that their children are encountering through media, peers, school environments, etc. Evangelicals have been able to enjoy a livelihood greater than other religious groups in America largely due to their aggressive stance in “defending a biblical worldview” (Smith 1998, 37) and their “commitment in belief and action to accomplish [their] mission” (Smith 1998, 43). This

zeal for discourse and missional mindset seems to dissipate substantially when it comes to discussing sexuality, even with their own children.

Subcultural identity theory points to a second shortcoming common in evangelicals' treatment of sexuality, which is a failure to actively engage the world around them. Where sexuality is concerned, evangelicals have actually followed the pattern of what Smith terms, *sheltered enclave theory*. This is the belief that by sheltering itself from the surrounding culture, a religious subculture can thrive. However, rationality, cultural pluralism, and structural pluralism of modernity are highly corrosive to the boundaries between religious groups and the broader culture, making this system rather ineffectual (Smith 1998, 68). Sadly, this frequently remains the stance that both churches and parents take with topics of sexuality. They essentially hide from cultural ideations, neither refuting them directly, nor offering positive biblical alternatives.

To the contrary, a classically evangelical approach would include offering a thriving, robust narrative of positive, orthodox sexuality to the surrounding world. This is by no means to suggest arguing with, or debating, those that may have differing points of view. Instead, it involves a Christ-like incarnational presence with those that disagree. Hunter reminds us that,

For the Christian, if there is a possibility for human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God's word of love becomes flesh in us, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks; to the words we speak and the realities to which we, the church, point. In all, presence and place matter decisively. (Hunter 2010, 241)

Hunter refers to this kind of embodied living as "faithful presence" (Hunter 2010, 247). It is rooted in the model of Christ's incarnation. Hunter claims that our own "incarnation is the only adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution; the erosion of trust between word and

world and the problems that attend it” (Hunter 2010, 241). The chasm between the positive, orthodox views of sexuality that evangelicalism should rightly claim, and the dominant cultural narratives, can only be crossed using the tools of love, presence, empathy, and invitation that Christ embodied. Furthermore, engagement with those who offer differing understandings of sexuality must flow from the purest possible motives. Hunter adds that whatever benefit believers’ presence in the world offers, it comes from a “desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God’s command to love our neighbor” (Hunter 2010, 234).

This is not only the ideal stance for evangelicals to take in regard to topics of sexuality – it is the essential one. It is not merely strategic or pragmatic; it is central to the identity of followers of Christ. Hunter rightly points out that engagements with those who espouse counter-ideas should take on this kind of character:

As a natural expression of its passion to honor God in all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves; the church and its people will challenge all structures that dishonor God, dehumanize people, and neglect or do harm to the creation.  
(Hunter 2010, 235)

Presence and loving engagement with people and ideas should be a hallmark of evangelicals. Interactions with those that contradict a positive, orthodox understanding of sexuality move evangelicals into the position of providing a “prophetic witness” to the “net effect of a lived-vision of the shalom of God within every sphere where Christians are present” (Hunter 2010, 248).

### *Incarnational Discussions of Sexual Orientation*

One of the last respondents I interviewed in the present study was a young man named Dustin. At the conclusion of our interview, as we were preparing to leave, he put his

hand on my arm with obvious urgency. Looking me straight in the eye, he said, “If [parents and church leaders] aren’t going to talk about the homosexual thing, you’re just wasting your time – you have to talk about that.” In my own experience, this is by far the most desired topic for discussion and teaching among modern teens. They have grown up in a world where diversity of sexual orientations is celebrated and promoted across all forms of media and social conversation. While it is not within the scope of this paper to prescribe a stance on sexual orientation, a brief description of an incarnational and redemptive approach to conversations on such topics may be helpful.

In a paper delivered at the Evangelical Theological Society’s 2014 Annual Meeting, Darrell Bock offered keen insight into engaging in these conversations. Bock’s approach is rooted in what he refers to as a “hermeneutics of relating biblical tensions in a fallen world to one another” (Bock 2014). He claims that our default stance is to choose a side where biblical tensions exist, rather than hold the tension and live within it. Of particular value in evangelicals’ efforts to address topics of sexual orientation well is the tension that Bock identifies “between issuing a moral challenge and offering invitation, which is the core of the gospel” (Bock 2014).

In evangelical circles, it is most common for people to choose one or the other of these stances. Bock suggests that evangelicals must instead hold both of these actions in tension with each other. This means holding onto the truth and conviction that God wants and prescribes the very best for his creation – including all things that fall in the realm of sexuality. Evangelicals have a compelling story to tell about sexuality. It is rooted in our bearing the image of God; it draws us always back to him, and it works for the flourishing of all creation. This

story should be well studied and thought out, rehearsed among believers, then used as means of engaging the people and ideas that inhabit every sphere of society.

Engagement with those outside of evangelical circles, however must be done fully for the sake of inviting them further into the redeeming love of God. This means evangelicals ultimately cannot be concerned with winning or convincing, but must begin with real listening. Bock points out that, “love is compelling when it engages by actually listening, not just trying to win a debate” (Bock 2014).

Holding challenge and invitation in proper tension means that evangelicals cannot give up on either of them, even though this feels unsatisfactory given the natural desire to wrap up those interactions in clean, convincing fashion. However, living with the tension is the only means by which we can treat those with whom we converse, as well as God’s own testimony, with the dignity they deserve. Evangelicals must take on the task of presenting life-giving versions of sexuality to those around them, while continuing to trust in the exclusive power of the gospel to change lives and perspectives as necessary.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the pedagogical suggestion presented above rests on Jesus’ words to his apostles on the night before his crucifixion when he said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). For many, it is a “new” expression of love to surround our children with relationships and teaching that help them make sense and meaning out of sexuality. It is love that inspires parents and church leaders to ensure that structures are in place to support the ongoing growth in wisdom and understanding of their children and other members. And, it is love that turns evangelicals outward toward those that



disagree with them in order to offer even the most vehement objectors a redemptive understanding of sexuality and an invitation to this love, grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It should be understood that understanding sexuality in positive, orthodox ways cannot provide any guarantees about behavior. Evangelicals must also take into account the work of Satan and the strength of temptations of the flesh. Even a perfectly structured environment and ideal relationships cannot fully overcome the effect of living in a fallen world. Young people with positive, orthodox understandings of sexuality may lose their virginity before getting married or make other decisions that contradict that understanding. This can happen because, in a given moment, they submit to the same fallen tendencies that lead all of us to transgress our moral beliefs in various ways. Positive, orthodox sexuality is more interested in helping develop young people's way of being rather than simply modifying their behavior.

The author of this paper holds copyright protection of his work. This paper is shared with you in a spirit of collegial collaboration. You do not have permission to copy, disseminate, or quote extensively from it, without the expressed, written permission of the author.

## REFERENCES

- Ahrold, Tierney, Melissa Farmer, Paul Trapnell, and Cindy Meston. 2011. "The Relationship Among Sexual Attitudes, Sexual Fantasy, and Religiosity." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40 (3): 619–630.
- Berger, Peter. 2011. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Open Road.
- Bock, Darrell. 2014. "Challenge or Invitation? The Church's Dilemma and Why Sexuality Discussions Are so Hard for the Church (audio File)." In San Diego: Evangelical Theological Society. [www.etsjets.org](http://www.etsjets.org).
- Bruckner, Hannah, and Peter Bearman. 2005. "After the Promise." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 36 (4): 271–278.
- Chandra, Anjani, Gladys Martinez, William Mosher, Joyce Abma, and Jo Jones. 2005. "Fertility, Family Planning, and Reproductive Health of U.S. Women: Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth." *Vital Health Statistics* 23 (25): 1–244.
- Crotty, Michael. 1998. *Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: Sage.
- Fehring, Richard, Kerry Cheever, Karyn German, and Connie Philpot. 1998. "Religiosity and Sexual Activity Among Older Adolescents." *Journal of Religion and Health* 37 (3): 229–248.
- Finer, Lawrence. 2007. "Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States." *Public Health Reports* 122 (1): 73–78.
- Freitas, Donna. 2008. *Sex and the Soul*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, Christine. 2011. *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Hunter, James. 2010. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition.
- Kirby, Douglas. 2002. "Antecedents of Adolescent Initiation of Sex, Contraceptive Use, and Pregnancy." *American Journal of Health Behavior* 26 (6): 473–485.
- Knoblauch, Hubert. 2013. "Communicative Constructivism and Mediatization." *Communication Theory* 23: 297–315.
- Manlove, Jennifer, Cassandra Logan, Kristin Moore, and Erum Ikramullah. 2008. "Pathways from Family Religiosity to Adolescent Sexual Activity and Contraceptive Use." *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 40 (2): 105–117.
- Merriam, Sharan. 2009. *Qualitative Research - a Guide Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.
- Miller, Brent, and Karen Sneesby. 1998. "Educational Correlates of Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 17 (6): 521–530.
- Pluhar, Erika, and Peter Kuriloff. 2004. "What Really Matters in Family Communication About Sexuality? A Qualitative Analysis of Affect and Stale Among African American Mothers and Adolescent Daughters." *Sex Education* 4 (3): 303–321.
- Regnerus, Mark. 2007. *Forbidden Fruit*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Christian. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.