

GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY
AMONG CONTEMPORARY YOUTH:
GENERATION SEX

SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH
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**GENDER, SEX, AND
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CONTEMPORARY YOUTH:
GENERATION SEX**

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Julie Liefeld, RN, LMFT, PhD, graduated in 2006 from the University of CT with a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies; she earned her Master's from UCONN in 1999 in Marriage and Family Therapy. She is licensed and became an AAMFT approved supervisor in 2005. Her undergraduate degree is in nursing from Boston College. She is a registered nurse in CT and worked in pediatric oncology before pursuing her family and advanced degrees. She is a practicing family therapist, an associate professor, and director of the Southern Connecticut State University Marriage and Family Therapy Training Clinic. Before joining the core faculty at SCSU, she worked in Student Affairs as Counseling Center Directors at Mitchell College, where she became the Vice President of Student Affairs before she left to Direct the Counseling Center at SCSU. She developed a specialty on training faculty in issues of transition for millennial students and became a specialist in suicide prevention in postsecondary populations. She is also a registered yoga teacher and trainer of yoga teachers; she integrates the concepts of yoga and mindfulness in her clinical practice, research, and teaching. Clinically, she specializes in the impact of trauma, disability, and oppression on individual and couple life satisfaction. Julie feels passionate about applying her lifelong learning to create an integrative developmental approach to healing and change using mind body awareness, principles of human development, and a deep-seated belief that people can heal the past in the present through self-awareness and the practice of authenticity. Her research involves the investigation of the impact of mindfulness, creativity, and whole-brained activity on postsecondary students and applying nodal mapping to clinical assessment learning and teaching, and the impact of disability on transition and life satisfaction. She has presented nationally and internationally on these topics.

Mollie T. McQuillan is a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University in the Human Development and Social Policy Program. Her current research uses both qualitative and quantitative evidence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the academic environment for gender-expansive youth and how their social environment influences their health. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago and two master's degrees, one in Teaching from the University of Saint Thomas and another in Human Development and Social Policy from Northwestern University.

Krysti N. Ryan is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Davis. Her work investigates the social forces that generate and maintain restrictive gender norms in US society. She focuses on identifying common but hard to detect barriers to and opportunities for advancing gender equality and tolerance for gender diversity.

Timothy Stablein, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Union College in Schenectady, NY. He received his PhD from the University of Connecticut and postdoctoral training at Dartmouth College. His areas of specialization include adolescence, deviance, health, and research methods. His research focuses on two overlapping areas. First, he is interested in how adolescent experiences shape deviant and delinquent behavior, identity, and health trajectories, particularly among homeless adolescents and others with homeless and street life experience. He also researches adolescent health-care experiences and the role technology plays in shaping views about health information privacy and health information exchanges. He was recently Principal Investigator for a study supported by the Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), which explored the role of electronic health records in pediatrician–adolescent patient interactions. His research has appeared in both applied and cross-disciplinary outlets such as the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Emerging Adulthood*, *Health Sociology Review*, *IEEE: Security & Privacy*, and the *Journal of Health Organization and Management*.

Yvonne Vissing, PhD, is the Founding Director of the Salem State University Center for Childhood & Youth Studies and is Professor of Healthcare Studies there. She is author of seven books in the Sociology of Children and Youth and many chapters and articles. Her new book on *The Sociology of Children and Youth* will be published next year by the University of California Press. She is a Child Rights Policy Chair for Hope for Children in Cyprus, and was invited to speak at the 25th anniversary conference of the UNCRC in the Netherlands, which resulted in her chapter in Liefwaard and Sloth-Nielsen's comprehensive book on the UNCRC. She also has chapters and articles on human rights education, child safety, child abuse, hunger, poverty, and homelessness. She is also an organizational consultant for strategic planning and research/evaluation. Trained as an expert in human rights education by the Equitas International Human Rights Training Program in Montreal, she has developed human rights training programs at Training 4 Excellence (www.training4excellence.com). She is a former National Institute of Mental Health Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Whiting Foundation Fellow, and is a member of the American Sociological Association's Department Resources Group of consultants. A former member of the Board of the National Coalition for the Homeless, she is a gubernatorial-appointed member of the New Hampshire Juvenile Parole Board. She is also a trainer for the National Alliance on Mental Illness and a former mental health counselor and mediator. Her interest in the concept of sexual debut was introduced to her by child rights expert, Laura Lundy, of Queens University in Belfast, Ireland, who she thanks for the inspiration for this publication.

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R. Stephen Warner (PhD, University of California at Berkeley, 1972) is Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has been President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Chair of the Sections on Sociology of Religion and Sociological Theory of the American Sociological Association. He has held Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships, has been a visiting member of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton, NJ), and his research has been supported by the Lilly Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Among his publications are *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (University of California Press, 1988); “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States” (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1993); *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Temple University Press, 1998; with Judith Wittner); *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore* (Penn State University Press, 2001; with Ho-Youn Kwon and Kwang Chung Kim); *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (Rutgers University Press, 2005); “The Role of Families and Religious Institutions in Transmitting Religion among Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in the USA” (with Rhys H. Williams), pp. 159–165 in *Religion and Youth*, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion (Ashgate, 2010); and “Race and Religion beyond Protestant, Catholic and Jewish Whites,” in *The Oxford History of American Immigration and Ethnicity* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Rhys H. Williams (PhD, University of Massachusetts, 1988) is Professor of Sociology at Loyola University Chicago, where he is also Director of the McNamara Center for the Social Study of Religion. With R. Stephen Warner and Courtney Ann Irby, he is working on a book from the research reported here, tentatively titled, *Slow Religion: Bringing Up American Youth as Protestant, Muslim, and Hindu*. His other research focuses on religion, culture, politics, and social movements in the United States. His books include *Cultural Wars in American Politics* (Aldine, 1997), *A Bridging of Faiths: Religion and Politics in a New England City* (Princeton, 1992; w/ N.J. Demerath III), *Religion & Progressive Activism* (New York University Press, 2017; w/ T. N.

Fuist and R. Braunstein), and *The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity in the City* (New York University Press, 2017; w/ J. Barron). His articles have appeared in journals such as the *American Sociological Review*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Theory*, *Theory & Society*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, *Sociology of Religion*, and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. His work has won “Distinguished Article” awards from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the American Sociological Association’s Section on Sociology of Religion. He has been President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion and of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, as well as Chair of the American Sociological Association’s Sections on Religion, Social Movements, and Political Sociology.

Ciann L. Wilson, PhD, is of Afro-, Indo- and Euro-Jamaican ancestry. She has over a decade of experience working within African, Caribbean, and Black communities across the Greater Toronto Area first as a youth programmer and now as a health researcher. She is Assistant Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University where her areas of interest build off her community-engaged work to include critical race theory, anti-/de-colonial theory, African diasporic and Indigenous community health, HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive well-being, and community-based research. Her body of work aims to utilize research as an avenue for (1) sharing the stories and realities of African diasporic and Indigenous peoples and (2) improving the health and well-being of these communities.

INTRODUCTION

Today's youth may very well be the most sexually open-minded and tolerant generation. Issues of gender identity and sexual behavior are increasingly prominent in various spheres of popular culture and media consumption. As such, youth are inundated with a barrage of sexual images, content, and ideologies, making sex a topic that is more openly discussed and, therefore, a more significant aspect of young people's everyday lifeworlds compared to previous generations. While sexuality has always been an important part of adolescence, notions of sexuality have become more fluid and flexible. The sexual experiences of youth are considerably less bound by the limitations of conventional gender norms and heteronormative sexual scripts. With access to the Internet, young people around the globe can readily obtain virtually any and all information they seek concerning sex and sexuality. Gender and sexuality have thus become increasingly salient aspects of identity formation for contemporary youth. Many young people are more openly expressing their gender identity, testing boundaries, and challenging traditional societal norms and the didactic gender constructs of femininity and masculinity. This has led to considerable social debate about not only feminine and masculine identities, but also transgender identities among youth. Indeed, the loosening of gender boundaries and the sexual liberation of youth has not come without backlash. As the present volume of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* was coming together, issues of equality as they relate to sex, gender identity, and sexual behavior have been at the forefront of national political debate in the United States as well as other countries around the world. From discussions about limiting women's reproductive rights, to efforts to curtail the progress that has been made in terms of legal protections for those in the LGBTQI+ community, the rights of those who do not conform to traditional hegemonic standards of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality are being challenged, once again. Amplified effort to control the sexuality of youth is especially exemplified by a recent vote in the House of Representatives to pass legislation that would send teens who sext (or send naked pictures) to jail for a minimum sentence of 15 years. While all of the democrats voted in opposition, only two republicans voted against this harsh measure aimed at punishing teens for engaging in unconventional sexual behavior. In this book, we explore some of the evolving issues concerning sex, gender, and sexuality in the lives of children and adolescents.

Religious groups and leaders have long been concerned with how to best control and monitor the sexual behavior of young followers. In the chapter, “‘Dare to Be Different’: How Religious Groups Frame and Enact Appropriate Sexuality and Gender Norms among Young Adults,” Rhys H. Williams, Courtney Ann Irby and R. Stephen Warner investigate how adults in positions of religious authority attempt to shape the gender norms and sexual behavior of the youth they work with in the face of what they see as an increasingly hypersexualized culture. Through numerous observations and interviews with religious young adults and religious leaders from Muslim, Hindu, and Protestant Christian religious groups, the researchers identify three organizational styles used across the religious traditions to promote traditional understandings of gender, heterosexuality, and marriage.

While there has been growing social acceptance and advocacy for LGBT rights in recent years, many youth continue to experience negative reactions and rejection from family members. Timothy Stablein provides a comprehensive review of the literature concerning the experiences of homeless LGBT youth in the chapter, “Estimating the Status and Needs of Homeless LGBT Adolescents: Advocacy, Identity, and the Dialectics of Support.” After identifying the logistical problems with accurately estimating the extent of the problem, research concerning the experience of homelessness among LGBT youth and issues of advocacy and support are addressed. Stablein then concludes with some practice and policy recommendations intended to help improve the situation of this vulnerable and understudied group of young people.

Youth who have been identified as intersex at birth or as a child represent another group that researchers have neglected to study. As conveyed by the 16 youth interviewed by Georgiann Davis and Chris Wakefield in the chapter, “The Intersex Kids Are All Right? Diagnosis Disclosure and the Experiences of Intersex Youth,” growing up intersex is not as detrimental to gender identity development or sense of self as doctors and parents once feared. Rather than withholding this information as was often done with children diagnosed as intersex a generation ago, all of the youth in this study were made knowledgeable about their diagnosis at the time of diagnosis. As Davis and Wakefield discover, heightened activism and the greater ability to connect with others in the intersex community has had a remarkably positive impact on today’s intersex youth helping them to confront and embrace their intersex status.

Stigma surrounding gender-nonconformity has also lessened over the last decade or so as the topic has gained more public visibility, calling attention to how children can influence parents to develop and accept alternative notions and understandings of gender. In the chapter, “Examining the Family Transition: How Parents of Gender-Diverse Youth Develop Trans-Affirming Attitudes,” Krysti N. Ryan conducts interviews with parents of gender-diverse and transgender children. Mothers, in particular, expressed overwhelming feelings of being caught between the competing mandates of mothering a

well-adjusted or “proper” child by hegemonic standards of gender and demonstrating unconditional love, acceptance, and emotional support.

The taboo subject of transactional sexual relations among youth is explored by Ciann L. Wilson and Sarah Flicker in the chapter, “Let’s Talk about Sex for Money: An Exploration of Economically Motivated Relationships among Young, Black Women in Canada.” Relying on multiple sources of qualitative, empirical data, Wilson and Flicker demonstrate the existence of a transactional subculture among a group of Black youth in the Northwestern part of Toronto. Transactional or economically motivated sexual relationships take many forms and are increasingly facilitated by the widespread availability of the Internet, related websites, and social media. While these relations are not specific to any race or class, Wilson and Flicker argue that limited resources and access to job opportunities as well as other structural barriers, such as institutional racism, increase the likelihood of women engaging in economically driven relationships.

Using nationally representative longitudinal data (AddHealth), Mollie T. McQuillan extends upon previous research concerning advantages in educational attainment among nonheterosexual youth in the chapter, “Educational Attainment and Sexual Orientation in Adolescent and Young Adult Males.” Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, most sexual minority men are found to have higher educational attainment. Arguing for the parsing of sexual identification categories instead of lumping all sexual minorities into one group, McQuillan finds unique differences between young men who identify with varying levels of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Interestingly, those who inconsistently identified as heterosexual or homosexual reported lower levels of educational attainment compared to those with more stable reports of sexual identification. Early identification of sexual orientation and stability of sexual orientation over time appears to be positively associated with higher levels of educational achievement.

The intersection between queer sexual identity and disability among adolescents has rarely been explored. Youth are often perceived as asexual or sexually pure, especially youth with disabilities. Using data collected from a case study with a young gay man with cerebral palsy undergoing queer affirmative therapy, Rebecca Harvey, Paul Levatino, and Julie Liefeld illustrate some of the challenges of experiencing multiple intersecting marginalized identities in the chapter, “‘To Feel Him Love Me’: Emerging Intersections of Identity, Queerness, and Differing Ability.” The model of therapy presented offers experiential insight and direction for practitioners and clinicians working with queer youth who are differently abled.

As children and adolescents have traditionally been viewed as sexually innocent, there has always been debate about how much and when information about sexuality should be disclosed to young people. Since talking to teens about sex can be quite difficult for many adults, young people are often unprepared for their first sexual experiences and, as a result, more susceptible to

negative consequences. In the chapter, “Sexual Debut Education: Cultivating a Healthy Approach to Young People’s Sexual Experiences,” Yvonne Vissing promotes the “sexual debut” framework, a child rights-based approach to sexual education intended to empower young people and give them greater control in decision-making regarding the sexual activity they partake in by arming them with honest and accurate information. This comprehensive approach to sexual education can help to protect youth from victimization, promote greater communication before sex with partners, encourage more satisfying sexual relationships, and increase the overall health and emotional well-being of youth.

Dating violence is one of the deleterious consequences of being poorly educated about sexuality and healthy sexual relationships. In the chapter, “Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: Teen Dating Violence Victims’ Responses to Partner Suicidal Ideation,” Jessica M. Fitzpatrick presents key findings from interviews with 16 young women who had been involved in abusive relationships during their teenage years where their boyfriends threatened suicide when they feared the relationship was ending. The themes that emerge through the interviews demonstrate the need for prevention education to address the connection between dating violence and teen suicide.

Despite a growing body of literature concerning the influence of media on gender and sexual socialization, there is a relative dearth of research on the socializing effects of children’s literature. The manifest and latent content in children’s books can significantly shape how children come to see and understand normative gender and sexuality constructs. In our final chapter, “Two by Two: Heteronormativity and the Noah Story for Children,” Sarah M. Corse analyzes 47 different books about the story of Noah and the flood to demonstrate how traditional gender norms, as they relate to patriarchal hierarchy and a gendered division of labor, and heteronormativity are normalized and reinforced.

Overall, the 10 chapters that have been included in this volume of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* offer considerable insight into various issues concerning sex, gender, identity, and sexual behavior among contemporary youth. Many thanks are due to all of the authors for their contributions to this volume, the anonymous reviewers who offered thoughtful and detailed reviews, and the editorial staff at Emerald Publishing.

Patricia Neff Cluster
Sampson Lee Blair
Editors

“DARE TO BE DIFFERENT”: HOW RELIGIOUS GROUPS FRAME AND ENACT APPROPRIATE SEXUALITY AND GENDER NORMS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Rhys H. Williams, Courtney Ann Irby and
R. Stephen Warner

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The sexual lives of religious youth and young adults have been an increasing topic of interest since the rise of abstinence-only education and attendant programs in many religious institutions. But while we know a lot about individual-level rates of sexual behavior, far less is known about how religious organizations shape and mediate sexuality. We draw on data from observations with youth and young adult ministries and interviews with religious young adults and adult leaders from Muslim, Hindu, and Protestant Christian groups in order to examine how religious adults in positions of organizational authority work to manage the gender and sexual developments in the transition to adulthood among their youth. We find three distinct organizational styles across the various religious traditions: avoidance through gender segregation, self-restraint supplemented with peer surveillance, and a classed disengagement. In each of these organizational

responses, gender and sexuality represent something that must be explained and controlled in the process of cultivating the proper adult religious disposition. The paper examines how religious congregations and other religious organizations oriented toward youth, work to manage the gender and sexual developments in their youth's transitions to adulthood. The paper draws from a larger project that is studying the lived processes of religious transmission between generations.

Methodology/approach – Data were extracted from (a) ethnographic observations of youth programming at religious organizations; (b) ethnographic observations with families during their religious observances; (c) interviews with adult leaders of youth ministry programs. The sample includes Protestant Christian, Muslim, and Hindu organizations and families.

Findings – The paper presents three organizational approaches toward managing sex and instilling appropriate gender ideas: (a) prescribed avoidance, in which young men and women are segregated in many religious and educational settings and encouraged to moderate any cross-gender contact in public; (b) self-restraint supplemented with peer surveillance, in which young people are repeatedly encouraged not only to learn to control themselves through internal moral codes but also to enlist their peers to monitor each other's conduct and call them to account for violations of those codes; and (c) "classed" disengagement, in which organizations comprised of highly educated, middle-class families do little to address sex directly, but treat it as but one aspect of developing individual ethical principles that will assist their educational and class mobility.

Research limitations/implications – While the comparative sample in this paper is a strength, other religious traditions than the ones studied may have other practices. The ethnographic nature of the research provides in-depth understandings of the organizational practices, but cannot comment on how representative these practices are across regions, organizations, or faiths.

Originality/value – Most studies of religion and youth sex and sexuality either rely on individual-level data from surveys, or study the discourses and ideologies found in books, movies, and the like. They do not study the "mechanisms," in either religious organizations or families, through which messages are communicated and enacted. Our examination of organizational and familial practices shows sex and gender communication in action. Further, most existing research has focused on Christians, wherein we have a comparative sample of Protestant Christians, Muslims, and Hindus.

Keywords: Religion; youth/young adults; congregations; sex; gender; Muslims; Hindus; Evangelical Protestants; ethnography

INTRODUCTION

While religious groups have long had a vested interest in moralizing and structuring the sexual lives of their members, the debates on sex education during the 1990s, and the salience of what were called “culture wars” issues about gender, sexuality, and family brought the connection between religion and young adult sexuality to the foreground – in both religious communities and for scholars. Focusing predominately on abstinence messages and programs, a wealth of social science research has since studied the intersection of sexuality, religion, and young adults by examining the religious influence of “abstinence-only” messaging on the sexual lives of youth and young adults. For the most part, this body of work has approached these issues by either analyzing the individual sexual practices of religious young adults (Adamczyk, 2009; Barkan, 2006; Beck, Cole, & Hammond, 1991; Burdette & Hill, 2009; Hull, Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011; Jensen, Newell, & Holman, 1990; Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004; Rostosky, Regnerus, & Wright, 2003; Uecker, 2008; Woodruff, 1985) or evaluating the rhetoric on sex and religion among movements such as True Love Waits (Gardner, 2011; Hendershot, 2004; Jones, 2012).

An extensive body of quantitative research has sought to specify why religion appears to often decrease the rates of sexual activity among young adults and adolescents. While this research often finds that religion reduces the number of sexual partners of young adults (Burdette & Hill, 2009; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; Uecker, 2008; Woodruff, 1985) and affects when they start having intercourse (Beck et al., 1991; Hull et al., 2011), the strength, and even the presence, of the statistical relationship often depends on how religion is operationalized. For instance, with the exception of sectarian groups such as the Latter-Day Saints, religious tradition often has little impact (Beck et al., 1991; Holman & Harding, 1996; Uecker, 2008). Additionally, while religious attendance generally tends to be negatively associated with sexual activity, the findings are mixed. Perhaps not surprisingly, religious affiliation and attendance have little independent impact on behavior; rather, research tends to indicate that religious salience is most predictive.

A smaller stream of scholarship has sought to move away from analyzing the rates of sexual activity among young adults and, more broadly, challenges the binary categories of “abstinent” and “sexually active” (Gardner, 2011). One strand of this research has qualitatively examined how religious young adults strive to live chaste lifestyles by focusing on their daily experiences negotiating tensions of gender, sexuality, and faith (Diefendorf, 2015; Irby, 2013; Mir, 2009; O’Brien, 2017; Wilkins, 2008; Yip & Page, 2013). In doing so, these scholars have documented the multitude of ways that religious youth actively renegotiate their sexuality within secular contexts, which often produces greater variation than the more narrow moral mandates about sex and relationships. A second strand of this research has tried to complicate understandings of the context and

social categories of young adults' faith and sexuality by examining the surrounding rhetorical context. By studying abstinence groups, such as True Love Waits or The Silver Ring Thing, scholars have discovered that while religious groups promote abstinence they also use sex to sell young adults on living an abstinent lifestyle (Gardner, 2011; Hendershot, 2004).

Together this research reveals insights into the cultural logics about sexuality that young adults face and the actions that they take. The current literature, however, is limited due to little empirical examination into the *mechanisms* that mediate the rhetoric and how those mechanisms shape young adults' actions. More specifically, we show that research into the religious communities and organizations that young adults inhabit can provide insight into how young adults learn about sexual morality from religious authorities, and the religious context for their sexual actions. How do local religious communities mediate, contest, and reshape broader cultural messages about sexuality? Additionally, how do local religious communities shape young adults' sexual actions through processes such as social control, social support, and accountability? Moreover, how are the constructions of "proper" displays of masculinity and femininity articulated through messages about sexuality? To approach these questions, we examine three organizational styles that emerged in our study of youth ministry programs: *avoidance*; *self-restraint* and *peer surveillance*; and *disengagement*.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from interviews, ethnographic observations with religious organizations, and ethnographic observations with families, all gathered within a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The research project's overall purpose was to explore how important, and in what ways, religious institutions help formulate youth and young adults' senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections; we are interested in the intersection of organization and identity, and the role of organizations in the lived reality of religious transmission. The present paper uses data gathered from organizations and families representing Muslim and Hindu groups, and White and Latinx Protestant Churches. Due to our interest in the dynamics of organizational involvement, we purposefully studied young people and some families who were involved with religious organizations and religious organizations that had vibrant youth involvement. Our goal was to examine some of the organizational and familial dynamics in which young people are involved, and how that affects the ways they develop the religious and public identities they come to claim.

Specifically, we focus here on two sources of data. First, we conducted institutional ethnographic work through multiple site visits with religious organizations. We attended worship services, classes, and youth activities at Hindu, Muslim, and Protestant Christian organizations that cater to or seemed to

attract youth. For the most part, this meant congregations and their youth programs, but it also included some organizations that reached across individual congregations to offer programming for youth and young adults in our larger metropolitan, or smaller regional, areas. We located these sites in two phases; first we canvassed with the help of graduate assistants and undergraduate interns for a wide variety of organizations that we or our student assistants had heard about.¹ After finding some institutions that particularly seemed to fit our needs in terms of their vibrant youth activities and membership, we chose a sample for extended study. As a result, we intensively researched eight particularly vibrant organizations/congregations by doing multiple visits and individual interviews with their youth ministry leadership. These sites included one African American Protestant church, two evangelical Protestant congregations that were multiethnic, one White moderate/mainline Protestant church, one Muslim *masjid*, one regional youth organization sponsored by a national Islamic group, one Hindu temple, and one Hindu group that held regional meetings that included youth and young adults.

Our second source of data for this paper comes from ethnographic observations of families regarding their religious involvements. We spent entire days, usually on the most religiously significant day of the week (e.g., Sundays for Christians) with families, not only participating with them in their religious involvements, but also sharing meals and informal relaxing time. Understanding how the key “religious” day is organized, at both the congregation and the home, was designed to help us get a clearer sense of how religious faith is transmitted to children, but it also complemented our ethnographic observations about the ways in which youth and young adults were incorporated into, and in turn used, the organization. We contacted the families through references from the religious leaders at their main place of worship. In total, there were 12 families from six different religious congregations – two African American Protestant families, two White Protestant families from a moderate nondenominational suburban church, four families from two different multiethnic (White, Black, and Latinx) Evangelical Protestant churches,² two Muslim families from a suburban *masjid*, and two Hindu families from a temple that sought specifically to educate families in Hindu traditions (beyond just functioning as a site for the performance of rituals). All the families had youth under-18 living at home. Our experiences with these families allowed us to examine the direct connection between family practices and religious organizations.

Taken altogether our data show the important role that religious institutions play in helping to formulate young adults’ senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections. These data may not allow us to make sweeping generalizations about religious institutions and their attempts at organizing young people’s sexuality; rather, we report on the patterns we observed that cross religious traditions as well as some similarities and differences existing within traditions. While we did not set out to research how congregations teach about sexuality, the topic inductively

emerged as we were in the field, examining how religious institutions work to organize ideas, cultural logics, and practices so that youth become religious adults. In paying attention to those processes about many different aspects of life, we noticed many of their efforts were about sex. We developed our typology here from watching these varied institutions in action and considering how teachings reflected the particular religious traditions, as well as the racial–ethnic and class positions of each organization. Rather than offer a set of ideal types that can be generalized to all youth ministry in each specific religious tradition, the following analysis draws on our observations to frame inductively when sex and attendant notions of appropriate gender behaviors emerged as salient within organizational practices. Toward this end, we employ an interpretation presentation approach (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 184) to showcase the three organizational styles because “this alternation makes the relationship between the data and analysis more evident and conveys ways in which they form a whole.”

DATA ANALYSIS

While religion likely has always played a role in regulating sexuality (Ellingson, 2002), the topic of young adult sexuality has recently created significant anxieties for many religious groups (Page & Shipley, 2016). From the perspective of many religious communities, young adults have become increasingly sexualized or at the very least are exposed to a more sexualized culture (Regnerus, 2007). Furthermore, the recognition that young people marry and form families at a later age means that many religious organizations feel compelled to monitor their youth and young adults – to socialize and prepare them over this more protracted period of youth and adolescence. Nonetheless, explicit and direct encounters with sexuality and gender were not uniform among the eight religious institutions where we observed. In analyzing the talks, programming, and informal interactions between leaders and youth, we identified three organizational styles that emerged: *avoidance*, *self-reliance* and *peer surveillance*, and *disengagement*. Thus, this paper demonstrates how the process of becoming a religious young adult is infused with particular messages and institutional practices about sex and gender, as well as modeled by the adult religious leadership.

Prescribing Avoidance

Faced with what they view as a slackening of sexual norms and values, conservative religious groups often promote avoidance as a strategy for their members. While many religious leaders instruct unmarried, young adults to avoid all sexual activity (i.e., abstinence), some extend this message to include

prohibitions against dating and to limit interactions with people of a different gender (Irby, 2013; Mir, 2009; O'Brien, 2017). The Muslim groups we observed most explicitly called for avoidance for their young adults and employed organizational strategies to enact this ideal. Within their religious organizations they sought to create gender-segregated classes and activities that would ideally also minimize cross-gender interaction among the unmarried adolescents. In an effort to extend this behavior outside the mosque, teachings also included directives for how young men and women should embody modesty. While both men and women were advised to dress modestly, men were further advised to approach women with downcast eyes and to avoid overly personal inquiries. In the following ethnographic vignettes, we explore how calls for avoidance were grounded in gendered constructions of the challenges and promises of sexuality for young adults.

One summer, a religious- and gender-mixed group from our research team conducted participant observation at the annual summer camp/conference of an organization that specifically organized and ran programming for high-school-age youth. This particular summer conference brought together youth from Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, many of them from small towns where they might be members of the only Muslim family, with youth from Chicago, Milwaukee, and other places with significant Muslim populations. The male authors and a male undergraduate intern attended a workshop for the young men (ages 14 to 18, some of them already bearded) focused on the conference theme, "Dare to Be Different." It stressed the particular responsibility of these young Muslim men to practice and stand up for the ideals of sexual modesty and complete abstinence from sexual activity. A theme in the young men's workshop, which varied in its explicitness, was the threat posed to men's honor by women's sexuality.

One speaker referred to the story told in the Qur'an (S. 12, Section 3) of the coming of age in Egypt of the Prophet Youssef (the Biblical Joseph), whose host's very attractive wife attempts to seduce him. Although sorely tempted, Youssef is mindful of Allah's invisible presence and refuses her advances. He thus passes the test that proves him suitable to become a leader of his people. The speaker admonished the gathered young men that he did not mean that men should studiously avoid women: "Don't just stare at the floor all the time at school so that you walk into a wall" – "We're Muslims, not airheads" – but that instead they should conscientiously tell themselves to look away when confronted by temptation. Sexual energy is not itself ungodly, but it should be saved for the time to be spent with one's wife, "that one relationship that you enter with someone who has saved herself for marriage just as we save ourselves for marriage." She is the person with whom we will eventually enter paradise.

While the men's workshop presupposed that the key issue was young women serving as a source of temptation, the young women's workshop (attended by a female research assistant and three undergraduate interns) focused more on the standards of non-Muslim society that might be a lure and a source of

temptation. For the women, it was not so much that they either resented or guiltily enjoyed boys touching them, but that they felt constrained to fit into the culture of their high school peer group. Without negating the idea that the approaches of boys could be problematic, leaders located the real problem in the standards of a society that condone touching and hugging across gender lines. But many young women articulated that their most difficult challenge was to wear *hijab* when they were one of the very few Muslim girls in their suburban or small town high schools. (For most of them, *hijab* meant a head scarf covering hair, neck, and ears.) In a context where the young women felt the need to fit in, the call to “dare to be different” centered less on the boys in school than on more generalized social pressures (see Williams & Vashi, 2007). In both cases, there was recognition that the advice for the young men and women had to be practical within a secular context and within settings where they are surrounded by non-Muslims.

After the gender-segregated session, the next workshop involved both young men and women, but they were evenly divided into separate seating sections. The theme directly addressed “Gender Relations,” although sexuality permeated the discussions. The main speaker, whom we call MD, was a recently graduated medical doctor doing his residency at a local hospital and who was at least a decade older than most of the young people in the audience. One of the teenage speakers from the first session, whom we call TS, assisted him. MD stipulated that sexual attraction per se is not un-Islamic. Indeed, in the right context (marriage) it can be seen as worship. But before marriage, men and women must regard each other as brothers and sisters who can interact civilly and professionally and who ought to care about one another’s well-being but ought not otherwise get too close. What is needed is to balance modesty with a “brotherly” love for each other. Sitting separately is good, but we should not be separate in our hearts. Rather, it is important to know how to interact with a sister at the mall, in the school, and in public.

Similar to recent evangelical efforts to use “sex” to sell abstinence (Gardner, 2011), Muslim leaders used a sex-positive rhetoric that constructed it as a reward for the faithful in marriage. As such, marriage tended to be presupposed as nearly inevitable and as a goal for “good” religious men and women in all the sessions (see also Irby, 2014; Yip & Page, 2013). Within this context, heterosexual marriage is not only assumed but often portrayed as the natural goal of becoming an adult and of a life well lived. In the attempt to move away from negative understandings of sex, the efficacy of sex and its ability to be good becomes dependent upon context (heterosexual marriage).

Continuing, MD explained that Muslims have values distinct from non-Muslims and “American society” on gender relations. Even otherwise nice people you know and like may have the wrong values in respect to gender – totally *haram* (forbidden). He acknowledged that some Muslims go to extremes in their treatment of women, but generally Islam has healthy practices in regard to gender relations: above all, modesty; lowering the gaze; having most friends

of the same gender; respecting but not really sharing private thoughts with members of the other gender. MD said at one point, “you don’t really need to be tight with a sister,” implicitly assuming the male problematic. Recognizing that we are human and have human desires, he went on, Islam recognizes proper limits on our gender relations, whether with Muslim or non-Muslim women (again seemingly unconsciously privileging the male perspective).

In order to illustrate proper and improper gender relations, MD enlisted his assistant TS to playact some scenarios of gender relations, in what was clearly planned to be the highlight of the workshop. MD played “Joe Muslim,” and TS played a girl, who, depending on whether or not he was wearing his kufi was either a Muslim sister (“Fatima”) or a non-Muslim fellow student (“Christine”). In the first scenario, Joe and Christine have just taken an exam, and she greets him out in the hall after the exam, excitedly asking how he did on the exam, putting her hand on his arm and giving him a hug, and then inviting him to go out for coffee. How should he deal with this? Use body language to keep respectful distance and politely refuse her offer.

One of the high-school girls in the audience objected here that it isn’t always Christine who makes such overtures; sometimes, Joe Muslim makes such overtures to non-Muslim women. After acknowledging such a possibility, MD went back to his point that Muslim men are often the hapless objects of such overtures (alluding, perhaps, to the story of Prophet Youssef, but ignoring for the time being the bid for a bit of gender equality in the discussion). The next scenario had Fatima greeting Joe after the exam, and he ignores her, rushing along with his face to the floor. Appearing to hit a resonant chord, this occasioned laughter from both the men and women. This approach too, MD explained, is un-Islamic. In the next scenario, Joe is shown treating Fatima properly; he is polite, reciprocates her question about how he did on the exam, and asks about her family. In this scenario, Joe occasionally looks at Fatima, but mostly he looks a bit past her and sometimes looks down, consistently averting his gaze but trying not to be rude; and, of course, he avoids touching her and avoids making any gestures about going out for coffee. Above all, he does not “stare” at her, by which MD meant looking her steadily in the eye. MD said that the same approach should be used with a non-Muslim woman: be polite. “After all, Christine is a potential Muslim.” The general rule is to avoid close proximity with the other gender, avoid one-on-one isolation, being alone in the same room together, and avoid personal questions. (Several times, MD illustrated the inappropriate personal question with “what’s your favorite color?”)

The same woman who had objected that Christine isn’t always the aggressor then asked for an illustration of how sisters should deal with men, and it took a bit of time for MD and TS to arrange a new scenario. Eventually, MD played the non-Muslim man who approached Fatima (mispronouncing her name as fa-TEEM-a) with the same kind of approach with which “Christine” had approached “Joe.” Played by TS, “Fatima” deflects his overtures, and when he asks her to go out for coffee, she counters by inviting him to the Muslim club

meeting. After the scenario, MD said that such an invitation is an excellent idea, and even if you don't have a Muslim club in your school you can invite someone to the nearest Islamic center.

The themes at the youth conference surfaced in other settings oriented toward young Muslims as well. For example, at an all-night, and all-male *qiyam* (a night-time gathering in which prayer, reading the Qur'an, and religious meditations are shared), we heard a long theological disquisition on the need for purity, suspecting but not knowing that sexual temptation was the unspoken issue. Another time, at a picnic sponsored by the Muslim Student Association of a university in the metropolitan area, we heard an elder say that when a man and a woman are alone together there is always another party present, namely *shatan* (Satan). Thus, at the youth conference, we heard explicit teachings that no doubt summarize what these boys, and to a lesser but significant extent, the girls have been hearing and behavior they have seen modeled all their lives.

In sum, these Muslim youth were admonished to adhere to more modest standards in their cross-gender interactions than what they perceive to pertain in the surrounding society. They were being urged to "dare to be different." However, the warnings reflected gendered constructions of sexuality that imagine distinct struggles for young Muslim men and women. The boys were told, and often acted, as if the presence of girls, especially Muslim girls, was the greatest challenge to their proper Islamic deportment. Comparatively, the girls expressed that the greater challenge is their desire to fit in with their non-Muslim peers, both young women as well as young men.

Interestingly, other Muslim leaders we encountered worried that these motivations for purity, combined with the temptations that may be in fact exacerbated by the very lessons about and motivations for purity, may actually serve to drive Muslim boys and girls apart. One result might be that less "pious" Muslim men may find it easier to interact with (and then possibly to marry) non-Muslim women. Thus, some more liberal Muslim institutions encourage boys and girls to sit together in supervised youth group activities in the hope that such experiences will bond both boys and girls to their Muslim peers (see also Hathout, Osman, & Hathout, 1989).

Self-Restraint and Peer Surveillance

Given that contemporary religious youth, even those involved with religious institutions, spend significant time away from their parents and congregations, religious adults often seek to develop their internal moral character to ensure they make the "right" decisions. This is particularly true when they anticipate youth may find themselves surrounded only, or primarily, by their peers, such as when they go away to college. In these situations, youth may feel that they

are, or perhaps will become, part of a religious minority (Bryant, 2006; Irby, 2013; Mir, 2009; Wilkins, 2008) which can increase the salience of the call to “dare to be different.” For Muslims in the United States, their status as religious minorities is apparent both numerically and culturally. The leaders in the sites we observed were acutely aware of this in trying to guide their youth and sought to help their young adults avoid the situations where their outsider status might put them in temptation’s path. In comparison, at the evangelical Protestant churches we observed they also communicated a sense of outsider status, based less on demography or even cultural minority status, but rather because of their religious teachings that the youth should be “in” the world but not “of” it (see also Bryant, 2006). For two of the evangelical churches we studied this sense that the secular world would threaten youth’s moral and religious standing differentially manifested in their efforts to cultivate an ethic of self-restraint within their youth, which they buttressed by encouraging them to monitor one another. While evangelical Protestants certainly do not have the minority status of either Muslims or Hindus, the organizational leaders we spoke to, and the programming we observed, clearly communicated that evangelical young people would be out in a world that would threaten their moral and religious standing.

To accomplish the development of self-restraint, and the sense of responsibility to engage in peer surveillance, evangelical adolescents were encouraged to participate and become actively involved in the mixed-gender youth ministry programs in their churches. In the two cases we highlight here, the youth ministry leadership was only slightly older than the youth themselves, and that appears to have been an intentional plan to provide youth with leaders who could help model the appropriate behavior and choices in this and the upcoming life stage. As Gardner (2011) has noted about purity movements among Evangelical Protestants, their efforts often rely on tropes of sexualized culture to sell the “right” choice as cool to youth. In the following ethnographic vignettes, we explore how the evangelical youth ministry programs selectively embraced and reinscribed elements of what is perceived as a sexualized youth culture in an effort to make it the young people’s own choice to be sexually chaste – and encourage their friends to do the same.

Urban Faith Church is a multiethnic, multiracial urban Evangelical Protestant church, with a significant Latinx membership, including in the pastoral leadership (although the senior pastor is African American). Likewise, City Baptist Church’s thriving youth program is multiethnic (White, Black, and Latinx, primarily Puerto Rican), even though the adult church membership and senior pastors are predominately White.³ As with many youth ministry programs, both churches’ employ fairly young youth ministers (men) who showcase their marital status by having their wives working with them in the youth group (either paid or unpaid).

Urban Faith extensively used Christianized popular music (e.g., a romantic song about “the two of us” reimagined to be about the believer and Jesus) to

encourage the youth to view cultural objects through the church's "God lens" rather than through a secular, often sexualized, perspective. Or, as Bobby Ramirez, the popular youth pastor, explained, "Jesus is the lover of your soul." In his work with the youth, he sought to gain the ear and respect of the youth by keeping up with and incorporating elements of "their culture" into activities (e.g., breakdancing) and offering leadership roles to youth. While always under his eye, youth often planned and executed their own programming. Ramirez used the authority and caché he gained from this type of leadership strategy to promote sexual propriety and demarcate particular lifestyle choices as appropriate or not.

In particular, Ramirez discouraged "dating," which we understood as unsupervised social meetings between boys and girls. He insisted that girls remain virgins until married and admonished the boys not to be "players." It was assumed that dating could not end in marriage at such a young age, and thus was considered a dangerous distraction from the important tasks of finishing high school, perhaps being employed, and setting oneself up for a successful transition into adult responsibilities. In fact, one girl at Urban Faith had been excluded from participating in the youth group's overseas mission trip because of violation of the nondating standards (although it was not clear whether her boyfriend was a member of the group and what, if any, sanction was applied to him).

This position was consistent with a loose antidating movement at this time (Irby, 2013) found in many evangelical communities. In her review of evangelical self-help relationship books, Irby (2013) notes that many authors instead promoted a model of "courtship" as a means to distinguish premarital relationship practices from the perceived more sexualized practices in secular culture. Challenging youth to replace the "selfish" practices of dating with efforts that foreground the pursuit of (heterosexual) marriage, the courtship literature contended that premarital relationships should only occur when people can envision marrying the other person and that the young people's families should be involved in the process.

Given the tendency to privilege the role of the father in this process, Ramirez's concern about single mothers' ability to assert authority over their kids, but especially sons, takes on a new meaning (see also Armitage & Dugan, 2006). Raising boys to be responsible for marriage and family was key to maintaining viable families in this formulation. Ramirez did not mind that some such young men called him "Daddy," and he in turn acted out the role by assuming authority over them.

Ramirez also enlisted the help of adults in the congregation to offer one-on-one mentoring to the young people, to give them support and attention. During the youth group's alternative Halloween celebration, we spoke with one such leader, whom we call Mike. A White man in his late 40s, his own children grown up or in college, Mike and his wife serve the church's youth program as leaders and chaperones. Mike himself is at the church three or four nights a week. We observed him reach out to touch, greet, and sometimes hug the youth

as they arrived, as he spoke to us about ways he tries to counsel them. He said that he takes the boys on fishing trips and invites one or another girl to dinner at his home from time to time. He tries to notice when a couple are dating, and he might take the boy or the girl aside to admonish them that their conduct should be above reproach. He assured us that the kids, particularly those without their own fathers, remember the attention paid to them, and he regards his role in reaching out to them as part of his role as youth leader, even though it is not part of the youth group activity, as such.

The significance of marriage as an ideal and desired state also emerged in other ways throughout our fieldwork. We accompanied Ramirez to monthly meetings of a city-wide group of evangelical youth, and we noticed that the youth leaders from city churches that served ethnoracial minority communities were, despite their relative youth, always married men whose wives were visibly involved as volunteers in the youth groups were present. We suspect that this may be an intentional strategy to place the young male leaders as off-limits to the participants in the groups, as well as act to try to restrain any reckless behavior by the young male pastors. In another manner, however, it reinforced the evangelical emphasis on marriage that tends to integrally tie adulthood and religious maturity to marital status (Irby, 2014).

City Baptist Church more directly engaged sex in their youth group than did Urban Faith Church, devoting significant and explicit attention to the topic. The middle school/high school youth group at City Baptist stood out for its racial diversity (roughly equal numbers of Latinx, Blacks, and Whites), its gender balance (nearly as many boys as girls), its abundance of singing and dancing talent, its openness to frank personal disclosure, its attention to serious doctrinal teaching, and its highly physical, alternately playful and heartfelt, occasionally flirtatious, member participation. As such, the organizational style differed from the Muslim programs, despite the leadership at each employing a similar a sex-positive abstinence rhetoric that delineated marriage as the only legitimate place to express sexual desires. As the youth pastor said in one sermon to the group, “Sex is like fire. It’s great when it’s in the fireplace but becomes destructive outside.”

During our visits at City Baptist’s youth group, we witnessed frank discussions about sexuality coupled with explicit efforts to monitor the behavior. For example, on one early visit we witnessed the wife of a volunteer youth leader testify about her struggles with sexuality. She had been raised Christian but slid into “sexual sins” in high school. Contrite over this behavior, she recommitted her life to Jesus and began “witnessing” about the changes in her life. One of the people to whom she told her story was her high school best friend, whom she subsequently married (and next to whom she was sitting). On yet another occasion we observed a woman youth leader who presided over a girls-only discussion of sex where the young girls felt comfortable enough to discuss their sexual desires. One such girl described how she often feels “horny” and doesn’t care that much about guys emotionally. As such, she inquired, “Is it wrong to

just want a boyfriend for the sex part?” While we could tell there was a general consensus in the group that did not approve of what she suggested, it also appeared that she had touched a nerve among others. At the very least, this indicated that she perceived the group as a place where she could articulate such thoughts.

Despite the sense that sexuality could, and perhaps even should be, openly discussed (and monitored) in youth group, it was also clear that it was not a place to act upon these impulses. On another visit, we witnessed a stern lecture to the high-school group from the youth pastor on “PC” – physical contact – after walking in on an incident among the junior high students. One day he had entered the youth room to find some junior high kids with their arms around each other. Although that may not be out of place at times, he also mentioned that he saw some of them touching each other’s “butts.” This was totally out of line. Thus, he made it clear that he did not want to see that among either the high school or the junior high kids. “I cannot control what you do at home but I can control what you do in the youth group. If I see anyone touching someone else’s butt I will kick his or her butt out of the youth group.”

The leader also tried to enlist the high-school group in his attempt to monitor this behavior by asking that if they saw junior high kids “hanging on each other” or touching each other inappropriately they should say something to the kids involved. From the “oohs” and “aahs” we heard, those present appeared to agree. Talks such as this one transmitted to the evangelical youth the idea not only that they were responsible for monitoring themselves by cultivating self-restraint but that they must work to help out their peers (and juniors) in this process (see also [Diefendorf \(2015\)](#) for a discussion of evangelical accountability networks).

City Baptist’s more explicit attention on sexuality may emerge in part from their involvement in the “True Love Waits” sexual abstinence program. A central dimension of this program involved the single people in the church making the following public pledge:

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.

To conclude the final event in this campaign, the youth group enacted a Jerry Springer-style skit dramatizing troubles that sexual activity can bring into the lives of youth. The performers were intentionally chosen, with especially trusted members of the core of the youth group playing “couples” who told the TV reality show “host” about their “sexual activity.” In one case, a girl had become pregnant and she and her boyfriend were not ready to be parents, but they were Catholic and could not have an abortion (which seemingly needed no translation among the youth at this Baptist church). In another case, a girl was secretly cheating on her boyfriend with another guy, whom the host invited on stage to provoke a simulated fist fight. The “show” was brought to an

emotionally compelling end by a message from another of the youth group's core members about the virtues of abstinence before marriage. At the close of the speech, virtually everyone sitting in the youth section came forward to sign the pledge.

In sum, at both Evangelical Protestant youth groups there was a mix of expression, repression, and the undeniable attraction of approved interactions with attractive peers in mixed-gender settings. Within the context of the religious community, the leadership was careful to employ adult supervision and espoused strong abstinence messages. Yet, there was also a recognition of the lure of sex and, in our view, a tactical attempt to appropriate elements of youth culture to convince adolescents to restrain themselves when they were not in the church and to enlist them in "helping" their peers do the same through mechanisms of monitoring and peer-pressure. Like the Muslim groups, the evangelicals stressed abstinence before marriage while encouraging the idea of sexual fulfillment as appropriate within marriage. Importantly, however, the evangelicals' tactics of telling young adults to avoid sex (abstinence) while in cross-gender settings and group activities were distinct from the style of separation and avoidance we witnessed in the Muslim groups.

"Classed" Disengagement

While religious groups have often been presented as key proponents of abstinence, we found evidence that concerns about youth sexuality may not always be their primary motivating concern. During our observations at a regional youth program for Hindu youth and at an upper-middle-class Protestant church, we noticed that the leaders were more concerned with educating both their boys and girls in ethical decision-making. Compared with the previous groups that exhibited considerable concern and anxiety about the (gendered) sexuality of their young adults, the leaders in these programs appeared to worry about sex primarily as it may relate to issues of upward educational and social mobility. In other words, worry about sexuality manifested in a concern that their youth should focus more on their studies and future professions. In the following ethnographic vignettes, we explore how moral lessons being taught in religious group settings were disengaged from explicit concern with sexuality and instead were used to inculcate into young adults more universalized ethical principles. These principles, while focused on ethical treatment of others, and some of the temptations of acting improperly/immorally, did not focus on sexuality and its "dangers." We saw in this a "classed" worldview in which assumptions about education, material resources, and lifestyle provided some protections from life-risks, and young people were assumed to have the capacities to navigate much of the terrain themselves.

Situated in an inner-ring suburb, Grace Church is a “mainline” Protestant congregation that served a relatively privileged population with a membership that the pastor estimated to be 95% White. As a nondenominational church that was marked by general approval of evangelical social values, the congregational culture was situated somewhere between “mainline” and “evangelical.” Nondenominational churches are much more common among evangelicals. Yet, Grace Church also belonged to a Reformed Protestant tradition and its organizational style, including worship practices, programs, and constituency, more closely resembled mainline congregations. In our view, the church presupposed not only affluence but also education. Messages at Grace Church were consistently, and often abstractly, theological. The church leadership seemed most concerned that the members have a thorough understanding of what they perceived to be the necessary theological beliefs, and constructed age and educationally appropriate programming toward this end. In particular, they taught members that their salvation came through faith, not works. Echoing these teachings, the youth programming combined a focus on theology with intentional efforts to keep their younger congregants interested, involved, and committed to the faith. In particular, they sought to accomplish these goals at a time when youth began to make educational and career decisions for their lives.

By and large, it appeared to us that the regulation of youth sexuality was seen as a parental issue. We never observed the explicit sex-focused programming that we have recounted in the Evangelical churches or at Muslim youth events. Given the prevailing upper-middle-class norms that emphasized family privacy and eschewed public surveillance and confession, we did not expect explicit attention on sexual matters and did not see it. In fact, the messages presented by youth leaders at Grace Church rarely prohibited or promoted any specific behaviors. Instead, they sought to teach principles that could be applied throughout one’s life, including to matters of sex and sexuality. For example, one lesson used “Pringles potato chips” in a fairly clumsy analogy that did not seem to resonate with the kids. One young man’s mother quickly discerned the lesson on the drive home, and said to her son: “The theme of the class was ‘sin.’ Just as when you eat one potato chip you want another, when you sin you don’t want to stop with just one.” The mother might have wished that the youth leader had gone on to give examples of such sins, perhaps involving drugs or sex, but she did not elaborate at that time and the son did not respond with any elaboration of his own. The group presumably sought to impart a message that might be one that the son himself would remember later in his life when he reflected on something that made him uneasy. But they left as much room for inferences from the youth involved as they did for us as observers. In general, we sensed that Grace Church assumed that their constituent families had the educational and material resources to provide their children with the moral compass, good sense, and deep-seated psychological security they would need to stay out of the sexual trouble that they, and that the church, found

unacceptable. What exactly that trouble was, or the behaviors that led to it, remained unarticulated in our observations.

Likewise, the Hindu institutions we observed often had a similar class profile with constituents who had high educational attainment, professional or managerial occupations, and relatively comfortable circumstances. As with their mainline Protestant counterparts, they seemed less focused on dangers of youth sexuality than the Muslim or evangelical institutions. Notwithstanding the “no-dating” rule that one of our Hindu families mandated for their children – a rule that the 14-year-old daughter felt was invidiously applied in a classic double-standard pattern – the Hindus we met and the institutions they were part of did not appear as committed to resisting social standards in secular culture. Indeed, they conceptualized the dilemmas posed by the larger society quite differently, leading subsequently to different responses. For example, one Hindu youth group we visited at a local temple had the look of the Mainline Protestant youth groups we have seen: a mixed-gender, casually dressed gathering of young upper-middle-class teenagers, who, under the leadership of post-college youth leaders, discussed ethical issues (in school and dating) in light of scriptures and religious teachings, in this case, Hindu. On one occasion, on the scriptural text, which had been assigned as homework, was a chapter of an English translation of the Hindu epic, *the Ramayana*, where the hero, Rama, attracts the attention of the widow Surpanakha, who is described by the poet as pot-bellied and cross-eyed, a very ugly woman. Rama refuses her advances, explaining that he is married, and is on a mission to rescue his beautiful wife, Sita, from an abductor. Surpanakha is outraged. The youth group leaders had prepared several issues for the teenagers to discuss, one of which was “How do you deal with an ugly person who asks you out? What if it’s a disabled individual at school? How about someone boring, dorky, and generally socially inept?”

These questions, which presupposed both that the youth were privileged enough not to be ugly, disabled, or dorky, but also that being “asked out” itself is not problematic, were radically different from those confronted by the youth at other venues. “Dating” here seemed inevitable and an accepted practice when done ethically. Indeed, even the implied adultery in the story was not the focus of the leadership’s first set of questions. Compared to the Muslim or evangelical groups we discussed above, dating itself is not a nexus of larger issues of gender and sexuality. Instead, the Hindu group leaders were using *the Ramayana* (a valuable icon of Hindu culture) to help young people develop their discretionary moral sense. Not incidentally, the group also intended to promote solidarity among Hindu youth of both genders, who are typically very thinly spread across their suburban high schools. As such, youth programming for these young Hindus allowed them to participate in a group where they were often of a similar age, race, religion, and social status as their peers. In doing so, it likely served a social dimension of connectedness for adolescents who in many other locales may feel like an outsider. Additionally, it helped many young adults learn more about their religion, something many of them knew

relatively little about. The knowledge they gained from this process hopefully allowed them to represent themselves differently (and maybe with more pride) to non-Indians and non-Hindus. Of course, participation also allowed them to spend time away from their parents, while also pleasing their parents by going to the temple, and to potentially even meet someone who may become a spouse (again, everything we saw in the programming assumed heterosexual marriage).

More than unwanted pregnancy or spiritual transgression, our Hindu families seemed most concerned that their youth obtain the best education and subsequently make appropriate marital matches. Marriage, particularly a “good” marriage, was clearly assumed as necessary for a successful adult life, and even for religious maturity. Unlike the more rhetorical connections made among family and religious life among evangelicals and Muslims (see Irby, 2014), within Hinduism the issue of marriage and family becomes particularly salient religiously since many if not most religious practices are conducted with one’s family at a home altar. However, in this case marriage seems to be as much a class project as it is a gender or sexual project. Good marital matches assure that the young people, particularly young women, maintain their reputations, but such maintenance was not seen as requiring stringent surveillance as much as the development of an attuned internal moral compass and clear knowledge about future plans and prospects.

The Hindu youth, on the other hand, often had ambivalent responses to their parents’ ambitions for them. During an observation at a week-long summer camp held at a lake-side resort a short drive from the city, the high-school and college-age young people often had opportunities to put on plays and skits. In doing so, they regularly presented humorous reenactments about their parents’ occupational and educational ambitions for them, often portraying the parents as too materialistic, too concerned with social status, and too attentive to the “cultural” dimensions of the Indian and Hindu society and not concerned enough with the spiritual. Indeed, the young people often presented themselves as more concerned with Hinduism’s spiritual and religious messages, and less tied specifically to their parents’ version of Indian culture. For these young adults, their attempts to be “counter-cultural” focused more on money-and-status materialism and its pervasiveness in the culture and among their parents, and not on concerns with secular culture as sexualized. This was reinforced during some sessions with religious leaders (often gurus from India), where the fundamental lessons were about communicating abstracted ethical principles – not about rigid systems of “thou shalt nots.”

In sum, at both Grace Church and among Hindus, the religious leadership emphasized concerns about the moral and educational/professional development of their youth. In some ways their attempts to develop an internal moral code that emphasized personal responsibility resembled evangelical Protestants, however, they rarely oriented this toward the topic of gender or sexuality, nor did the logic employ legalistic accounting of forbidden behaviors. Further, their approach also lacked the evangelical emphasis on peer

surveillance. For the young people at Grace Church or in the Hindu programs we observed, their own internal codes, along with their and their parents' concerns with educational and professional achievement, needed to be the necessary resources.

CONCLUSION

Religious leaders from a variety of traditions worked with youth in an attempt to mold them on their journey to adulthood. In this process, concerns about developing moral and spiritual character often, but not always, intersected with anxieties about sexuality and gender. In particular, we observed three organizational styles that characterized the explicit lessons taught and the programming practices: (1) *avoidance* – a strict, legalistic, abstinence approach that involves strict sex segregation and consistent adult monitoring; (2) *self-restraint* and *peer surveillance* – an abstinence message that reappropriates elements of youth culture to enlist adolescents in monitoring themselves and others; and (3) *disengagement* – a largely *laissez-faire* approach that treats the development of abstract ethical systems, and a situational ethics format, as the resources that can provide youth with the material with which they will construct an internal moral gyroscope.

While we structured our analysis of these three styles largely by religious tradition, we caution against overidentifying any of these approaches with a particular faith. On the one hand, religious beliefs about gender within Islam or a theology of personal responsibility among evangelicals may orient them toward avoidance and self-restraint/peer surveillance, respectively. However, no faith tradition is monolithic and religious communities and their members interpret and negotiate local conditions and constraints. Future research should continue to investigate how youth ministries mediate their theologies and particular congregational cultures within the emplaced demographics and challenges of adolescence.

For example, additional dimensions of difference emerged that, in our case, sometimes overlapped with religious tradition. For both the Muslims and Hindus we observed, their experiences as a religious minority in the United States affected their conversations with adolescents about what to do, how to act, and what to avoid. In both cases, this produced concerns and anxieties that influenced their organizational programming. However, the Muslim and Hindu groups we observed interpreted this outsider status in different ways. Whereas Muslim leaders largely identified as a *religious* minority living in a cultural context that challenged some core values (such as gender segregation), Hindu adults we spoke with often articulated their minority status more along *racial-ethnic* lines. Their concerns about the dominant culture centered less on its religiosity and more often considered the challenges of upward mobility for their children.

Additionally, gender also emerged as a key, but multifaceted, difference across these organizational styles. Unlike much of the literature that has

focused on how religious groups conceptualize men and women as having different needs and traits (see, for example, Irby, 2014), our analysis draws attention to other ways gender can (or fails to) organize religious teachings. While Muslim leaders clearly constructed men and women as different from one another, the salience of avoidance emerged more from their concerns with secular culture and the desire to be counter-cultural than it did from any theory of complementarity. In contrast, the Hindu and mainline Protestant adults rarely gendered their religious instruction for young adults by delineating different concerns or challenges. Instead, it appeared that both sons and daughters were expected to do well in school and their future professions. The challenges in life were treated, at least in manifest programming, as the same for young men and women.

Despite the variations in how these religious groups addressed sexuality with their young adults, they also operated from shared assumptions. For the most part, the program leaders – and many participants – treated their approach and message as part of an effort to be “counter-cultural.” In some cases, this explicitly implicated sexuality – conceptualizing the dominant surrounding society as morally decayed and sexualized which represented a threat to the pursuit of purity that had to be resisted (see, for example, Williams & Vashi, 2007). In other cases this could implicitly involve sexuality – such as the concerns about cultural materialism and the level of insufficient moral character. By valorizing the distinctiveness of their group, their religious teachings, and their worldviews and actions, youth leaders engaged in a religious project to simultaneously keep their youth in the fold while helping them to navigate the world successfully.

In another way, however, they shared a common vantage point with mainstream culture by operating from a heteronormative framework. Discussions about the challenges and experiences of adolescent sexuality presumed that all the girls and boys would be heterosexual. Furthermore, religious leaders and parents consistently talked as if marriage was a given and natural goal for their youth’s futures. In the process of guiding their adolescents on the journey to adulthood, there existed a presumption that this process would culminate in marriage (and a family). In other words, adolescent sexuality must be controlled and monitored until such a time that these young people have matured and committed to a marriage where they can freely enjoy sex. A lifetime of singleness, or at least a protracted period of time, went largely unacknowledged or addressed. In a period of delayed age of first marriage, there is some indication that religious communities are leaving their youth feeling unprepared for how to live a chaste life into their twenties (Diefendorf, 2015; Irby, 2013). Future research should extend beyond the age of youth and young adults to examine how religious communities construct and organize gendered sexuality across the life course.

NOTES

1. During this phase of the research, eight graduate student research assistants worked on the data collection: Janet S. Armitage, Affaf Baig, Sayida Baste, Mary Jean Cravens, Rhonda E. Dugan, Korie Edwards, Jennifer Janis, and Jon Stamm. Of these eight, two were African American, one an Arab Muslim, one a South Asian Muslim, and four Euro-American. Fifteen undergraduate interns also participated in these site visits: Rooman Ahad, Shannon Andrysiak Rabi, Melaniece Bardley, Mary Calderon, Oscar Edmond, Kurt Griesch, Eman Hassaballa Aly, Daniel Kovacs, Angee Meen, James (Tre) Morris, Farid Muhammad, Kimberly Richards, Joaquin Rodgers, Tamara Rose, and Gira Vashi. The interns were thus comprised of five African Americans, an Asian American, an Arab and an Indian Muslim, an Indian Hindu, a Jew, an Hispanic Catholic, and four Euro-Americans who were at least nominally Christian.

2. We note that in our sample multiethnic, multiracial churches are over-represented compared to Protestant congregations in the United States as a whole. Because we are interested in the ways in which religious organizations help shape identity and form religious adults, we do not consider that a problem. Both of these churches had thriving youth programs that even attracted some young people whose parents were not church members and who crossed neighborhood lines to get there (see Williams & Warner, 2003).

3. All personnel and organizational names used here are pseudonyms.

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