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SEXUAL "SIN" AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF

Amy Hawkin

Abstract

This project explores the experiences of cognitive dissonance caused by the sexual activity of unmarried Christian adults in the UK. It identifies processes of the formation, negotiation, and maintenance of participants' religious identities, and the impacts that sexual activity has on these processes. Using anonymous narratives, autoethnographic material, and semi-structured interviews, it uncovers some of the impacts these experiences had on their religious beliefs and their relationships. In doing so, it highlights potential causal factors for young adults distancing themselves from the Church and limiting its authority over their lifestyle choices. The dissertation argues that unmarried Christians experience their sexual selves through complex and interlinking processes of negotiation between beliefs, actions, and identities. It states that the process of negotiation is often a painful one due to experiences of cognitive dissonance, which usually has vast implications on the believers themselves, their sexual partner/s, and their church communities. It suggests that establishing firm beliefs about sex outside of marriage prior to sexual opportunities is vital in order to avoid this. Finally, it suggests that the Church could potentially enable this by encouraging thorough, open, and honest dialogue about sex and marriage.

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SEXUAL "SIN" AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF

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Introduction

This project presents some of the experiences of young Christian adults who have grown up as members of conservative evangelical Churches in the UK. It demonstrates the ways in which sexual education and conversations about sex, or lack thereof, have led to confusion and hurt for my participants. The project explores sexual experiences outside of marriage, looking at physical, emotional, and spiritual manifestations of sexual desire, frustration, and satisfaction. It argues that experiences of cognitive dissonance led my participants into identity crises as they wrestled with dualistic interpretations of the physical self and the spiritual self, labelling themselves "sinners" for having and acting on sexual desires outside of marriage. It also highlights the severity of the issue; it gives voice to my participants who tell stories of self-harm, suicidal ideations, and failures to acknowledge sexual assault and rape. In these ways, the project highlights the need for the Church to acknowledge the sex lives of unmarried Christians in the UK and to improve the dialogue for future generations.

Research into what happens when young Christians get involved in sexual acts outside of marriage and its aftermath has been limited, particularly in the UK where sex remains largely a 'taboo' subject in conservative evangelical Churches. The majority of the literature on sex and religion has taken place in the US and with adolescents, rather than young adults, with the focus often being primarily with a view to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Evans et al., 1995). Much sociological research about sex tends to be limited to statistics and therefore rarely offers deep insights into the realities of individuals' sexual experiences and their impacts (Berdychevsky and Carr, 2020). There is limited research into sexual feelings, relationships and experiences occurring after sexual and emotional maturation. Most of the recent discussion about sexuality in Christian circles has focused on homosexuality, gender, and sexual dysfunction, so the theological and sociological exploration of extramarital, heterosexual sex has tended to be

neglected (Aune, 2006). Therefore, there is a need to do more research into what I call the 'cognitive dissonance' that young people experience when they engage in practices that contradict their Christian beliefs.

This research gains insight using perspectives offered through the study of lived religion (Ammerman, 2006; McGuire, 2008), using narrative exercises which capture participants' everyday experiences of their religious lives. Studying lived religion allows us to look much further than doctrine and explicitly religious activities, letting us witness the points at which peoples' everyday decisions and actions interact with their spiritual and emotional lives. It acknowledges the fact that religion is embodied; religious practice takes place cognitively through belief, emotionally through encounters with the divine, and physically through the actions taken by believers (Burke, 2016). The project explores the concept of 'embodied practices' and deepens our understanding of the ways in which spiritual belief can be accomplished through the body (McGuire 2016). It looks into the areas of participants' lives that are not explicitly religious, but nonetheless contain elements of religion in the form of the transposable schemas that are carried from their religious arenas (Sewell 1992). Few researchers have combined the study of lived religion with sexual behaviour in the UK, largely due to the fact that sex tends to happen in private and British people do not like talking about it. I hope that this research will offer insight into a very private and often silenced area of Christian life.

Contextual background

Throughout the project, I will identify some of the ways that cultural constraints have been negotiated alongside religious constraints, the ways these have shifted over time, and their impacts on individual believers and their sense of agency in relation to their sexual behaviour. Scholars have pointed out that 'our entire experience of sexuality can be viewed as a context and culture-specific story that we come to live' (Tolman and Diamond, 2001, p39), and my project emphasises

the relevance of macrolevel contextual constraints, pressures, and opportunities presented to participants in this study. I now provide some of this contextual background to highlight the influence on participants' expectations, desires, and behavioural tendencies.

Over the last century, research has documented dramatic changes in the sexual landscape of the modern world, in ways that have influenced my participants perceptions and expectations of sex. Studies have pointed to many related causal factors, most notably the advent of modern contraception (Guest, Olson and Wolffe, 2012) and increasing gender equality (Thompson, 1990), both of which have allowed men and women to fulfil their sexual desires more freely than ever before. The unhindered pursuit of sexual pleasure has dominated the global media and the pornography industry is thriving (Parker, 2010), creating sexual scripts which encourage casual sex and later or no marital commitment (Braithwaite et al, 2015). Sex is increasingly conceptualised as a leisure activity which must be available to all people to allow fulfilment and satisfaction; sex is even becoming one of the many 'channel[s] for self-care, pleasure, expression, and meaning' (Attwood, 2011, p93), and there are very few circumstances in which sex is deemed unacceptable in the UK. For example, although most people believe that adultery is morally unacceptable, many of the most popular films and TV series include highly sexualised storylines involving adultery. Scholars have commented on this widespread obsession: 'Prime-time television clearly reflects society's greater willingness to tolerate adultery: now television dramas depict affairs without obvious homewrecking villains, and extramarital affairs are apt to go unresolved for months' (Zare, 2001, p29). These trends highlight some of the increasingly tolerated sexual liberalism in secular culture which prioritises sexual desires over many other factors, including physical, relational, or emotional consequences. It is noticeable that some of these shifts have influenced my participants' views of sex, providing them with more reason to view traditional beliefs as outdated and open to interpretation.

These cultural shifts incorporate 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1993) and the increasingly pervasive tendency to see sexual pleasure as vital for healthy relationships. Plastic sexuality describes the modern sexual norms which allow for personal malleability in the pursuit of sexual satisfaction. It acknowledges that sexual pursuits have become disentangled from socially imposed gender roles and the expectations of reproduction (Hawkes, 2007). Giddens explores this 'posttraditional' form of relationship, attributing it to globalisation and discussing the negative implications of this modern condition. For example, he acknowledges the tendencies towards compulsive sexual behaviour and the merchandising of erotic objects which can distort and confuse healthy conceptions of sexuality (Fontana, 1994). These shifts and their impacts on the sexual landscape were clearly influential to participants' sexual beliefs, experiences, and desires.

Marriage trends have shifted over the last few decades; the rise of postmodern family units has led to a general shift in perceptions about the importance of marriage and the circumstances that necessitate it (Stacey, 1998). In the 1800s, girls reached puberty at around 16 years old, and tended to marry around that time (Balswick 2008). Now, the average age of menarche is around 13, and the average age of marriage is around 36 for women and 38 for men (Office for National Statistics 2021). Those who believe that sex is only permitted within marriage therefore face around 10-20 years (or a lifetime, for those who do not marry) of putting off their sexual urges – with varied success, according to most researchers. Kristen Aune (2006) noted that cohabitation and serial monogamy are the norm for most secular adults in the UK, with marriage tending only to become an option much later in life. She also pointed out that marriage has shifted in its purpose, becoming more companionate and shifting from 'institution' to 'relationship'. Further to this, the young Christians in this study have grown up in the middle of changes resulting from the liberalisation of the Church, with fierce debates surrounding gay marriage leading many to abandon traditional views on sexuality and marriage. When discussing their beliefs about sex outside of marriage, some participants noted some of these shifts and suggested that the biblical understanding of marriage,

and therefore sex, was no longer as easily applicable to their personal situations. Many felt that it was unrealistic to expect them to "wait until marriage" and shifted their beliefs for this reason.

Religious and societal norms have often been ignored in private, which highlights the need to avoid assumptions that, in this instance, unmarried Christians are not having sex. Sharon Thompson (1990) pointed out that by the late 1980s, around seven in ten women under the age of 20 in American cities had already had sex. She warned of the dangers involved when religious authorities do not acknowledge the realities of social change and suggested that young women were at risk due to a lack of understanding or knowledge about the sex they were having. My research agrees with Thompson's points; many participants had not received any sex education or teaching about the purpose of sex because this tended to be saved for marriage courses or for conversations with engaged couples. Important advice and teaching is therefore avoided on the assumption that unmarried Christians will not need it. I argue that if some of my participants had received earlier teaching about the purpose of sex and God's intentions for it within marriage, they would have been able to form beliefs about it before having sexual opportunities. Additionally, if my participants were educated about how to have consensual sex that is pleasurable and safe earlier, they could have avoided some of the damaging situations they went through or caused.

The research

This project analyses written and verbal narratives of my own and my participants' experiences to gain insights into the processes involved in cognitive dissonance. There were three elements to the collection of this material: an autoethnographic narrative written by me, 25 anonymous narratives written online, and verbal narratives gathered in semi-structured interviews with five participants. I created an open questionnaire online which allowed participants to submit large written narratives anonymously. I purposely provided participants with a very broad subject, asking them to write narratives about their sexual experiences outside of marriage or teaching on the topic. I

wanted participants to talk openly about whatever was most pressing for them when they thought about these subjects. I also wrote my own autoethnographic narrative in a similar way, discussing my experiences of both teaching and sex outside of marriage. These narratives provided a broad sample of qualitative data, enabling me to identify themes and commonalities which were explored further in the interviews.

Of the 25 written narratives, twelve identified as females and ten as males. A further four participants chose not to state their gender identity. To collect these narratives, I used my personal social media pages to contact around 100 young Christians between the ages of 18 and 30. They had all lived in the UK and had been active in their local church for at least two years. They all identified as committed Christians who attended conservative evangelical churches. In a private message, I explained the project's aims and methods and attached a link to an online survey page for those who were willing to take part. Recruiting participants in this way limited any discomfort or awkwardness for invitees because although I knew who I had invited to take part, I did not know who had accepted.

These online survey results were anonymous because I did not ask for any information which revealed participants' identity, and I was not notified about who had completed the survey. I decided to use anonymous written narratives due to the sensitive and often taboo topic of this research; anonymity provided participants with the opportunity to talk freely about their sexual experiences without fear of judgement. Rosenbaum's (2006) work with American teenagers found that participants were unlikely to self-report non-normative behaviour, and that many participants lied or changed their sexual histories throughout the project – particularly if they belonged to conservative churches. The challenges of researching issues of sex and religion are obvious; the gap between belief and behaviour can be a painful and confusing thing to expose (Briggs et al, 2015). This method, then, allows participants to write narratives without having to interact with me or associate themselves with the narrative produced publicly. Narrative methods were useful

in lowering the risk of social desirability as well as reducing potential discomfort for participants. All participants were given a participant sheet upon invitation to take part which included an explicit description of the study including the aims, methodology, and the intended use of the results. It also explained that throughout the write-up, I would be cautious and avoid writing anything which might reveal the identity of my participants to the reader. It informed participants that they were welcome to withdraw at any stage of the research and that they were free to retract any or all statements at any point. For the written narrative section, the online survey asked for consent before participants could go on to write their narratives.

The online page explained that participants were encouraged to write about any sexual experience outside of marriage – it was purposely very vague so that I could capture the pressing issues and feelings that people had about this topic. Of all participants, 23 expressed that they went further with partners than their personal sexual boundaries allowed. The remaining three did not discuss their sexual experiences; one talked about her experiences of her church's teaching on relationships in general, one talked about her lack of sexual experience, and one did not talk about his personal experiences at all. This participant wrote his opinion about sex outside of marriage, and his entry is discussed in Chapter 1.

To recruit participants for the extensive interviews, I added a question onto the survey requesting contact details of people who would be willing to take part. I interviewed four men, one of whom did not fill in the narrative survey but was willing to do an interview, and one woman. I suggest that the fact that only one woman was willing to take part in the interviews is interesting, and gender differences will be discussed throughout the dissertation with a particular emphasis on shame and identity. I was explicit about what the interviews involved, and I pointed out that filling in this section would remove the anonymity of the narrative. With the interview participants, I used pseudonyms (in my notes as well as in the final paper) and ensured that all those involved were happy with the comments used in the final draft. I was the only person who knew who had

taken part in the interviews, and they took place in private locations chosen by the participant. To keep all identities anonymous, I was careful throughout the write-up to adapt any comments or conversations which may have revealed the participants' identities. After giving individuals a participation sheet and a consent form, I had to trust that the interviewees were sensitive to their own feelings about what I should or should not know. I was particularly cautious and sought to protect those I interviewed, as their honesty about their experiences and generosity with their time demanded respect and sensitivity. We went through a consent form prior to each interview, as some participants did more than one. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, I employed process consent (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 2014), ensuring that participants were happy to continue to take part throughout the whole project.

Due to my sampling method, many of the narrative participants, and four of the interview participants, are also my friends. Doing research that involves friends as participants might raise some ethical concerns. However, I found that there were benefits too. It has been argued that creating relationships with people and developing rapport with them in order to gather personal information about their lives is ethically dubious (Oakley, 1981). I would suggest that the more sensitive the research topic is, the more difficult this becomes. Involving existing friends in the case study element of the research ensured good levels of trust and rapport prior to the project. This was vital to the research because it increased the chances of interviewees providing accurate and detailed information about sensitive topics (Bernard, 2002). Keith Cherry (1996) carried out a longitudinal study on the experiences of HIV and found that his roles as friend and researcher shifted between the centre to periphery, enriching his findings intellectually, ethically, and emotionally. Friendships between researcher and participant can also be useful in reducing hierarchical separation or power imbalances which are often caused by the position of the researcher who seeks to gain knowledge about the researched (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). On the other hand, I also acknowledge that there were risks involved in researching with friends as

research subjects. My primary concern was that feelings of shame or embarrassment could hinder the friendship, particularly if people overshared and then regretted it afterwards. Throughout the project I reiterated to participants that they were free to withdraw their consent if they wished, and if they chose to, I would terminate the research with them at that point. Before asking any personal questions, I reminded them that they did not have to answer if they did not feel comfortable doing so. As mentioned, the consent forms and invitations were detailed and explicitly stated the kinds of questions I would be asking, so I hoped that participants had considered this beforehand or withdrawn during the project if they had become uncomfortable.

The topic of discussion required mutual trust and respect between myself and my participants. Researchers have found that self-disclosure and reciprocal sharing can be used in sensitive interviews to establish equal footing and to express understanding (Oakley, 1981). Throughout the interviews I gauged the level of sharing that was appropriate, whilst acknowledging that I was acting as both a researcher and as a friend (Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong, 2008). For example, if a participant disclosed a painful experience or emotion that I related to, I was willing to disclose this in order to help them feel listened to and understood. This, I suggest, was one of the benefits of researching with friends as participants. Though it had the potential to become messy, I hope that any impacts on the participants were resolved more effectively than they would be if I had had these discussions with strangers. Finally, I considered the possible emotional responses for participants following their involvement in the project. The nature of the topic meant that painful memories and moral questioning inevitably came up for participants. Ellis (2007) warns that effective autoethnographic writing reveals 'warts and bruises' (p17), and I was aware that a project like this was likely to uncover hurt and regret for participants (including myself). Another point to note is Ellis's point that once documented, experiences become both concrete and public; they are made vulnerable to criticism and judgement from readers. This had the potential to cause distress or spiritual turmoil. For these reasons, the interviews ended with a

debrief and I had contacts for pastoral support ready to give to participants in case they were required. Further to this, I made use of my relationships with the participants, which allowed me to support them as friends, rather than just as a researcher.

The decision to include an autoethnographic narrative written by myself in this research was made on the basis that in order to make sense of the social world, we must reflexively examine our own experience in the culture of study through the use of narrative. I grew up in a conservative evangelical church and picked up on many implicit moral expectations about sex outside of marriage, whilst only receiving intentional teaching on the topic once or twice. Like my participants, I found myself confused and frustrated by the lack of guidance I had received and unsure how to find clarity and guidance on the matter. Conversations with friends over the years led me to realise that my experiences were not uncommon, and the severity of some stories led me to carry out this research. The experience of turning back on ourselves to look more closely at the interactions between the self and the other can be enormously beneficial to the research findings (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography demands the recognition that all researchers are 'representative of a multi-layered lifeworld' (Duncan, 2004, p30), and an honest exploration of *that* can offer deep and enlightening insights into the social world surrounding it. Bochner (1997) encourages researchers to turn their own life experiences into narratives in order to theorize and analyse them as insights into the social world, all the while using them to 'activate subjectivity and compel emotional response' (p435). Autoethnographers are encouraged to form nuanced and complex knowledge about *particular* lives, experiences, and relationships, rather than general information about large groups of people (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 2015).

My primary concern when considering the use of the autoethnographic method in this project was the fact that all narratives about personal experiences involve and therefore implicate intimate others. When writing my own story, I was simultaneously and inevitably also writing the stories of others. In this project particularly, the 'rights, wishes and feelings of those involved' (Freadman,

2004, p124) were of utmost importance, and I wished to remain loyal to those I wrote about and negotiate the grey areas of revealing and concealing with care. Carolyn Ellis (2007) suggests that writing about oneself and others involves relational ethics. She uses this as a moral framework in her writing. Relational ethics and Carol Gilligan's ethics of care (2003) acknowledge the importance of reciprocal respect and dignity and for the researcher to be responsible for one's own actions and their consequences on others (Alley, 2018). Relational ethics requires researchers to acknowledge and appreciate their interpersonal bonds, both past and present, with others and to carry out their research accordingly. This was particularly important when writing about experiences of sexual intimacy in my relationships. I consulted those involved and discussed any implications the writing may have on them, and we agreed that I would add my autoethnographic narrative to the rest of the anonymous narratives, providing myself with a pseudonym as well. This gave me the freedom to explore my experiences openly and honestly while remaining loyal to those I have been intimate with.

Further to this, the benefits of the research may help to off-set these risks and concerns. Bochner and Ellis (2006) tell of the ways in which narrating the past can help authors to assign meaning to their experiences, fulfilling the human need to make sense of our struggles and 'grasp the ungraspable' (p4). Scholars have praised autoethnographic and narrative methods for their ability to help authors 'self-create', to move forward with life by remaking their past. Bochner borrows from Kierkegaard, saying that 'we live forward, but we understand backward' (p425), and suggests that autoethnography offers rich opportunities to be renewed by the past, by thinking deeply about the characters and their emotions from their present viewpoint. Autoethnographies often discuss trauma and challenge, which can provide readers who have been through similar experiences with someone who understands and can empathise with them. They seek to give voice to the voiceless, and these methodologies embrace this philosophy, often touching on topics which are left unspoken, opening discussion with vulnerability and honesty (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 2014). They

can be powerful ways of forcing people to hear the words of marginalised people and the stories about taboo subjects. This was certainly my experience whilst I was writing my narrative – I felt able to share my story with the reader and then, as a reader, see that many people expressed similar experiences to my own but had never felt able to share. This kind of research could open discussions that have long been closed to the public sphere by allowing the narrators to voice and reflect on their experiences, which in turn allows the reader to do the same.

Out of the 23 participants who discussed their sexual experiences, only two people wrote about them through a positive lens. Interestingly, both of these participants stated that they were still in a relationship with the person they had had sex with, whereas the participants who were no longer in those relationships recalled experiences more negatively. Those who stated that they were in relationships at the time of writing tended to give more balanced narratives about their sexual experiences, offering both positive and negative perspectives.

One predominant theme, evident in all of the narratives, was the experience of shame and secrecy around participants' sexuality, and the impact this had on their identity and emotional wellbeing. All 26 mentioned feelings of guilt, and the majority expressed "deep remorse" over their experiences. Participants who had been sexually active for extended periods of time spoke of living a "double life"; their "sex life" felt separated from their "Christian life". Many of the participants pointed towards spiritual turmoil caused by the cognitive dissonance they experienced. Some went through long periods of confusion as they wrestled theologically with ideas about love, sex, and life itself during periods of sexual activity. Some participants expressed outright disagreement with their church's teaching about sexuality and frustration about the lack of open dialogue on the matter. Some talked about temporary losses of faith, and many noted changes in identity as a result of having sexual encounters that conflicted with their beliefs.

Many of the narratives discussed emotional damage caused either by cognitive dissonance regarding sexual behaviour or the Church's dealings with the topic of sexuality. Many of the

participants talked about isolating themselves from their church community, feeling like they couldn't be themselves, and feeling uncomfortable in church services because of their sexual experiences outside of marriage. Some participants discussed periods of severe mental health difficulties stemming from their sexual encounters, including three people who opened up about self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Three participants wrote about sexual experiences that they did not want, but were pressured into, and the spiritual anguish that followed. These consequences are discussed throughout the dissertation and the role of the Church, in both causing and in resolving some of these issues, is explored.

Using the voices and words of young Christian adults in the UK, this research highlights many concerns about Christians' experiences of sexual intimacy outside of marriage and the consequences of it. It demonstrates the needs for young adults like those in this project to establish healthy relationships with their sexual desires and beliefs prior to having any sexual opportunities with others. Because behaviour during the transition to adulthood usually impacts behavioural patterns and emotional responses in later life (Matsuba and Pratt, 2018), I argue that the impacts discussed in the project are more significant than the Church has tended to acknowledge. I also argue that situations like those discussed in this research ought to be dealt with particularly sensitively by those in authority and with pastoral responsibility.

The research points towards the prevalence mental health issues and depressive tendencies for people who regularly experience feelings of sexual regret (Grello, Welsh and Harper, 2006), and highlights the wider impacts of these consequences. It explores feelings of shame that became inherent to unmarried Christians' sexual desires and suggests that participants were unsure how to manage their sexual selves. In these ways, it highlights the fact that getting married was unlikely to prevent them from instinctive shame responses whenever they experienced or acted on their sexual desires. For these reasons, the dissertation argues that restorative acts must be taken to provide healing after dissonance-inducing sex, but that the Church lacks formal mechanisms that enable

this; unmarried Christians therefore struggled to heal and move on from the trauma of sexual regret and shame.

The dissertation therefore highlights areas in which the conversation around sex outside of marriage in UK Christian circles has been lacking, leaving young adults to go through traumatic experiences and mental health crises alone. Local church communities and the Christians within them have much to offer on this issue, especially when participants have been provided with support and received healing through friendship and guidance.

Methodological limitations

This research presented several methodological limitations. The primary limitation was the fact that the written narratives left no room for me to respond with follow up questions or go further into certain comments made. Often, an anonymous participant had written something very insightful that I would have been interested to explore further but could not do so because of the fact that they did not leave their names for interviews. On the other hand, though, this became interesting in itself, because many of the anonymous narratives were the ones who had not told anyone else about their sexual experiences. This methodological limitation therefore offers insight in itself, pointing out the extent to which participants felt ashamed and unable to admit their experiences to someone doing a research project including many other participants. As well as this, it suggests that although they did not feel able to give their names, they did feel strongly enough about the issue to bother responding and were perhaps glad to finally confess their thoughts and experiences on the matter.

Secondly, I was intentionally very vague about what I wanted participants to write about in the narrative, which meant that I was left with an extremely broad selection of topics and issues. In many ways this was beneficial in the sense that participants led the direction of the research and also confirmed my assumptions about the themes that people would be most interested to discuss.

However, some comments or themes were only brought up briefly in narratives, some of which I would have liked to explore more thoroughly. It also meant that some participants wrote about things that were very interesting and insightful but were not going to be of use in this piece of research. For example, one participant wrote in depth about a lack of relational advice or teaching in their church, including advice about friendships and healthy boundaries.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic largely limited the options I had available for this social research project. Whilst the online narratives gave much insight and provided very interesting responses despite the lockdown and rules about isolation, I experienced limitations in the amount and quality of the interviews I felt was possible. Face to face interviews were limited by the conditions imposed during lockdown. Although I made use of online video calling, Zoom fatigue meant that people were sick of calls as restrictions eased. I was also aware that we were all going through a difficult time and many people were struggling emotionally as a result of the pandemic. This led me to avoid pressing for more information at certain points in the interviews. For example, in two of these interviews, participants got emotional, and one opened up about having suicidal thoughts and self-harming. I was very aware that it would not be helpful discussing these difficult topics at length during long periods of isolation in a global pandemic. I therefore found myself refusing to go deeper into some comments for fear of causing emotional distress to participants.

To make my argument, Chapter 1 points to the silence some participants were met with when they questioned dogmatic and unclear recommendations around Christian sexual discipline. Because the Christians in this study were rarely encouraged to form their own sexual ethics, they felt restricted and frustrated as they felt forced to abstain from strong sexual desires without understanding why. The chapter argues that this lack of firm convictions about their sexual ethics led them to explore their sexual desires, hiding their behaviour from their Christian communities and therefore developing unhealthy relationships to their sexualities. Chapter 2 outlines these explorations and the experiences of cognitive dissonance caused by them. It suggests tactics they

employed to remove the discomfort caused and begins to explore the identity transitions caused by sex outside of marriage. Chapter 3 explores this further, demonstrating the negotiations between body and belief and the impacts of behaviour on the sense of self. It looks at the physical experiences of believers who are trying to live according to their beliefs, and also suggests mechanisms by which they can restore their sense of self after dissonance-inducing behaviour. Chapter 4 identifies notions of virginity and the significance of it as a marker of identity for Christian believers. Finally, Chapter 5 explores the implications of all of these things on participants. It draws on their experiences to demonstrate that the inability to form their own sexual ethics, enlightened by scripture and open Christian dialogue, had devastating effects for my participants. It points to the effects of dissonance and highlights the risks involved when the Church does not provide opportunities for young adults to restore their sense of self after dissonance-inducting sexual activity. Finally, the dissertation concludes by suggesting that the Church can help to reduce these experiences of dissonance by actively encouraging young adults to take ownership of their theologies of sex, marriage, and relationships prior to sexual opportunities occurring.

Chapter 1: The relationship between belief, action, and identity

One of the most common themes that came up in my research was the strained interactions between belief and behaviour, and their mutually influencing relationship with the self. The narratives pointed towards an extreme sense of malleability of each; participants' belief, action, and identity went through processes of reformation whilst individuals negotiated with their sexual behaviour and desires. This chapter will explore the ways that moral convictions (or lack thereof) shaped participants' actions, which subsequently shaped their identities, and vice versa. This became an important theme to explore because it appears that many of my participants' sexual experiences, and the emotional turmoil that followed, were the result of participants' lack of firm convictions about their own sexual boundaries prior to sexual opportunities arising.

This chapter asks *how* people believe things rather than simply *what* they believe by taking into consideration Jonathan Mair's (2013) call for Anthropology to 'pay attention to modalities or styles of belief' (p450). As Mair points out, much can be gained from exploring *actual* religious belief by interpreting the wider context, 'including the relationships, embodied knowledge and aesthetic standards with which cognitive aspects of belief are tied up' (p463). Mair suggests that if we observe belief through this wider lens, we might find that beliefs are much more transient and complex than they initially appear. Indeed, my participants gave much insight into the ways in which religious belief itself can be understood as a set of embodied skills which require effort to form and strengthen throughout the believer's lifetime. The chapter will explore how belief and action interact bidirectionally in the case of forming and then living up to one's own sexual ethics. The outline of the chapter will be as follows: I explore the silenced or limited conversations that participants had on the topic, followed by participants' interactions with authority figures and then with secular culture, and finally I discuss participants' common experiences of being sexually

intimate before having fully formed beliefs about whether they should or not. According to my participants' experiences, I conclude that moral beliefs – specifically about sex - are dynamic and often shift to accommodate both internal and external pressures. The chapter highlights the importance of providing space for believers to consider and discuss sexual ethics in order to form healthy and well-established decisions about their own sexual beliefs – ideally *prior* to actually having sexual opportunities and/or experiences. The chapter points to the reality that *sincerely* holding a belief to be true is often much more complex, painful, and transformative than is acknowledged or accepted in church teaching on doctrine and ethics.

Silence and stifled discourse leading to alternative discourses

One of the participants who took part in the narrative exercise, which invited participants to write narratives exploring their experiences of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, demonstrates the kinds of statements that are often made in Christian circles about sexual ethics. He wrote:

> *There are a tirade of increasingly painful outcomes. There are reasons to hold back and be scared, for fear of the damage that might be done. Relationships, people, memories, feelings are not simple. They can be destroyed in an instant and take so much longer to repair. Principles can be the barrier that prevents mistakes. I don't mean to be insensitive - there are many people who would rightly say that's too simplified. As if by saying casual sex is wrong the whole situation could have been avoided. Without diminishing anyone who feels they have been made a victim, let's admit that self-control can protect us from decisions which are rash.*

The above is the full response from an anonymous male participant. I use it here because it points helpfully to the heavily opinionated, emotive, and dogmatic statements in Christian circles that other participants complained about. They hint at blanket statements like this when they talk about unhelpful and "simplified" comments that are made with no reference to personal experience and without clear reasons to back them up. It struck me that, compared to the other 24 participants,

this one demonstrated no vulnerability or willingness to share why he held those views. It is unclear whether he had had sex outside of marriage himself, giving him first-hand experience of "the damage that might be done", or whether he had never been in a sexually intimate scenario and therefore had no experience of the "self-control" required. There was also very little specificity about what he was actually advising people to "hold back and be scared" of; it is unclear whether he was referring to penetrative sex, any sexual activity at all, or something in between. Finally, it demonstrates limited humility in the sense that he clearly thinks that what he has to say is the truth and that there need be no further discussion, which was something participants struggled with. I suggest that this participant has provided evidence of the kinds of comments that led other participants to feel that their questions were stifled; they leave little room for discussion or nuance, and the tone implies that the writer might be unlikely to take a non-judgemental approach to the experiences or "mistakes" participants felt they had made. The narrative therefore provides foresight into some of the experiences of teaching or conversation about sex which I now explore.

For many who took part in this research, stifled discourses on sexuality left them covertly dismissing, critiquing, and nuancing the prescribed beliefs about sex outside of marriage by themselves, with their partners, or with friends who had similar questions. After experiencing sexual desire, they began to think more seriously about what they had been taught. Sophie wrote:

> *From a young age I was taught that sex before marriage is wrong. It was justified or explained through the belief that sex is sacred, special, and therefore virginity should be kept for one person once you are married. Throughout my early teens I didn't question it much, I thought most people thought the same. But as I got older I realised that wasn't the case.*

Participants discussed the ways they began to question these things. For example, some had questions about what *was* allowed before marriage, what counted as sex, and whether the bible's teaching was even clear on these matters. Because many felt they had no safe spaces to ask questions such as "how do I build intimacy with my boyfriend without sinning?", and "what

changes when you've got a ring on your finger?", they tried to find answers themselves. In other words, people were "left to work out" what they believed about sex on their own – often through "trial and error" – which, in many of my participants' cases, led to them getting hurt. According to my participants, this approach to forming beliefs about sex has caused faith crises, painful breakups, and both spiritual and emotional trauma.

Furthermore, due to the lack of open conversation about matters of sex, this experimental journey of finding out what they believed was an isolating experience for participants as they often had no one to talk to about sexual regrets. For example, Hannah explained that she "was able to live within the understanding of sex" that she had "created" for herself and was left alone "without any challenge" or interest from other people. The limited conversation meant that she had to form beliefs, make decisions about her behaviour, and then deal with the consequences by herself. Many participants noted similar situations which led to frustrations about their church's handling of the topic. Esther wrote:

> *Discussions surrounding sex were never really discussions, they were just statements, and it was implied that no one could possibly disagree and still consider themselves a 'true Christian'… I think if people have had sexual experiences and regret them, there needs to be a space where they can talk about it and seek support. And I think if people have had or are having sexual experiences and do not think it is a mistake or a problem, there needs to be the opportunity to have an open dialogue that allows people to express their opinions and feelings without feeling ostracised or judged.*

Throughout the narratives and interviews, part of the disappointment around the public sexual advice for unmarried Christians was the lack of clarity – combined with the limited willingness of the Church to encourage conversations that could clear up confusions. Participants felt that "other than, essentially, don't have sex until you're married", the teaching on the topic was "vague" and "unhelpful". Sarah wrote that "the lack of openness in the Church has made navigating sexual

intimacy in [her] relationship extremely hard" and explained that the silence on the subject meant that she was left alone to "figure out" the specifics of the teaching she had received. My findings suggest that this very general "no sex outside of marriage" teaching, combined with limited opportunities for open conversation, led unmarried couples to experiment with their sexual boundaries, forming their own theologies of sexuality based on their own experiences and opinions. In her narrative, Sarah was still with the boyfriend she had been exploring her sexuality with, and she spoke of the "flexible perspective on sexuality" they hold, which allows them to regularly re-evaluate their beliefs as they learn more about themselves, their sexuality, and God. She wrote:

> *I have never believed in hard and fast rules in my faith, which enables me to have a more flexible perspective on sexuality. Where we 'draw the line' continually changes based on our relationship at different stages and we have learnt how to savour being intimate without necessarily being sexual. At times we have been sexually intimate and I felt incredibly at peace with that and with God and my faith.*

Because many young people do not feel able to discuss the specifics of Church doctrine, such as what *is* acceptable outside of marriage, their options were either to accept blindly and "desperately try to abstain" from their sexual desires and instincts – for reasons they often do not understand or agree with – or to experiment and decide for themselves. For the majority of participants in this category, this vague guidance and lack of dialogue led to painful and confusing experiences at best, and bitterness, alienation, and heartbreak at worst.

More than this, participants were frustrated by the lack of clear reasoning behind these vague moral guidelines. For over half of my participants, this was the main reason they failed to keep sexual activity within the context of marriage. Sophie wrote:

I've thought the way the church often teaches about sex can be damaging for people. There is so much of 'do not do this' without the context or explanation of why. Knowing 'why' could have clarified my confusion as a teenager in a happy relationship, just trying my best to love both God and my boyfriend.

This was a common story for my participants as they wrestled with what they believed and had very little teaching to help them in this regard. For example, Jessica wrote that her first sexual experience, which "opened the floodgates" to many others, happened because she had "baseless beliefs" that she did not understand and could not justify to her non-Christian boyfriend. Over time, this led to her allowing "anything but sex" in her first relationship, which she finally ended because of the "overwhelming guilt" she could not get away from. This pattern continued for Jessica throughout numerous relationships, causing "deep pain" for her and her partners. My findings suggest that Jessica's story is a common struggle for young Christians. An ethnographic study in an evangelical Anglican church in London also received very similar results about the lack of clarity in church teaching about sex:

Eliza developed her beliefs around sexuality based on what she believed God desired of her, not church teachings (which she complained were lacking as they did not explain 'the why').

Gaddini, 2020, p112

Gaddini's participant was also forced to come to her own conclusions about sexuality outside of marriage because her church did not provide her with sufficient reasoning. My participants were therefore not alone in having sexual opportunities in their formative years, whilst they were trying to make sense of their beliefs about their boundaries. This is made more complicated by the fact that many of my participants said they had very few people whom they trusted enough to feel able to talk to about sex. In Jessica's words, this resulted in her "figuring it out...the hard way", leading

her to get "swept up in exploring what felt right or wrong" for herself, which she believes has caused lasting damage from which she has not yet healed.

In an interview James explained his experiences of struggling to make sense of the beliefs about sexuality that he had received from his church. Firstly, he noted that he had never even considered the question of *why* sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong, and what the bible teaches about it. It was only when he "fell in love and first acted on [his] sexual desires with [his] girlfriend" that he began to consider the teaching that he had previously "taken for granted". He wrote the following:

> *When it happened, it was like, this is clearly normal… this is how things should work… as soon as I had that experience I started to question things that I wouldn't have before… Why am I being told this stuff at church, is that actually true? But then – how do I know that I'm right? How do I know my experiences aren't just taking me down a path of thought that I want to be true?*

His frustration was evident as he recalled, laughing, "the Sunday School teachings about the 'great and wise King Solomon'" and the fact that they had "failed to mention that he enjoyed sexual relations with hundreds of wives and concubines". He shared some of his internal debates with me, acknowledging the societal differences between 21st century Britain and the contexts in which the bible was written. This point was particularly common among participants; they argued that the bible spoke to very different cultures, and one asked themselves whether the guidelines should be "more realistic, now that that we're not getting married at 13 anymore". These kinds of findings were also common in the literature. Studies in a US theological seminary received almost identical responses to my participants about the confusion around moral teachings:

Joseph expressed his frustration thus: "The church tells me that premarital sex is a sin, but I don't understand why. What are the consequences? I know people who are doing it and claim Christ as Lord and Saviour but I'm not seeing the damage."

Chaparro, 2015, p83

Along with my participants, then, unmarried Christian adults at a US bible college also did not know why they were told that sex should be kept for marriage. Because their churches did not provide clear and evidenced reasoning or encourage open conversations about questions such as these, people found it extremely hard to agree with and therefore live up to the standards prescribed.

Many of those participants who regarded the "no sex before marriage teaching" as outdated, misunderstood, or open to interpretation, had nowhere to voice these opinions or discuss them with trusted Christian authority figures. Natalie wrote that all the Christians she knew were just "covering [up] the issue" of sexuality, to the extent that she wondered whether people who were married even talked about their sex lives. In and out of faith crises, she "slept with several people", including her current boyfriend who is also a Christian. She explained that in their relationship as a Christian couple who have both had sex outside of their relationship, they were still trying to figure out their boundaries. At the time of writing, they were "pausing being sexually intimate for now, having conversations about it with each other and praying about it". Her narrative highlights the seclusion of this process of negotiation between belief and behaviour; she wrote that because she has never told anyone about it, she feels she is hiding a "big shame" that she "can't confess". She explained that this left her struggling to feel integrated into her Christian community because of the fear of judgement. Mathew Guest's research in an evangelical congregation in the UK found that public discourses tended to be partial, avoided controversy, and allowed the perceived attitudes of the majority to shape them (Guest et al, 2016). Discussion on topics such as sexuality were often avoided, and they were 'effectively privatised' (p79) due to the lack of public expression,

which fits with the experiences of my participants. Guest found that conservative beliefs, particularly those that clashed with mainstream societal beliefs, were often kept within private spheres such as small group settings so as not to cause offence or disrupt unity in the congregation. In practice this meant that teaching rarely gave explicit moral prescriptions, but rather pointed vaguely to the bible and left church members to draw their own conclusions.

It is important to note the impact this stifled conversation can have on couples who are trying to make sense of biblical teaching, often whilst or after already being sexually intimate, and to consider the impact that this has on the couples' ability to feel safe in Christian communities. As well as this, the seclusion that Christian couples often experienced (although often self-inflicted due to shame) made it more difficult for them to establish their beliefs. Whilst in the midst of these belief-forming processes, the fact that couples often did not have close Christian community involved made it easier for them to get distracted by one another and the temptations to be sexually intimate.

Participants made plain the consequences of Christians being left to come up with answers to their own questions about sex. Peter, who had sex with his non-Christian girlfriend and only came to terms with his beliefs about sex after the relationship broke down, said:

> *The dissonance and discomfort I felt between my actions and my beliefs led me to do some serious investigation into the reasons behind the Christian teaching on sexual sin and in particular pre-marital sex. The logic behind the approach of the Church became clear to me when it was corroborated by my own experience and feelings, and other sociological research that I came across. It was only through actually experiencing first-hand the effects of sex that I was able to understand and appreciate the advice that was given to me, and the teaching of the Church on this issue. However, I would not wish anyone else to have to have the experience in order to understand the good reasons behind the Church's teaching, and so if I was in a position of influence in another Christian's life, who was in a similar position to the one I had been in, then I would seek to give*

them similar advice, but in the strongest terms and with the added weight of my own first-hand experience.

Here we see how Christians are having painful moments of realisation about the reasoning behind Church doctrine only through their own experiences of sexual intimacy. Experiences like Peter's make sense of the frustration and hurt that participants have expressed about the teaching they had received about sex outside of marriage. I argue that my participants' experiences demonstrate the need for leaders to offer open and vulnerable discourse, with reference to personal first-hand experiences of the "damages caused by sex outside of marriage". Without this, I suggest that young adults struggle to understand the logic behind the guidance and are therefore reluctant to be cautious about it. In some instances, the limited discussion frustrated participants so much that they renounce any of the teaching they received. Instead, these participants opted to explore their sexual beliefs themselves, usually finding out what they believe through painful experiences.

As well as the limited discourse about what was acceptable outside of marriage, participants were also frustrated by the lack of advice about *how* to live according to those standards. Tom explained that he had had sexual encounters with over 30 women, some of whom were Christians. He explained that he had "a clear sense that sex was wrong before marriage" but had never understood, or been offered help understanding, how to "deal with his sexuality in a healthy way". Claire put this more abruptly, saying that the teaching she received merely attempted to "shame and scare" young people into an impossible task of "having nothing to do with their sexual desires until they got married". Tom explained that although his behaviour caused him immense misery and guilt, he did not have "the willpower or understanding of the gospel to be able to resist" his sexual impulses for many years. His words resonate with those of many other participants who had questions about the challenging and self-denying lifestyle they were supposed to be living but had no one to ask. In his study on men's sex lives in a Christian theology college, Onorio Chaparro (2015) found that men were unlikely to remain "sexually pure" without practical wisdom or

positive teaching on why and how they should keep sex within marriage. He found that this lack of nuanced and realistic discussion led to men feeling pressured by legalistic burdens which, in turn, led to limited success, feelings of guilt, and eventually a disregard for the teachings altogether. One of his participants said the following:

> *According to the church and the bible it's not the correct way. You should both be virgins. I never understood why… I would say it is a sin, but not why… I believe because of reputable people who have taught me.*
>
> *Onorio, 2015, p83*

These findings are similar to my own and emphasise the fact that unmarried Christians find it hard to follow guidance about sex when they do not understand the reasoning behind it. I therefore suggest the importance of having open conversations in Church about matters of sexuality rather than dogmatic and unquestionable guidelines.

Participants also complained that there was extremely limited teaching on what *was* healthy for unmarried Christian couples who were trying to explore whether marriage was a sensible option for them. Emily wrote:

> *A lot of couples are trying to work out what is "right" and what they feel peace about, without having much guidance on how to build intimacy without "sinning".*

It is clear from the narratives that relationship advice felt very limited and rarely shed light on how to build strong, committed relationships without involving sexual intimacy. In fact, one participant wrote predominantly about the limited teaching on emotional and spiritual intimacy, because she felt that this was as important as the teaching on sexual boundaries:

> *Emotional boundaries are not often well addressed and instead of having sex physically, people almost seek to satisfy that longing emotionally which can lead to just as much hurt.*

Jade

Jade noted that she and many other friends had been hurt in relationships (both romantic and platonic) because they had not kept "healthy emotional boundaries" and had often built up excessive trust and dependency on friends of the opposite sex. She commented that this limited guidance about spiritual and emotional intimacy was as important as that of sexual intimacy, but often it seemed that sexual boundaries were over-emphasised. This observation is important when we consider whether unmarried couples would be better equipped to manage sexual boundaries if they were given more holistic relationship advice. I therefore suggest that my participants would benefit from information on how to build healthy relationships, taking emotional and spiritual factors into account rather than simply emphasising the importance of not having sex.

Authority figures

With regards to their beliefs about sexuality, participants gave varying levels of authority to their church leaders. Whilst most were very comfortable trusting their own viewpoint and did not worry too much about judgement from authority figures, some did have genuine fears about the impact their behaviours would have on their relationships at church and the stance that their church leaders might take. Natalie had "never told anyone in [her] church congregation about [her sexual experiences]" because she was afraid that she would be "judged or exiled from the church." This fear of feeling exiled, judged, or generally unwelcome in the church was fairly common for my participants, and it led not only to hiding the realities of their sex lives, but also their opinions and beliefs about how their church dealt with sexuality and ways they feel it should change. Many who had contrary beliefs or were frustrated about the Church's dealings with sexuality rarely spoke up or tried to improve the conversation due to of these fears. Natalie continued:

I also don't completely agree about the lack of conversation around premarital sex and sexual intimacy, but I am too afraid to bring it up with others in the congregation and who are leaders in the church.

However, other participants were less afraid of the opinions of church leaders and shared more freely with them. For example, James did partially open up to his church leader about his sexual intimacy with his non-Christian girlfriend despite being able to predict his disapproving stance on the situation. Whilst assuming that he might be judged negatively and advised against his sexual relationship, he pursued a pastoral conversation with his church leader but held back certain confessions:

After speaking with my Pastor, I decided it could not continue. I didn't even explain the extent of our relationship as I was afraid of the judgement I would face from him.

When I asked why he felt the need to keep certain facts from his pastor, he explained:

There's obviously a lot of resistance. As soon as you start to question these things, they immediately put the shutters up and say, "they're losing their faith", which I just don't think is true or helpful… my pastor kept trying to bring it back to Jesus dying for me, as if I was taking that as separate from what I was talking about.

James was frustrated because he felt that his pastor had made assumptions about his understanding of Jesus' death simply because he was struggling with, and trying to understand, his sexual boundaries with his girlfriend. It was common amongst my participants to fear that members of the church – particularly those in authority - would judge them or, more importantly, their relationship with Jesus and their Christian identity. Sophie said that in church, she "felt deeply ashamed - dirty almost - and definitely a failed Christian". It therefore seemed like one of participants' primary fears around people knowing about their sexual experience was that they would be viewed as having a 'lesser' Christian faith than those who were not having sex or wanting

to talk about sex outside of marriage. As well as demonstrating the awareness that participants had about the potential perceptions that others would have about their Christian identity, it also points to the importance that they placed on these perceptions. They often appeared to prioritise the way they might be perceived over their desire to have open conversations about their sexual experiences, despite the painful searching and frustrated questioning that this stifled conversation caused.

On the other hand, unlike those participants who feared the judgement of authority figures, some participants had negative experiences of teaching which gave them reason to dismiss the church's teaching on sex altogether. Hannah noted her church's annual seminar on sex and relationships and explained that because "one person on the panel said something ridiculous", she used that to "justify rejecting everything they'd said". She wrote:

> *They had a panel answering questions and, unsurprisingly, several of them said that you shouldn't be doing some of the things that we were doing outside of marriage. One of the panel members also said that you shouldn't even kiss with tongues, which I thought was ridiculous. Matt came away from this evening worried about what we were doing and thinking that we should stop, but I wasn't convinced. They hadn't said anything particularly different from what I'd heard before and hadn't directly contradicted the idea that sex was one particular act. I thought that their advice might be helpful for people who were more easily tempted to go all the way and commit the actual sin (penis in vagina sex) but we were more self-controlled than those people so it didn't apply to us. Plus, since one person on the panel had said something ridiculous, I think I was trying to justify rejecting everything they'd said.*

Hannah acknowledged that combined with the imminent temptations of exploring their sexuality in their relationship, hearing "bad teaching" provided legitimacy for her to adapt what she had heard or to discard Christian guidance on the matter altogether. Interestingly in these situations the judgements were switched; the authority figures warning about sexual intimacy were judged by

members of the congregation who were not particularly concerned about what they were doing outside of marriage. Grace, who spent her early life in "the brethren" and was therefore given extremely conservative teaching on sex and marriage eventually left to go to a more "mainstream church". She said:

> *Being taught that anything sexual was a sin caused huge conflict - why do we have such desires naturally if it is considered a sin...surely we are just set up to fail. We were never taught good practical sex education, how to deal with your desires. Instead we were taught that we shouldn't have them. Which is shocking.*

Grace was openly angry about the teaching she received within the brethren, saying: "do I regret having sex with both boyfriends before I married one of them? No". She also said that many people she knew got married young to "have guilt free sex... fast forward a couple of years and 3/4 couples are divorced". I suggest that Grace's particularly bad experiences of extremely conservative Christian teaching led her to form her own beliefs about sexuality and completely disregard the moral teaching of the church in which she grew up. She then stated what she believes now:

> *If you are sleeping with a different man every night, not forming intimate relationships with people or are addicted to pornography, that is not healthy, and is what I would describe as sexual immorality. These actions are immoral.*

Grace had decided to ignore the guidance she had been given at her church and established her own sets of beliefs. This reaction to restricting teaching is understandable given the trends in the authority of religious leaders recent decades. Scholars have noted that the individual has become the most decisive authority figure when considering lifestyle choices and ethical beliefs (Petersen and Donnenwerth, 1997), which certainly fits with my participants' experiences. Man-hei Yip

(2003) found similar results to mine in his research with homosexual and bisexual Christians; 'the self plays a far greater role than church authority' (p136).

In Britain in 2022, it is increasingly rare that religious dogma would have the final say over how people should or should not behave, and any attempts for it do so are usually widely criticised – particularly those that have implications on secular society, such as the ongoing pro-life and same-sex marriage debates which are often littered with hostile religious language from some Christians. Ruth Perrin (2020) discusses generational shifts in the willingness of young adults to organise their beliefs and identity around doctrine provided by authority figures. She writes that millennials and younger generations are used to being exposed to 'a plethora of beliefs, worldviews and practices' which has led to a 'mosaic' effect (p12); young adults now tend to piece together their identities and beliefs using a combination of sources rather than basing it only on their local church's doctrine. Perrin suggests that these changes are the result of habitual consumerism within an increasingly pluralistic and liberal society, and I suggest that these generational shifts account for some of the rejection of authority evidenced in my results.

Interruptions from the secular viewpoint

The narratives also pointed out some of the obvious and stark contrasts between Christian and secular views of sex, and the ways in which increasingly liberal societal norms have been blended into young adults' beliefs, and therefore into their actions and identities as well (Perrin, 2020). Participants seem to have created alternative discourses, taking wider social norms and combining them with various theological beliefs provided by their Christian worldview, as well as their own experiences of their sexuality. I will now discuss the ways in which participants have engaged with secular interpretations of sex outside of marriage.

Conversations about sex in Christian circles appeared to be in direct contrast to conversations in modern secular society, in tone, content, and approach. In comparison to Christian environments,

popular culture frequently references sex explicitly, both seriously and in jest. Tom mentioned that he would never have been able to talk about his sexual experiences "to family or Christian friends", but he remembered "boasting about it to lads at school" often. Participants regularly complained about the awkward silences in church about sex outside of marriage and the fact that it was often "avoided" or "covered up". This silence seems almost the complete opposite to their experiences of explicit or light-hearted conversations about sex in the media and with non-Christian friends. It is important to note that this contrast is likely to exacerbate these frustrations about the restrictive nature of discussions on sex within the Church; as the secular world increasingly encourages open conversations about sexuality, the fact that the Church rarely does will feel more obvious to young people and will likely become an ever-growing source of frustration, shame, and fear for those who are trying to live out their Christian faith whilst living in secular society.

Some of my participants expressed concerns about missing out on the experiences that the young adults around them all seemed to be having. In her narrative, Gemma questioned whether she "would have had several relationships by now" if she had not been a Christian. She wrote:

> *The modern societal perception of having to 'achieve' things by a certain age, makes keeping the principle of celibacy until marriage as very difficult to uphold. I have felt a deep sense of shame or embarrassment when others talk about having had sex etc. and they are really shocked that I haven't had sex.*

Another participant, Sarah, felt pressured to have sexual experiences as a teenager because "everyone else was doing it". She had similar anxieties to Gemma; as a teenager she had been concerned about what she would say when people asked things like "who was your first kiss?" and "have you DONE anything?". Her experiences of not wanting to be left behind resonated with other participants:

> *At that time, I felt it was good to explore what I liked and to have experience or no one would want me - this is what I garnered from secular culture. I felt it was expected that I would be sexually intimate. I then reconciled this belief with my faith by compartmentalising what counted as forbidden (ie sexual penetration) and what was okay.*

Here we see this tension between wanting to be accepted in the Christian community as well as in the secular community. People feared both judgement for being sexually intimate with their partners as well as judgement for abstaining from sexual intimacy. Emily also commented on the conversations she had with both Christian and non-Christian friends about her decisions on her sexual boundaries with her partner:

> *The more liberal you are, the more judged you get. However, there is also a lot of judgment if you are really conservative. It's sad, as there never seems to be a point where there isn't judgement. My non-Christian friends seem quite interested in how I have a relationship with no sex and they think we lack intimacy without it, but then some of my Christian friends think we have too much intimacy and that we are acting wrong. Hard to get the right balance.*

In a bid to negotiate some middle ground between the secular and the Christian view of sex, participants appeared to have combined elements of the teaching they had received from the Church with the norms of modern society to create their own beliefs about sexuality, which many felt were far better evidenced and reasoned than traditional Church doctrine. Whilst trying to make sense of the grey areas around what was acceptable outside of marriage according to the Church, participants consulted wider cultural narratives about what classed as "healthy" or "good" sex.

Similarly, the narratives revealed that modern norms of 'sex as leisure' were influencing Christian beliefs about sex and morality. In 2019, the World Health Organisation's definition of sexual health included having the right to pleasurable and safe sexual experiences (WHO, 2019), which demonstrates that sexual pleasure is viewed as a vital part of life to which all are entitled. The ideals

of secular society suggest that abstaining from sexual desires (other than when this would be non-consensual) is an unhealthy form of sexual suppression which is usually imposed on individuals, rather than there being a valid and healthy option to abstain from sexual desires out of choice. Sex has been defined as a healthy avenue for self-care and self-expression, as well as providing the opportunity to creatively explore and to find meaning in life (Attwood, 2011). Furthermore, medical studies have pointed to the ways that using sex as leisure can be used as a coping mechanism for those suffering with depression – providing meaning and connection in times of mental ill-health (ibid). In these ways, sex is portrayed in secular culture as a completely normal and appropriate way to experience connection. Some participants were in relationships with non-Christians, which were implicated heavily by this secular norm. Jessica wrote:

> *He wasn't a Christian and didn't understand why we couldn't share a bed. It almost offended him that I had said that, I think he saw it as me suggesting that I didn't trust him to respect me.*

This highlights the extent to which abstaining from sex is almost alien to those who do not hold religious beliefs, and this caused difficulties for participants for various reasons. I therefore argue that participants often incorporated secular ideas whilst forming their beliefs about sex outside of marriage. To varying degrees, they agreed with notions that sex is a healthy part of life which should not be restricted for many reasons. I also point out that this is almost the opposite of the traditional Christian viewpoint, which maintains that sex in the wrong context is damaging and unhealthy.

On a related note, participants appeared to have incorporated notions about the importance of pleasure into their understandings of marriage and sexual relationships. For example, Sarah suggested that she wanted to have sex with her partner before they married because she felt they needed to "get to know that part of [themselves]" first. Other participants also suggested that there were risks involved in marrying someone with whom they had not been sexually intimate. I suggest that this concern demonstrates fairly secular perspectives about sex and marriage. All Christian

understandings of marriage emphasise sacrifice and life-long companionship, which chooses the good of the other rather than the self. I therefore suggest that worrying that sex might not be "good" with their future spouse suggests that participants had been influenced by a more secular view of marriage. Participants appeared to have been influenced by secular culture in the ways that they placed less emphasis on the fact that marriage is a permanent covenant which often requires sacrifice over one's own pleasure. In these ways, a secular view of sex appeared to have seeped into these unmarried Christians' understandings of sex; rather than seeing it as a God-given tool to unify and strengthen a lifelong bond to be used for the glory of God, some appeared to see sex more as a fundamental right of human existence which should be easy and pleasurable at all times.

Participants had also adopted more recent social norms about female sexuality into their beliefs about sex, which the Church as a whole is still coming to terms with. In an interview with James, he said about church culture:

> *It seems like a Christian relationship, presented to us, is that a guy should always want sex, girls never do, the wife would occasionally give in and do it.*

When he realised that his girlfriend also had strong sexual desires, he began to disregard his initial expectations about women's sexuality. Young adults in this study appeared to be in the process of deconstructing remnants of Victorian Christianity which saw female desire as shameful and an unnecessary concern in relationships (Balswick, 2008). In this way, they are aligning themselves with modern secular culture, which has been acknowledging female sexual desire increasingly since the 1920's (ibid). The idea that women's desire is often as strong, if not stronger, than their male partners is becoming more normalised in society today – although there still appears to be an expectation that men will struggle more than women to practice self-control. Giddens (1993) discussed 'plastic sexuality' as a phenomenon which followed the advent of contraception and removed reproduction from sexual desire, leading to an acknowledgement of women's sexual

enjoyment and began to encourage an unashamedly active pursuit of sexual pleasure (Daniluk, 2003).

I suggest that participants had been coming to terms with the fact that sexual desire for women is much more normal than tradition had led them to believe. Judith explained why she often "pushed [her] boundaries", saying, as if surprised: "honestly, I enjoyed it!". Similarly, Louise said "we lay there for ages afterwards, and I remember not actually being able to believe that we'd done it and that sex was that good". Similarly, Sophie said: "in the moment and even afterward I really enjoyed it". This research demonstrates that fact that Christian men like James only grew to understand women's desires after they had begun being sexually intimate with them. Interestingly, female participants did not seem to feel any more shame than men did about their sexual desires or the fact that they found pleasure in their experiences – in fact, some agreed with secular society that desire and pleasure were valid reasons to allow sex outside of marriage. In these ways, then, participants had been influenced by both secular and religious trends and found themselves negotiating between the two.

Participants also consulted secular sexual ethics to establish their beliefs about what they felt were appropriate and safe sexual situations. The #MeToo movement, founded in 2006, revealed the prevalence of sexual assault and abuse in the contemporary world, rightly highlighting the need for more awareness about consensual sex. These positive steps to reduce sexual violence and coercion have added a dimension to sexual morality which some participants have used to help them form beliefs about their sexual activity outside of marriage. Some participants incorporated questions about whether the sex is respectful, a demonstration of love, and enjoyable for both people into their decisions about sex. Some participants felt that if there was no harm caused, having sex outside of marriage was not too much of a concern. For example, Sophie commented:

> *Being sexually intimate with someone brings you infinitely closer to another being, and I think it's best that that happens within a loving relationship, where each party is respected. But in my*

experience, I felt I was in a loving relationship and I knew I was respected, so I struggled to see how it could be so wrong.

This demonstrates the ways in which dominant societal themes such as consent and female sexual empowerment were incorporated into my participants' religious understandings of sex, both in and out of marriage. In these ways, participants are being influenced by secular society in positive ways, demonstrating that, to some extent, there are benefits of incorporating other sources into the formation of religious beliefs.

So far I have examined the ways in which my participants formed their own belief systems, made up of Christian teaching, secular cultural norms, and personal feelings and experiences. My research demonstrates that many participants' beliefs about sex were in a constant state of flux, susceptible to drastic change at any point. Without firm and constant beliefs about sexuality, participants often found themselves acting out of confusion and indecisiveness – which, combined with the urgency of sexual and romantic desire in their relationships, led them to behave in ways they later regretted. I will now discuss the impacts of these actions or behaviours and the ways they, in turn, shaped identity and also reshaped belief.

The relationship between wavering convictions, "sinful" behaviour, and belief systems

These incomplete, malleable, and precarious sets of beliefs about sex outside of marriage appear to have led participants to change their beliefs in order to fit in with their experiences. Because many of my participants acted on sexual opportunities before they had fully decided what they believed about them, they became influenced by many more factors than they would have been before the act. Interestingly, participants reflecting on these internal conflicts openly acknowledged this risk. For example, James was worried that his "experiences might be taking [him] down a path that [he] want[s] to be true" after he "fell in love with [his] flatmate who wasn't a Christian". It

was apparent that those who had not decided what they believed did feel at risk of letting their experiences of sex lead their beliefs or opinions about it. In a similar way to James, David also had these reservations:

> *"I was quite susceptible to compromising on sexual ethics in the relationship, perhaps in order to please Rachel, or in order to please myself by getting what I thought I wanted."*

He also said that he had sex for the first time with his girlfriend and then "was like 'hmm. I should think about this'." He explained that at this point, he thought briefly about it and then "reached a decision – or convinced [himself he] had – and then just stuck with it". This decision allowed him to have sex without feeling guilty throughout the whole of the relationship, until the relationship ended. Only after it ended, and he stopped having sex, did he come to terms with his beliefs about sex outside of marriage. He admitted that the arguments he used to make this decision had been largely influenced by his desires to continue having sex with his girlfriend. Louise and James also discussed the fact that they had made boundaries with their partners with the underlying motivation being what they wanted to do at the time of discussion. For example, after Louise and her partner had tried oral sex for the first time, she said they "subtly" made the decision to claim that "it didn't count as actual sex" but "it was obvious" that rather than "basing it on actual beliefs about whether it was okay", it was based more "on the fact that [they] wanted to do again – but neither of [them] admitted this to the other". They also noted that discussions about "loosening boundaries" tended to take place in the heat of the moment, rather than before any sexual intimacy or temptation had begun. James laughed about this topic in an interview and said, "you're definitely more lenient when the temptation to do it again is right there in front of you". Based on these participants then, I suggest that young adults who have not yet fully formed beliefs about sex outside of marriage are at risk of enjoying sexual experiences and allowing them to shape the formation process.

This highlights the importance of Jonathan Mair's (2013) argument that allowances must be made, 'using an ethnographic sensibility that allows for people's reflexive relationship to their own belief to register' (p452). Only then, Mair argues, will we get close to understanding the 'contours' of belief. On a related note, Ammerman (2020) also highlights the necessity of a practice approach for understanding religion. She emphasises the 'hybridity of social life' and that 'just as work, family, and politics are mutually implicated, so religious practices are not confined to a single institution or uniquely untouched by patterns that originate in other spheres' (p13). My participants highlight the fact that holding a moral belief to be true is a complex and shifting process, requiring analysis of phenomenological experiences, structural domains, and cognitive schemas. Whilst many participants, when considering this topic, saw it as an objective fact that "most Christians believe extra-marital sex [is] a sin and that everyone obviously knew that", my results demonstrate that believing something to be morally unacceptable according to the bible and embodying those beliefs are two very different things. This section has explained the ways in which my participants acknowledged that their experiences of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, which usually happened before they had fully come to any conclusions about their beliefs, led them to alter their beliefs according to their subsequent feelings and desires. This will be explored further in the following chapter, using Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, as I explore the impacts of participants' actions on their identity as Christians, and therefore the implications on subsequent beliefs and actions.

To conclude this chapter, I have discussed the frustrations that many participants felt about the teaching they had received about sex. Many ascribed some of the blame to authority figures for failing to provide them with adequate explanations for the "don't have sex until you're married" trope and allowing them to learn the hard way, having sex and then regretting it. I then explored some of the ways in which this limited or, in some cases, non-existent discourses led participants to form their own beliefs. I described the factors that led to the creation of 'alternative discourses'

about sex which were formed according to concoctions of their own sexual experiences, aspects of secular narratives, reactions to Christian dogma, and their own understandings of God. Finally, I emphasised participants' experiences of the complexities involved in holding beliefs to be true. The chapter demonstrated the fact that religious beliefs are constantly being formed and maintained, usually through the exertion of much emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual effort.

Chapter 2: Cognitive dissonance and avoidance strategies

Having explored the ways in which belief and action have interacted in the lives of participants whilst coming to terms with their sexual behaviour, I will now explore the impact that these dynamics have on their Christian identity. I will use cognitive dissonance theory to understand some of the behaviour shown in the narratives and interviews, suggesting that participants have responded to their own actions in ways predicted by Leon Festinger (1957), using various tactics to reduce dissonance whilst acting against their beliefs. I also use my results to suggest that cognitions about the self were amplified and strengthened when they were used successfully as motivation to avoid discrepant behaviours, which then resulted in further avoidance of dissonance-inducing behaviours as a result of their reinforced Christian identity.

The theory of cognitive dissonance was first defined by Festinger (ibid) to explain the discomfort caused by perceived inconsistencies between pairs of cognitive elements. The theory assumes that people strive for 'cognitive integrity' and 'subsequent congruent behaviour' (Bosco, 2016, p9), leading to the conclusion that when a person makes decisions that go against their core beliefs, they experience psychological struggle and seek to alleviate the discrepancy. Studies of cognitive dissonance therefore predict, for example, that when individuals believe that sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong, but they also engage in sexual activity outside of marriage, they will feel discomfort. Festinger also suggests that the level of discomfort experienced will be proportional to the importance placed on the cognitions by the actor. My research agrees with these predictions, and I suggest that my participants' experiences can be more fully understood through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory. All of my participants experienced discomfort when their behaviour

did not match their beliefs about sex and all of them appeared to employ strategies to reduce feelings of dissonance in various ways, as I will outline in this chapter.

The role of the self-concept is important for understanding cognitive dissonance, but theorists disagree on how cognitions about the self influence the 'arousal and reduction of cognitive dissonance' (Cooper and Stone, 2001, p228); whether cognitions about the self create expectations which result in dissonance arousal, or provide resources for dissonance reduction, or are not linked at all has been debated for some time. Aronson (1968) argued that dissonance is most significant when the behaviour goes against some inherent aspect of the actor's self-concept due to our innate desire to maintain a stable sense of self, and I use my findings to agree with this and also to suggest that dissonance, in these instances, can then lead to dramatic shifts in the identity of the actor as they alter their self-concept in order to relieve the discomfort. The interplay between identity and action becomes important as we uncover the ways in which participants sought to reduce cognitive dissonance. For some, the dissonance caused when they acted against their expectations of the self-concept led them to compartmentalise aspects of the self so that the 'Christian self' did not interact with the 'sexual self'. Alternatively, participants sought to adjust the self-concept, which involved changing the beliefs held or the importance ascribed to them. Finally, there were some participants who demonstrated ways in which their identity as Christians helped them to withhold from sex, preventing dissonance-causing behaviour successfully. In these cases, the self-concept was therefore an influential factor when these participants made the decision to avoid having sex. I now explore these different tactics of avoiding cognitive dissonance in relation to sex outside of marriage, and the influences of and impacts on participants' identities.

Participants all saw themselves as Christians seeking to obey God's commands, and this formed a large part of their self-concept. Their Christian worldview, which gave them varying levels of belief that God created sex for marriage, led them to see "purity" and "abstinence" as part of their identity as unmarried Christians. In these instances, they seemed to make every effort to avoid sex,

and when they failed to do so, they were deeply affected. John wrote about his relationship with his first girlfriend, saying that they "gradually became more and more intimate, but never [went] 'all the way' because that wasn't Christian". About his current girlfriend, he wrote that their sexual intimacy developed slowly due to their attempts to prevent it, "until [they] went 'all the way' and [he] lost an aspect of [his] identity as being celibate for God". John went on to say that he "was humbled and prayed about it, cried a lot, and ate a lot of doughnuts", pointing towards the intensity of spiritual and emotional turmoil that so many of my participants experienced. In John's case, we see the impacts of the conflict between his current identity as an unmarried Christian man who was having sex and his belief that God designed sex for marriage. Because he could no longer identify as "being celibate for God", he experienced intense discomfort and a sense of alienation from his sexual desires, which took many years to heal. I therefore suggest that the self-concept is an important part of cognitive dissonance in both the ways that it causes it and the ways it is affected.

Tactic 1 – Categorise the self

The phrase "living a double life" was explicitly mentioned in seven narratives and three interviews, implying that this uncomfortable experience of living with conflicting cognitions is common among Christians who are sexually active whilst believing they should not be. Joe wrote:

> *This mainly happened at a confusing time in my faith and I am sure was partly a rift that I felt between myself and members of my church as I never really talked to anyone about it and often felt like I was living a bit of a double life.*

Like Joe, other participants also reported living a life which involved acting on sexual urges, causing a disjunction between their "Christian faith and identity on the one hand" and their "powerful sexual desires on the other". In an interview, Luke said that he was partially ambivalent about his actions when he used to have sex with strangers because "it didn't feel like [him]", to the extent

that his mentor had to point out that "there's only one Luke – you did that". In these ways, Luke appeared to have separated his religious beliefs from his sexual actions. He explained the process he went through during sexual activity:

> *…every time I've done that I've just shut God out. Not like a bit, but like a 180 ° to like disregard him completely… I didn't want to think about, because I knew what he thought, I know he doesn't want me to do that. And I knew if I thought like that I wouldn't do it.*

I suggest that many of my participants categorised their sex lives, keeping them separate from their faith lives in order to reduce the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance. In an interview, David said that he did not experience guilt regularly, even at church when there was talk of sin. He suggested that this was because he "tend[s] to package stuff up", and it is not until he "actually sit[s] down and think[s] about it" that he acknowledges that "it was a really stupid thing to do". When talking about his sexual guilt and awareness of his sin, he said "it didn't really come up in church… probably because [he'd] unconsciously separated church from everything else". He noted that before communion, confession of sins or reflection can often feel "a bit like going through the motions". David's words imply that his experiences in church have limited connection to his sexual experiences - though he believed sex outside marriage was sinful, his sexual relationship with his girlfriend rarely came to mind in church when people talked about sin. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance makes sense of these semi-conscious attempts to separate the religious and the sexual identity, suggesting that my participants had successfully prevented many moments of the potentially painful awareness of the dissonance between their beliefs about sexuality and their sexual behaviours.

As well as categorising different aspects of the self, I suggest that those with Christian partners also categorised their relationships in a similar way. Louise wrote that the physical intimacy with

her Christian boyfriend made them feel like they almost had two separate relationships: the sexual one and the spiritual one:

> *I felt, in these moments, very separate from God. Almost as if I had shut him out of the room so he couldn't see. This part of our relationship did not fit alongside our Christian part. We both regularly prayed for strength against this temptation, but it rarely came up in other contexts. We usually only discussed it or prayed about it whilst we were actually dealing with the sexual temptation or regret right there and then. We were never able to enjoy or explore our sexuality without making God completely separate. And then we'd go to church together and grow as Christian leaders together and we'd basically be acting like a completely different couple to the one that has sex.*

At this point it is important to consider the ways in which cognitive dissonance is being navigated not just by the individual, but by both of the individuals in Christian relationships. They both must combine their own beliefs, opinions, and experiences and then enter into negotiations together to make a moral decision: whether to go through with the sexual acts or to abstain until married. With two people taking part in this process of categorisation to keep aspects of their relationship separate to avoid dissonance, I suggest that the impacts of the two categories finally "clashing" back together is likely to cause deep hurt and add complications to the relationship. I suggest that two people going through cognitive dissonance adds a layer of complexity to the discomfort both individuals are going through, and I also suggest that the relationship is also likely to offer distractions, often in the form of sexual temptation, as they both try to negotiate their own identities.

Interestingly, most participants separated the two lives unconsciously; it happened without them really noticing whilst they were distracted by the sexual activity. However, Nadia wrote the following in her narrative:

My partner's sister talks to me a lot about her thoughts on it and she once said quite an interesting phrase: I've separated sex from theology. I found this quite challenging as it wasn't the fact it was sex, more just the process of separating something from theology feels like a slippery slope. She said this comment when she has just started dating a non-Christian guy, she's 25 and has decided she wants to have sex because she's separated sex from God.

Whilst Nadia is consciously aware of the option and had chosen not to allow any separation of the faith life and the sex life in her relationship, her partner's sister had consciously made the decision and had actively separated the two in order to have sex without feeling guilty. This is interesting because most participants realised that this separation was happening at a certain point, either during or after they had sexual encounters, and at that point they felt deeply uncomfortable and sought to reconcile the dissonance. In this case, Nadia partner's sister had consciously rationalised it in her head and decided that it was acceptable to keep her sex life apart from her faith life. It would have been interesting to hear her rationale and find out how she did this in practice, and whether she had separated any other parts of her identity or her relationship from her faith or not. Future research could focus on Christians who actively rationalise separations like this and use them to enjoy behaviours they previously classed as "sinning". For now though, I simply point out that most participants did not actively separate the identities, and upon realising that this had happened, they tended to feel discomfort about it.

Participants had different experiences of how long these categorisations of the self lasted and how difficult they found it when they eventually "clashed" back together. Nadia's partner's sister, who had consciously made the separation of "God and sex", told her after a few months of having sex with her boyfriend:

It appears the separation of sex from theology was not as easy as it first appeared, and it's been quite a hard journey.

For some participants, the Christian identity emerged very suddenly after the act, but others experienced long periods of sexual activity, which, more often than not, meant that they "dimmed down" the Christian self. Some disengaged with church and avoided Christian community altogether for long periods of time, whereas others seemed to switch between the two in a continual conflict, going to church and feeling guilty, then avoiding it for a while until they felt "convicted" again. Some participants even became more active in church to make up for the conflicting behaviour, with some continuing to lead worship or small groups whilst they were experiencing the spiritual and emotional turmoil resulting from their sexual experiences. Louise wrote that during intimacy with her Christian boyfriend, they both felt "very separate from God" and like they "had shut him out of the room so he couldn't see". For her, these feelings of being separated from God tended to last a while after the intimacy with her boyfriend, until she had "another encounter with God" where she would "realise, with relief, that God still loves [her] and wants the best for [her]". In these moments, she would commit to trying to "avoid having sex with [her] boyfriend again" and would feel "at one with God and led by the Holy Spirit".

Sonya Sharma's (2011) research with young Christian women points to similar avoidance strategies as those noted above, finding that some of her participants 'disappeared in sex' (p69) due to conflicts between their sexual and Christian identities. Interestingly, they became passive in sexual intimacy, shutting off from their experiences and refusing to fully engage with the pleasure of the acts. In this way, Sharma's participants did not give their 'entire sexual selves' (p70) to the encounters, making them feel less responsible for their perceived deviant behaviour. Although Sharma's findings demonstrate the same strategies of separating the spiritual and the sexual self, it is interesting to note that my participants, rather than becoming physically passive in sexual activity, were more likely to "shut down" their Christian identity and beliefs about sex; at the point of extreme arousal it was more common for my participants to almost switch from embodying their faith to embodying their sexuality – allowing them to fully experience and take part in the sexual

acts whilst avoiding the discomfort of dissonance. Regardless of which self participants tended to shut down, both mine and Sharma's research add to the theory of cognitive dissonance by showing that one tactic of avoiding discomfort is to keep the two conflicting cognitions distinctly separate; in order to engage with their sexuality, unmarried Christians tend to shut out God, and in order to engage with God, they tend to shut out their sexuality.

My participants' experiences suggest that, although people often manage to reduce their awareness of the dissonance and therefore the negative emotions it produces, this does not usually last long and people tend to crash back to reality upon realisation that the two cognitions, ultimately, continue to conflict. Participants did note specific instances when the two overlapped in uncomfortable, and often painful, ways. For example, Sophie wrote that in the moment, and even afterwards, she really enjoyed being sexually intimate with her boyfriend, but when she "got to church on Sunday" she felt "deeply ashamed – dirty almost – and definitely a failed Christian". More than this – two male participants identified moments where, during sexual intimacy, their awareness of their sin became extremely obvious when their discomfort was manifested physically in instances of sexual dysfunction. These examples will be discussed further in Chapter 3, where I discuss the role of the body in acts of dissonance.

In this section I have laid out the first tactic that my participants tended to employ in order to reduce cognitive dissonance whilst enjoying sexual intimacy outside of marriage. By assigning their sex lives to a distinct and separate category, they were able to quieten the discomfort caused by the inconsistencies between belief and behaviour. I now move on to discuss another tactic; rather than keeping the religious identity separate, participants decide to change it to reduce the inconsistencies themselves.

Tactic 2 – Change the self

Perhaps more extreme than categorising parts of their lives, some participants pointed towards significant and long-lasting identity transitions that took place after their first few sexual experiences, which then shaped the behaviour or lifestyle that followed. Naomi, who had resisted "even kissing guys" in order to avoid sexual temptation, wrote that she "stopped declining guys" after she was pressured into her first experience of sexual intimacy with a boy she liked. Because she felt she had "gone too far to please God", her boundaries loosened, and she let "guys do what they wanted". Similarly, Luke spoke of his first sexual encounter at the age of 15, saying that "once that 'line' had been crossed, it was hard to stay on 'the other side' of it again". These experiences were common among my participants as their "failings" clashed with their sense of self, resulting in identity crises and subsequent attempts to re-establish the self in order to regain stability. These experiences were often extremely damaging to the individual's emotional wellbeing, with pressing questions of identity, purpose, and even fears of divine retribution (Pitt, 2010) causing emotional and spiritual distress. In addition to these tumultuous emotions, participants often isolated themselves from their Christian community, which exacerbated the intensity of their questions about identity and belief. It is therefore unsurprising that initial sexual experiences, for some participants, led to symptoms of varying degrees of trauma, anxiety, and depression. These consequences will be explored further in chapter 5.

Research in the US (Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler, 2007; Regnerus and Uecker 2006) found similar results regarding identity change after sexual debut. Young Christians in America very often began to alter their religious beliefs after having sex outside of marriage due to the guilt experienced, allowing them to reduce the importance placed on their sense of "purity" or "identity as being celibate for God" and therefore reducing the extent of the distress felt. This resulted in participants going to church less, spending less time in Christian community, and often eventually abandoning their faith altogether. Similarly, Kimberley Mahaffy's (1996) study with female Christians who were

in same-sex relationships found that they were more likely to alter their cognitions than live with conflicting beliefs. She identified different tactics they used to change their beliefs about sexuality; some emphasised biblical principles of love and acceptance over conduct, others focused on God as creator (of people and their sexualities) and still others drew from definitions of God to provide accepting interpretations of bible verses. If, after questioning, they felt that the cognitions and actions were not compatible, they often then left Christian faith altogether. My participants also engaged in long processes of adapting their beliefs in similar ways, as discussed in Chapter 1's section on the formation of alternative discourses. Louise wrote:

> *We justified each boundary after we had broken it and said that it would mean that we wouldn't have sex - and that was the main thing. We both admitted that if we kept extending these moments of intimacy, we would inevitably end up having sex before we were married. We constantly moved in between the boundaries we set, relaxing them based on dubious logic and enjoying sexual intimacy, and then feeling guilty and tightening them again.*

In this way, Louise and her boyfriend negotiated their beliefs as a couple according to what they had been doing or had wanted to do in the moment. In this example, they extended their boundaries with the rationale that going to the "next boundary" would stop them having sex, which in their opinion "was the main thing". Cognitive dissonance theory can be used here to highlight the potential motives for making extreme changes to belief following, or immediately prior to, engaging in behaviours that go against previous beliefs. My participants again provide evidence of the complexities involved in holding challenging ethical beliefs, and the identity work individuals do continuously whilst doing so. I suggest that cognitive dissonance theory helps us to understand some of the processes and the underlying motives behind the alteration of belief.

As explored in Chapter 1, participants pointed out the fact that they did not really know what they believed about sex outside of marriage. I wonder whether this hesitation to come to any final moral conclusions about sex is another tactic that allows people to remain sexually active outside of

marriage with limited dissonance arousal. Rather than seeking to completely change their beliefs after conflicting behaviour, I suggest that some participants tended to remain confused and unsure about what they believed was morally acceptable outside of marriage, allowing them to have sexual intimacy with their partners without experiencing dissonance. Furthermore, many pointed to their church's failings to help them conclude and consolidate their beliefs prior to their sexual exploration. As discussed in Chapter 1, many participants were of the opinion that there are not really any concrete guidelines about the specifics of sexual conduct outside of marriage, and therefore sought to "experiment" and "figure things out" for themselves. Others appeared to busy themselves in order to limit thinking about their beliefs, often continuing with their actions despite not really knowing what they thought about them. Many also emphasised the speed with which their sexual intimacy increased, emphasising the ways they got "swept up" in it all without properly "sitting down to think about it". Judith wrote about her relationship with a nominal Christian:

> *Our relationship escalated at an alarming speed. Any boundaries that I thought I would have in a relationship disintegrated rapidly, and it wasn't long before we slept together. The novelty and excitement of a physical relationship meant that I buried the feelings of guilt I had knowing that I was sinning against God.*

This tactic of minimising dissonance by disengaging with the thought processes required to form, hold, and stick to their moral standpoints appeared to be effective up until the point at which they, for whatever reason, eventually ended up stopping the dissonance arousing behaviour. At this point, participants appeared to find time and space to acknowledge what they believed and evaluate their behaviour accordingly. David explained that it was only after his girlfriend, who he had been sleeping with for months, broke up with him that he had to come to terms with his beliefs about sex, which was a painful process and led to bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts. I therefore suggest that some young adults may avoid coming to any firm conclusions about their beliefs on sex before marriage, allowing them to act on their desires without discomfort, but I also point out

that this technique is likely to an abrupt and painful end, with participants deciding what they believe about sex too late.

Similarly to this, some participants appeared to go along with what their partners believed was acceptable rather than fully coming to conclusions by themselves, particularly if they had already been sexually active in some way. Hannah wrote about the events following a church seminar on sex:

> *Unsurprisingly, several of them said that you shouldn't be doing some of the things that we were doing outside of marriage… my boyfriend came away from this evening worried about what we were doing and thinking that we should stop, but I wasn't convinced… I thought that their advice might be helpful for people who were more easily tempted to go all the way and commit the 'actual sin' (penis in vagina sex), but we were more self-controlled than those people, so it didn't apply to us… things continued as usual for a while. Over the next couple of months, Matt withdrew more and more… he eventually said it was because he thought what we were doing was wrong. He'd sort of hinted at this before but I assumed, since we continued being sexually intimate, that he continued to share my views that it was in fact ok…*

In this way, Hannah's boyfriend appears to have been trying to limit his feelings of dissonance by leaving the burden of decision with his sexual partner – he went along with their sexual intimacy because Hannah believed it was okay, and even though he had been worried it was wrong for a long time, he did not voice his concerns but continued being sexually intimate with her. Similarly, David explicitly said that part of his rationale for deciding to have sex with his non-Christian girlfriend was "to make her happy" because she didn't "see any problem with sex outside of marriage". Similarly, Louise talked about the ways that she and her boyfriend would often "subtly try to turn the other on more so that it wasn't [their] own decision to break [their] boundaries". In this way, some participants appeared to be in a process of negotiation with both their own sexual

and spiritual self, and then their partner's as well. Some even led the other to make the decision to "sin" in order to negotiate the blame away from the self.

Other participants behaved in similar ways, particularly those who were being sexually intimate with partners who were not Christians. Jessica and Naomi both gave in to physical desire because they felt guilty when their partners wanted to keep going further. Their non-Christian partners could not understand why they did not want to be physically intimate with them, which led them to relax their boundaries until they eventually had sex. Cognitive dissonance theory would interpret these behaviours as attempts to alleviate the discrepancy between the belief and the desire to act against it, by putting someone else into the position of responsibility. This tactic, where sexual acts are consensual but initiated by one member, allow the other to feel less responsible for the dissonance arousing behaviour. These nuances of consent and boundaries are discussed in later chapters.

These behaviours were far more common if participants were acting against their sexual beliefs on a regular basis, as opposed to "making a mistake" once or twice. Controlled psychological research found that when forced to behave in ways that were contrary to their beliefs people tended to internalise that behaviour, altering moral views to maintain a coherent sense of self. For example, if participants were forced to tell small lies, they then altered their moral views about lying afterwards (Jones, 1981). Researchers also found that people were more likely to end up holding the new belief permanently if they were asked to carry out the behaviour more than once (Collins and Hoyt, 1972). I add to this research; according to my participants, the likelihood of altering cognitions permanently depended on how many times the individual acted in dissonance inducing ways. Of my participants, those who had more regular sexual encounters whilst believing they should not were much more likely to change their cognitions to align with this behaviour, whilst those who only had one night stands did not feel the need to alter any cognitions. I therefore argue

that young adults who regularly behave in ways that do not match the self-concept, i.e., have sex outside of marriage regularly, are likely to alter their self-concept in some way to reduce discomfort.

In what I am calling tactic 2, my participants opted to negotiate and adapt their own religious beliefs and identity in order to avoid the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. Many admitted altering their boundaries according to their feelings and desires at the time of arousal, whilst others went through long periods of identity shifts or even turned away from their Christian faith altogether. Alternatively, participants appeared to almost feign ignorance by avoiding coming to any firm conclusions about their sexual ethics and boundaries, and others allowed their partners to make the decisions for them so that they could avoid blame. I now turn to the final tactic that was common for my participants, which actually resulted in a stronger sense of Christian identity and a strong desire to avoid dissonance-arousing behaviours.

Tactic 3 – Amplify the self

Having discussed the ways in which participants sought to prevent dissonance whilst being sexually active, I will now explore the ways in which my participants employed the threat of dissonance to avoid temptation; they allowed their beliefs, and therefore the expectations associated with their self-concepts, to prevent sexual activity outside of marriage. When employed successfully, this strengthened the religious identity and led to further successful dissonance-avoidance in occasions afterwards, and vice versa. Luke explored his spiritual understanding of this:

> *I think there is an element to which we, through the thing we worship, define who we are… if I'm a Christian… and if I worship God I then become more like him. But I don't know if there's a thing where… if you worship other things, I think it feels like an allegiance thing to me. Like who or what you give your allegiance to, then it starts to shift and you feel that's where your identity lies.*

Luke attributed this dynamic to a strengthened sense of religious self; when he acted with self-control and avoided dissonance, these actions fed positively into his religious identity, which then led to further dissonance-avoidance. This explains some of the more productive ways in which the self is developed and shaped by actions and decisions that are in line with the religious identity and the cognitions that form it. When participants "chose to obey and avoid the temptation", they aligned themselves with their beliefs and their actions produced a stronger religious "allegiance".

This is almost entirely opposite to the response of tactic 2, where the actions taken forced changes to the Christian identity, leading to further actions against their previous beliefs and self-concepts. I suggest that some of my participants' experiences gave insight into an element of cognitive dissonance that has not been thoroughly explored: the ways that the internal threat of dissonance can actually lead to positive experiences of belief and action being united, resulting in reinforced cognitions. In this way, the theory of cognitive dissonance can be used not only to explain the discomfort experienced when acting against religious beliefs, but also to understand more fully the feelings of satisfaction experienced when people act in accordance with their cognitions. In one narrative which was written with a sense of relief that he was no longer having sexual encounters with strangers, Joe wrote about times when he felt "strongly convicted by the Holy Spirit to leave the situations". This happened twice and these events became significant milestones which led him to stop going home with girls, avoiding sexual relationships outside of marriage. In this way, the choice to act in accordance with existing cognitions resulted in a strengthened sense of self with reinforced cognitions.

This chapter has explored the relationship between belief and action, and the impacts that this relationship has on the actor's self-concept. I have noted 3 of the tactics that were used by my participants to avoid the uncomfortable experience of cognitive dissonance; in response to sexual activity which goes against their belief, some participants chose to shift their sense of identity between their faith lives and their sex lives, allowing themselves to enjoy sexual activity unhindered

by the guilt arising from acting against their beliefs. Others responded by altering their beliefs or Christian identity in ways that allow sexual activity outside of marriage with limited discomfort – either disengaging from their Christian community or changing their views on sex and marriage or abandoning their faith altogether. And finally, tactic 3 explored the more positive impacts of cognitive dissonance – the ways in which participants used their beliefs about marriage, and their awareness of the impact that acting against these will have, to avoid sexual activity and therefore act in agreement with their cognitions.

Chapter 3: The body and the self: a tumultuous relationship

Having explored the ways in which belief and action interact, I will now discuss the physical experiences of these interactions in more depth as well as looking at the ways bodily actions impact on the religious self. I use the narratives and my interviews with participants to identify patterns of both bodily and spiritual experience before, during, and after engaging in acts they had labelled "sinful". I will explore some of the physical responses to this dissonance causing behaviour and the impacts these responses had on participants and their partners. As well as this, I also seek to understand the process by which participants embodied religious beliefs by abstaining from sex. This impacts the body and, in turn, the religious self, which leads to a mutually reinforcing relationship between both the body and the religious self.

The chapter engages with Meredith McGuire's (2007, 2008, 2016) discussions of religion and the body. She describes the ways in which religious belief becomes embodied through religious practice, building on the existing religious identities of the actors. I use my findings to add to this and to suggest that the opposite is also true; sexual acts, practised by individuals who believed they were sinful in their context, appeared to have a diminishing impact on their religious identities. I conclude that, through the same mechanism which sees ascetic discipline regulate the body and establish distinct religious identities, perceived sinful acts – such as sex outside of marriage - can lead to confused and undefined religious identities through the lack of this disciplinary regulation of the religious body. This chapter also explores the ways in which 'society inscribes itself' (McGuire, 1990, p284) upon the bodies of believers through mediation and observance, and the impact this had on participants' sense of self. Along with McGuire's work, I also find Bourdieu's theories helpful for understanding the relationship between the body and society, offering insights

into the ways in which participants did or did not use their socially informed bodies (Bourdieu, 1977) to enact religious meaning, and providing explanations for the identity transitions discussed in previous chapters. I explore in depth the emotional, physical, spiritual, and societal impacts of participants having sex outside of marriage as I analyse participants' actions through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of practice.

The socially informed body and the production of "not wanting"

Bourdieu made a distinction between belief and practical belief; a process by which our bodies connect actions to cognitions and thereby form a socialized body which is disciplined according to doctrines and dogmas supplied by the actors' community. Through observation and repetition, Bourdieu argues, we learn practices in the same way that we learn language, building up vocabularies of behaviour along with their ascribed meanings. He calls the body a 'living memory pad' which acts automatically and 'leads the mind unconsciously along with it' (Bourdieu, 2000, p68). He added that this process embeds learned senses of justice and morality, thus establishing an ethical framework through which we interpret the world and the ways our bodies act within it. He wrote the following:

> *The socially informed body, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its senses, that is to say, not only the traditional five senses-which never escape the structuring action of social determinisms-but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humor and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on.*
>
> *Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, p124*

Bourdieu named these frameworks and dispositions the 'habitus' and suggested that this is responsible for shaping the 'social agent', imbuing the perceptions, practices, and responses of the individual in everyday life. The habitus steers values and preferences, filters opinions and emotional responses, and leads the direction of our desires and ambitions. Importantly the habitus is internalised within the context of the 'field', the social realm the individual finds themselves in - the 'arena' in which social relations take place between different 'agents and institutions'. Bourdieu refers to social relations as competitive in nature, as agents 'struggle' over the acquisition of 'capital' within the relevant fields. He identifies the habitus as the driving force behind all social interaction because it is responsible for leading the agents' pursuits of symbolic 'capital' (Donahay, 2004). For example, the habitus would provide the motivation required to work hard in order to achieve an academic degree, which becomes a form of intellectual capital within the field of academia. It has been suggested that fields are 'relatively autonomous' and 'interrelated', which allows for the transfer of capital from one to the other (Rey, 2014, p45).

However, my research highlights some of the critiques of Bourdieu's theories of practice. One limitation is the fact that it does not seem to make sense of situations wherein gaining capital through social practice in some fields can result in the loss of capital in another. My participants were often faced with conflicting desires and prompts; to practice abstinence would provide symbolic capital within their religious field, but to enjoy sexual activity would provide capital in the forms of prestige, pleasure, and experience within other social fields. For example, Tom wrote that he had "a feeling of shame around [his] sexuality since being a young boy" due to his church environment which "both implicitly or explicitly communicated the idea of sex as something forbidden". Though he physically enjoyed most of his sexual experiences, he said that he was "aware that it was not morally good" during the acts, and that they eventually led to "misery and guilt" because he felt he could not "resist [his] sexual impulses". It is clear that although Tom's habitus led him to *want* to abstain from sex until marriage in order to acquire the symbolic capital

of holiness and purity, his physical desires prevented him from enacting his beliefs. Furthermore, he "boasted about it to lads at school" whilst feeling deep shame at home and church, demonstrating the fact that some forms of social capital are of benefit within certain social fields, but of detriment in others. Tom gained capital in the form of respect and status by boasting about his actions in one 'field', whilst doing the same in his church or family sphere would have had the opposite effect, stripping him of valuable perceptions of holiness or commitment to his beliefs. He therefore chose to alter his behaviour according to the field he was in, in order to maximise social capital and establish himself both as one of the "lads" at school and "committed to [his] faith" at church. Louise's narrative also highlighted the clashing of 'fields' and the fact that gaining capital in some areas of social life forced her to lose it in others. She pointed to the "immense frustrations" she experienced with her partner when they chose to stop sexual activity because of their beliefs, with some friends telling her that she was "missing out on physical intimacy" and "growth in [her] relationship". The losses in one field were contrasted by the "intimacy with God" and the sense of "mutual sacrifice" or camaraderie with Christian friends who were also trying to abstain from sex. I therefore agree with critiques of Bourdieu's theory of practice to the extent that, like many theories, it becomes burdened with reductionism due to the neatly defined categorisation of analysis and does not account for the complexities of individual social lives and interactions (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1993; Yang, 2014). Whilst I believe it offers helpful insights into the formation of my participants' belief systems, and the relationship between them and their actions, I hold it carefully as an analytic tool for understanding the experiential element of decision making and acting.

As mentioned previously, my participants had developed opinions and beliefs, formed by their Christian experiences, which provided defence mechanisms for participants to prevent their bodies from going against their sexual boundaries. Deborah Tolman (2005), in discussion with teenage girls about their sexual experiences, describes a watchfulness that participants' minds exerted over

their bodies. She found that they monitored their desires and physical responses according to the 'reservoir of social norms and rules and a compendium of consequences' (p96). More than this, Tolman noted that when girls were tempted to enjoy sex or explore their sexuality, their mind 'chastised' their bodies; the mind acted as a protective figure that worked to keep the body out of trouble. My participants had similar experiences:

> *Until I was 19, I had never been sexually involved with anyone. I had always been extremely cautious even about kissing people at parties.*
>
> *Louise*

> *In the nightclub he started dancing with me and trying to kiss me. I had never kissed anyone before and I was not drunk and so was quite embarrassed to decline for about 10 minutes of his attempts that I eventually gave in."*
>
> *Naomi*

> *After not kissing for the first 3 months (I know), we gradually became more and more intimate, but never going 'all the way' because that wasn't Christian.*
>
> *John*

> *I went into university with the plan that I wouldn't have sex and I probably wouldn't do much else other than kissing as it might lead to sex.*
>
> *Hannah*

These participants had made conscious, premeditated decisions about what they would allow their body to engage in prior to actually being in any sexually intimate situations. In this way, they demonstrate the fiercely protective position of the mind over the body and the extreme measures

participants went to in order to prevent their bodies from taking them past a point that they believed was morally acceptable.

In these ways, participants demonstrate a practical outworking of Bourdieu's theory of practice. The habitus of each person, which had been stewarded within their respective field, led the body to practices of restraint and discipline. Like Tolman's participants, their environments had provided them with perceptions of 'risky' situations, which had led some of them to the conclusion that even kissing someone would pose too much of a threat to their body. However, as discussed in chapter 1, it seems that once participants ended up having their first sexual experiences outside of marriage, they often started to re-evaluate their beliefs and opinions about the morality of it. Furthermore, some participants started to challenge the validity of their prior religious beliefs, teachings, and communities due to the "enlightened" position they found themselves in having gained actual sexual experience. This highlights the challenges to Bourdieu's theories by pointing out that although bodies are 'socially informed', individuals do have agency and can very easily change their opinions, beliefs, and preferences as a result of their experiences and their interpretations of them (Adams, 2006). Therefore, I suggest that participants' initial beliefs and actions can be seen as evidence for Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, but the way that many rebelled against the norms of their 'field' and subsequently changed their beliefs demonstrates the malleability of the habitus. It reminds us of the complexities of belief and that theories about human behaviour can rarely predict with certainty due to the unpredictable nature of individual minds and wills.

It is interesting to note the impact of prominent narratives in society on the gender norms or expectations of sexual desire and satisfaction. I have mentioned in chapter 1 the ways in which participants' beliefs and expectations about sex were influenced by both secular and religious society. One participant was surprised when he found that his girlfriend struggled with sexual temptation as much as he did because he had grown up with assumptions that women,

particularly Christian women, would not be very interested in sex and would be highly unlikely to act on their desires unless the man was the one who initiated it. Researchers have acknowledged the varying expectations of desire according to traditional gender roles. For example, Anastasia Powell's (2011) research with young people in Australia pointed to the pressures felt by secular men to be the sexual initiators, with the prominent expectation being that men would actively pursue women primarily for the purpose of sex. Some men therefore had the expectation that women do not or should not seek out sexual opportunities. Sharma (2008) discusses similar themes and explores the fact that women tended to 'carry the burden of purity' in relationships due to the 'inscribed Christian femininity on women's sexual identities' (p79). In these ways we can see another way in which, as Bourdieu and McGuire suggest, society inscribes itself upon the bodies of its members, providing them with gendered blueprints for decision making and acting within their social worlds.

My participants demonstrate the tension between habitus and desire; although participants have a socially informed belief system which shapes desire and preference to some extent, their bodily desires (when conflicting with beliefs) can provide challenge to the habitus in ways discussed in Chapter 2. Louise's narrative expresses this tension between the habitus and conflicting physical desires:

> *The times when we managed to resist our desires felt like the most frustrating times of my life. We both had to try so hard to avoid it, and when we didn't manage to, it was because it felt like an overwhelming, almost out-of-body force… It almost felt like I actually couldn't stop my body at all, no matter how hard I tried. Often I actually heard God, in the moments of my deepest desire, telling me to stop and ask my boyfriend to leave. I would have whole internal dialogues with God or myself about what was happening, but felt I had no strength to stop myself. So we kept enjoying it until we'd finished and then go grovelling back to God afterwards.*
>
> *Louise*

Merleau-Ponty (1962) reminds us that the physical body is the tool with which we analyse subjective reality, and it therefore makes sense that participants *believing* that actions are immoral became very different once they had actually *experienced* sexual desire and pleasure. Only after this did they have the added lens of bodily experience rather than simply the habitus provided by their primary social field. I argue that Bourdieu's habitus provides a helpful starting point for understanding participants' initial beliefs and the formation of them, but I also argue that the habitus which includes beliefs about sex is very easily challenged by the individual's actual sexual experience. I therefore find it useful for understanding the formation process of participants' baseline beliefs, particularly those who grew up going to church, but less useful for exploring the processes of cognitive dissonance involved when "sinning".

Finally, I point out that regardless of whether believers do embody their beliefs successfully or not, society nonetheless continues to 'inscribe itself' on their bodies, which I argue is manifested in the discomfort that participants experience after engaging in sexual acts outside of marriage. In her research with Christian women in Britain and Canada, Sharma (2011) noted similar feelings of guilt and shame experienced by many young Christians over their sexual experiences, demonstrating that although they had not lived *out* the sexual ideal, they still lived *with* the ideal in mind. In the narratives, participants wrote about scenarios that saw them act entirely against the teachings of the Church and the norms within it, which most had spent years unconsciously adopting. It is therefore unsurprising that guilt and identity crises followed, as the religious norms they had previously embodied were stripped from them, leaving them feeling like they had embraced alternate belief systems, desires, and identities. Norbert Elias (1939), in his book The Civilizing Process, makes sense of this in his analysis of embarrassment and shame as a technique of self-regulation which deters individuals away from acting against social norms. He emphasised that this has become an internal process – as a person grows up, they internalise prohibitions, taboos, and 'acceptable' behaviour; rather than deviation resulting in external punishment, individuals

experience shame and embarrassment within the body, which leads to discomfort – particularly if the deviation is witnessed by others. In these ways, then, my participants' experiences provide evidence of the socially inscribed norms that they embodied, whether by disciplining the body in order to avoid "sin", or by experiencing guilt and shame as a result of it. The impacts of cognitive dissonance can be understood more closely alongside Bourdieu's theories, which imply that when individuals acting against their habitus, they experience discomfort. It also explains the extent of the discomfort experienced; the habitus is made up of inherent tendencies and preferences which are constantly monitored and strengthened over many years, and which often set them apart from others in their field.

The body and the self-concept

The role of the self-concept becomes important here as we discuss the impacts that participants' actions had on their sense of self and their religious identity. I will briefly outline self-concept theories and then apply them to participants and the identity transitions they experienced. Stemming from Charles Cooley's concept of the looking glass self (Cooley, 1922), ideas of self-concept lie on the premise that peoples' perceptions of us make up our sense of self. The self-concept is made up of observations of the individual made through the lens of the people around them. The individual gathers evidence about themselves in light of others, which is subsequently confirmed or refuted by their experiences and behaviours. Over time the individual forms a definition of their existence within the world which is backed up by experiential proof (Slotter and Gardner, 2014). Achievements, feedback from others, and habits all contribute to the formation of this self-concept, confirming or challenging it over time.

People continuously seek to maintain self-concept clarity; an internally consistent, clear, and coherent sense of who they are in order to avoid the emotionally distressing work of having to 'reorganise the conceptual systems through which they make sense of their world' (Swann, 1987,

p1039). If others perceive the individual differently to their self-defined self-conception, or if the individual acts in ways that do not align with their self-concept, the individual will experience discomfort and seek to change the perception, behaviour, or self-concept until they align. Interestingly, this desire to maintain self-concept clarity remains even if the self-concept that is threatened is a negative one (Swann, Pelham and Krull, 1989). For example, if an individual feels they are unintelligent, they will struggle to accept evidence to the contrary such as a good school report from their teacher. This desire to maintain self-concept clarity means that actions are often taken in response to threats against the self-concept (Gardner and Carswell, 2018). These threats to the self-concept are most often nullified by the individuals themselves, who will seek to self-verify by proving to themselves and those around them that their self-concept remains the same. For my participants, examples of this came from those who had acted against their beliefs briefly rather than those who were in relationships and often found themselves with sexual opportunities. For example, Joe very quickly "felt convicted" and removed himself from the situation on the few occasions he went home with girls, and found his Christian self-concept returned to normal almost immediately as a result of stopping the behaviour that conflicted with his self-concept. However, in ways discussed in Chapter 2, sometimes individuals decide to reform their self-concept in order to maintain clarity whilst continuing with the counter-attitudinal behaviour. When people cannot come up with a satisfactory justification for the inconsistency between behaviour and belief, they act in ways to prevent the inconsistency (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959). This makes sense of my participants behaviours; when their long term behaviour was not consistent with the self-concept, the individual tended to internalise the behaviour and incorporate it into an altered self-concept.

Alternatively, when individuals themselves struggle to maintain self-concept clarity, others can step into the breach to restore stability after upheavals in a person's self-concept. Romantic partners, friends, or family may offer words of comfort and say things that verify their self-concept. For example, the friend of a struggling artist might remind them of their success in galleries or their

awards (Slotter and Gardner, 2014). In this way, evidence can be presented to the individual which reinforces their sense of self and re-establishes their self-concept, thus providing comfort and confidence. Whilst it does not change the cause of the inconsistency, it adds strength to the weakening self-concept. I now propose that corporate, bodily acts within church communities, such as regularly taking communion, also served this function for participants who were confused about their self-concept. Participants who attended church whilst they were engaging in dissonance inducing behaviours said they felt a range of different emotions about their identity. For example, Sophie wrote:

> *When I got to church on Sunday I felt deeply ashamed - dirty almost - and definitely a failed Christian. I found it hard to worship, always thinking in the back of my mind 'how can you praise Him and proclaim you love Him when you can't do what He asks in His Word?'.*

I suggest that having these kinds of intense emotions and questions about the self in church put people in positions to have intense moments of searching and transformation with regards to their sense of self. For example, after Tom "lost his virginity", he went to church and had the following to say about it:

> *It shocked me into going back to church (where I hadn't been in a while) and the gospel spoke to me at that point… Understanding the freedom of the gospel was, for me, mostly about sexual sin. I did get it, and when I got it things would change.*

In these ways, my participants seemed to have key moments of identity change within their church environments. I suggest that this was because it forced them to engage in very physical acts of worship in the presence of other Christians, which was starkly different to engaging in the very physical act of sex. By attending church services participants were symbolically and physically declaring their Christian identities. By joining the congregation in worship, they 'brought into being' and articulated the 'collective conscience of the community' (Warner, 2008, p178). In these

ways, those who continued to attend were faced with very physical reminders of the religious identity they had been choosing to neglect in favour of the sexual self. McGuire (1996) discusses the role of the body in religious actions and the fact that rituals are particularly powerful because they involve the 'total involvement and absorption of the body/mind/self' (p109) and force the full engagement of 'emotions, imagination, memory, perception, and senses, which in turn are powerfully linked with bodies' (p110). By physically taking the bread and the wine whilst hearing words referencing the body and blood of Jesus, Christians are provided with opportunities to tangibly identify themselves with "Jesus' death on the cross" and recommit themselves to living according to their beliefs. Through this ritual act, the church community appears to restore one another's sense of "identit[ies] as child[ren] of God" in a tangible way. I suggest therefore that religious environments and acts, such as communion or corporate worship, were powerful ways for participants to strengthen their self-concept as Christians after or in the midst of "sexual sin".

In this section, I have discussed the importance of self-concept clarity and the impacts that sexual behaviour outside of marriage tended to have on it. I also explored the ways in which people can restore a coherent sense of self, and if this is not possible, how the community around them can do this on their behalf. I also point out that those participants who did not continue to attend church were not receiving any of these reminders of their religious identity, which can further explain the tendencies for people to limit their religious sense of self. I now explore the formation of self-concepts, beliefs, and identity using Bourdieu's social theories.

Bodily acts and religious identity

My research findings emphasise that bodily actions have dramatic impacts on the religious self. I use my participants' experiences to demonstrate that both religious acts, and non-religious acts both act upon the self and change the identity in some way. Meredith McGuire's work gives insight into the ways in which believers' religious identities are formed by and through their bodily actions

by looking specifically at the phenomenon of religious healings. She identified that religious or spiritual beliefs are 'accomplished through the body' (McGuire, 2016, p154), with ascetic discipline creating physical manifestations of rationality. My research findings agree with this; participants found that their religious identities changed in response to their physical actions, regardless of whether the actions themselves were religious or not. She explains the complexities of my participants experiences, pointing out that their identities were constantly shifting according to the interplay of cognitive beliefs, emotional experiences, and religious actions. Similarly, McGuire writes: 'religion regulates the body through the regimen of diet, hygiene, posture…' (1996, p105), highlighting the formational role that physical actions play in establishing the religious self. The constantly shifting senses of identity and religious beliefs that participants experienced add to McGuire's discussion by providing evidence of the complex interactions between belief, behaviour, and identity.

In these ways, participants' sexual encounters interrupted, stunted, and sometimes stopped the formation of their religious identity as they embodied conflicting identities through their actions outside of marriage. In her exploration of millennials' faith development in the UK Ruth Perrin (2020), pointed out that younger generations take much longer to form stable identities than previous generations, often not reaching 'stable adulthood' until they are around 30 years old. My participants were in their 20's and many admitted that they were still "figuring things out". It is therefore fair to assume that they experienced an ongoing process of forming their identities as Christians whilst their sexual experiences took place. Orit Avishai's concept of 'doing religion' (2008) is a helpful tool to explore these journeys of identity formation. She explained that all bodily actions work towards the 'performance of an identity' which is solidified through repetition (p410). In this way, religious acts such as fasting, veiling, and praying '[solidify] religious morality' and create a 'religious moral habitus' which becomes more 'durable' each time it is enacted (Rao, 2015, p415). This concept helps to make sense of the fact that abstinence appears to strengthen

participants' religious identities, whilst behaviour that went against their religious beliefs seemed to work to 'perform' an alternate one; a self that clashed harshly with aspects of the religious self they were trying to form.

Participants described ways in which their behaviours often multiplied, and I argue that this can be explained by these processes of identity formation. For example, when they managed to abstain from sexual activity, their religious identity was strengthened, and they felt more able to avoid it again as a result. In one narrative, Chris wrote that each time he acted in accordance with his "core beliefs" rather than his "fleshly desires", he became "stronger" and wanted to live more "wholeheartedly for Jesus". Similarly, in an interview Luke talked about long periods of avoiding sexual activity which tended to coincide with feeling "closer to God" and "wanting to honour him more". In a similar way, he talked about identity when he explained his thoughts on the "impacts of sexual sin" on the self, contrasting it with moments of self-control: "when we worship God, we become more like him". We see here the bidirectional process through which practice informs belief, whilst belief, or senses of morality, also inform practice (Bourdieu 1990).

Luke's narrative demonstrates that using the body in acts of worship strengthens the religious self. Choosing to avoid "sexual sin" led him to a more Godly identity and drove future choices about how he used his body. In this way, participants' experiences suggest that what they did with their bodies translated into who they were, or perceived themselves to be, and therefore what our lives will look like as a result. Similarly, they evidence Bourdieu's theory of practice; participants made decisions about their actions based on their habitus, which was formed within and by their religious field, in order to gain spiritual capital of holiness and "purity". Once the agent attained capital within their religious field through their actions, e.g. abstaining from sex, they appeared to gain momentum and continue to pursue abstinence. I therefore suggest that both Bourdieu and McGuire's theories can be used together to explain why my participants' experiences of successfully withholding the body from acting on its sexual desires (in response to their beliefs about God-

given designs for sex) resulted in strengthened religious identities and subsequently encouraged further adherence to their religious and moral beliefs.

The narratives of my participants also demonstrate that the religious self is built up through comparisons with secular Others (see Avishai 2008). Secularism is most usually associated with ethical liberalism which holds individual autonomy as the most important factor when making moral decisions (Woodhead, 2016). These perceived 'secular Others' are more likely to make decisions according to their own feelings and opinions rather than submitting to any authorities on the matter. In her narrative, Sarah highlighted the differences between what she "garnered from secular culture" about sex, saying that according to her non-Christian peers, she needed to gain sexual experience from a young age or else "guys won't want [her]". Participants who succeeded in their abstinence embodied the rejection of the accepted view in British society that sex outside of marriage is fine. They distanced their actions from those perceived to be the norm in secular society. In avoiding temptation, those participants' religious selves are both amplified and set distinctly apart from many of their non-religious peers. This explains some of the turmoil experienced by my participants when they failed to do this – during the formation of their religious identity, their sexual activity sees their bodies enacting, even if temporarily, secular assumptions and beliefs about sex. When participants engaged in behaviour which they saw as more "normal for non-Christians", it is unsurprising that they felt "less of a Christian" or even "like a failed Christian". Participants who were sexually active experienced a diminished sense of religious identity due to the realisation that their actions had become very similar to those taken by 'secular Others'.

At this point it is interesting to consider the fact that participants seemed to place far more importance on matters of sexual purity than they did on any other areas of their life as Christians. According to my participants, sexual sin had far more of an impact on their identity as believers

than other sins such as lying or gossiping. I had the following conversation in an interview with James about his emotional response to crossing his sexual boundaries:

> *Then as soon as it's done and afterwards you sit down and reflect on things, you think like "have I lost everything that my life was leading to, am I going to hell?" Even though I don't know what I believe about hell… like I don't even believe in hell but I'd still be like "oh am I going to hell?"*
>
> *And do you get that with other sins?*
>
> *No. This is just a specific, this is always.. I dunno why that is, maybe it's more of a feared sin…*

I suggest that the disparity between sexual sin and other sins, and the varying impacts each has on the identity and the sense of self can be explained in part by the identity shifts that take place as a result of physical acts of either worship or "disobedience". I suggest that there are very few other physical acts that engage the body, and all its senses, as much as acts of sexual intimacy, and it is therefore unsurprising that sexual acts have such an impact on the sense of self. In contrast to the physical acts of *worship* available to believers, which help them to build up their religious identities in small ways, I suggest that sexual acts outside of marriage epitomise for participants an intense opposite: physical acts of *disobedience* which provide dramatic blows to the religious identity.

Interpreting experience

I now explore the ways in which sexual ideals held by participants influenced their interpretations of their sexual experiences, having dramatic and influential impacts on how they felt during intimacy in the following ways: physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Research has noted that the ways in which our bodies interpret experiences are entirely shaped by the beliefs, norms, and discourses we are exposed to (Knapp, 2003). Our sexual social scripts (Burke, 2016) providing us with expectations based on our social knowledge, rather than simply based on our physical intuitions (Gagnon and Simon, 1986). This explains some of the discomfort participants

felt when torn between enjoying their sexual encounters whilst simultaneously feeling uncomfortable, scared, or ashamed. In their church life they were provided with sexual scripts that said sex is a powerful act of union which is only appropriate for marriage, differing from those provided by wider society. For example, Sarah's friends suggested that she should "explore what [she] liked" and "have experience or no one would want [her]". I use the narratives and interviews to explore the ways in which our bodies interpret physical sensations through the lenses of the social worlds they inhabit.

The most obvious influence that their Christian teaching appeared to have had on participants' experiences was the tendency to feel that their sexual desire or behaviour was an inherently uncontrollable force which clashed entirely with their religious beliefs and desires. Louise wrote that in moments of intimacy she felt "completely intoxicated" to the point that she "couldn't think about God at all". Chris said that during moments of intimacy the "conflict has always been my flesh against my core beliefs". This mindset also seemed to influence some participants' expectations about romance and the kind of spouse they would look for. For example, John wrote: "I sort of resigned myself to the idea that I would either find a girl sexually attractive, **or** they would be good for me spiritually". In these ways, my participants demonstrated that many Christians continued to hold remnants of Plato's distinction between the body and the soul (Greenberg, 2018). This dualistic viewpoint is understandable when we consider Paul's discussion of sin in Galatians 5 where he complains about the exhausting and constant conflicts between his 'spirit' and his 'flesh' – participants often expressed their sexual desires in similar ways, implying that they were fierce rivals to their spiritual desires. Chris highlighted this sense of exhaustion and frustration along with other participants, saying that his "overwhelming desire" has been to "honour God and fight this battle" but emphasising how much of a "challenge" it has been. This cognitive divide - between sexual desire as an unmanageable force which feels completely at odds

to the desire to "honour God" by keeping sex for marriage - has manifested itself in participants phenomenological interpretations of their sexual feelings and actions. I will now discuss these.

Only 5 participants talked about physical pleasure or acknowledged the fact that they desired sexual intimacy at all. My participant Sophie wrote the following in her narrative, highlighting the sexual scripts she had received prior to sexual experience:

> *Ultimately, doing anything sexual before marriage scared me, I was fearful of being 'found out' and of what 'emotional damage' might result from it. And that was because of the way sex was spoken about in Christian settings - not in a loving way, but out of fear that we might 'mess up' and suffer the consequences forever.*

Some of my participants emphasised the fact that they were mainly trying to satisfy their partners when they engaged in sexual activity. For example, Naomi wrote that she "did want to [have sex] but it wasn't very enjoyable" and that she mainly "wanted to please [her sexual partner]". Similarly, David said that his lenience with his sexual boundaries was "perhaps to please [his girlfriend]", and only very briefly mentioned his own sexual desire whilst drawing contrasts between desiring God and desiring her. In similar ways to Sharma's participants mentioned in Chapter 2, who disappeared in sex, Tolman (2005) found that the US teenagers in her study also 'dissociated themselves' (p51) from the sexual experience, sometimes not even acknowledging that they had experienced sexual desire or pleasure at all. She suggests that this loss of physical or emotional feelings may be the result of the fear they felt about becoming sexually active. In this way she suggests that her participants did not allow themselves to feel the extent of normal bodily responses to sexual intimacy, thereby distancing themselves from the insecurity or perceived danger of the acts. Similarly, in her studies of teenage girls' sex education, Michelle Fine (1988) found that when girls were exploring sexually, they often switched between being 'taken with the excitement of anticipated sexuality' and 'consumed with anxiety' (p35) over it. they were as aware of the potential pleasure as they were of the potential danger, in similar ways that led Tolman to state that her

participants were 'doing battle with themselves' in attempts to 'resist embodying desire' (p82). My participants therefore also demonstrated these tendencies to remove their bodily experiences of pleasure or desire, perhaps demonstrating, like Tolman and Sharma's participants, an effort to protect the religious self from the consequences of sex outside of marriage.

Interestingly, tendencies to shut off physical pleasure during intimacy is common for victims of sexual abuse, serving as protection from emotional harm for the individual (Young, 1992). This raises questions about the extent of the concerns about sex that participants had developed. In some instances my participants have exhibited similar behaviour to victims of sexual trauma through their extreme efforts to avoid the discomfort of dissonance caused by their counter-attitudinal behaviour. In some scenarios, then, my participants appear to have felt such fear and shame about their sexual desires or actions that they, in Tolman's terms, 'dissociated' them from the self, replicating some more extreme emotional and behavioural tendencies of survivors of sexual abuse.

In the ways outlined above, I suggest that the fact that many participants completely failed to acknowledge any of the pleasure or enjoyment of their experiences demonstrates subconscious expectations and attempts to maintain distance between the self and their bodily actions. This was common throughout both the narratives and interviews as well as the literature, which demonstrates the prevalence of those with traditional views about sex exhibiting a 'dual consciousness' (Fine, 1988, p35) during sexual activity. This research therefore points the ways in which beliefs can be materialised in and through the body, shaping even the way we interpret physical experiences such as sexual pleasure. In Chapter 5, I will consider the potential impacts that this tendency can have on the peoples' long-term experience of sexuality and relationships, but for now I conclude this section by arguing that my participants' interpretations of their bodily experiences were influenced largely by the sexual scripts provided. Their bodies had been socially

inscribed, in Bourdieu's words, and the embodiment of their sexuality tended to conflict painfully with the embodiment of their faith.

Wanting and not wanting

I now explore the physical manifestations of the interactions between cognitions and the body in sexual scenarios, looking at the bodily responses before, during and after sexual acts outside of marriage. When participants described their experiences prior to a sexual act, the overarching theme was that at the point of arousal, they experienced a powerful conflict of desires up to a certain point. As mentioned in chapter 2, when they "reached the end of certain boundaries", participants described being aware of the "part of" them that warned them not to go any further. Due to their cognitions, or 'habitus', some participants had prevention strategies which they employed when they reached their boundaries and did not want to go further. However, others went past these boundaries and described their bodily responses during the sexual act. These varied from, as mentioned, "shutting out" the mind and successfully enjoying the bodily experience, to moments of inner turmoil manifesting in erectile disfunction or an inability to climax.

Participants employed strategies to try and prevent themselves from reaching the point at which participants succumbed to the desires of their bodies. For example, Louise wrote that "if [she] was tempted to go any further than kissing with clothes on, she would ask [her partner] to go and masturbate" so that they would avoid crossing their boundaries. She explained that this was due to "the risks of pregnancy if he had already ejaculated once", as they chose not to keep condoms so would be using the "pull out" method of contraception. They therefore created their own deterrents – making sure the boyfriend had already ejaculated once to "make it riskier" if they were to end up having sex without a condom, and intentionally not having condoms available. In this way, she and her partner employed intentionally extreme strategies of increasing the risk of pregnancy if they were to "break [their] boundaries" because they felt they "could not trust

[them]selves" to stop their bodies from "going against what [they] believed was right". The times they decided not to have sex "were the most frustrating times of [her] life"; she both desperately wanted to have sex but also desperately wanted to avoid it. These extreme tactics were established in order to limit the likelihood of experiencing cognitive dissonance, with participants like Louise being aware of the fact that they needed these measures in order to avoid succumbing to their desires. In these ways and those outlined previously, participants employed strategies to keep their bodily desires in line with their religious desires to keep sex for marriage, and often found themselves both wanting sex and not wanting it.

However, there were many occasions when participants' prevention strategies failed and the desire to have sex surpassed the desire to avoid it. They talked about the situations where they reached a point where their sexual desire became "unbearably" stronger than the desire to abstain, at which point the body seemed to block out the mind so that it could continue with the sexual experience rather than being consumed by guilt and stopping. They described ways in which they felt the body had tried to "shut down" the internal moral debate at the point of extreme arousal for them to progress further than their boundaries would allow them. On these occasions, they enjoyed the sexual act but were then reminded afterwards of the fact that they had wanted to avoid it - as discussed in many parts of this dissertation.

Although this worked for some participants, allowing them to enjoy sex in the moment without thinking about the desire to abstain, many found that this did not work. Some found that although they initially blocked out their thoughts long enough to begin sexual intimacy, they could not maintain this for very long. I asked interview participants whether the internal debates about sex returned during their sexual experiences or not. Interestingly, two male participants discussed the fact that feelings of shame or discomfort about what they were doing sometimes manifested physically in the middle of sexual intimacy. One of the men recounted moments of erectile dysfunction, which he attributed to a deep sense of shame and a sudden panicked thought along

the lines of "what am I doing here?". Another recalled his inability to reach orgasm due to the internal moral conflicts that he could not get away from during intimacy with his girlfriend. Although he said that often "the passion of the moment takes it away", allowing his body to go against his beliefs in the “heat of the moment”, he did recall times where he felt uncomfortable because he had initiated sexual intimacy and later changed his mind. He said:

> *I haven’t gone soft, but I have had inability to finish. Yeah. I think that is a legitimate, yeah because if you’re feeling comfortable it can happen, but if you’re uncomfortable, it won’t.*
>
> *James*

In these instances, it was clear that these interruptions of the sexual act were very unwelcome and were usually accompanied with awkwardness and embarrassment. For these men, then, their bodies had caused the sexual act to stop suddenly without them actually coming to any conscious decisions about it.

However, some participants talked about feeling pressure to continue the sexual encounter even after they had changed their mind. For example, one participant explained that he would always make sure that his partners reached orgasm first because he knew that once he had, he would want to "get out of there" as quickly as possible. He said that because he had arranged to “hook up” with them, he would feel bad if he changed his mind about it after he had arrived at their house. This highlights the fact that both before and during the act, participants were often aware of how they would feel afterwards, but still ignored this and forced the body to continue despite necessarily wanting to. For some, these decisions were made due to considerations of the other person involved, requiring effort to *make* the body continue, but for others, the “heat of the moment” led them to succumb to their own temptation and *allow* it to continue.

It is worth noting here that some of the narratives written by women (who did not offer to do an interview) implied that they had experienced similar moments of internal confusion or distraction

during intimacy, moments of indecision or even wanting to stop – but these were not acknowledged by their partner in the moment. It is interesting to consider the gender differences in the physical indicators that a woman is changing her mind about having sex than if a man were to experience sexual disfunction, as well as the gender differences in the tendency to "go along with it" in order to please the partner. Further research might explore gender differences in Christian experiences of decision making, focusing on expressions of consent and moments of indecisiveness or discomfort during sexual acts. It would be beneficial to explore the role of insecurities and feelings of entitlement following the initiation of sexual intimacy. I will touch on matters of consent further in Chapter 5.

Acts of redemption and moving on from cognitive dissonance

Eventually, most of my participants who left did eventually decide to come back to their faith, but this was usually after they had ended their periods of sexual "sin" and returned to their previous behaviour of abstinence. I argue that in order to return to their church communities fully, participants required a restorative or reconciliatory act to restore their sense of self to one which resembled their previous religious self. Sitna Quiroz (2016) explored the 'productive potential' that became available after moral failure and subsequent discipline, identifying these moments as crucial to moral change and formation when dealt with effectively. She observed that in a Pentecostal church in Benin, sins like adultery were confessed publicly in front of the congregation, starting a period of discipline which involved the whole community. These processes, combined with individual acts such as prayer and fasting, worked to 'reintroduce' the person back to the religious life, and Quiroz notes that this offers benefits to both the individual and the community as a whole.

Grace had bad experiences of teaching about sexuality in the brethren church which she attended with her family as a child and was then also made to feel unable to talk about her sexual experiences or beliefs at her current church. She had sex with her ex-fiancé and also slept with her now-

husband outside of marriage, and her narrative made it very clear that these experiences led her to disagree with the traditional views of sex given in her experiences of church. She asked rhetorically:

> *Do I think that those sexual experiences have ruined marital sex? No. Do I regret having sex with my first boyfriend? No. Every time we had sex we were expressing our love to each other. It was beautiful. Did having sex with my previous partner make things awkward with my now husband? No, I have never compared the two. I never think about my previous partner in a sexual way nor do I ever feel like my husband is comparing the way we have sex to the way he and his ex partner had sex.*

She went on to express her frustration about the ways her churches had taught her to deal with her sexuality and failed to provide space for her to discuss her views and beliefs:

> *However we could not admit that we had sex to our church community, because they openly said that we would be chastised for doing so. Every young christian couple that I know has had sex, yet the church puts such shame on it and young couples are ashamed to admit that they have 'slipped up'. The guidance and teaching on the subject is poor.*

I suggest that because Grace was unable to talk about the fact she had sex openly, she had no redemptive moments with any of her Christian friends, family, or leaders about her sexual activity, and therefore did not receive the "kindness" or "support" that other participants received. Grace's narrative demonstrates some of the anger and bitterness which threatened to lead other participants away from the Church until they had these redemptive experiences. It is concerning to think that people like Grace may hold these opinions about the Church, and also suffer from the inherent feelings of shame that she associates with sex, for many years to come.

According to my participants, only those who already had close relationships with other Christians came across any forms of 'reintroduction' into their church community. Those who had friends or mentors who actively offered to keep them "accountable" benefitted from redemptive moments

where their self-concepts were restored. Two participants talked about the relief they felt after restorative acts with others in their community which resolved the discomfort faced by dissonance and shame and restored their sense of religious identity. For example, Louise and her boyfriend confessed to their church leaders that they had been having sex, and said that they were "very gracious, kind and understanding and prayed for [them] at length". This helped them both feel "understood when [they] expected judgement" and provided "guidance for moving forward rather than dismissal". Similarly, Graham was relieved when he spoke about his sexual intimacy with his girlfriend to a married couple "who looked out for [him]". Again, he was surprised to find "no judgement, but instead a desire to help lead [them] through to the holiness that God calls [them] to". These examples suggest that in order to have positive experiences of returning to their church community, they first required the relationships in which these honest conversations could happen, and secondly be given opportunities and safe spaces to be honest and confess their "sexual sin". Due to the lack of corporate mechanisms for confession in most churches, these were the prerequisites required for participants to verify the self and move forward in community. Only then could they feel they were acting with integrity rather than hiding significant parts of their lives. Where these 'redemptive moments' were possible, participants appeared to swiftly return to their religious selves and communities and were even able to incorporate their stories of sexual sin into their identities.

However, those who did not have these kinds of friends or mentors in their church community were unlikely to find opportunities to be reintroduced to the community with restored religious identities. My participants highlighted the fact that there are no corporate mechanisms to support these confessions, and church leaders rarely give guidance or encourage their congregations to have these conversations, unlike those witnessed in Benin. There were no explicitly prescribed means by which my "sinful" participants could confess their sin and deal with it in order to feel reconciled back into the community of believers. For example, Sarah wrote that she "hated how

[she and her partner] associated [their] sexual intimacy not with intimacy but with guilt and shame", and it is important to consider whether people like Sarah have opportunities to heal from these associations before moving on to get married. Similarly, Tom wrote about the fact that there was never any teaching about "cleansing from sin once it had happened", and that he had no support or teaching to help him make sense of his sexual experiences. He did say that he had "moments with God" where he experienced "deep forgiveness" and the "freedom of the gospel", but his "fundamental mindset about sex" never changed; he equated his sexuality with sin because he was not married and had sexual relationships with "over 30 girls". For him, this resulted in numerous experiences of deep shame and a constant "disjunction between [his] Christian faith and identity on the one hand and [his] powerful sexual desire on the other". He had no Christian friends who he could open up to about this, so he kept it all to himself and failed to find the "grace" and "guidance" that others had spoken of. I therefore suggest that because there are no corporate mechanisms such as the open confession in Benin, there are gaps in church communities which leave those who have "sinned" stuck in it without being able to feel fully known and accepted afterwards. According to my participants, unmarried adults who did not already have close relationships with other Christians established prior to their sexual encounter found that they had no one to turn to for support during these identity crises.

Some participants appeared to compensate for this by confessing to God in their own private ways, finding ways to discipline or punish themselves in secret, or simply withdrawing from their beliefs. The contrasts between the open confession of sin in Benin and the secrecy around sexual sin in my participant's narratives is obvious, and I discuss throughout the dissertation the damaging behaviours that this lack of restorative mechanisms led to for my participants. Lynd (1958) considers the fact that public knowledge of one's shame can sometimes be less painful than inner shame. She quotes Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter: 'Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!' (Hawthorne, 1998, p182). She points out

that the seclusion of coming to terms with one's own weakness, alone, can cause more damage than having it made public. Further to this, and interestingly for this study, Lynd acknowledges the discomfort caused by actively hiding shame itself from others. Many participants experienced feelings of inadequacy that came from the fact they were ashamed in secret and therefore had to hide or put up a front. For example, Sarah attributed her "pain and guilt" to the fact that she "was living two lives – the one where [she] went to parties and was intimate with boys on a Saturday night and the one where, on a Sunday morning [she] attended church as one of the only youth 'actively engaged' in their faith". Rather than attributing her pain and guilt to the sexual acts themselves, she attributed it to the fact that she was hiding something from her church community.

Some participants wrote about experiences of God intervening in their lives, which "spoke His grace and truth into the situation" and showed them the "beauty" of physical intimacy and the "purpose of sex in the right context". Further to this, some participants wrote about times when they were "convicted by the Holy Spirit" in moments of temptation or had deep experiences of spiritual or emotional healing which they attributed to God. They therefore shared stories of redemption in regard to their sexual experiences, and I suggest that this is extremely important to enable Christians to establish healthy attitudes about sex in the future. I also found that those participants who involved other Christians in these processes tended to come to more conservative conclusions about sex than they had prior to or during their sexual activity outside of marriage. For example, John wrote the following about his experiences after pastoral conversations with his church leaders:

> *Jesus spoke his grace and his truth into the situation, and I began to see the value in this part of me that he had created. That sex was good, and that was why boundaries are given. That my feelings are not sins in themselves…*

Interestingly, John then ended this sentence by saying "but none of this was communicated by either sermons on a Sunday, nor in other pastoral support". This highlights again the frustration

that participants felt after having come to realise that they had endured such pain and confusion due to previous, and what they now viewed as faulty, perceptions of Church teaching about sex. They appear to suggest that if these perceptions had been cleared up earlier and they had been able to establish what they actually believed about sex before acting, they would have had healthier experiences of their sexuality.

I suggest that some of my participants have described intense experiences of growth and development in both their religious beliefs and their views on sex and marriage, which they felt could be used positively to encourage others. David wanted to tell his story in order to encourage others and help them to understand the "reasons behind teachings about sex". I suggest that there were many positive ways for both the individuals involved and those hearing to bring good out of the difficult experiences my participants went through. In narrating their experiences openly and honestly, their identities can be reformed and shaped with the inclusion of their "sin", rather than uncomfortably hiding it away. David said that "if [he] was in a position of influence over another Christian's life, he would tell his story because he "would not wish anyone else to have to have the experiences [he] had in order to understand the good reasons behind the Church's teaching". In this way, it seems that my participants acknowledge that their experiences could be used to help others avoid going through similar confusion and difficulty. I therefore conclude this section by stressing the importance of Christians being able to share their stories of coming to conclusions about sex outside of marriage. It offers the individual opportunities to incorporate their "sexual sin" into their identity by narrating their experiences as Christians who have had moments of redemption. Some participants who had moved on from their sexual behaviour in favour of reembracing their religious identity actively incorporated the period of "sexual sin" into their narrative identities as well. For example, David, after his relationship ended, planned to use his experiences to support others going through similar things. He found that being able to tell others

his story also provides them with pastoral opportunities to use their experiences to help other Christians to understand why they believe "sex is best for marriage". As David said:

> *I would seek to give them similar advice, but in the strongest terms and with the added weight of my own first-hand experience. I think the dissonance that I have experienced can be a useful tool in preventing other people from having to experience similar dissonance.*

David therefore provides evidence of the ways in which stories can successfully be retold and used to add dimensions to the narrative identity, forming a self-concept which includes the "sin" rather than hides it. I also suggest that by re-forming the self-concept in this way, incorporating their stories of "sexual sin", individuals regain some sense of the power and autonomy that they had lost in their physical defeat by sexual temptation. In these ways, they construct their identities in an active project of the self in ways that feel productive to the individual and offer benefits to the community.

This chapter has explored the ways in which the body interacts with the religious identity, focusing specifically on the bodily experience of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, and the impacts it has on the bodily and the religious self. I then explored the ways in which the body is 'socially informed' and has developed desires and expectations according to their habitus. This provided context for the exploration of the bodily responses to sex, due the ways the habitus informed the ways their bodies interpreted sexual desire, pleasure, and gratification. I explored the tendencies of the believers' body to block out beliefs about sexuality in moments of temptation and touched briefly on the fact that participants appeared to dissociate their bodies from their religious selves in attempts to reduce the discomfort caused by dissonance. I explored the role of communal acts of worship and the opportunities they provide for participants to embody their beliefs, thereby strengthening their religious self. Finally, I suggested that acts of redemption were vital in order to restore participants' religious sense of self after dissonance-inducing actions. Without these redemptive opportunities, I argued that believers find it very hard to return to the Christian

community and even the Christian self after sex outside of marriage. I will now turn to examine notions of virginity and participants' experiences of their "first time".

Chapter 4: Navigating the space between the virgin and the "sinner"

Participants appeared to put much emphasis on the distinction between penetrative sex and other forms of sexual intimacy. I was surprised by how many of my participants' narratives automatically described the specific event where they had penetrative sex for the first time, with many referring to their virginity in the process. As many sociological studies have pointed out, virginity is viewed globally as a significant and permanent change in a person's identity, making it unsurprising that first intercourse has a dramatic and lasting effect on participants' religious and sexual identities (Holland et al, 2000; Carpenter, 2001; Tsui and Nicoladis, 2004). This distinction and its use as a marker of identity is an important one to bear in mind when we consider the pastoral implications of unmarried Christians' experiences of first intercourse outside of marriage, and these will be explored in depth in Chapter 5. In this chapter I explore participants' notions of virginity, the emphasis they put on it, and the role it played as a label. I explore the implications this label had on participants' processes of identity formation as Christians. I first discuss some of the cultural shifts that have influenced the ways participants experienced the transition from "virgin" to non-virgin, noting the impacts of cultural shifts in relation to ideas about sex and personhood.

The influence of cultural narratives

There are many different definitions and interpretations of virginity with varying levels of importance attributed to them depending on the perspective. The semantics of sex have been analysed across cultures and time frames and there is very little consensus about what actually counts as having sex, and therefore very little consensus about what counts as being a virgin (Carpenter, 2001). The literature acknowledges that there are different levels of cultural significance attached to virginity, and these differ according to their individual social frameworks

which help people navigate through their first experiences of sex (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). Over the past few decades western countries have seen discourses around virginity become less dominant in secular society. Barnett et al (2017) found that young adults at a US university had very different opinions about what it was to actually have sex. Whilst the majority labelled penile-vaginal and penile-anal intercourse sex, others included oral sex and other forms of penetration in the same category. They therefore labelled virginity differently; some believed that you remain a virgin as long as you don't have penile-vaginal sex, whilst others believed that all forms of penetration and oral sex removed the label.

As well as there being different definitions of virginity, there are also various levels of importance attributed to it. For example, Anouka van Eerdewijk (2009) explored notions of virginity in Senegal and found that brides were still expected to be virgins and were supposed to provide evidence of this on the wedding night in the form of blood on a white bed sheet. This practice was common historically but remains the norm in some societies today (Tsui and Nicoladis, 2004). On the other hand, scholars in the US, UK and Western Europe have noted the continuing decline in the age of sexual debut since the sixties (Woodhead and Catto, 2012), demonstrating a significant shift in social norms around sexual debut and the growing prevalence of premarital sex. Some of my participants grew up being equally encouraged to "explore and enjoy their sexuality" regardless of marital or relationship status, with serious restrictions only being emphasised in relation to making sure that young people were having safe and consensual sex.

These shifts have undoubtedly contributed to sexual mores (Greenwood and Guner, 2010) and the expectations young adults grew up with about their sexual debuts. My participants were very aware of these social norms, as mentioned in Chapter 1: Gemma was "extremely ashamed" during conversations with non-Christians when they found out she had not had sex – they struggled to comprehend the fact that she planned to save it for when she got married. Similarly, Sarah felt she had to have some sexual encounters in order to be prepared for questions like "have you DONE

anything?" in teenage conversations with her friends. Again, Simon felt he could fit in with "lads at school" because he had been sexually intimate with girls at parties. It is therefore important to acknowledge the contextual shifts that participants were negotiating as they navigated their beliefs about sexual debut and virginity. These contextual shifts and perspectives about virginity also help to shed light on how participants' identities as "virgins" impacted them. In these ways, notions of virginity are interpreted widely; each individual in my study is likely to define it differently and associate varying levels of significance to it. For these reasons we must be careful whilst discussing my participants' first experiences of "having sex" and their interpretations of virginity. It is important to recognise that the semantics used are shaped by many factors, and I try to use terms carefully and each time in line with the participant's own use of them.

The shifts in gender influences on perceptions of virginity

There has long been a sexual double standard in most cultures, which allowed men to live promiscuously whilst women were supposed to maintain their virginity until they were married (Humphreys, 2013). These gender differences in expectations for maintaining virginity still exist in many societies today, with many women feeling and being more judged for having sex outside of marriage than men are. For example, Laura Carpenter's (2002) research in the US suggested that for men, virginity loss has tended to be seen as 'a rite of passage entailing physical performance and the achievement of manhood' (p346). Onorio's (2015) study in a US theological college also found that women were often labelled or talked to by peers if they were deemed 'too sexually active' (p43), whilst the men were expected to find it more difficult to resist sexual urges until marriage and were therefore given more sympathy. He demonstrated that it is still the case in many societies for the majority of men to eagerly await their virginity loss, often viewing it almost as an initiation, seeing sex like a ritual which leads young men through a threshold and into adulthood. Eerdewijk's (2009) work in Dakar pointed out that in some cultures, losing virginity is seen as

important in order to be seen as a grown man, with many men having sex well before marriage and actually being judged for not being a virgin. She wrote:

> *Being a man is not so much a matter of biology; it is not the fact of having a penis that makes a man a man, but what he does with that penis. Men become men by using their penis for heterosexual sex (p11).*

In these ways, cultural preferences and norms around virginity and purity have often been determined by the gender of the individual. Having sex for the first time has had vast implications on the individual's identity and sense of self, for better or for worse, depending on the gender and context.

However, Carpenter (2002) highlighted the shifts that are taking place in some cultures with regards to gender differences, finding similarities in the social norms for men and women in some contexts. She explained some results which demonstrate changes in recent decades; whereas previously women tended to find it shameful to have sex outside of marriage, many are now joining men in 'seeing virginity as embarrassing' and wanting to 'get it over with' (p347). Studies in the UK have found similar results; with some even stating that women are becoming as eager as men to lose their virginity, attaching stigma to the idea of *not* being sexually experienced and being "pure" at marriage (Humphreys, 2013). Whilst women in the US valued virginity highly in the 1970s and 80s, Carpenter found that most of the young women in her study saw their virginity as a gift they were willing to give in the context of a committed relationship, but not to be held back until marriage if someone deserves it. One of her participants explained what she felt it meant to have sex for the first time: 'you're willing to give something private of yourself… [It's] something of mine that I choose to give up, that I can only give up once' (p351). Carpenter concluded by saying that both men and women in her study saw the 'giving of virginity' as a precious and 'non-renewable' gift of love which usually resulted in 'enhanced love and commitment' in their relationships (p352).

With the societal trends of the UK and the US in mind, it is interesting to point out that my participants' beliefs did not appear to be influenced by gender. Both men and women felt shame and regret about "losing [their] virginity outside of marriage" and for not keeping their "purity" because of it, and the only participant who did not feel this way was a woman. In my study, more women than men mentioned that in some areas of life they could boast about their sex lives and feel good about the fact that they "had done it", and more women were anxious to admit that they had not had sex in conversations with non-Christian friends. As well as this, all participants – male and female - who had had penetrative sex, except the one female participant, expressed that the religious self was very uncomfortable about the fact that they had done this outside of marriage. They struggled with the idea that they had experienced the change in identity prior to "the wedding ceremony", and as discussed in this chapter, this identity change came as an unwelcome and painful experience for many. For example, when John was managing to avoid going "all the way", he felt comfortable calling himself a Christian, but when he finally did have sex, he suffered because he felt he had lost his identity as a celibate Christian man. The men in my study therefore appeared to believe that it would have been preferable for them to embody the more traditionally feminine label of "virgin" and "wait until marriage" than being able to "say [they have] had sex". In these ways, the genders of my participants appeared to be much less influential to their perceptions of the label "virgin" and their desires to keep it.

What remains across all narratives is that participants had clear ideas about whether they had "had sex" or not, and this point was often emphasised without prompts as an important part of their narratives. Participants talked about their experiences of sexual intercourse very differently to how they talked about other experiences of sexual intimacy, and I found it interesting that these participants talked at length about their first time having sex and also included the details about the actions they took afterwards. I now discuss participants' references to "losing [their] virginity" or "having sex" by grouping them into categories. Group 1 talked about sex as a distinctly different

act to the other sexual behaviours they were engaged in, and I suggest that they used their virginity as a 'bargaining tool' to allow those behaviours to continue. Group 2 were unsure what they believed about their sexual behaviours, and I suggest that they used their virginity as a 'safety blanket' to comfort themselves when they felt guilty or confused about the sexual acts they were engaging in. Group 3 talked about their "first time" almost like it was an accident that they had not really had chance to think much about. They described their virginity as an unplanned loss and the sexual transition as a process "that [could not] be fixed". Finally, group 4 was very small but is made up of participants who seemed to use losing their virginity as a 'final act of rebellion', being a measured way of surrendering to their "sexual sin" and giving in to previous attempts to hold on to some element of purity.

Group 1: Virginity as a bargaining tool - it's not S E X!

Many participants openly noted the fact that they regularly justified their sexual behaviour by saying that it was preferable to do that if it meant that they would not end up having penetrative sex. See the following examples:

> *Not long into the relationship his hands started moving to places I wasn't expecting so I asked him how far he was wanting to take this. Turns out he had similar views to me - sex was penis inside a vagina and everything else was permissible as long as it didn't lead to sex.*
>
> *Hannah*

> *I would regularly go out clubbing and often would end up kissing girls. On a couple of occasions this led a bit further and I went home with them, each time there was some sexual foreplay but no intercourse.*
>
> *Joe*

Whilst I had been taught that sex was wrong, other sexual acts seemed a grey area that no one had spoken about, so I felt happy with doing everything that didn't involve penetration.

Sophie

I justified my acts of sexual immorality on the ground that I was engaging in all forms of sexual intimacy that were not actual sexual intercourse itself such that I was not fornicating.

Simon

As discussed in Chapter 2, participants felt that they had to justify what they were deciding to do in order to reduce the discomfort that would be caused by cognitive dissonance. They had therefore established cognitions about what they felt was acceptable outside of marriage which allowed them to experience some sexual intimacy without going against what they believed. In this section I suggest that participants often used the fact that they "weren't having sex" as a tool which allowed them to do other sexual activities with their partners without feeling discomfort. I now use Hannah's narrative to demonstrate this trend.

As was common for my participants and discussed in Chapter 1, Hannah entered her "relationship with confused beliefs about sex". However, during her relationship she made decisions about what she believed, stating that "[she] wanted to live within what was pleasing to God and genuinely thought [she] was doing so". She wrote about her responses to an evening of teaching at church about sex and relationships, which she had attended with her boyfriend at the time:

Matt came away from this evening worried about what we were doing and thinking that we should stop, but I wasn't convinced. They hadn't said anything particularly different from what I'd heard before and hadn't directly contradicted the idea that sex was one particular act. I thought that their advice might be helpful for people who were more easily tempted to go all the way and commit the

actual sin (penis in vagina sex), but we were more self-controlled than those people, so it didn't apply to us.

This narrative demonstrates the ways in which Hannah took a defensive stance about her virginity when listening to the advice she received, which she later regretted after her relationship ended. Her story is an example of the ways in which many participants drew lines about what they classed as sin – most usually penetrative sex outside of marriage – and were "happy to live with those boundaries", enabling them to enjoy other forms of sexual intimacy without feeling guilty. Hannah also appeared to take some pride or comfort in the fact that she and her partner managed to have some level of sexual intimacy whilst having the self-control required to stop before they had penetrative sex. She also explained that "anyone trying to convince [her not to do any sexual acts] were just being overly cautious, or so [she] thought at the time. [She] didn't see it as a sin that [she] kept being tempted to commit – [she] didn't think [she] was sinning".

Hannah's story also offers insights into the negotiations that take place both within the individual and between the two individuals in a relationship. The couple were both at the same church so presumably had similar beliefs about most major topics, but both had different, though undecided, convictions about "what counts as having sex". Whilst one member of the couple felt that the sexual acts they were doing were going too far, the other confidently stood by her conclusion that penetrative sex was the only act that was too far. Whilst Hannah was therefore content in her status as a virgin according to her beliefs about sex, her partner was not. She admitted that in hindsight she "was very much guilty of not respecting his boundaries once he raised concerns". Because she "thought it was fine and didn't want to stop", she admitted that when "he got tempted to do things [she] would encourage it rather than stop it for his benefit". This negotiation and the complexities involved when both individuals are confused about whether they want to do certain sexual acts is discussed in Chapter 6.

Simon and Hannah both wrote in a regretful tone and with hindsight about this process of dissonance avoidance. Simon openly admits that he "justified acts" with the argument that he was only having "forms of sexual intimacy that were not intercourse". Interestingly – he described those sexual acts as "sexual immorality" – long after these events had taken place. At the time of writing, he stated that he had lived for many years "with a high degree of sexual integrity". It is therefore unclear whether Simon believed he was acting with sexual integrity when he was sexually active but not having "intercourse". On the other hand, responses which discuss past behaviours are helpful in that participants appear to have settled with their beliefs in hindsight and are explaining the processes they went through before they had decided.

To conclude, some of my participants were using their boundary of "actual sex" to allow other sexual behaviour to continue without any negative feelings. During their sexual relationships, some participants used their identities as "virgins" as a bargaining tool which allowed them to enjoy some forms of sexual intimacy with their partners without feeling any of the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance.

Group 2: Virginity as a safety blanket – it's not S E X…?

Other participants were very unsure what they believed their sexual boundaries should be outside of marriage, which caused discomfort and worry. Unlike the participants above, these participants did not come to any firm decisions about their beliefs whilst they were having sexual encounters on a regular basis; they were "figuring it out as [they] went along". In these scenarios, participants appeared almost to be playing it safe – they seemed to be avoiding penetrative sex altogether but mainly because they were not entirely sure what boundaries they felt were acceptable, and they did not want to risk getting it wrong. In these instances, they were protective of their virginity due to their fears of having sex and then later regretting it. Rather than using their virginity as a justification for other sexual acts, they were using it to make them feel safe and confident that they

would not cause themselves or their partners harm. The following quotes demonstrate some of the confusion and the fact that it led participants to cling to the fact that they were not having sex:

> *I often thought well the bible doesn't talk about other stuff, just sex, so surely the rest is ok. I would think about it a lot but never came to any solid conclusion, and so just kept the same way, not really sure what I believed or why I believed it but knowing that I thought that sex was the one step too far that I wouldn't do.*
>
> *Jessica*

> *It was quite a confusing relationship for me in many ways, but the fact the sexual intimacy was going on added a whole extra layer of confusion, especially because my boyfriend at the time said he did not want to have sex before marriage. We never had sex, but we did have sexual encounters on a regular basis.*
>
> *Esther*

> *I recognise now that it was not what I truly believed as we did not tell the other flatmates and kept it completely secret. If I had thought it was ok, I would have been open about it. Things became more intimate over time. Beyond what I think is acceptable before marriage for a Christian. We were staying in the same bed and although we never had sex, we were naked at times.*
>
> *James*

Jessica's story is particularly insightful and helps us to understand why confusion about boundaries led people to be more intimate with their partners than they had planned. She explained that she never had the chance to "talk about the line between virgin and full on sex, with anyone, let alone someone [she] trusted and who knew [her] well". This led her to "explore what she "felt was right or wrong". She felt that she at least had the protective buffer of remaining a virgin; at least if she stopped before "full on sex" then she felt that would be okay. She therefore went along with her

boyfriend's wishes to be sexually intimate in other ways, despite not knowing what she believed about these other options for intimacy – all she knew was that she did not want to have sex because that was the only thing she had been told. The blurry lines between what is and is not acceptable, both in public teaching and in private belief, meant that participants ended up being sexually intimate without giving it much thought because they had the safety net of being able to say "we never had sex". I suggest that if these participants had been able to make decisions about each sexual act such as "kissing with tongues", "touching each other naked", or "oral sex" before they were in any sexual situations with their partners, they may not have gone as far as they did. However, because they did not know what they believed about these acts, they settled with a simple solution of going along with their partners or their own desires without giving each act much thought. Their priority appeared to be that they were keeping their virginity intact.

For participants in both Group 1 and Group 2, their blurry distinctions between "grey areas" and "full on sex" led them to do sexual acts with their partners without giving them much thought, because they "weren't having sex". Interestingly many participants later acknowledged that these behaviours, though they were not sex, were unhelpful or unacceptable before marriage. For example, Hannah wrote with an obvious tone of regret that upon "Looking back, [she] realised that the sexual components of [her] relationships with both Alex and Matt had created a level of intimacy far too great for what could be justified for four month relationships between two people who weren't really compatible". When her ex got into a new relationship, Hannah suspected that they were keeping things to just kissing. It made her "quite uncomfortable to think how his new girlfriend must feel about how close and intimate [she] had been with Matt, and in a way that she hadn't". A long time later, Hannah "FINALLY understood what church leaders were saying when they often refused to set a clear line of 'this is when it goes too far'". As a married woman now, Hannah concluded that "there's a grey area between what is normal and acceptable for an

unmarried couple and what strays into sexual intimacy", and "[she] could see [she'd] gone way beyond the grey area."

To conclude, I suggest that participants were so focused on "not having sex" that some of them ended up going further than they would have liked. With the 'safety blanket' of "not having sex", they did not carefully ask themselves what they believed *was* okay outside of this protective boundary. They did not carefully consider what they *did* want to do with their partners outside of "avoiding intercourse" outside of marriage. According to Hannah's example, this focus of "not having sex" risks distracting young adults and leading them to allow "everything but sex" without giving other boundaries enough thought or time to come to solid conclusions.

Group 3: Virginity lost in the heat of the moment – that *was* S E X...

The next group of participants appeared to have had sex without actively planning to and without carefully considering it with their partners. The language many of them used when they talked about their first experiences of sex implied that they were "swept up" in it, as if it almost happened *to* them rather than both individuals acting with agency. They described it almost like they were victims to moments of such passion that they had no control over the situation. I discuss this victim mentality at various points throughout the dissertation, but for now it is important to note that for many participants, their mentalities implied that rather than actively crossing it, they had accidentally fallen "over the line", crossing the threshold between being a "virgin" and being a "sinner" and only coming to terms with the permanence of this transition afterwards.

Firstly, I note the speed at which many participants' physical relationships "escalated" until they reached the "last thing" and had sex. The narratives in this group described their "first time" as if they were clumsy mistakes rather than carefully thought through moments of intimacy between lovers. See the following examples, where participants both wrote about the development of their sexual experiences until they eventually had sex:

That relationship went further than just kissing, but never anywhere near intercourse. Again, this was something shameful and not something I told anyone about… and then shortly after arriving in university, I had my first experience of intercourse (again, connected to a party in our halls). It shocked me into going back to church.

Tom

Our relationship was mainly a result of physical attraction – we kissed at a house party and started dating a few weeks later. Our relationship escalated at an alarming speed. Any boundaries that I thought I would have in a relationship disintegrated rapidly, and it wasn't long before we slept together. The novelty and excitement of a physical relationship meant that I buried the feelings of guilt I had knowing that I was sinning against God. This went on for several months, until finally God spoke to me and I was prompted to end my relationship with Alex, knowing it was not good for my relationship with God.

Judith

The language used in both narratives implies that neither participant had planned or expected to have sex when they did. Tom was "shocked" into going back to church, demonstrating the significance he attributed to the occasion and the fact that he felt his identity as a Christian was in question because of it. Similarly, Judith's relationship caused a continual battle in her mind; she also appeared to place a lot of significance on the fact that she and her boyfriend were "sleeping together", and clearly felt she was "sinning against God" in the process. However, the speed and "excitement" of the relationship allowed her to ignore the guilt she felt. As a sidenote, the above participants appear to have got "carried away" mainly by the "physical attraction" and the excitement of sexual intimacy and intercourse. Neither participant implied that they were emotionally intimate with their partners and there were few serious long-term expectations for the relationships. In contrast to the account that follows, sexual relationships like Tom's and Judith's

caused different emotional responses to those who were in more serious relationships. Their narratives were much more blunt and talked very factually about the sexual acts and the impact they had on their Christian identities.

Other participants had long-term expectations and had been romantically involved for some time before they had sex. They had "tried so hard to avoid" having sex throughout their relationships and had been successful up until the occasions described in the following narratives. Louise's account is as follows:

> *The first time was so beautiful. We lay there for ages afterwards, and I remember not actually being able to believe we'd done it and that sex was that good... But the day after we met up to talk and pray about it, and we both wept uncontrollably. We felt so out of control, and like we'd messed up beyond a point that could be fixed.*

Here Louise demonstrates the disbelief she felt when she and her partner finally "went too far". She describes the scene where she lay with her boyfriend "for ages afterwards", as if paralysed by a flurry of emotions because of what had just happened. She seems to describe the pair only coming to terms with what it overnight, separately, which adds to my previous arguments about individuals and/or couples separating their sexual lives from their religious lives. Whilst together on the night they had sex, it sounds like Louise and her boyfriend had a romantic time laying together after having a "beautiful" first experience of sex and being shocked that it was "that good". However, once they were alone and had space to think, it seems that their individual religious selves had come to terms with the fact that they had had sex. The next day, after this realisation, it seems that the two religious selves then came back together in a very different context – they planned to "talk and pray" about their actions but instead "wept uncontrollably". In this way, Louise appears to narrate two different stories; the one where a couple had a "beautiful" first time of intercourse together and lay in shock about how "good" it was, and then the one where a

couple cried because they were "out of control" and regretted that they had "messed up beyond a point that could be fixed".

Her comments also provide insight into the fact that being sexually active in this way is seen as a permanent, qualitatively different state than virginity (Tsui & Nicoladis 2004); Louise and her partner had transitioned into a state of being and they had no option to transition back. John had a similar experience with his long distance girlfriend:

> *This led us to very intimate moments over the few visits, until we went 'all the way' and I lost an aspect of my identity as being celibate for God… I was humbled and prayed about it, cried, and ate a lot of doughnuts.*

John also appears to have experienced an unwanted and irreversible transition in his identity. He wrote that he had tried for a long time to maintain his celibacy until he was married, and interestingly used the word "lost" to describe what happened to his celibate identity. The notions of having "lost" virginity as if by accident is a stark contrast to the notions discussed earlier of virginity as a 'gift' (Carpenter, 2002). Rather than reaching a point in a relationship where they felt they wanted to reciprocally share the irretrievable 'gift' of one another's virginity, participants in group 3 seem to have accidentally offered it without fully considering the consequences.

I suggest that Christian couples who had been romantically involved for some time, in the aftermath of their sexual desire and moments of acknowledging their satisfaction, were blocking out the fact that they had just had sex despite their plans to save it for marriage. Only afterwards, when they were out of these positions of sexual and relational intimacy and left alone with their thoughts, did they realise what had happened and awaken the religious self. There was clearly a sense of panic or urgency for Louise and her boyfriend given that they met up "the day after" to pray about it, suggesting that the "conviction" Louise has mentioned in other parts of her narrative had led her to do some action to restore the religious self in some way. The narratives in Group 3

demonstrate the theme running throughout this dissertation; some participants were clear about the boundaries they had set but tended to get "carried away" in their moments of desire, leading them to cross boundaries and only come to terms with it after the act. Their religious selves then felt that they needed to carry out some restorative action in order reclaim some sense of the identity that had been threatened or diminished by the sexual act. Both John, Louise, and their partners "went to Christian leaders and those who [they] respect[ed] to get guidance", which I suggest was the means by which they sought to find some resolution to the situation. As mentioned in Chapter 3, when the individual fails to maintain self-concept clarity, others can help them do the work required to restore it. For example, the pastoral support John received helped him to see that "Jesus spoke his grace and his truth into the situation" and he began "to see the value in this part of [him]" that God had created. In this way, though he was upset to have "lost" his celibacy and experienced the discomfort of having his self-concept clarity disrupted, he was eventually able to form a new self-concept which incorporated both the sexual self and the religious self: He learnt "that sex was good, and that was why boundaries are given. That [his] feelings are not sin in themselves" but that "God had created his sexuality".

John had found healthy ways to cope with the unwanted and unplanned change in his identity, through the actions he took after having sex. It is interesting to note that whilst John's narrative ended on this positive note of a restored identity, Louise's did not. She wrote the following about her church leaders:

> *They were very gracious, kind, and understanding. They prayed for us and said they could keep us accountable if we wanted. They also said "we just need to ask…I know it's hard, but are you in this relationship with a view to marrying each other?" we both said yes, we were very seriously considering marriage. They said that this was okay, and in that case we should stay together and be held accountable. But, if we thought that actually we wouldn't marry, we should break up immediately to avoid this happening again.*

Unlike John, who went on to marry the girlfriend he had sex with, Louise did not marry her partner. She wrote about the break up:

> *I felt like I was living a nightmare for weeks. I couldn't believe, or even comprehend, that my life was not going to be spent with him. I hated myself for allowing us to be so intimate, and I regretted being so stupid. I suddenly understood why sex was best within marriage. The pain was unbearable.*

One of the reasons Louise and her partner experienced so much discomfort was because they did not experience any restoration of their self-concept after they unexpectedly lost their identity as virgins. The advice from her leaders had, in essence, put the emphasis on the fact that they should either be considering marriage or breaking up because they had already had sex. Rather than providing Louise with a restored self-concept like John's did, her leaders provided more reason for her to feel bitter and keep the sexual self separate from her identity. These factors led her to the intense emotions she experienced as a result of the end of her relationship:

> *I began self-harming to relieve some of the hatred and anger I felt towards myself. I hated my body for letting me fall so uncontrollably for him, and for having such little self-control.*

When Louise went to receive pastoral support immediately after her identity changed as a result of having sex, the leaders could have guided her in the process of rebuilding the Christian identity that she felt had been diminished as a result of having sex outside of marriage. They could have clarified her self-concept by reminding her of the "grace" she had experienced before and by providing ways to reconcile the sexual and the religious self in healthy ways. Whilst John had received help in incorporating his sexual story into a coherent sense of self, using theological concepts of forgiveness and atonement to remove the discomfort caused by the fact that he was "no longer a virgin", Louise continued to see her body as the part of herself that had "failed" her. She therefore kept it as a separate entity and appeared to blame it for "letting [her] fall so uncontrollably" for her boyfriend that she had sex with him. I therefore suggest that the

participants in Group 3 who "lost [their] identity as celibate for God" experienced a severe destabilisation of the self after unexpectedly crossing over their boundaries. After the painful process of coming to terms with their new identities as Christians who had had sex outside of marriage, they sought to restore their sense of self with the help of trusted pastoral leaders. John took actions, guided by pastoral support, which strengthened both his relationship with God and the relationship between his body (and its sexual desires) and his religious self. However, Louise did not experience any reformulation of her identity because of the advice given by her chosen pastoral support. Along with the trauma of breaking up with her boyfriend, she also experienced a severance in her identity; the religious self began to "hate" the body for allowing her to have sex.

Group 4: Virginity as a final act of rebellion

The final group I have identified of the participants who had sex appeared to almost throw away their virginity in a final act of defeat or rebellion. They had continually broken their own sexual boundaries and reached a point where their frustration at the self and the temptation they were experiencing led them to give up and go "all the way". I will use Naomi's narrative to explore this further, and to demonstrate the impacts of behaviours that clash with participants' Christian identities and their motivations to maintain their "purity".

Naomi's narrative started by telling the story of a girl who had never even "kissed anyone before" because she had "always seen even kissing as quite a big deal and nothing [she] would let [herself] into lightly". The story then follows the aftermath of a night when her boundaries were forcefully pushed by a "boy [she] fancied" who had convinced her to be far more intimate with him than she wanted to. Naomi then wrote about the painful development of her sexual identity after she realised that those first sexual experiences did not mean anything to her sexual partner. I explore the dramatic transition from a sense of religious identity which caused her to avoid kissing people,

through to one that caused her to have sex with a stranger. The following describes her behaviour after the first incident:

> *Many nights I would be led by guys to do what they wanted though I made sure I didn't have sex still because that was all that I could save now. When I would wake up in the day I would wrestle with my faith and cry and apologise to God and hate myself.*

Here, Naomi does demonstrate the same protectiveness over her virginity as participants that were discussed in groups 1 and 2, but she also appears to have labelled herself with another undefined identity following her first few sexual experiences. This emphasises the different labels people ascribe to different levels of intimacy and demonstrates that once someone feels they have gone beyond their own established boundary, they easily assume a new identity and then act accordingly.

As Naomi's sexual boundaries had previously been "not kissing", she clearly had very strong opinions about what she felt was acceptable outside of marriage and had set boundaries to help her stick to those beliefs. She warned the insistent guy she fancied that she "wanted him to sleep next door because [she] knew [she] would do something [she] didn't want to do as a Christian" if he slept in her room. It seems that she had no questions about the "grey areas" that other participants referred to – she did not want to go further than kissing until the time was right. Naomi therefore placed high value on the "purity" she planned to keep until marriage and was deeply affected by her feelings that this had been tainted. After her first experience, she said she found herself "numb and not caring about anything anymore". She started getting "very drunk on regular nights out" and "stopped declining guys as [she] had done for years". She wrote that "the following few weeks [she] felt such shame and sadness. [She] kept playing things over in [her] mind", "crying uncontrollably" and "self-harming" which she had done before. In a similar way to Louise, Naomi appears to be punishing her body because she "wasn't strong enough to stop him". At this point, she felt like she had gone past a point of no return after her first sexual

experience. Her sense of identity therefore appeared to shift after this incident and seemingly turned into the 'cycles of sin' that I discuss in the following chapter.

Naomi's narrative also highlights the different values people ascribe to each point in the space between, for example, kissing and having penetrative sex. It reminds us that sexual boundaries are very personal; Naomi appears to have decided that even though she was still a virgin, she was also already a "sinner" because she had been more sexually intimate with people than she had planned to be outside of marriage. In her mind the threshold had already been crossed from innocent to guilty, and she suffered depressive episodes as a result.

Her narrative ends with the following, which I suggest expresses the immense frustration that Naomi felt about the actions that led up to this point. She appeared to have lost all motivation required to adhere to the boundaries she had set herself according to her beliefs:

> *My actions didn't change and eventually I was in bed with a guy saying I was a Christian and that was why I didn't want to go all the way with him. He asked me why doing other things was okay to Jesus and I felt so stupid. I wasn't pleasing God, and I wasn't even pleasing that guy. I decided I'd gone too far to please God now anyway, so I went all the way with him. I did want to, but it wasn't very enjoyable, but I just wanted to please him.*

The way she narrates the event seems to emphasise the exhaustion, frustration, and hopelessness she felt as a result of this struggle with her sexual self; what was once so precious to her – her purity – was given over to "a guy" simply because she felt that she had not satisfied God. She alludes to the fact that she had decided that she may as well give the "guy" some satisfaction since she had failed to "please God anyway". Lewis (1995) describes shame 'as extreme pain, discomfort, and anger' (p44) and I suggest that this experience of shame was the causal factor for Naomi's act of rebellion; it led her to have sex in an act of self-destruction as it was "the only thing she had left". I therefore suggest that Naomi's story offers insight into the ways in which

participants' feelings of having failed often led them to give up and go against their beliefs in acts of defeat or rebellion. These themes will be explored in the following chapter in where I discuss cycles of sin.

A final point to note here from Naomi's story is that she appeared to have no concern about what her own desires were. When she eventually had sex, she wrote that "it wasn't very enjoyable" but that she "wanted to please him". This gives us some idea of how she felt about herself and the worth she believed she had at this point in her sexual story. She wrote that she was ashamed, and these feelings are common when feeling shame; Lewis defines it as 'feeling that one is no good, inadequate, unworthy' (Lewis, 1995, p45). Naomi's narrative gives insight into participants' feelings of failure when they did not manage to stick to their sexual boundaries, and the ways these feelings can lead people to feel ashamed and "worthless". It is unsurprising that Naomi disregarded her own beliefs, feelings or wishes whilst in this emotional state, and it draws attention to the vulnerability that is caused by sexual shame. Participants did appear to become vulnerable in many ways, often lashing out on the self in acts of sexual sin as a self-destructive mechanism.

Naomi's experiences demonstrate what appeared to happen to participants who experienced shame very intensely; Lewis explains that usually, experiencing shame tells the self: 'stop, you are no good' (ibid), but he points out that if these feelings of shame become too intense to handle, the individual can 'bypass shame' and start to just ignore it. I add to Lewis's discussion on shame by arguing that Naomi's sense of shame became too much to handle, but rather than ignoring it, she acted out against it in moments of rebellion or self-destruction.

In this chapter I have highlighted the differing viewpoints that participants had about what counted as sex and therefore where they saw the threshold between virgin and non-virgin. I outlined participants' views on the significance of the category of "virgin" and the fact that both men and women considered their "first time" to result in a significant identity shift. I argued that most of my participants used their virginity as a bargaining tool or a safety blanket to allow sexual

intimacy without experiencing dissonance. I then pointed out that of those participants who did have sex, most crossed the threshold from virgin to non-virgin in impulsive moments of intimacy, which resulted in shock and confusion as they came to terms with their new identities. Finally, I argued that some participants gave up their identity of virginity in final acts of rebellion or self-destruction after long periods of frustration with the self.

Chapter 5: Internalising shame and losing power: the consequences of dissonance-inducing sex

Having explored the Christian teaching received by participants, their beliefs, and the relationships between their bodies, minds, and religious identities in moments of cognitive dissonance, I will now explore the consequences of all of this on participants. These stretch from participants' immediate responses to those stretching up to 13 years after the sexual acts. I argue that participants internalised sexual shame and developed characterological self-blaming tendencies, which led to significant emotional distress. I also identify some of the impacts of cognitive dissonance on my participants' relationships with their bodies as a result of their sexual activity. Finally, I explore the implications of all that has been discussed on participants' understandings and experiences of sexual consent and rape. I conclude the chapter by emphasising the severity of the consequences of unmarried Christians beginning to engage in sexual activity without first having firm beliefs. I also point out the dangers that participants were exposed to as a result of limited sex education or open discussion about sexual desire and consent.

The sudden realisation

As mentioned in Chapter 3, participants varied in the length of time it took to come to terms with their sexual experiences, but the majority of participants discussed the hours after sexual intimacy as intensely emotional. Luke said in an interview:

> *I would be interested to know whether other Christians have like a come down… in my experience that's been really intense, like so intensely opposite to what I'd just been experiencing.*

Luke's notion of "a come down", which plunged him into feelings that were "so intensely opposite" to those he had been experiencing in the midst of sexual activity, was very common for

most of my participants. Because they tended to "shut down the mind" during the sexual act in order to enjoy it in the moment, it is unsurprising that the moments afterwards were moments of painful realisation and regret. James wrote the following:

> *The passion of the moment takes it away… and then as soon as it's done… you reflect on things… you think 'have I lost everything that my life was leading to? Am I going to hell?' And I don't even believe in hell…*

Like James, coming to terms with what had just happened appeared to come as a surprise for many of my participants, and they were usually quickly followed by intense feelings of remorse. Participants' experiences add weight to Helen Lynd's (1958) work which describes shame as 'being taken unawares… something is suddenly exposed which is incongruous with, or glaringly inappropriate to, the situation, or to our previous image of ourselves in it' (p31). She attributes the painful impacts of shame to the uncomfortable feeling of being unprepared or yielding unexpectedly as if helpless, often as if being betrayed by the body and mind. I suggest that this response was particularly common for the participants in Group 3 of the previous chapter; they were hit with both the shock of going past sexual boundaries and the change in identity. These participants appeared to demonstrate the fact that their bodies had shocked them by having sex, taking them over the threshold of being "abstinent for God". My research therefore supports the idea that a fundamental part of experiencing shame comes from the fact that these exposures often come as if by surprise, often both to the self and to others.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, some participants talked about the speed with which their sexual experiences happened, and often used language which implied that the experience had almost taken them victim rather than them actively deciding to act on their sexual desires in certain ways. For example, David said that "university life became fast and reactive… it's more common just to float along and then things happen to you. And you decide afterwards what you're gonna do about it", pointing to the lack of control he felt he had over his lifestyle whilst he was having sex with

his girlfriend. Luke provided helpful insights into this. Whilst discussing his experiences, he stopped in the middle of a sentence and said "I was about to say 'what's happened to me'… but I mean what I've done… I think there's a tendency to be passive to not take ownership or acknowledge agency". Similarly, Judith wrote that her "relationship escalated at an alarming speed. Any boundaries that [she] thought [she] would have in a relationship disintegrated rapidly, and it wasn't long before [they] slept together". Similarly, Luke said in an interview that immediately after the event he reacted to one-night stands in the following way:

> *It's like 'I want to leave this room, this building, as quick as I possibly can and like leave…' there's almost an element of like, I dunno, almost like self-loathing, I'd probably describe it as like… so like, I always had to make sure they finished first, because I know that once I'm done, I'm done… I don't want to be there.*

This demonstrates the common experience of sexual acts which went against participants' beliefs happening quickly and then almost shocking them after they had finished and had time to consider what had just happened. These notions of shame point to the processes involved in participants' experiences of cognitive dissonance; when they consider their sexual experiences, they are suddenly hit with an exposure of opposites: a sharp discrepancy between what they view as "*Christian*" behaviour and their *actual* behaviour. For my participants, Lynd suggests, the underlying cause of shame is the sudden and often unexpected realisation of a discrepancy between the person's sense of self and their behaviour.

Participants who had been stuck in spirals of sexual behaviour ended up stopping the spiral of sexual activity for different reasons; Naomi fell out with her best friend because her behaviour had gone so far, which made her "hit rock bottom [she] needed to start caring again". Joe had "a surge of real conviction" and a desire to follow God. Louise or her partner would "feel convicted by the Holy Spirit, and David's relationship was ended by the girlfriend who had been encouraging them to have sex. Despite these differences, all of my participants seemed to talk about these moments

as very sudden revelations of what they had been doing and how different it was to what they believed they should be. It seems that the cognitive dissonance had ceased after they reached a point in their cycle of "sin" because they became apathetic towards it, until it almost came flooding back to such an extent that participants stopped the behaviour altogether.

I noticed interesting gender differences in the length of time it took for participants to consciously go back to God after "hiding from him" during "sexual sin". This experience of avoiding God rather than turning to him after they felt they had sinned was more commonly noted by my female participants than the males. My male participants seemed quite comfortable to engage with God about their sexuality and listen to what he was saying about it, whereas the females seemed to express more avoidant behaviour, "hiding from him" for longer than the men. For example, in an interview, Lewis wrote that after "going too far with [his] girlfriend", he would often want to pray about it with her immediately. He went on to explain that his girlfriend usually felt "really uncomfortable about praying immediately after" being sexually intimate, saying that "she struggles to bring it to God" and would often "want to leave it for a bit". These responses may be linked to the historical narratives mentioned earlier which belittled the possibility of women's sexual desire and suggested that men are far more sexual. In future research, it would be interesting to explore gender differences in these tendencies to try and keep God separate to sex, and to identify the impacts this has on men and women's religious identities and integration in their religious communities.

Characterological self-blame and the body

Many participants expressed how feelings of shame associated with their sexuality interacted with their sense of self and altered the ways they felt about their bodies. For some, this went as extreme as "self-loathing" to the extent that they started self-harming. For example, Louise talked about intense self-hatred after a serious relationship which involved sexual intercourse ended, saying:

I regretted being so stupid, and I suddenly understood why sex was best within marriage. The pain was unbearable. I wanted to die. I hated myself, and I didn't believe I would ever recover from the pain. I began burning my arms to relieve some of the hatred and anger I felt towards myself. I hated my body for letting me fall so uncontrollably for him and for having such little self-control.

Louise

Similarly, Naomi "kept remembering" the forceful touch of the boy she liked and being annoyed at herself that she wasn't "stronger to stop him", which led to patterns of sexual encounters and self-harm throughout her university career. Luke wrote that he would shower as soon as he possibly could after having sexual experiences with strangers because he felt "gross", pointing to notions of defilement that are common in conversations about "sexual immorality" and other sin involving bodily actions. These are some of the extreme ways in which participants felt shame "deeply in [their] bod[ies]", taking their "sinful behaviour" into themselves and attaching it to their bodily identities.

In response to sexual sin, participants tended to place the attribution of blame directly onto their selves rather than onto the situation surrounding the sin. In 1979, Janoff-Bulman identified two different types of self-blame; characterological self-blame, which occurs when the individual feels that they themselves are to blame, and behavioural self-blame, which sees fault with a particular action or experience. Identifying which type of blame participants tended towards is important when discussing the impacts that shame had on their bodily identities. Research has suggested that characterological self-blame tends to present alongside low self-esteem, high levels of shame, and depressive tendencies (Breitenbecher, 2006; Lukwak et al, 2003). My participants' narratives demonstrated more characterological self-blaming tendencies than behavioural. Rather than just feeling guilty about the particular *actions* they had taken, participants tended to feel as if their *sense of self* had been dramatically implicated by their actions. Young adults in my study tended to internalise their 'sinful' actions and label themselves 'sinners'. They had difficulty separating their

identity from their sexual acts. I therefore suggest that Christians who behave contrary to their beliefs - specifically in the area of sexuality - are more likely to experience debilitating feelings of shame about the self as opposed to feelings of guilt about particular behaviours.

Some of my participants appeared to have very low views of the self which may account for these tendencies of characterological self-blame. For example, Louise said that after her break-up with her boyfriend, she "went back to the self-loathing [she] had lived with before" – suggesting that she was prone to having very low self-esteem. According to research, then, it makes sense that Louise also "hated [her]self" for the sexual acts they engaged in, rather than placing the blame and frustration on the acts themselves. Furthermore, the identity shifts caused by sexual "sin", discussed in previous chapters and the following section, often led to diminished self-esteem. It is therefore unsurprising that most participants tended towards characterological self-blame, given that they experienced many knocks to their self-esteem as a result of their sexual experiences.

I suggest that participants ended up blaming the self after sexual "sin" and, in some cases, despising it, because they had no way of returning to the self after the sexual act. A prominent finding in this research was that my participants' churches were almost completely silent on what a believer is to do if they had not succeeded in keeping their sex lives within a marriage relationship. Only six participants wrote that they had gone to trusted individuals to talk openly about their experiences and receive advice. The rest had kept most of it hidden from the Christians in their lives or received unhelpful or unloving responses instead of responses which could them move on healthily from their experiences. Tom wrote that he never received "teaching on cleansing from sin once it had happened", pointing to the reasons behind my participants' attempts to act conclusively to try and cleanse themselves. Without any obvious options for public confession, participants were left "dealing with things alone" – they would therefore receive very little rebuke, acknowledgement, or forgiveness for their mistakes. This left some people feeling uncomfortable and unable to reach any end point to their experiences in order to move on from blaming their own body.

I propose that this led to some of the concerning consequences of self-harm and bitter self-hatred; participants believed they were in the wrong and did not feel comfortable simply continuing as if nothing happened, with no conclusive consequences and therefore limited relief. As mentioned previously, people automatically expected to lose respect from their peers and their partners (Regnerus, 2007) for the reasons discussed in chapter 1. I have argued that this led some participants to stay silent rather than open up about their "sin". As a result, they had limited opportunities for any redemptive moments or any affirmations of the "forgiveness of sins through Jesus", which I suggest caused some of these unhealthy relationships with the bodily self. Because participants had no tangible way of physically experiencing redemption from their "mistakes", and especially not in the presence of others, they ended up developing intensely negative feelings about the self, and in extreme cases they acted on these feelings by self-harming. Sharma's (2011) research explores some cases of her participants' self-harm and concludes that it is often used as a tool to live out the embodiment of shame, which results from self-blaming tendencies and the anticipated judgement from others. She writes about one of her participants: 'by punishing herself, Maya disciplines her unruly body and soul' (p68). I suggest that some of my participants' intensely bitter opinions of the bodily self were employed as a coping mechanism for understanding and acknowledging their situation in order to move on. Erving Goffman's role theory suggests that when there is distance between the image of oneself and one's behaviour, individuals will take actions to regain control of any implications (Bruner, 1963). I therefore suggest that they were attempting to judge and punish themselves in order to help them feel more comfortable or at peace with the discrepancy. Participants felt the need to act upon the body that had "sinned", whether by punishing it, changing their opinion of it, or attempting to 'cleanse' it in order to find closure from their actions and move forward.

The most significant pastoral observation this research has made is the impact of characterological self-blame on participants' mental health. This tendency to blame the self not only caused a vast

amount of pain for participants, but also led to the 'spirals of sin', faith crises, and the mental health issues that participants alluded to. I suggest that this was because they put blame on their bodies and assigned them as "powerless" and "hopeless, with no going back". The ways in which it can lead to severe mental health issues are obvious; if participants regularly "sinned", and regularly blamed the self for these "failures". It is unsurprising that the blame placed on the body would lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and a tendency to jump to blame their own body when things went wrong. Louise wrote about her experiences of trying to punish herself: "I remember, when exercising, that I would push myself almost into a frenzy because I enjoyed the pain and felt like I was letting some of the anger out on my body". It is easy to imagine how cycles of self-harm or eating disorders could develop rapidly if this kind of behaviour becomes habitual.

Furthermore, some participants appeared to have developed a complete mistrust of their own body and a fear that it would always fail them. Again, Louise wrote about the day after she had sex with her partner for the first time; "we met up to talk and pray about it, and we just cried uncontrollably. We felt so out of control, and like we'd messed up beyond a point that could be fixed". Similarly, Simon found himself "filled with fear at the prospect of going on a date; whereas going on a date with someone does not mean you will inevitably end up engaging in sexual activity". Participants also mentioned feelings of anxiety causing a reluctance to pursue future relationships due to their sexual experiences; Tom identified a fear "of punishment and shame that would fall upon" him if he made a mistake in a relationship. He said: "I never talked about any of this (out of deep shame) and never progressed into proper relationship with most of the girls I encountered. It deepened the sense of misery and guilt in my heart". This kind of mistrust of the body was prominent in my research – young people appeared to be afraid of the damage that their sexual selves would cause for themselves and their partners, suggesting that they were not living with a healthy, coherent sense of self. Simon sounded quite surprised when he said, "I can honestly say that I have lived for many years now with a high degree of sexual integrity", demonstrating the

fact that participants seemed to struggle to believe that they could effectively control their own bodies due to their past choices. In these ways, some participants appeared to be so prone to characterological self-blame that they lived in constant anxiety about their ability to live according to their own and their community's standards. It is likely that, like Tom, participants' fears of their own bodies will dictate their feelings and decisions about future relationships. This kind of pessimism about their own ability to behave in line with their beliefs could mean that they develop anxious traits in their relationships, possibly struggling to trust other people. For example, by constantly feeling like they cannot trust themselves to act in ways that they perceive to be morally acceptable, it is likely that they would also assume that other people are the same. Their relationships with future spouses could potentially be strained by an unwillingness to trust the other, and again highlights the importance of young adults having space to process these experiences and the emotions which come with them.

Perhaps the most concerning impact of Christians developing a tendency to blame the self is that they may be less likely to voice non-consent in situations where they do not actually want to have sex, or to report it after something has happened. Naomi's narrative, about her first sexual encounter, talks about a man she had "fancied" who was extremely persistent throughout the night, despite her continually saying no to his numerous attempts. She wrote about the next day: "I kept playing things over in my mind and kept remembering his forceful touch and being annoyed at myself that I wasn't stronger to stop him". This is a devastating example of the ways in which characterological blame can cloud judgements about consent, and it highlights the risk that self-blame could lead to not acknowledging or speaking out about sexual harassment, assault or even rape.

Guilt and shame

When participants allowed themselves to think about what had happened, either after the act or after a spiral of acts, the most prominent feelings were guilt and shame. They used concepts of guilt and shame interchangeably and it was unclear whether they drew any distinctions between the two. This is understandable given that the differences between guilt and shame are also rarely discussed in wider Christian circles, despite the fact that they are vastly different in many ways (Pattison, 2011). The impacts of both guilt and shame, and suggest that participants more often experienced feelings -associated with shame rather than guilt. Fossum and Mason (1989) defined shame as ‘an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person’ (p43). Shame can be debilitating, instilling feelings of powerlessness and disorientation (Pattison, 2011). Whilst shame is closely linked to feelings of guilt, scholars tend to differentiate between the two feelings according to the attribution of blame. If a person feels that they themselves have caused some negative effect, they feel shame; they may want to hide, they may feel unworthy, and they may fear abandonment as a result (Sheehy et al, 2019). Lucy demonstrates the way shame made her feel:

> *Because I have been sexually intimate with my significant other and other people in the past, I feel like I am hiding this big shame that I can't confess. I don't feel completely integrated in the church because of this.*
>
> *Lucy*

If, however, a person feels that they have done some action which causes a negative effect, and place blame on the *action* rather than the *self*, they are more likely to feel guilt. In this case, the individual’s sense of self has not been diminished, but the individual is aware that their *actions* have not lived up to their own moral standards. Because the emphasis is on the action, which is external to the self, there is less damage done to the individual’s sense of self (Scheff 2003). This guilt response did not seem to appear very often in my narratives or interviews. Rather, participants

were much more prone to feeling "deep shame" which led to frustration at the self for not being able to prevent their actions. It also led them to withdraw from others due to the fear of judgement and feelings of exposure. I will therefore focus primarily on the experiences of shame that participants discussed, but it should be noted that participants often referred to both interchangeably despite describing characteristics of shame rather than guilt. Michael Lewis (1995) provides insightful definitions of shame:

> *A fourth feature is the fusion of subject and object. In shame, we become the object as well as the subject of shame. The self system is caught in a bind in which the ability to act or to continue acting becomes extremely difficult. Shame disrupts ongoing activity as the self focuses completely on itself, and the result is confusion: inability to think clearly, inability to talk, and inability to act. This fourth phenomenological feature enables us to differentiate shame from guilt. As described above, shame is the complete closure of the self-object circle. However, in guilt, although the self is the subject, the object is external to the self. The focus of the self is upon the behaviour that caused the interruption, namely the inadequacy to meet certain standards, and upon the object who suffers from that failure. Many have used terms like concern or regret as synonyms for guilt, suggesting a focus on something external to the self rather than on the self itself (p45).*

The nature of shame, as opposed to guilt, is such that feelings of deep shame after perceived "sinful actions" are unlikely to be adaptive in any way. Louise's comments highlight the extent of this for some of my participants: "I hated my body for letting me fall so uncontrollably for him, and for having such little self-control". Shame is a social emotion, typically felt after the exposure of failures, inadequacies, and moral or social transgressions (Izard, 1977); when people fail to live up to social or moral standards and when others are aware – or could become aware – of this failure. It is known to make people feel as if they have an audience, even when they are alone (Lewis, 1971). In these ways, shame provides a reference point when people fail to act in accordance with their own moral standards, bringing challenge to the self in order to change the behaviour.

It is important to note that shame arises when an individual sees themselves negatively in the light of others – whether that is in a real or imagined scenario; it is caused by 'the imagined effect of our reflection upon others' (Cooley, 1922, p182). When people experience shame, they think of others who disapprove of them or who will evaluate them negatively (Bain, 1875). This was a particularly common concern for my participants – they were very worried about "the judgement [they] would face" if people were to find out. For example, Louise wrote that "[she] worried, if [she] ever did meet anyone again, [she] would have to tell them that [she] had had sex with someone else", demonstrating the ways in which participants' shame about their sexual experiences were linked to conclusions they had drawn about how people might view them as a result. Because moral standards are usually shared by their significant others, a combination of internal and external judgements (or perceived judgements) on these failures can combine to form a damaging experience of shame and a fear of judgement. In these ways, we see how shame can help people to identify whether their relationships with others would be under threat (Mason and Fattore, 2017). This experience is likely to increase when those others are people whose opinion carries weight for the individual, such as authority figures. This real or imagined audience, then, if it includes people such as those in authority and people whose opinion has an impact on the individual, will cause immense pressure to perform to a high moral standard. I therefore suggest that participants' tendencies to experience shame are linked to the anxieties and self-hatred that some of my participants experienced.

The experience of shame is also more damaging when the individual is being judged, or is imagining being judged, by someone who achieves highly in the area they are being judged negatively for. To use Cooley's (1922) example, shame is usually greater for a man who has appeared cowardly in the presence of a brave man. The implications of this are obvious; when the general perception in the Church is that good Christians are holy and never succumb to sexual desires outside of marriage, unmarried individuals who do succumb to sexual desires will

experience deep feelings of shame around other Christians. David assumed that his moral practices were far worse than everyone else at church: "Although nobody in my church community actually knew that we were having sex, the divisions in moral practices between me and people in my church still made me feel uncomfortable". Because of this perception that everyone else in church were living "holy" lives and not having sex outside of marriage, David did not feel he could share himself fully with his community. He experienced a divide between his sexual life and his church life, due to feelings of shame vis-à-vis those he perceived as high achieving others whose judgement he was expecting and dreading. Other participants also withdrew from their church community and did not enjoy close fellowship as Christians because of shame. For example, Naomi "tried going to Christian events though [she] felt disconnected through shame". Similarly, Sophie spent many years with her shame "weighing [her] down for so long" because she "never told anyone who could understand the weight of what [she] felt". These narratives portray the debilitating nature of shame. My research gives evidence of the ways in which shame simultaneously makes people feel as if they have an audience whilst also feeling completely alone, setting one apart and destroying any sense of trust and acceptance (Wurmser, 1995).

The spirals of "sin"

Many of my participants went through cyclical patterns of sexual behaviour, lasting from days to years depending on the situation but eventually coming to abrupt and painful ends. For example, Naomi wrote about the weeks after she lost her virginity: "I felt even more confused but also even more carefree and continued in these behaviours until they eventually broke one of my close friendships". Others spoke of "going too far" and not being able to "go back to before", suggesting that there was a threshold which, once crossed, led the individual to feel that they had no option to return. I now seek to understand these cycles and to explore the roles of motivation and desire in maintaining these cycles of behaviour.

Participants who felt they had been "failed by [their] bod[ies]" multiple times lacked confidence in their ability, or the determination required, to practice self-control. They therefore became less likely to put effort into abstaining from sex. In an interview James talked about "going down a rabbit hole" and explained that he would go a few weeks doing what he wanted and saying "screw you God", then then he would realise and think "oh my goodness, I'm unforgiveable, how can I cope, how can I go home and be with my family when they don't know?". This dramatic and polar behaviour is striking; it seemed that participants found themselves pushing boundaries and then having no way of finding resolve or closure, so they simply continued pushing their boundaries further. According to Louise, sexual temptation sometimes felt like an "overwhelming, out of body force" that she couldn't fight "no matter how hard [she] tried". I suggest that these cycles of sin were triggered by initial sexual acts which resulted in feelings of powerless and a limited desire to abstain.

I propose that self-concept theories can help to explain the processes behind these spirals. Participants' self-esteem and hopes for the future were damaged when they, in their opinion, "sinned". Low self-esteem leads people to expect that they might fail to act according to their beliefs (Stone and Cooper, 2001). David wrote that he felt insufficient around Christian friends due to "an incongruence which [he] felt at the time, between [his] actions outside of church, and the faith [he] professed and shared with other people". I suggest that this demonstrates the detrimental effect that dissonance causes, damaging the self-esteem and making people aware of the instability in their sense of self. People lose confidence when they do not feel like they occupy a stable and coherent sense of self, leading to feelings of defeatism and a reluctance to try and act according to their beliefs. In a self-perpetuating cycle, then, dissonance causing behaviour lowers the self-esteem and further reduces hopes for their future behaviour, giving the individual less reason to actually try and reach their own personal standards of morality. Research found that those with lower self-esteem were less likely to be as uncomfortable in occasions of dissonance

because they had lower expectations of themselves (Bae, 2016). It is therefore likely that participants would then become less effected by dissonance-inducing sex the more often it happens, due to the damage caused to the self-esteem each time. I suggest that this explains that for my participants, each time they "messed up" they became more likely to do so again due to their awareness of the inconsistency of their beliefs, desires, actions, and personality traits. This awareness made them more likely to continue with dissonance-inducing behaviours due to the impacts of conflicted identity on self-esteem.

As well as decreasing self-esteem, these initial discrepant behaviours, in this case a sexual experience out of marriage, can also lead to confusions about the self-concept. David said the following in an interview:

> *These different effects of having sex in a relationship before marriage combined to change how I identified myself (although importantly I didn't realise this at the time), and ultimately threatened my ability to recognise my identity as a child of God.*

This confusion, and the discomfort that usually comes with it, can sometimes be relieved by disregarding the old self-concept and identifying with a different one. I therefore suggest that participants continue in cycles of behaviour according to these temporary and unformed self-concept. Although this sometimes worked for participants as a temporary defence mechanism to avoid the pain of behaving contrary to the self-concept. They then crashed back to reality as discussed in Chapter 2. During these periods, James' guilt was non-existent for "weeks" until it suddenly hit him and sent him into a spiral of guilt and frustration, going back to behaviours like "counting the days that [he]'d managed to stop sinning".

In the case of sex outside of marriage, it would have been interesting to have explored whether changes to cognitions about the ethics of it were made consciously with the awareness that sexual opportunities might take place regularly. For example, David was aware that his decision making

may have been swayed by the fact that he was in a relationship with a girl who believed sex outside of marriage was fine – he therefore had a motivating factor to contend with whilst he made his decision about the ethics of it. Unfortunately, none of the participants who had "one night stand[s]" or only "went further than planned" once or twice offered to take part in the interviews. These narratives were also much shorter and gave no hint of justifying or altering their beliefs after their behaviour. For example, Joe talked very briefly about two occasions where he went home with girls after nights out, and said he had "a real surge of conviction that what [he] was doing was wrong and very quickly left". He said he was grateful for "the holy spirit convicting [him]" and expressed no hint of doubting his cognitions about sex outside of marriage. The fact that these narratives were so short and conclusive could be interpreted as evidence for the fact that people in relationships, who were more likely to have sexual opportunities arise regularly, were more likely to spend time deliberating over the morality of these actions.

Given that participants were discussing instances where they crossed their sexual boundaries with others, the impact of being observed by others becomes important when discussing counter attitudinal behaviours. Studies found that internalisation was much more likely to take place if the dissonance inducing behaviour had been witnessed by another person (Baumaster and Tice, 1984). I therefore suggest that participants in relationships may have been more likely to internalise their concept of the self into agreement with one's recent behaviour (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959) in order to save face in front of the sexual partner. Further, because we can assume that participants placed high value on the opinion of the person they had sexual encounters with, it is worth considering that they may also have been motivated by the desire to maintain perceptions of integrity and consistency of the self. For example, Naomi and Jessica both found that once they had been sexually active with their non-Christian partners, they struggled to explain why they believed that sex outside of marriage was wrong. Hannah's boyfriend appeared to have had a similar experience – once they had concluded that "anything but sex" was okay outside of marriage,

and then proceeded to be sexually intimate with one another often, he did not feel able to tell her that he did not believe that they should continue with the sexual intimacy until they get married. Though none of my participants elaborated on these experiences, it is obvious that it became very difficult for them to hold views that conflicted with their recent behaviours, particularly if they were witnessed by another person.

Relational turmoil

My findings also suggest that some couples who had decided on boundaries together and then broke them together experienced damaged trust in the other's ability to care for them and therefore placed some blame on them. The narratives suggest that that sexual experiences within Christian relationships often caused disorientation in the relationship itself and led to doubts about the suitability of their partners. Louise wrote that she "was also bitter about the fact that [her partner] often initiated it despite knowing how much the consequences would hurt [them] both". Similarly, Hannah wrote:

> *I was angry at Matt. Although he hadn't put pressure on me and I hadn't taken much convincing, he was ultimately the one who convinced me that to engage in certain sexual behaviours was ok. If I had been setting the boundaries at the beginning, we would probably have just kissed, but I had a nice Christian guy telling me that other things were ok. I only did those things because he suggested it, but then I felt like he was making me feel guilty for it. At the time I was like 'Why should I feel guilty? This was your idea!'*

These narratives capture the added hurt that female participants felt when their partners' shared their Christian beliefs about abstinence until marriage but continued to encourage sexual intimacy. There is a sense of frustration at the other member of the couple and the fact that they did not play their part in helping them avoid sex outside of marriage. Whilst secular culture suggests that sex, regardless of marital status, is a natural and healthy way of deepening romantic relationships,

Christian couples tend to respond to sexual intimacy in ways that distance them from one another due to feelings of blame, frustration, and confusion.

Christian narratives about male headship have subtly become part of some young adults' concerns about sex outside of marriage, influencing the way they respond to their partners' after having sexual intimacy outside of marriage. Only female participants acknowledged that another person was responsible for their sexual acts, whilst the male participants took full responsibility for the sexual "sin". For example, though David wrote that his non-Christian girlfriend wanted to have sex with him and actively encouraged it, he placed the blame for the sexual acts very strongly on himself. James also wrote that in conversations about sex at his conservative church, he was told that "men must control themselves for their girlfriends' sake", which he found frustrating because it implied that men need to be told how to "look after" their girlfriends as if they were not doing this already. Similarly, Louise wrote that one of her partners felt solely responsible, saying "he felt that he should have stopped us because he was supposed to be protecting me from harm". It is therefore interesting to consider whether participants (consciously or unconsciously) held the historically ingrained notions of male leadership which have existed in society and particularly the Church for many years (Aune, 2006). Most participants did not attend churches which taught conservative perspectives about male headship, but it is likely that some of them would still have some implicit expectations about the role of men providing protection for their partners as a result of numerous cultural scripts as well as remnants of conservative teaching (Onorio, 2015). Female participants such as Hannah and Louise implied that they had expected their partners to help them and protect them from harm and were frustrated when their partners did not do this successfully in regard to their sexual activities.

Interestingly these dynamics of relational turmoil and anger seemed to be very different for the participants whose partners were not Christians. Jessica wrote that *she* was the one who felt guilty when her non-Christian boyfriend got offended that she wouldn't sleep in the same bed as him.

She did acknowledge that her boyfriend complained, saying that she "didn't trust him to respect [her]", but she implied that this was not the case despite the fact that he persisted to encourage her to be more sexually intimate than she wanted to on numerous occasions. Similarly, Judith wrote the following about her relationship with a non-Christian:

> *Time and time again he would push my boundaries and I would feel guilty afterwards and tell myself it wouldn't happen again. But temptation got the better of me and I gradually gave in to his advances and we slept together.*

Rather than these women feeling that their partners' "advances" and petitions were unfair because they had already explained that they did not want to cross certain boundaries before marriage, they put the blame on themselves and the fact that they didn't stop both of them from giving into temptation. In these ways, participants seemed to make excuses for their non-Christian partners in a way that Christian couples did not. In an interview, Jessica said that it was to be expected for non-Christian men to want to have sex with their girlfriends, and she felt that he was being kind and understanding enough by staying in the relationship despite the fact that she did not want to. I suggest that these Christian girls actually ended up feeling ashamed for two reasons: for stopping their partners from having sex due to beliefs they didn't personally hold, *and* for breaking their own sexual boundaries when their non-Christian boyfriends "couldn't handle the temptation".

Consensual sex, rape, and the aftermath in Christian circles

It is of vital importance to consider the risks involved in situations where people were torn between wanting and not wanting sexual intimacy. In terms of consent, the line becomes blurry and wavering when one individual (or both) simultaneously does and does not want to have sex. I have already noted numerous occasions where participants have implied that they were pressured into certain acts by their partners or vice versa, and I now highlight the complications involved.

The first concern about consent that is evident in the narratives is that participants often talked about times when one of the partners would encourage the other to cross their boundaries. Although they did not literally force them to do sexual acts, they admitted that they did manipulate situations wherein their partner would succumb to temptation. For example, Louise mentioned that she and her partner would often tease each other by trying to "turn each other on" until the other eventually succumbed to temptation and initiated oral or penetrative sex. Hannah described these kinds of situations, highlighting the obscurities caused by continuous indecisiveness and confusion in relationships, with boundaries constantly being negotiated:

> *Looking back, I was very much guilty of not respecting his boundaries once he raised concerns. I thought it was fine and didn't want to stop, so whenever he got tempted to do things I would encourage it rather than stop it for his benefit.*

Judith wrote about an occasion when her non-Christian partner encouraged her to have sex for the first time. She demonstrated the effort required to abstain in these situations where individuals both wanted and did not want to have sex. She said "it was easier to let it happen than resist, and honestly, I enjoyed it". In these ways, participants evidenced some of the ambiguities involved in these relationships; because of the effort required to avoid sexual temptation, it seems that participants often found themselves just letting their partners do what they wanted rather than actively deciding to remove themselves from the temptation. Alternatively, participants were the ones doing the tempting, and made it difficult for their partners to say no. This shows how some unmarried Christians, or their partners, demonstrate manipulative behaviours in order to engage in sexual intimacy outside of marriage with their partners.

The second concern is that these ambiguities appeared to be exacerbated when couples regularly shifted their sexual boundaries and often changed their opinions in the "heat of the moment". It seems that when a couple are regularly indecisive about their sexual boundaries, they are more likely to dilute, ignore, or even incorporate the ambiguity as part of the excitement. Participants

appeared to have developed concerning relationship dynamics as a result of their joint experiences of cognitive dissonance. Interestingly, James expressed optimism in an interview, suggesting that men would realise if their partner was uncomfortable about having sex:

> *Yeah I guess there's the idea in society that guys will sleep with anything that moves and have no perception of what the other person's feeling, they don't care. But I think, if she wasn't having a good time, the guys would pick up on that… so I wonder whether, I a girl started panicking about whether it was right, whether the guy would respond. I don't know.*

Unfortunately, this assumption that Christians would "pick up on" whether their partners were willing to do certain acts was incorrect for some participants. Louise wrote about occasions where a Christian boyfriend "started to assume that [she] wanted to push the boundaries whenever he did" because they had mutually "gone too far" on many occasions. She explained that towards the end of the relationship, he started to initiate sexual acts without getting any kind of consent from her at all. This continued for a while until one "serious occasion" when he actually began having penetrative sex with her without seeking any kind of consent. She wrote:

> *When I made him stop, he did, and when he realised how upset I was (I cried and told him that I hadn't wanted to have sex), he apologised like he did often, and said he thought I wanted it too. I accepted this and apologised for making him think that.*

Tragically, Louise apologised for this incident and "only realised after the relationship [ended] that [her] boyfriend had raped her". I suggest that this is a result of some of the issues I have discussed in this dissertation. She appears to have initially justified his behaviour because of highly charged sexual encounters in the past, where both members often made the decision to "break [their] own rules". This story points towards the identity changes that are explored in this dissertation; Louise appears to have shifted her identity in a way that makes her assume that she was the one in the

wrong. Similarly, Naomi demonstrated a lot of strength by consistently saying no despite "fancying" a persistent boy on a night out and also feeling quite tempted:

> *It took ages again for him to let me close the living room door after he was now asking to come and stay in my room… Again after a long flirty argument he ended up staying on my bedroom floor. I went to the toilet and when I came back he was on his hands and knees and kept trying to hold me. I went to bed and then he kept putting his hands under the covers to touch me. I kept telling him not to. I admitted that I actually liked him and that was the reason I wanted him to sleep next door because I knew I would do something I didn't want to do as a Christian…*

Unfortunately, Naomi's insistent "no" did not stop the man she liked from encouraging her to go a lot further than her boundaries allowed. Again, Naomi blamed herself for "not being strong enough to stop him". I suggest that these tendencies towards characterological self-blame led participants to blame themselves automatically. In Louise's case, she blamed herself without considering whether the other person involved was in the wrong, despite the fact that he had not gained consent before penetration. Louise therefore dismissed an incident of rape and even "felt bad" about the fact that her partner had not been able to control himself during heated moments of intimacy. In Naomi's case, she blamed herself for not stopping her partner from sexually harassing and eventually assaulting her. To add to these issues, due to their concerns about judgement, they did not talk to anyone about these incidents. It is therefore highly possible that these participants are still blaming themselves for these incidents.

These participants' stories point to further concerns. They make clear that most of them have never been advised about the realities of sexual intimacy, other than the very limited sex education most of them received in school. This left little room for discussions about how to communicate consent, how to make the experience pleasurable for both partners, and even how to have safe sex. They are a sobering example of the dangerous mindsets that Christians often end up having as a result of the limited guidance on how to control sexual desires, the taboos and restricted

conversations about sexual intimacy, and the importance of giving and receiving consent before acting on sexual desires. Further to this, given the high rates of pornography usage amongst young people (Stanley et al, 2018; Valkenburg and Peter, 2009 and 2011), Christians who have no healthy sex education are at risk of developing perverse views and expectations of sex. Pornography is notorious for its historically degrading portrayal of women, with limited emphasis on consent and protection, and sometimes including graphic sexual violence (Braithwaite, 2014). Combining the unlimited access that young people have to pornography, then, with a limited discourse in Christian settings about safe and healthy sexual intimacy, can easily provide young Christians with dangerous and unhealthy sexual scripts. This repression of the topic has led to occasions of assault and even rape for participants like Louise due to the obvious challenges of communicating desires when individuals both do and do not want to have sex.

In this chapter, I have explored some of the consequences of sex outside of marriage for believers. I used participants' experiences to highlight the dangers of poor teaching and unhealthy relationships to sexuality, specifically pointing to dangerous impacts on mental health, behavioural patterns, and sexual impulsivity. I have argued that when Christians do eventually find themselves with sexual opportunities outside of marriage, they tend to take place in highly erotically charged and often very impulsive and frustrating encounters. I used participants' honest accounts of traumatic experiences to demonstrate ways in which these occasions resulted in shock and confusion, leading to damaging feelings of shame which left some participants (or their partners) feeling powerless to control their sexual desires. I also used Janoff-Bulman's (1979) discussions of self-blame to suggest that participants tended towards characterological self-blame, which may explain participants' depressive episodes and negative beliefs about the self or the body after sex outside of marriage. I added to the literature by arguing that dissonance-inducing sex and the silence that surrounds it increases the dangers for unmarried Christians. I used participants' stories to argue that they are less likely to learn how to cope with overwhelming sexual desires and

therefore more at risk of non-consensual sex. As well as this, I demonstrated the fact that Christian victims of sexual assault and rape are at risk of being silenced due to fears of judgement, or worse, tendencies such as characterological self-blame that can cloud judgements about consent and blame.

Conclusion

This dissertation explored the impacts of cognitive dissonance on the religious self, looking specifically at the sexual experiences of unmarried Christian adults. The research involved the analysis of 25 anonymous narratives, one autoethnographic narrative, and extensive semi-structured interviews with five participants. In this way, it gives voice to many participants who had not felt able to share their questions, experiences, or opinions with others due to stifled discourses around sex outside of marriage in the UK Church. These methods allowed me to explore the practical realities for those who hold religious beliefs, highlighting ways in which religious identities are formed by the *actions* of believers as much as they are formed by the cognitive beliefs. It also offers rare insights into the private lives of believers and the ways they often differ from both public Christian teaching and private Christian belief.

One of the most common findings in this research was the fact that many of my participants did not have fully formed beliefs about sex outside of marriage prior to their first sexual experiences. Young Christian adults often found themselves with sexual opportunities whilst they were still in the process of forming their religious beliefs, which meant that these were easily influenced by sexual activity. Some participants actively acknowledged that this was the case, and that their temptations often led the formation of their beliefs about sex outside of marriage. Some participants did not understand why sex was "such a big issue", and others were frustrated or confused by the way their church had handled discussions. This led some to "avoid church" and to come up with alternative discourses, particularly if they felt that conversations about sex had been stifled rather than "being open to discussion". In these ways, I argued that young adults followed generational trends by refusing to accept the guidance of authority figures and tradition, instead choosing to establish their own sets beliefs from various different sources.

Throughout the dissertation I acknowledged that participants experienced their sexuality according to numerous factors including gender, relationship status and length of belief. Social and religious norms influenced the ways in which participants interpreted their sexual experiences, meaning that discomfort was experienced at different times and in different ways. These factors had implications for the participants' experiences of sexual desire and satisfaction. Participants maintained dualistic understandings of the bodily self and the religious self which caused unconscious distinctions. Many interpreted their spiritual desires on the one hand as "good" and sexual desires on the other being "sinful". This can explain why participants were dragged into identity crises when they acted on their sexual desires. My participants appeared to find it difficult to relate to their bodies and sexual desires; they did not see them as created by God to be enjoyed, but rather as an enemy to be defeated for the sake of their "purity". It is interesting to consider whether my participants may have been less likely to have such tumultuous struggles in their faith following sexual experiences if Church teaching was more careful to avoid this duality. For example, if sexuality was taught in a more positive light, seeing it as a good part of God's creation in human beings, I suggest that participants would have been less likely to see their desires as "something to be afraid of".

I also suggest that Christians who grew up going to church were likely to inherit this dualistic view of the bodily self and the spiritual self, which prevented them from feeling empowered to control their sexual desires. Instead, as mentioned throughout, participants often felt "completely defeated" by their physical temptations, as if their sexuality was a force outside of themselves that constantly needed to be "fought". This mindset led many of my participants to fear their own sexuality, subconsciously removing it from themselves and expecting it to "overwhelm" them. In this way, they grew up with the implicit expectation that their body would fail them, usually before they had ever experienced sexual desire. The evidence provided suggests that these dualistic notions can become dangerous when mixed with the confusion caused when Christians both do and do not want to have sex, providing them with reasons to excuse their behaviour. For example,

some participants described sexual experiences where the boundaries of consent were pushed in "the heat of the moment", including one instance of rape, two instances of sexual harassment, and another of sexual assault. The ability for perpetrators to blame something external to the self, i.e., sexual desire according to this dualistic view, led some participants to excuse occasions of rape or assault. Again, my participants point to the fact that ideas stemming from Gnosticism continue to influence their everyday experience of Christian life; they seem to view their bodies and therefore their sexuality as "dirty", whilst viewing the mind and spirit, which abstains from "sexual immorality" as honourable (Cornwall, 2013). This stark divide between the sexual and the spiritual self led to perceptions that their sexual actions strengthened their sexual identity in ways that entirely negated growth in their religious identity. This and other examples show some of the lenses through which participants interpreted their sexuality. Some of these lenses had been provided by the Church unintentionally through poor teaching or stifled conversations.

This dissertation highlighted serious limitations in the provision of guidance that participants received, which was partly to blame for some of the damage caused by their sexual experiences. Advice about how to control sexual desire was lacking, with some participants stating that they had never heard any practical guidance on how to go about abstaining from sex. Furthermore, it shows that churches need to have conversations about how to ensure that sex is consensual and also how to have safe sex in order to avoid pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. As mentioned, these topics were rarely talked about in church due to the assumptions that unmarried Christians would not be having sex and therefore should not need to know about it until they were engaged and preparing for marriage. This led participants into some risky situations, and I gave the example of one couple who used the "pull-out method" because they had chosen not to buy condoms in order to prevent them from having sex.

The lack of teaching and guidance in Christian circles about consent meant that Christians who are trying to abstain are often at greater risk of blurring the lines of consent. Participants

demonstrated that unmarried Christians tended to have highly intense and impulsive sexual encounters. Their accounts highlighted the need for practical advice about consent and the need to encourage Christians to say "no" and listen for "no" in these scenarios. Some of the most concerning findings from this research involved the stories of 3 female participants who crossed boundaries because of persistent men. Naomi and Jessica were heavily pressured by their partners, and Louise was raped by her boyfriend who assumed that she "wanted it too". The dissertation highlighted that the lack of open discussion about sex led Louise to ignore the fact that her partner had raped her until a year after they broke up, as he was the only other person who she had talked to about the incident. Christians who had been assaulted were likely to fear judgement for admitting that they had put themselves in positions of sexual intimacy in the first place, and therefore might find it hard to explain the contexts in which these sexual assaults took place. In these ways, I used their traumatic stories to argue the importance of making educational conversations about sex accessible for Christians, specifically including matters of consent.

The dissertation also suggests that there ought to be a particular emphasis on the need to respect one another's boundaries and abstain from sex for the sake of the other person. For example, prior consideration or teaching may have empowered participants to "say no" in order to help their partner abstain. Instead, many participants admitted to "pushing [their partners] into temptation" despite knowing their wishes to avoid having sex outside of marriage. The risks of avoiding these conversations are evident in my findings; some participants, or their partners, had developed dangerous and damaging habits due to a combination of factors. The consequences of this lack of knowledge was evident in these women's narratives, causing them serious emotional and spiritual damage by failing to realise the seriousness of what had happened to them. To prevent situations like this, young Christian adults must be given opportunities to talk openly about their sexual experiences, to learn about matters of consent, and to establish habits of restraint where consent is not given willingly.

I also highlighted pressing pastoral issues related to sexual experiences, specifically exploring some of the implications on mental health, including eating disorders and self-harming tendencies. The limited discourse and the secrecy that surrounds unmarried Christians' sex lives meant that my participants felt unable to talk about their experiences due to fears of judgement. In many instances, this reluctance to talk about sexual encounters in the Christian community left participants suffering in silence, which led to the withholding of much-needed support. I used the examples of participants who began self-harming due to their feelings of shame and anger which they had not felt able to voice or seek help about. I also pointed to spirals of destructive behaviour which was common throughout the narratives. The Church's restrictive conversations about sex often gives limited opportunities for honesty and therefore forces unmarried Christians to go through the subsequent emotional turmoil alone. This made it less likely for people to find healing and move on from their experience, and more likely to continue in self-destructive patterns of behaviour.

This silence in the Church about sex contrasted starkly with the loud voices of shame and guilt that my participants experienced, making it hard for them to engage fully with their church community. Some young adults, or others they knew, walked away from their faith entirely whilst they were pursuing sexual relationships due to feelings of shame or alienation. In these ways, poor or limited conversations about sexual discipline can also lead young adults to leave the Church. This highlights the need for the topic to be addressed sensitively and for Church leaders to encourage believers to ask questions about the moral guidelines they were following. I suggest that if churches facilitate open spaces for young people to be honest about their opinions and experiences, in the safety of a loving and non-judgemental environment, young adults would be more likely to have formed healthy beliefs about sex. The earlier these conversations take place, the more likely these conclusions will be reached before having sexual opportunities, thus avoiding the hurt and confusion evidenced in this dissertation.

The dissertation provided lived examples of the realities of Festinger's (1957) theories of cognitive dissonance and demonstrated some of the ways in which devout believers dealt with their experiences of it. It also gave evidence and insight into the significant challenges that this cognitive dissonance brought to participants' identities, relationships, and mental health. I used my participants' narratives and interviews to explore the physiological, spiritual, emotional, and behavioural realities of sex outside of marriage for conservative Christians. The project also explored the ways in which participants sought to reduce the discomfort of dissonance.

The most common option participants took was to separate the religious and the sexual lives so that the painful clashes of dissonance were reduced. Whilst having sex, they attempted to "push God out" of their minds so they could enjoy the act, and whilst engaging with God in church, with Christian friends, or alone, they pushed their sexual selves out. They did not change any beliefs or religious commitments to avoid dissonance, they simply blocked them out of their minds temporarily. For example, participants mentioned hearing teaching about sex in church or "literally" hearing "God telling [them] to stop" whilst in the middle of a sexual act. In these moments, they were struck by the fact that "what [they] were doing wasn't okay" and therefore endured extreme conflict with their own bodies. For these reasons, those who regularly engaged with this tactic experienced many painful moments of guilt and shame when the religious self was reminded once again of the dissonance caused by the sexual self. I found that this led to inner conflict and painful negotiation; the desires of the religious self often clashed harshly with those of the sexual self. This led to frustration and confusion for both them and their sexual partners.

The dissertation also explores other tactics of avoiding dissonance. Sexual experiences outside of marriage led some participants to change the self in order to reduce the discomfort, with some altering their beliefs about sex outside of marriage so that the dissonance was removed altogether. Some participants went through phases of limiting the importance of their beliefs and even the significance of their Christian faith to their lives, with some leaving church for long periods of

time. Interestingly, I found that those people who did this, or others they knew who had, eventually ended up returning to their religious beliefs later, usually after stopping their sexual activity. This was usually a painful experience due to the discomfort that remerged after the acknowledgement of their dissonance-inducing behaviours. Often, the dissonance was actually exacerbated because they had only come to "understand the reasons behind the teaching" in hindsight. For these reasons, some of my participants returned to the religious self with more conservative views about sex only after they had stopped being sexually active. These instances caused much regret and they required redemptive moments to enable them to restore their sense of identity.

Participants experienced spirals of "sin" due to characterological self-blaming tendencies; each time they engaged in sexual behaviour, they labelled themselves as sinful. Participants' bodily actions led to a deterioration of their religious self, embodying secular norms of sex outside of marriage rather than perceived Christian norms of "holiness" and abstinence. Bodily actions taken by religious believers therefore had a large role in shaping the identity of the believer, regardless of whether they were religious actions or not. These constantly shifting senses of identity, which came as a result of their actions, added to McGuire's work by providing evidence of the complex interplay between belief, behaviour, and identity. My participants' experiences demonstrated that when they acted against their religious beliefs about sex, they caused damage to their religious selves by highlighting the similarities that their behaviours shared with secular society.

Throughout this research I found that my participants placed a lot of emphasis on the fact that penetrative sex is different to other forms of sex. Young adults approached the idea of virginity differently and some used the justification of "at least we're not having penis-in-vagina sex" to loosen their boundaries without feeling guilty. Some participants seemed particularly defensive about their virginity – both in making sure they kept it, but also in making sure that it could continue to be used as justification for all other sexual acts whenever they felt they needed one. On the other hand, some participants gave up their virginity in an act of self-destruction or final

defeat. In all instances though, those who did "lose [their] virginity" saw it as a significant event and effected their sense of identity in a different way to other sexual acts.

As well as struggling to engage with their usual church lives whilst they were still sexually active outside of marriage, participants did also seem to struggle if they had not dealt with their previous dissonant lifestyles effectively. Because of the implications of bodily acts on religious identities, participants were painfully aware of the ways their bodies had "failed them" in the past, leaving them feeling "dirty" and "inadequate" when attending church. I therefore suggested that until participants engaged in some restorative act to bring them back into their community, they found it hard to "reconcile" their previous behaviour with their religious identity.

Finally, participants' experiences highlight the importance of effective pastoral support, from friends in their church community as well as those in positions of mentoring and leadership. Although most of the narratives and interviews demonstrated the more negative elements of the Church's dealings with the topic, participants did also point towards some positive and redemptive experiences. There were also significant moments for participants which allowed this sense of self to be re-established, which were important to allow participants to move forward from their discomfort, which I suggested was likely to prevent further damage to their mental health, relationships, and future sexual experiences.

My research found that participants who had been able to speak to trusted Christian friends, leaders, or family after their sexual experiences were likely to have opportunities to develop a well thought through mindset about sex and marriage. This implied that "sinning" and then going through the processes described in this project appeared to give people opportunities to thoughtfully evaluate their beliefs about sex, and to come to settled conclusions about their sexual ethics. Despite the resistance and feelings of judgement from his church leadership (discussed in Chapter 1), James continued to engage with podcasts, family members, and friends from his home church. He found this helpful and felt he rarely received judgement despite disagreements. In some

ways, he found this experience empowering; "it's actually made me stronger in the sense that my faith has got a lot deeper… I'm more willing to question things". In these ways, as well as helping him to develop his view about sex and marriage, James also gained a more holistic and thorough belief system through these open and honest conversations about matters such as sexuality. Having firm convictions therefore enabled them to have more effective management over their behaviour and therefore their identities. For these reasons I amplify the voices of participants who noted the immense benefit of having space to be vulnerable and to talk about their sexualities free from judgement.

As well my findings pointing to the discomfort caused by dissonance, they added an element to theories of cognitive dissonance and the self-concept. Some participants used the threat of cognitive dissonance to prevent themselves from acting on desires which they believed would lead them to "sin". Many of them had an awareness of the discomfort they would experience if they did have sex, and they allowed this to direct their actions. As a result of this, their religious senses of self were affirmed. They were left with a more robust set of cognitions, which in turn led to further abstinence as a result, thereby strengthening the self-concept and limiting further dissonance-inducing behaviours. So, whilst cognitive dissonance does cause emotional and spiritual distress for some, it also has the potential to guide participants and motivate them to behave according to their beliefs. This response was the opposite to cognitive dissonance, where the religious self was diminished and resulted in subsequent dissonance inducing actions. When participants abstained from sex due to their beliefs, the congruence between cognition and behaviour provided them with stronger cognitions about abstaining from sex. Studies found that people tend to alter their cognitions after acting in order to maintain congruence between the action and belief (Jones 1981; Tice 1992). I suggest that people also altered their cognitions when they did act according to their beliefs, often becoming more fervent in the cognition they acted according to. My participants' experiences therefore demonstrated that much like dissonance-

inducing behaviour is internalised and repeated, successful dissonance-*avoiding* behaviour is internalised in the same way.

To conclude, the processes of identity formation discussed in this dissertation demonstrated McGuire's (1996) claims that religiously motivated behaviour results in the 'interpenetration' of the 'body, mind, self and society' (p107) and contributes to the formation of the religious self in a continuous process of adjustment. Participants were forced to contend with the influences of secular culture, religious authority, and their sexual partners during this formation of the self. They noted times where they abstained successfully from sex in order "to honour God", and these actions led to strengthened religious selves. Similarly, when participants engaged in acts of worship or attended church, their religious selves were strengthened. I therefore suggested that corporate acts of worship such as taking communion and singing together were vital in times of confusion and doubt caused by sexual activity.

In these ways, this dissertation sheds light on the benefits of the Church ensuring that it deals with sexuality effectively. I suggest that there is scope to encourage unmarried Christians to enjoy an empowering relationship with their sexuality, since abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage was a positive experience for my participants when they succeeded. When young adults chose to abstain, it instilled feelings of belonging to the Christian community as they made sacrifices for their faith in ways that they believed the people around them were also making. I reference participants descriptions of sexual temptation as choosing to act "in allegiance" to God and suggest that language reminiscent of war and loyalty highlights the feelings of camaraderie that can arise when individuals make sacrifices to abide by common moral guidelines. This increased sense of belonging provided further motivation to abstain and gave participants more certainty about their decisions to avoid sex outside of marriage. Furthermore, I suggest that participants who chose to abstain despite the difficulties and temptations experienced a strengthened sense of self and found the confidence to regain control over their bodies and their sexual selves.

Suggestions for future research

Due to the limitations of this research described in the introduction, there were certain topics that I would have liked to discuss further. This was predominantly due to the fact that participants who had touched on these themes or topics in their anonymous narratives did not offer to do interviews. I therefore could not follow up on things they had said or implied. I will outline these things briefly.

I discussed in Chapter 1 that participants often internalised their dissonance-inducing behaviours, changing their cognitions and reducing the discomfort. It would have been interesting to find out how conscious or aware people actually were of the fact that they were changing their cognitions about sex, and whether these changes were consciously motivated by possible future sexual opportunities. Further research could explore whether, if people were in long-term relationships which were likely to involve sexual opportunities, they would be more likely to consciously internalise the acceptance of sexual behaviour outside of marriage. As mentioned, some participants in relationships certainly expressed concerns that this was the case, with James asking himself: “how do I know my experiences aren’t just taking me down a path of thought that I want to be true?”. In this way, some participants appeared to have been aware of the possible influences that these motivations may have had on their decision making, but further research could explore the link between acknowledgements of potential dissonance-inducing situations and any subsequent changes to cognitions about sex outside of marriage. It was unclear from the narratives whether changing beliefs was more of an unconscious process where new cognitions were internalised during the act without much deliberate thought.

I suggest that further research should explore the gender differences in tendencies to express discomfort or doubt in the middle of sexual acts, and the likelihood that this would stop the act. I discussed moments of erectile dysfunction when men were undecided about the sexual encounters,

demonstrating the physiological responses to emotional turmoil when having sex outside of marriage. However, these responses are less obvious for women, and I suggest research should explore whether women felt able to express their confusion in the middle of sexual acts.

According to some of my female participants, particularly the 3 who were pushed into sexual acts, women often struggled to get men to listen when they said no. Other female participants spoke of some instances where this was the case, but I suggest that further research could look at this more in depth, to see whether many women were actually less willing to have sexual experiences than they expressed to their partners.

Though limited, my research suggests the importance of providing opportunities for unmarried people to resolve the discomfort and guilt that many are likely to feel instinctively about sexual desire and pleasure. Further research could explore the impacts on Christian marriages if this healing process is not complete beforehand. Courtney Ann Irby (2019) talked about going 'from battlefield to playground' (p649), which was a concept my participants picked up on. For example, Pheobe said with frustration: "I didn't get what changes when you have a ring on your finger", expressing the confusion about this transition from single to married. I suggest that future study could explore the very short period of liminality between being unmarried and being married. Studies should focus on how effectively Christians adapt to the sudden change from sex being discouraged in "loving", "committed" relationships outside of marriage, "to being encouraged to have loads of sex" on the night of the wedding. I suggest that further research should explore whether there are detrimental impacts of sexual guilt in Christian marriages in the UK for those who had been sexually active prior to getting married. As well as this, it would be interesting to explore more widely the differences in physical and spiritual responses to sexual activity within marriage, compared to the experiences I have outlined in this dissertation.

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