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The Talk: Christian Right and Liberal Left Rhetoric about Sex Education

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

by

True Victoria Neal

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Martha Copp, Chair

Joseph Baker

Paul Kamolnick

Keywords: Sex education, Christian, Liberal, Rhetoric, LGBT

ABSTRACT

The Talk: Christian Right and Liberal Left Rhetoric about Sex Education

by

True Victoria Neal

This thesis examines the rhetoric surrounding sex education crafted by two major types of advocacy groups: the Christian Right and the Liberal Left. I conducted a qualitative analysis of content on sex education produced by six high-profile organizations: The Heritage Foundation, Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, American Civil Liberties Union, the Guttmacher Institute, and Planned Parenthood. I found that these polarized organizations do not debate each other; instead, they focus on parents whose political leanings match their own. Sex education is at the center of other issues that also divide the Christian Right and the Liberal Left: healthcare, morality, marriage, education, and STIs. I analyze the arguments advocacy organizations make, the liabilities of their appeals, and their strategies to mobilize parents emotionally. Both conservative and liberal organizations aim to secure the beliefs of the next generation through their parents, not to find common ground.

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I am grateful for the friends who have supported me throughout this journey. Without the late-night talks and early morning study sessions, I would not have finished this research. I am especially grateful for Sydney Crowder, without whom I could not have finished this work.

DEDICATION

My research is dedicated to my devoted mother, Lynn Marie Neal. Her endless wealth of love, encouragement, and support has pushed me to do more than I thought possible. I also dedicate my research in loving memory of my grandmother, Beverly Ann Marsiano (November 14, 1930 – October 30, 2017).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
DEDICATION.....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Historical Framework	10
Religion and Sex	11
My God Given Right	14
Comprehensive Sex Education	15
Abstinence-Only Sex Education and Its Shortcomings	16
For Their Own Good.....	17
Mobilization of Emotions	19
3. METHODS	21
Qualitative Content Analysis	21
The Organizations.....	22
Major Themes	25
4. ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL STRATEGIES	26
Empirical Evidence.....	26
Alternative Facts and Silence.....	29
Opposition Research	34

Are You a Good Parent?	37
Marriage Will Fix It	38
Mystifying Marriage and Marital Sex.....	39
Heterosexual Marriage Offers Temporal Salvation	40
Heterosexuality is Sacred.....	41
Mobilization of Emotion.....	43
5. CONCLUSION	47
REFERENCES	50
VITA.....	58

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sex education in the U.S. has been controversial from its inception. It was seen as vile and inappropriate to discuss in the early 1930s and, for some people, not much has changed (Luker 2006). The controversy about sex education has never been about sex itself, but who is having sex and when they are having it. In the early 20th century, most Americans believed that sex should happen only within a marriage; while women should never have sex before their wedding night, men were not held to the same moral and purity standards (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012; Luker 2006). For the most part, people believed that there was no need to talk about sex and no place for sex education in society. However, some people believed that sex education could help people make responsible decisions (Luker 2006). This debate is still happening today in the public domain.

This thesis presents a content analysis of opposing rhetoric on sex education that appeared in the websites of six advocacy organizations. I selected three high-profile organizations from the Christian Right (The Heritage Foundation, Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family) and three high-profile organizations from the Liberal Left (American Civil Liberties Union, the Guttmacher Institute, and Planned Parenthood). These organizations do not fully reflect the political platforms of liberals and conservatives, but they exert influence on sex education policy.

The Christian Right is interested in morality and religious freedom; thus, the debate over sex education falls into their purview. The Liberal Left reacts to the Christian Right. They are moderate and focus on providing information about sex to youth. The Liberal Left’s goal is to

educate youth about sex while the Christian Right's goal is to discourage sex outside of marriage. The Christian Right and the Liberal Left have been battling in the public eye and in the local, state, and national legal spheres for decades.

I investigate how the Christian Right and the Liberal Left organizations want antithetical sex education programs. The Christian Right wants abstinence-only sex education, which teaches that sex should occur only within marriage. The program curriculum focuses on waiting to have sex with a future spouse and repeatedly tells of condom failures. The belief is that the only way to fully avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is to remain abstinent, because birth control in the form of condoms is not 100 percent effective. The Liberal Left wants comprehensive and universal sex education. This program focuses on providing information. Comprehensive sex education programs inform students about birth control, including condoms, STIs, and how to avoid pregnancy. The belief is that teenagers are going to have sex, so they should be able to make informed choices about sex. While the Christian Right and the Liberal Left believe that their sex education program is the best for young people today, the sex education debate is still shrouded in stigma.

How can there still be a moral embargo on discussing sex education? No such embargoes exist in peer nations (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005). After decades of debate, how can Americans keep fighting over whether or not we teach our youth about sex? As my thesis will explain, this fight extends well beyond the controversy over teenage sex. Sex education is at the center of complex moral and ethical issues, such as marriage, morality, and education.

For the Christian Right, for example, sex education is connected to beliefs about the sanctity of marriage. Historically, by condemning sex outside marriage (premarital or extramarital), Christian Right organizations regulated sexual relationships and limited them only

to those who could legally marry: heterosexuals. People who identified as LGBT were invisible under abstinence-only (until marriage) sex education policies. With the U.S. Supreme Court's (2015) ruling on marriage equality, the Christian Right faces a "new" problem with those who identify as LGBT—people who can no longer be ignored in the sex education debate. If sex can occur outside of marriage, and if legal marriage is no longer an exclusive heterosexual right, then the Christian Right has more groundwork to do. I analyze how Christian Right advocacy organizations engage in boundary maintenance by focusing heavily on the sanctity of heterosexual marriage as part of their sex education project. If the Christian Right loses the battle over sex education, then they can lose ground on other religious arguments like marriage equality.

For the Liberal Left, my analysis will describe how sex education is about more than safe sex; the Left connects sex education to healthcare. If young people obtain comprehensive sex education, then they need access to healthcare, because if sex education is knowledge, then healthcare is the application of their knowledge. Hence, when the organizations I studied expound on sex education, they refer to much more than sex. What people do, say, and believe about sex and sex education creates consequences for other political concerns. Sex education thus presents multiple meanings and multiple risks for advocacy organizations that are pitted against each other.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Framework

American families have always had children at younger ages than families in European countries. This social pattern was unproblematic until childhood was conceptualized (Luker 1996). “Children having children” is a recent debate (Fields 2005). Young women are now conceptualized as babies and girls by people who are considered “adults” (Luker 1996). Under British common law, the colonies’ age of consent was seven. In the late 1800s, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement advocated for a higher age of consent. Some states doubled the British common law age of consent; however, on average, the age of consent was ten (Luker 1996).

“Adolescence” was not a word until 1904 (Luker 1996). Age was arbitrary: “young men” could mean anyone from fourteen to nearly thirty (Luker 1996). People were categorized by interest, not age. Ivy League schools accepted boys as young as fourteen; manhood began at ten (Luker 1996). The social expectations of children were different in the past compared to now. In the fourteenth century, children were once treated as little adults (Aries 1962). While “adolescence” and protected childhood are new concepts, many people today deeply believe that children deserve to be guarded and nurtured (Luker 1996).

Sex education in public schools was not a political issue until the late twentieth century (Baker, Smith, and Stoss 2014). When sex education became a political issue, the words surrounding the debate became hostile, and sex education was equated with child abuse (Irvine 2000). Sexual conservatives believe sex is sacred while sexual liberals believe sex should be explained (Irvine 2000; Luker 2006). The central question of the debate is whether teaching

morality or knowledge about sex is the best action (Irvine 2000; Luker 2006). The sex education debate is thus about values, not facts (Luker 2006). Liberals and conservatives are debating the value of sexuality, family, and gender (Fields 2012; Luker 2006).

The sex education debate laid the foundation for the conservative right platform from the 1960s until now (Irvine 2000). For conservatives, sex is sacred and should happen only within marriage. All viable pregnancies used to end in giving birth. With the onset of contraception, or birth control, a pregnancy did not have to mean having a baby; sex did not necessarily have to end in birth. Thus, bearing children is a moral act (Luker 2006). Conservatives are more likely to believe that people lean toward evil and people can do awful things, and that people need to earn rights, not have rights given to them. Conservatives seek order in the chaos humans naturally create, believing people can harm society (Luker 2006). However, sexual liberals frame the world differently. Liberals believe that society can harm the individual. People need protection from society; for example, people deserve rights (Luker 2006). Just who needs protection--people from society, or society from people--is an important framing question in this debate (Luker 2006).

During this debate over sex education, speech and action were conflated (Fields 2012; Irvine 2000; Luker 2006). "Talk" became the new "four-letter-word" (Irvine 2000). Merely speaking about sex could "corrupt" young minds (Irvine 2000; Luker 2006). If sex is sacred, then teaching young adults about it would demystify sex; it would become terrestrial, not celestial (Irvine 2000).

Religion and Sex

Religion is important to socialization, sexual socialization included (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Barkan 2006; Durkheim 1915; McCullough et al. 2000; Rostosky, Regnerus, and

Wright 2003). Which sex education policy elected representatives choose depends largely on the religious composition of the community (Baker, Smith, and Stoss 2015). Christianity, specifically, impacts coital debut (Barkan 2006; Hardy and Raffaelli 2003; Pedersen 2014; Rostosky et al. 2003). While sociodemographic, family, and other factors influence sex frequency, religiosity specifically impacts coital debut and frequency (Pedersen 2014). Generally, the more religious someone is, the more negatively they will view sex (Gannon, Becker, and Moreno 2012). Religiosity, on average, postpones coital debut (Bearman and Brückner 2001; Hardy and Raffeli 2003; Meier 2003). The more religious a girl is, the less likely she is to have sex. Religion does not have the same impact on boys (Meier 2003).

Overall, Christians have fewer sexual partners, fewer sexual experiences, and teenage Christians will have fewer sex partners later in life due to the belief that premarital sex is morally wrong (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Barkan 2006; Meier 2003; Pederson 2014). Teenage Christians experience pressure from religious friends not to have sex, and they may lose face and social status if others learn that they are sexually active--meaning penile-vaginal intercourse (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Fields 2008; Hardy and Raffaelli 2003; Hollander 2005; McCarthy and Grodsky 2011; Vazsonyi and Jenkins 2010). Even talk about sex is treated as taboo; students and teachers alike can be legally and socially discouraged from speaking about sex (Irvine 2000). With adults restricted in what they can say, adults seem old-fashioned and lack affinity with young people; thus, peer sex educators may provide better sex education to students (Fields and Copp 2015). Legal and social factors are not the only limitations to sex education in schools; many parents uphold asymmetrical beliefs about gender and sex, striving to suppress sexualized behavior in daughters, but not in sons. Parents and other adults may encourage sexual aggressiveness in boys toward girls as a sign of appropriate heterosexual masculine behavior

(Meier 2003; Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny 2002). To be considered conventionally “masculine in the United States, a man has to adopt casual sexual attitudes, high-risk taking, and physical aggression” (Murnen et al. 2002). “Traditional gender roles encourage men to be violent in the name of ‘masculinity’ and women to be sexually passive in order to be ‘feminine’” (Murnen et al. 2002:3).

What Christian teenagers deem “sex” varies. Teenagers may engage in oral or anal sex, and classify this type of sexual activity as not “sex” (Hollander 2015; Pederson 2014; Rostosky et al. 2003; Vazsonyi and Jenkins 2010). This allows teenage girls to satisfy male sexual partners without “technically” having sex, and allows girls to count themselves as “technical” virgins (Vazsonyi and Jenkins 2010). Therefore, teenage Christians are less likely to have “sex,” overall; however, if they have premarital sex, they are more likely to have feelings of unworthiness (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Hardy and Raffaeilli 2003). This not only explains the phenomenon of “technical virgins,” but why premarital sex may be “forgotten”: When asked about premarital sex, Christians “forget” about sex partners at a higher rate than non-Christian peers (Pedersen 2014).

Not all Christians are equally impacted by religious teachings; church attendance impacts sex frequency. The more a person attends church services, the less likely they are to have premarital sex (Adamczyk and Felson 2005; Hardy and Raffaeilli 2003; Meier 2003). Teenage coital debut does not appear to be affected by the fear of contracting an STI or becoming pregnant (Brückner, Martin, and Bearman 2004; Rostosky et al. 2003). Christian teenagers delay their coital debut more out of fear of emotional repercussions than spiritual obedience or temporal consequences (Rostosky et al. 2003).

My God Given Right

The Christian Right transitioned from focusing on the salvation of souls to preaching politics from the pulpit (Djupe, Lewis, and Jelen 2016). After key Supreme Court rulings (*Engel v. Vital* and *Roe v. Wade*), the Christian Right converted from upholding the separation of church and state to demanding a growing space to protect religious liberty (Djupe et al. 2014; Djupe et al. 2016; Goidel, Smentkowski, and Freeman 2016; Lewis 2014). The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) played a large part in moving evangelicals to action. In the late 1970s, the SBC began to call all Christians to stand united to end the legalization of abortion. This was a major step into the political world. The SBC was the first evangelical religious organization to transition from fighting the Catholic Church to working with the Catholic Church on pro-life issues (Lewis 2014).

This shift in focus came with a new framing: a rights claim. A rights claim simply claims that something is a right for a human being (Djupe et al. 2014; Djupe et al. 2016; Goidel et al. 2016; Lewis 2014). In this case, the right is religious liberty or religious freedom. People give this argument legitimacy in the United States, because people define rights and liberties as powerful (Djupe et al. 2016). Using a rights claim is perilous, though, because once something is named as a right, it stops all conversation. It is difficult to discuss anything after it is accepted as a right; the decision often renders a right undebatable (Djupe et al. 2014). However, a rights claim does not work for every argument. In the marriage equality debate, the claim that marriage equality is a right is countered by the argument that marriage equality is a special or extra right, thus, making it a privilege (Djupe et al. 2014; Djupe et al. 2016).

This rights claim framing is perpetuated by clergy members (Djupe et al. 2014; Djupe et al. 2016; Goidel et al. 2016; Lewis 2014). Religious organizations tell people how to order the

world and are therefore influential (Djupe et al. 2016; Lewis 2014). Typically, clergy members introduce a value threat--that religious freedom is under threat--and tensions rise (Goidel et al. 2016). People are easily manipulated (and emotionally mobilized) when they feel threatened (Djupe and Calfano 2012). By characterizing religious freedom as under attack, the clergy create a victim narrative in which the Christian Right is losing rights (Djupe et al. 2014; Goidel et al. 2016). Christian organizations can work with the victim narrative to promote intolerance and create stark differences between “us” and “them”; politicians can exploit these emotionally heightened boundary lines (Djupe et al. 2014; Djupe et al. 2016; Goidel et al. 2016; Lewis 2014). If mainstream clergy members make rights claims to their parishioners, then a political candidate can espouse a radical belief, but seem moderate (Goidel et al. 2016).

Comprehensive Sex Education

Advocates of comprehensive sex education programs hope to teach students how to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancy through a variety of contraceptive methods while accentuating abstinence until marriage (Starkman and Rajani 2002). Research has shown that comprehensive sex education reduces the risk of young adults contracting STIs, HIV, or having an unintended pregnancy (Kirby, Laris, and Rolleri 2007; Kohler, Manahart, and Lafferty 2007; Schaalma et al. 2004; Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011). Comprehensive sex education programs can “reduce sexual risk taking by a modest amount” (Kirby et al. 2007:214). Contrary to conservative rhetoric, comprehensive sex education does not encourage young adults to have sex: it delays sexual debut (Collins, Alagiri, and Summers 2002; Kirby et al. 2007; Starkman and Rajani 2002). Comprehensive sex education is associated with increased condom use; thus, this type of program reduces the risk of STIs, including HIV, and prevents unwanted pregnancies

(Collins et al. 2002; Kirby et al. 2007; Starkman and Rajani 2002). Empirical studies of comprehensive education report that it provides young adults with the information they need to reduce STIs, and unwanted pregnancies (Collin et al. 2002; Kirby et al. 2007; Starkman and Rajani 2002). However, empirically-based comprehensive sex education programs cannot exist in conservative political climates (Schaalma et al. 2004).

Abstinence-Only Sex Education and Its Shortcomings

Conservative activists make abstinence-only education possible by making sexuality a moral issue (Williams 2011). By building an argument against comprehensive sex education in the 1990s, the Christian Right advocated that virginity was the only acceptable moral choice for unmarried people (Fields 2008; Williams 2011). Although abstinence-only education has clearly documented negative effects (discussed shortly) and parents generally want their children to have a more comprehensive education, abstinence-only education remains influential as a curriculum in many states (Brückner et al. 2004; Eisenberg et al. 2007; Kohler et al.; McCarthy and Grodsky 2011; Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011; Williams 2011).

Abstinence-only education is promoted by state laws, because sex education has been framed as a moral debate (Irvine 2000; Luker 2006). If the sex education debate were about which sex education program taught young adults how to have safe sex by preventing unwanted pregnancies and STIs, comprehensive sex education programs would dominate the majority of sex education programs in the nation. However, because sex is understood as sacred in conservative communities, the way sex is discussed is morally, religiously, and politically important and highly debatable (Irvine 2000; Luker 2006). The purpose of abstinence-only education is not to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancies; it is to teach young adults that sex is

a sacred act between a man and a woman within the context of marriage (Irvine 2000; Luker 2006).

Abstinence-only sex education does not deter sexual activity, unwanted pregnancy, or help prevent STIs (Brückner et al. 2004; Kohler et al. 2007; Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011). Religious-based abstinence-only education programs such as virginity pledges do not significantly reduce or deter sexual activity (Rostosky et al. 2003). In fact, abstinence-only education does not delay coital debut for girls who believe sex will improve a relationship when the abstinence-only education rhetoric includes love as a necessary means for sex inside of marriage (Rostosky et al. 2003). Thus, this curriculum accomplishes the opposite effect.

Beyond providing ill-advised love advice, abstinence-only education can harm people beyond the risk of pregnancy or STIs by causing social and psychological harm (Brückner et al. 2004; McCarthy and Grodsky 2011). Abstinence-only education teaches teenagers that sex is only acceptable within a heterosexual marriage in adulthood, and teaches that sex is bad outside of this arrangement (Fields 2008; McCarthy and Grodsky 2011). For example, this rhetoric makes sex taboo and a source of anxiety. This teaches teenagers that sex is bad, which does nothing to deter sexual activity (Brückner et al. 2004; Kohler et al. 2007; McCarthy and Grodsky 2011; Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011).

For Their Own Good

The fight for LGBT rights has had a long history of wins and losses. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was generally accepted that being LGBT was deviant and even criminal (Ben Hagai and Crosby 2016). However, after the Stonewall Riots in 1969, LGBT people started a movement that declared the system and society as traditional and wrong and sought to prove that being

LGBT did not mean being deviant (Ben Hagai and Crosby 2016). After making that claim to civil rights, there has been a bitter culture war. Legal battles and rights were won, but rights and legal battles were also lost and taken away. For the next few decades, there has been a constant struggle over which gender and sexual identities religious organizations consider socially acceptable (Ben Hagai and Crosby 2016).

During this constant battle for LGBT rights, being LGB was declassified from a medical disorder in 1974 (Bryant 2008). This change in classification presented a huge problem for the Christian Right because if being LGB was not a mental disorder, then there could be no “treatment” for being gay. There would be no way to prevent or reform children who believed they were LGB if they could argue that there was nothing medically wrong with being LGB (Bryant 2008). Thus, being LGBT provoked a huge religious and spiritual problem and posed a threat to the moral identities of politically right-wing Christians (Bryant 2008).

To resolve this threat, some Christians began practicing “loving homophobia,” in which they expressed openly homophobic remarks yet claimed their intentions were socially acceptable acts of kindness to promote LGBT people’s salvation (Bryant 2008). Their action stems from attribution theory; if someone can choose to be homosexual, then they can choose to be heterosexual and can change their ways (Evans 2018; Thomas and Whitehead 2015; Whitehead 2010; Whitehead and Baker 2012). Defining homosexuality as a choice allows Christians to blame homosexuals for their choice to “sin.” Christians pursuing this strategy claimed that they were simply concerned with the souls of LGBT people (Bryant 2008). Since there continues to be a raging battle for LGBT rights, churches were and are legally allowed to discriminate against LGBT people within church walls (Sumerau 2017). The United States’ legal system continues to sanction this discrimination under the banner of religion (Sumerau 2017). In Sumerau’s (2017)

study, LGBT Christians depicted their continued support for Christianity, despite widespread discrimination against sexual minorities, by depicting their religious beliefs as a sacrifice for their faith, the LGBT community, and for God (Sumerau 2017). Ultimately, this cycle of approved discrimination leads to deeper discrimination, oppressive othering, and an unequal society (Sumerau 2017). The fight for LGBT Rights is spiritual and emotional, and activists use emotions to entice people to act (Kotliar 2016).

Mobilization of Emotions

Scholars who study social movements have come to understand that activists and organizations strategically use emotions to motivate people to act and to extend their influence (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Kotliar 2016). Emotions are connected to moral values (Rowe 2017). Guilt and shame are social emotions that people feel when they believe they have done something that goes against their moral identity (Scheff 2013; Stets and Carter 2012). Situations that people interpret as unjust may pose risks to their moral identity; they can become motivated to act in order to verify a valued identity (Rowe 2017; Stets and Carter 2012).

Religious organizations can mobilize emotions by appealing to people's religious values. Religion gives a person a lens to view society; the Christian Right invokes the lens of Christianity to remind their audience that their religious beliefs reflect the Truth (Thomson and Froese 2018). Christianity can be interpreted by believers as offering a black and white dichotomy to understand the world (Goodwin et al. 2001). A person is either good or bad, as following God's word or sinning by going against it. Since religion typically defines what is good or bad, a person can feel guilty or pious depending on how they react to a situation (Goodwin et al. 2001). For example, Christian moral entrepreneurs successfully rely on a culture

war narrative. They call on Christians to repair the waning culture. Christians may feel guilty if they do not actively participate in this repair work. Because they are the chosen people, they are expected to jump into action to fix this problem (Goodwin et al. 2001). Avoiding the guilt and shame of inaction is thus a powerful motivation (Goodwin et al. 2001; Rowe 2017).

Emotions are also central to people's political beliefs and identities. The way a person *feels* about an issue will influence how they view and interpret it (Kotliar 2016). Organizations on the Christian Right define the proper role of government as a stern father (Thomson and Froese 2018). The Right sees punishment as nurturing because it will teach people a lesson that they will help them grow (Goodwin et al. 2001). The Christian Right wants Christian nuclear families to follow this model; thus, Christian families expect this model of a Christian family to be reflected in the government (Goodwin et al. 2001; Thomson and Froese 2018).

Another social emotion that social movement activists mobilize is empathy (Norton 2011). Empathy is important for constructing a political narrative, because it allows people to put themselves in the role of another and try to feel what a person in that situation might feel (Clark 1987). It makes the situation take on personal relevance (Norton 2011). Ultimately, emotions shape how people perceive reality and how they understand and interact in the social world (Goodwin et al. 2001; Stets and Carter 2012). Because people use emotions strategically to elicit emotional reactions in others (Hochschild 2012), it is important to examine how different organizations incorporate emotions into their rhetorical efforts (Goodwin et al. 2001; Pierce 1996).

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Qualitative Content Analysis

I used qualitative content analysis to study six sex education advocacy groups. I chose the six organizations, three liberal organizations and three conservative organizations, based on how often the organization participated in public debates about sex education and by researching the organizations' missions and values. I read news articles, researched what organizations lobbied Congressional leaders and aides, and listened to press conferences about sex education bills. The organizations that were more consistently mentioned are the most active sex education advocacy groups. It is difficult to measure how influential the organizations are during public debates, because influence itself is subjective. Tracing the amount of money that is spent lobbying is difficult, because of reporting laws, in-kind donations, and indirect donations; thus, I could not choose what organizations spent the most money on the issue. The organizations that are well-known for advocating for a specific approach to sex education were the most active in the public debate.

I coded in two ways. First, I conducted open coding of the language that advocacy organizations used to discuss sex education (Lofland et al. 2006). After identifying all possible codes, I refined the codes, considered how the themes related to each other, and then I organized and condensed the data into themes (Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Lofland et al. 2006). After open coding 10 articles by each organization, I conducted focused coding on the rest of the articles with the condensed set of themes (Charmaz 1995; Lofland et al. 2006). I used NVivo (11) starter software to store and organize the data (Lofland et al. 2006).

While I worked on coding, I wrote three types of memos: coding, integrative/theoretical, and operational/procedural. Coding memos focused on clarifying my codes (Lofland et. al 2006). Integrative/theoretical memos explored the relationships between the codes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Lofland et al. 2006). Operational/procedural codes focused on how data were gathered and how I navigated any challenges (Lofland et al. 2006). I thus used memoing as an effective tool to improve and sharpen codes (Lofland et al. 2006).

The dataset includes roughly the first 200 pages of all relevant information about sex education on each organization's website. I stayed within five pages of my goal from each organization. I included more than 200 pages for an organization so that I could read the last article in its entirety. I downloaded and analyzed 202 pages from the ACLU, 200 pages from Focus on the Family, 201 pages from Family Research Council, 201 pages from the Guttmacher Institute, 205 pages from Planned Parenthood, and 201 pages from The Heritage Foundation. The organizations' webpages are the best places to gather data, because they serve as the platforms that the organizations use to speak to the public and attempt to reach out to anyone searching for information about sex education. I went to each website and searched for "sex education" and downloaded each relevant article in order of importance, which is ranked by each website, and I kept count of how many pages each article had in an Excel file. I chose to download articles in order of importance according to the website, because that is the order that other users would traditionally find the information.

The Organizations

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) claims to be the "nation's guardian of liberty, working in courts, legislatures, and communities to defend and preserve the individual

rights and liberties that the Constitution and the laws of the United States guarantee everyone in this country.” They claim to do this by defending their cases in front of the Supreme Court more than any other organization. They rely on a network of lawyers and state and federal affiliate offices to accomplish this goal, but they do not receive federal funding. They claim to have more than two million supporters who are advocates for them or donate to the ACLU. They claim to be a nonpartisan organization; however, their cases tend to be classified as liberal (American Civil Liberties Union 2017).

The Family Research Council (FRC) wants to create a “culture in which all human life is valued, families flourish, and religious liberty thrives.” Their mission is to “to advance faith, family, and freedom in public policy and the culture from a Christian worldview.” The FRC lobbies for laws that they claim protect the family, like covenant marriage laws, laws protecting heterosexual marriage, parental rights laws, and protecting the sanctity of life. They are a public policy organization that claims to promote family values through their pro-family agenda (Family Research Council 2017).

Focus on the Family is a ministry focused on providing families with resources to live a “Biblical” life. They focus on teaching the sacred separation of male and female, the importance of heterosexual marriage, the value of children, social responsibility, evangelism, and the sanctity of life. They have ministries focused on marriage, parenting, life challenges, faith, social issues, and pro-life concerns. Correspondingly, they offer eleven broadcasts and radio stations, magazines, conferences, books, webpages, counseling, etc. that offer more advice to promote the family. They claim that their ultimate goal is to help families get closer to Jesus Christ through their programming. Focus on the Family differs from FRC because Focus on the Family is

chiefly a Christian ministry and FRC is a Christian public policy organization (Focus on the Family 2017).

The Guttmacher Institute is a policy and research organization that focuses on reproductive health and rights. Their goals are to produce research and change policies that allow people to have access to reproductive healthcare and guarantee the right to reproductive health. The Guttmacher Institute values rigorous research, collaborating on research, answering evolving questions, and “prioritizing the needs of disadvantaged groups.” They publish two peer-reviewed journals and have earned funding that is traditionally only given to universities for their outstanding research. Over the next five years (2016-2020), the Guttmacher Institute plans to focus on researching contraception, unintended pregnancy, abortion, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, the reproductive justice framework, men and sexual reproductive health and rights, STIs, and sexual reproductive health and rights of LGBTQ populations (The Guttmacher Institute 2017).

The Heritage Foundation is a conservative public policy organization that focuses on “free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.” They claim to fulfill this mission by creating appropriate research on important policy issues and presenting the findings to members of Congress, Congressional staff, policymakers, academia, and the media. The Heritage Foundation claims to have half a million members who support them financially. They boast of their long history of fighting for and winning conservative policies in American politics, and assert that the current President depends on them for policy decisions (The Heritage Foundation).

Planned Parenthood provides reproductive health services to women, men, and children while leading the reproductive rights movement and providing comprehensive sex education.

They claim to serve millions of clients as well as teach sex education programs to over a million people every year. From its inception, Planned Parenthood has fought for women's rights for birth control and they continue to "advocate public policies" that guarantee access to birth control. While Planned Parenthood has specific goals that focus on providing healthcare, sex education, and protecting those rights, they do not have a specific plan outlined on their website on how to accomplish those goals (Planned Parenthood 2017).

Major Themes

I found six major themes in the data: framing research, science and legitimacy, eroding morals, parental guidance, emotional mobilization, and religious persecution. Each major theme is a strategy that organizations used to discuss sex education. Framing research and using science to create legitimacy are themes that occur together. For the Christian Right, research is framed as being illegitimate unless it comes from a recommended source. If any research exists outside of their sources, then it should not be trusted. The Liberal Left advocacy groups frame research as outside of a belief system: science is reality. Thus, science is the Truth and deserves to be scrutinized, but accepted until disproved, if it meets certain standards. Outside of the science debate, the eroding morals theme focuses on the Christian Right's transition from emphasizing virginity to needing to protect and reinforce heterosexual marriage. The parental guidance theme refers to how the advocacy organizations I sampled target parents. The Liberal Left organizations target middle-class parents by teaching that more information about sex will protect their children. For the Christian Right, emotional mobilization is a strategy for targeting parents. The Christian Right expands emotional mobilization by claiming religious persecution. This claim motivates parents to protect their religious beliefs because they perceive them to be under attack.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Parents are expected to protect and love their children. The websites advocating Christian Right and the Liberal Left agendas use this expectation to mobilize parents. Their websites employ emotional arguments to inform parents on how children should be reared and protected. The Christian Right advocates that parents should be the only people to teach their children about sex, because it sex belongs within a marriage. The Liberal Left advocates that comprehensive sex education should be taught in school, because the more information youth absorb, the better off everyone will be. By making emotional connections to traditional morality, Christian Right organizations persuade parents to demand that schools stop teaching sex education to young people. These organizations aim to instill fears of marriage equality and schools teaching children that people have sex outside of marriage as proof of the decaying morality of secular America. While the Christian Right organizations reach parents by focusing on moral missteps, the Liberal Left invokes the dire consequences of ignorance on children's health and well-being to motivate parents to action. The Christian Right and the Liberal Left both use data to validate their claims on how to protect children, counting on parenthood as a moral identity (Kleinman 1996) to motivate parents. However, these advocacy organizations teach parents from the Christian Right and the Liberal Left to consider themselves "good parents" only by taking antithetical actions.

Empirical Evidence

Contemporary Americans use a legal-rational framework to determine the legitimacy of claims. In this framework, science and research are trusted to test and understand reality more

than tradition or charisma (Weber 1925). The Liberal Left organizations in my sample strive to use science to legitimize their claims. They reference rigorous research to establish that their recommended way to teach sex education is better than any other way to teach sex education. When there is a prevalent myth about sex education, these organizations conduct a study or have a study conducted to discover if the myth has any merit. For example, there is a prevalent myth that talking about sex will encourage youth to have sex. However, in Planned Parenthood's Parent Guide, they tackled this myth. They sympathized that this is a common myth and explained that "the good news is that studies have shown that when parents talk with their children about sexuality—providing accurate information and sharing their values—their children are more likely to delay sexual intercourse and use protection when they do have sex." The organizations are open about their research methods. For example, when the Guttmacher Institute created a report about family planning, they included a methodology section that explained that they used "a survey of FY 2015 public expenditures for family planning client services and abortion services," and used "FY 2015 data for family planning client services with those from a series of prior surveys between FY 1980 and FY 2010." The Liberal Left organizations rely on scientific studies to demonstrate that specific sex education programs are working or to explain what needs to change to be effective.

The Liberal Left organizations attempt to avoid infantilizing young adults by using the word "youth," and share the view that young people are autonomous and able to make responsible choices. However, the Liberal Left organizations mainly talk to parents from a safety perspective; they mention the risks for pregnancy and STIs if young people are not given the scientific facts. The organizations also use research to recommend comprehensive sex education

that includes LGBT people, reflecting an assumption that all youth deserve the chance to make informed sexual choices for themselves.

One drawback of relying on science is that the Liberal Left organizations avoid mentioning any moral arguments, other than appeals to safety, that might connect to sex education. This silence on morality is not an oversight but seems to be a deliberate omission. The organizations provide factual information outside of the moral debate surrounding sex education. Their websites present a space that provides information without reference to any religious moral framework, because the organizations want people across the political spectrum to have access to this information. However, acting as if information is solely a public good, or that information can be segregated from religion creates an opening for other organizations to undermine the Liberal Left organizations' moral authority of serving a public need. Refusing to create and use a religious moral framework out of an effort to appear unbiased does not make people characterize liberal organizations as staying clear of a moral debate; instead, the Christian Right organizations characterize them as amoral. For example, one Focus on the Family article says that "to meet with human experiences leads men and women to accept lies." The underlying meaning here is that the Left would rather lie to people than accept Biblical truth.

The Liberal Left attempts to look and sound reasonable by being moderate, relying on research, and refusing to address the moral debate of abstinence until marriage. These organizations may even be attempting to talk to Conservative Christian parents, but they are talking past them. For example, in an ACLU article, the author urged that "morality should not be the focus of sex education...educators should focus on facts related to health." The Liberal Left's message can never be understood as reasonable for the Christian Right. This debate is exclusively about morals because souls hang in the balance. The Liberal Left's strategy to

bracket morals--out of the assumption that people can insert their own moral framework--only leads the Christian Right to believe that these organizations do not have morals.

Alternative Facts and Silence

As their first line of offense, the Christian Right organizations in my sample make stereotypical and universal morality claims to validate abstinence-only education and vilify LGBT people. For example, an article from the Family Research Council claims that, "...homosexual behavior is 'morally wrong.'" Focus on the Family echoes that claim and states that "sexual morality... is everyone's concern," meaning that abstinence education should cover morality. The Christian Right organizations insist that not only should morality be covered in abstinence-only education, but that everyone should hold the same moral opinions against LGBT people.

Yet rather than rely on moral universals alone, the Christian Right defends their moral positions by invoking research and science.¹ Christian Right organizations reference studies to undermine information about birth control, such as to claim that condoms fail. They present research which warns that sex, no matter if birth control is used or not, is never truly safe unless it is within marriage. Their aim is to demonstrate that there is no value in teaching children how to use condoms. Thus, if a student is tempted to fall away from this moral thinking and tries to have sex with a condom, they may hear that "...safe sex and condom use is not the answer: The condom failure rate...is 17 percent." While condoms are not 100 percent effective, ignoring that condoms help prevent STIs and, by this logic, are 83 percent effective is encouraging 100

¹ Science does not test morality. There is no scientific method to determine if something is moral; that is a philosophy question.

percent risk without a condom.² The Christian Right claims that sex always carries a risk of STIs or pregnancy, so if young people abstain from sex until marriage, they will be safe from STIs and pregnancy, and will become productive citizens. With evidence from selective research, the Christian Right can frame the Liberal Left as unreliable for suggesting that “safe sex” is even possible.

The Christian Right may have transitioned from solely using the Bible for foundational arguments to using selective science, but they continue to use the Bible as their underlying moral framework. The Christian Right does not believe in nor advocate for women’s rights or reproductive rights; thus, they ignore these topics by declaring that gender and gender roles are divinely ordained, and sex is only acceptable to God within a marriage. While the organizations state that sex should occur only within marriage and reference the Bible and God’s plan when discussing sex, they cite selective research studies that “prove” their claims on this and a wider set of issues. For example, they cite selective research that shows that people who have sex outside of marriage are unhappy and that people in relationships will find happiness through marriage. The organizations then repeatedly cite selective research that shows that condoms do not work, stating that if couples have sex outside of marriage and attempt to avoid the consequences of pre-marital sex by using a condom, it undoubtedly will not work.

An example of selective research involves the Heritage Foundation citing disgraced researcher John Money. Money was once a well-respected sex and gender researcher who published studies claiming that the environment impacted the gender of a child more than biology. Money’s studies relied on one major case study where an infant boy had his penis cut

² When using birth control there is typical use and perfect use. Perfect use is when a person knows how to perfectly inspect, equip, and use a condom. The failure rate for perfect condom use is 1 percent. However, typical use is when a person does not have the knowledge to inspect, equip, and use a condom. The failure rate for typical use is 18 percent (CDC 2017).

off in a circumcision accident, and he persuaded the family to raise the infant boy as a girl. The boy was raised as girl and not told of the accident. Instead, he was raised as a girl as if nothing had ever happened. However, his unethical experiment failed, and the infant later returned to presenting as boy. But Money failed to acknowledge that his theory was wrong until “John” contacted *Rolling Stone* and exposed Money (Colapinto 1997). In a 2017 Heritage Foundation report, the author wrote, “I agree with Money and the Hampsons who show in their large series of intersexed [those born with features of both sexes] patients that gender role is determined by postnatal forces, regardless of the anatomy and physiology of the external genitalia.” While this selective research is presented as legitimate support for their point--that God ordained the separation of male and female--it relies on outdated and widely discredited research from John Money and is not science. Thus, they use pseudoscience to prove that their interpretation of Bible-based scriptures are true.

The Christian Right organizations also point to a lack of scientific findings about LGB people to justify their moral position on LGB issues. For example, since “there is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation,” the Christian Right justifies conversion therapy, because surely a person’s sexual orientation can be changed. They claim a person can “transform” and be ex-gay, and the likelihood of successful conversions “...are especially common among young people.”

The Christian Right also employs selective research to prove that LGBT people do not scientifically exist and to uphold heterosexual-only marriage. Christian Right organizations argue that there is no reason to fight for LGBT rights or make any effort to speak to LGBT Christians, because “same-sex attraction...is a distortion of reality.” People claiming to be LGBT are simply confused by the liberal media. For the Christian Right, sexuality is a matter of choice.

If a person can choose to remain celibate, then people who live an LGBT “lifestyle” have deliberately chosen to stray from God’s plan. They are choosing to be sinful.

The Christian Right is not necessarily speaking to everyone who visits their websites, unlike the Liberal Left, which tries to sound reasonable and to combat vilification from the Christian Right. If someone attempts to verify the Christian Right’s claims about science and the Liberal Left’s agenda, the Liberal Left want to be able to appear moderate, unbiased, and scientific in contrast. However, no one from the Christian Right is going to verify the scientific merit of what they have been told by a Christian Right source (Tandoc et al. 2017). In a society where science is trusted and valued, these organizations use science to build trust and establish that they are not backward or wrong. Their beliefs appear correct to Christian readers who may be reassured by selective references to science. If a study shows that what they believe is correct, there is no need to check the source (Tandoc et al. 2017). A God who created science is now working through science to show people how His commandments must be obeyed.

Although it is probably effective with their target audience, this rhetorical strategy limits what the Christian Right can discuss. Because they co-opt science to legitimate their beliefs, they cannot talk about other topics without the proof or belief crumbling. For example, they never discussed contraception outside of condom failure rates, because they have told youth that it does not work. Even married couples who might want sex education get no information about contraception, because family planning with or without contraception appears to be off limits.

This silence about family planning within marriage is highly consequential for women. Without access to contraception and reliable information about it, women cannot be social and sexual equals to men. Without reproductive autonomy, women cannot have full ownership of their bodies. Moreover, if women are not perceived as responsible enough to make moral

decisions with their bodies, then they can never be seen as capable of making moral decisions about other important issues like war and diplomacy. Women are thus infantilized as incapable of making choices without God and men (Schwalbe 2017). At the same time that it is silent about women, the Christian Right embraces gender inequality because it is ordained by God. Ultimately, the Christian Right has mandated silence around sex for heterosexual married couples. This silence starts to undermine their argument that within marriage sex is sacred and expected, because of the prohibition against talking about how to have sacred non-procreative sex.

In my sample of websites discussing sex education, both the Liberal Left and the Christian Right make no mention of reproductive and women's rights. The Christian Right easily avoids discussing women's rights, because the assumption is that women are mothers and wives above anything else. The closest the Christian Right advocacy groups get to women's rights is a woman's right to be a wife and a loving mother. To my surprise, the Christian Right advocacy groups do not focus on adoption for heterosexual couples and only mention anti-adoption measures for LGB couples a few times. Liberal Left organizations, of course, have different reasons for avoiding any mention of reproductive and women's rights in their articles on sex education. The Liberal Left seems to avoid mentioning women's and reproductive rights out of the concern that if they did defend women's rights, then they would lose more ground when fighting for comprehensive sex education. Any curriculum that looks or sounds feminist is highly scrutinized. Thus, the Liberal Left organizations avoid any mention of feminist rhetoric, beliefs, or teachings, nor any mention of abortion as a form of birth control. While the Christian Right characterizes Planned Parenthood's sole purpose as an "abortion provider," Planned Parenthood only mentions abortion four times in over 200 pages on sex education. Moreover, Planned

Parenthood only mentions that they provide abortions once. The Liberal Left organizations seem to suggest that if they keep those issues quiet, then they can find middle ground with the Christian Right. Even though sex education as an issue intimately involves women and their bodies, women are ignored by both the Liberal Left and the Christian Right. At best, the price of politics and compromise is ignoring women's needs and wants. At worst, women are deemed worthy of discussion only within a marriage.

Opposition Research

The Christian Right uses misinformation to disqualify anything that the Liberal Left claims. The Christian Right claims that research from outside sources, anyone outside of their organization or organizations like them, should be immediately dismissed as false. This is a strategy of boundary work. As an example, a well-known peer-reviewed study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* by Peter Bearman and Hannah Brückner (2005) finds that virginity pledgers have more negative sexual consequences than nonvirginity pledgers. A Heritage Foundation article discusses this study and claims it “sounds bad -- until you learn that the Bearman and Bruckner [sic] study is seriously flawed.” Anything that threatens the Christian Right's worldview is deemed unreliable. To describe the Bearman and Brückner study, the Heritage Foundation author described the research as “junk-science.”

Most opposition research assertions warn readers that the Liberal Left is trying to make parents feel a certain way about issues and does not use science or research correctly. The general structure for warning parents against believing the Liberal Left is telling the audience what the Liberal Left said, framing it as ridiculous, assuring the readers that it is untrue, and that they should only listen to reliable organizations, such as theirs. When touting their own

researchers, Christian Right organizations describe liberal science about comprehensive sex education as “the siren song of the ‘safe sex’ crowd.” Not only do they say the Liberal Left tries to make people feel a certain way, they suggest the Left lures parents to think dangerous thoughts just as sirens lure virtuous men into danger. At other times, the Christian Right uses selective research to discount what the Liberal Left said, provoking further distrust of anyone outside of the Christian Right.

Thus, within this framework, the Liberal Left is characterized as immoral and deceptive. The Liberal Left can no longer claim that they are simply recommending the most scientific way of teaching sex education, if Christian-endorsed research shows that what they are teaching is not working. The Christian Right maintains that the Left favors a mere opinion, a wrong opinion, not facts. Through this strategy, all the Christian Right’s stereotypical vilifications of the Liberal Left apply. The Liberal Left wants to destroy families and defy God. What could the Liberal Left know about families and the true meaning of sex? Liberal feminists can be further vilified as ignorant and dangerous: they do not value heterosexual marriage. The Family Research Council claims that “radical feminists [are] aggressively...abusing and abandoning [the] male.” In this framework, there is no reason to believe the Liberal Left because the Christian Right’s selective scientific claims debunk them.

The Liberal Left does not use misinformation, but instead highlights the Christian Right’s misinformation campaign. Although the Christian Right claims that abstinence education works, the Guttmacher Institute’s research shows that “...scientific evidence accumulated over the past 20 years has found that [abstinence-only] programs are not effective at preventing pregnancy or STIs.” While the Liberal Left attempts to sound moderate and measured by using rigorous research, they look as guilty as the Christian Right has always made them seem, because the

Liberal Left is doing exactly what the Christian Right accuses them of doing: disregarding everything the Christian Right claims. They are claiming that everything the Christian Right says is out of context, and that only Liberal Left research matters. To the Christian Right, scientific Truth does not matter; for science to be considered reliable, it must confirm what the Christian Right already knows. For example, an article for the Family Research Council discusses the transgender folks undergoing surgery. The author describes how the Liberal Left claims that transition surgery would be a relief for the transgender person and then undercuts that claim by arguing that “research actually shows that social transition and sex reassignment surgery do little to reduce serious underlying mental health problems.” The Liberal Left is framed as not using reliable science, because the research that the Christian Right cites allows them to claim that their arguments and moral positions are correct. Thus, although the Liberal Left tries to reach out to more conservative people, this tactic fails because statements that the Left assumes are reasonable are deemed ridiculous by the Christian Right.

The Christian Right additionally claims that the Liberal Left is inconsistent. With their research, the Liberal Left ignores science in favor of free love and immorality. One article on Focus on the Family’s website claims that science is “the Left's worst nightmare.” Selective research tells them that there is no scientific evidence that people are born LGBT. Thus, the Liberal Left should abandon their cries for LGBT equality. From this vantage point, the Liberal Left, which claims to value science and is willing to change stances as science evolves, should move with Christian-endorsed research by abandoning teaching comprehensive sex education and renouncing LGBT inclusivity. To the Christian Right’s surprise and dismay, the Liberal Left continues to advocate for comprehensive and LGBT-inclusive sex education. Because “science” exists that supports abstinence-only sex education, and the Liberal Left ignores it, Christian

Right organizations frame the Left as biased and hypocritical. The biggest hypocrisy is that the Liberal Left says that sex and gender are fluid, but that sexuality is unchangeable, when Christian-endorsed research “shows” that is not true.

Are You a Good Parent?

The Liberal Left attempts to avoid adultist rhetoric by reaching out to parents, educators, and youth. However, their central message about youth is directed at parents. The core rhetoric is about how children, their children, could die from a lack of information or misinformation. Not only should youth have the knowledge about sex, but they should be able to practically use that knowledge through access to affordable healthcare. If youth do not have access to birth control through affordable healthcare, then what a young person knows may not matter, because they cannot apply what they have learned. Without the knowledge and understanding of how to use birth control coupled with affordable, accessible healthcare, a young person could contract a dangerous STI or get pregnant.

The Liberal Left organizations use more calls to action than the Christian Right organizations. The Liberal Left uses examples of parents getting involved in their communities, going to court and winning cases, and parents being able to change the status quo. Even if the battle takes years, parents’ continual activism is presented as important. The ACLU announced that after two years, “parents and teens in Pittsburgh are celebrating a victory for comprehensive sexuality education.” The call to action relies on dramatic stories in which school boards forbid teachers to teach students about sex, thus endangering students and the community at large. Following the deemed outrageous law, news story, curriculum, or school board meeting, there is a literal call to action. Parents are asked to stop this harm by getting involved with the issue. The

underlying message to parents is that their children's sex education is a life skill that their child and every other child needs.

While the Liberal Left attempts to speak to everyone in the village, the Christian Right is speaking strictly to Christian parents, and not to youth, who are the property of parents. These organizations make it clear that parents are and should be in control of their children's education. One Focus on the Family article literally makes a "...call upon all parents to take a proactive role in their children's development by teaching them about marriage." Part of being a good parent is teaching children within the home about topics like sex. It is not the village's task to teach their children about sex; it is the parent's right and duty to teach their children morals that reserve sex for heterosexual marriage. The Christian Right websites seek to privatize sex education and the Liberal Left websites want to publicize sex education. As to what, exactly, Christian parents should teach is omitted; because sex should happen only within a heterosexual marriage, marriage itself should be the definitive teacher about sex.

Marriage Will Fix It

Although the Heritage Foundation defended virginity pledges, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I did not find that the Christian Right websites promoted virginity. Instead, I found an emphasis on heterosexual marriage. This boundary maintenance strategy became necessary for the Christian Right because more Americans, whether conservative or liberal, are more accepting of equal marriage rights (Pew Research Center 2017). Without national or even conservative acceptance of heterosexual-only marriage, the Christian Right can no longer keep virginity the focus of their message, because the concept of virginity depends on heterosexuality. Virginity has no medical definition (Valenti 2009). The cultural and religious definition has

meant vaginal-penile penetration. However, this definition is heterosexist and erases non-heterosexual people. By this definition, a lesbian or gay couple can never have sex. Moreover, because same-sex marriage is legal, the Christian Right must argue that real marriage is only between a man and a woman. Abstinence-only education rhetoric thus reinforces marriage in three ways: mystifying marriage and marital sex, claiming that heterosexual marriage will make life better, and claiming that heterosexuality is sacred.

Mystifying Marriage and Marital Sex

The Christian Right organizations claim that youth, typically referred to as children rather than young adults or youth, are simply too young to know what sex is. They communicate the idea that sex is a gift intended only for heterosexual couples within marriage, so sex does not need to be discussed with single people outside of marriage. The organizations claim that “the act [of sex] itself is confined to marriage.” If sex can happen only within a procreative heterosexual marriage, then “safe sex” never has to be discussed. Sex becomes a mystery that only married (heterosexual) couples understand. Therefore, youth should get no information about contraception and certainly not about how to experience sexual pleasure. Focus on the Family suggested that, when talking to teenagers about sex, parents should “equip your teens offensively in the battle of purity by emphasizing that they are set apart for marriage and, more profoundly, for God’s purpose.” The Christian Right argues that giving youth information about contraception would endorse sex before marriage, thus they tell parents to teach the opposite, that contraception does not work and to discourage sex rather than talk about it at all. The organizations’ main goal is to keep sex exclusively within heterosexual marriage. If youth do not

know how to have sex and believe that sex out of wedlock can lead to unwanted pregnancies and STIs, then advocates believe that heterosexual youth will abstain until the wedding night.

Heterosexual Marriage Offers Temporal Salvation

The organizations claim that children born out of wedlock suffer immensely and will be unable to be productive citizens. The Family Research Council claims that out-of-wedlock children "...are more likely than other children to have lower grades, to drop out of high school, to be abused or neglected, to have a child as an unmarried teenager, and to be delinquent." However, people should save children from this fate by having children in wedlock and only through heterosexual parents. The organizations use selective research to show that children within marriage have all-around better lives and are destined for greatness in comparison to children born out-of-wedlock who are destined to fail. The Family Research Council claims that "there is a wealth of evidence that children raised by their biological, married parents have the best chance of becoming happy, healthy, and morally upright citizens in the future." Not only will heterosexual marriage save their future children from a life of tragedy, the parents' lives will be better. The Christian Right argues that people who have sex outside of marriage are miserable. "Unwed mothers and fathers are less likely to marry and more likely to suffer from depression and to live in poverty than are those who do not have children outside of marriage." Further, they claim that sex out of wedlock has the power to make people feel regret and guilt, have overall bad mental health, and be unable to have healthy emotions with a spouse. Marriage is treated as a saving grace.

Not only is there a promise of negative emotions and poor mental health, but the Christian Right organizations claim that pre-marital sex can have tangible negative consequences

as well. Young people who have sex outside of marriage before they are done with high school are more likely to have bad grades and be forced to drop out of school. The Christian Right claims that pre-marital sex can cause delinquency, STIs, drug and alcohol use, poverty, unstable marriages, abortion, and divorce. The Heritage Foundation warned that “Sexually active teenagers are more likely to be depressed and attempt suicide.” Sex outside of marriage will degrade God’s precious gift to married couples, lead to negative consequences for the people engaging in pre-marital sex, and harm society overall. The general message is that not only should sex remain a mystery before marriage, but if people have sex outside of marriage, then there will be massive emotional and earthly consequences.

Heterosexuality is Sacred

The Christian Right stresses that marriage itself can only happen between a man and a woman, and that marriage is the only place where couples can have healthy relationships and produce productive citizens with healthy souls. However, for heterosexuality to be sacred, all other sexualities must be erased. There cannot be dualism: multiple sexualities cannot coexist, because Jesus Christ never mentions homosexual couples. While Jesus Christ Himself never mentions homosexuality, if the entire Bible is ordained and God is never changing, then Levitical code should still apply. Thus, heterosexuality is the only ordained relationship and homosexuality is forbidden by God.

By defining LGBT people as choosing to be sinful if they refuse to practice celibacy, then the Christian Right does not have to acknowledge or check their homophobia nor their heterosexism, which informs their oppressive othering of LGBT people (Schwalbe et al. 2000). They can feel like they are good Christians by bringing sinners into the fold. One Christian Right

organization claims that "...we hate no one. We actively affirm God's love for everyone. We also affirm what we believe to be sound theological and sociological reasons for upholding sexual morality and preserving marriage as the institution between one man and one woman." They get to love the sinner and hate the sin to the fullest. By denying the legitimacy of LGBT people, the Christian Right can evade the charge that they are homophobic. If people are naturally heterosexual, there is no one to discriminate against. This allows the Christian Right to call on sexual non-conformist sinners to commit to abstinence until a heterosexual marriage, because there are only heterosexuals. Not only does the Christian Right define what marriage is within strict Biblical confines, but they are able to declare that they have done the work of God: bringing people back to His plan. One way to bring sexual sinners back into the fold is through conversion therapy or "sexual orientation change efforts" (SOCE). Not only does this Christian Right organization claim "SOCE can help people to change," but that there is "no clear evidence of the prevalence of harmful outcomes."³

This framework supports the Christian Right's version of a just society (Hochschild 2016). Bad people are punished and brought back into communion with God, and good people are rewarded. With a little tough love and Heavenly guidance, LGBT people will see their sinful ways and become heterosexual. All that LGBT people need to change is a little "motivation to change." From the Christian Right's perspective, heterosexual marriages are not undermined by marriage equality, because everyone will have a common understanding of what marriage really is: a man and a woman. LGB people may have partnerships or civil unions, but never legitimate God-given marriages. If the prosperity gospel is true and everyone is blessed by God because

³ SOCE is gay conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is disavowed by the American Psychological Association and others who have practiced gay conversion therapy in the past (HRC 2013). Conversion therapy is dangerous, does not work, and there is nothing medically or psychologically wrong with being LGB (APA 2009).

they are doing the “right” things, then heterosexual married couples should be rewarded, and LGBT people should not be able to marry and receive the blessings associated with marriage. Only heterosexual married couples can access the sacred gift of sex. Without this just society/Biblical framing, the Christian Right is being punished rather than rewarded for following God’s rules of marriage. The Christian Right’s resistance to same-sex marriage thus defines their sense of fairness: it is unjust if sex can happen within a marriage that is not heterosexual. LGBT people should not be rewarded with this gift for sinning; they should be corrected.

Mobilization of Emotion

The Christian Right uses emotions to mobilize their base of parents. Since sex education is about a child’s education, the Christian Right targets parents, presumably voters, who are involved in the spiritual and temporal education of their children. This limits the audience to mostly white middle-class Christian parents who are attempting to raise their children in an evangelical church and raise future Christian Conservative voters who will then teach their children the same values. Christian Right advocacy organizations want to shape the education of the next generation who will carry the beliefs and traditions forward.

The Christian Right crafts an emotional argument when it tells parents that their values and beliefs about the world and about God are being torn away from them. People have attachments to their beliefs and deep emotional connections to their way of life, which informs their fear of losing what they know (Hochschild 2016). Conservatives harbor a dread of liberals ruining their way of life, pushing away their cherished ideals, and forcing liberal ideals onto them and their children (Hochschild 2016). In times of political upheaval, people fear they might lose their way of life, and the Christian Right capitalizes on that fear.

For example, the Christian Right tells parents horror stories about comprehensive sex education. As I analyzed earlier, in the Christian Right's worst nightmares, comprehensive sex education tells children that having sex is morally okay as long as they use a condom, and that homosexuality is okay. The Christian Right believes that comprehensive sex education will encourage children to have sex, because they will feel safe. Yet comprehensive sex education cannot provide all children a proper moral education.

Because comprehensive sex education sponsored by the Liberal Left is deemed amoral, the Christian Right poses that it is parents' moral and spiritual obligation to train children. Thus, if a parent fails to teach a child what is morally right or wrong, then all of the emotional, moral, and spiritual repercussions should fall back on the parent. The parent will feel embarrassed or ashamed if their child gets pregnant or contracts an STI, because this is the parent's failure to teach a child. While the child may have agency, what a child chooses to do is ultimately a reflection of what the parents have taught them or failed to teach.

The Christian Right organizations thus use the anticipation of shame, guilt, and remorse that parents could feel to mobilize them. The websites publish testimonials from teenagers, girls mostly, who tell stories about how they either deeply regret having pre-marital sex, or how they rejoice that they waited to have sex. The stories usually followed the same structure: women or men made sexual mistakes, then regretted that they had had sex. One woman in a Focus on the Family article claims that "only later did I realize how callous I'd become to the true meaning of intimacy and purity." There are more stories of regretting sexual choices than rejoicing. Since parents are the target audience, these testimonials do not serve as warnings to teenagers; they are "what could happen" stories for parents. They are emotional stories that make parents worry about the regret that their children could feel first-hand, and the secondary emotions parents will

feel for their children. The Christian Right uses these feelings to tell parents to mobilize. Parents should not want their children to feel the way these teenagers do and should avoid the shame of losing their moral identity as “good parents” if their children stray from teachings.

The potential loss of face, culture, and belief system is infused with fear. The Christian Right cultivates a belief that everything about people’s way of life is about to crumble (Hochschild 2016). Within this orchestrated echo chamber, emotions are facts. If people feel like everything is in jeopardy, then everything is in jeopardy. In addition to this emphasis by Christian Right organizations, friends and family and Right-Wing media sources produce similar commentary, adding validity to their fearful thinking.

The Christian Right organizations claim that parents’ fear is justified: Active Christian persecution exists! The organizations present a loss of Christian hegemony as proof that Christians are being persecuted. For example, the Christian Right claims that there has been a power shift; the Liberal Left has the power, and they are using it to erase Christian norms. One Christian Right website claims that religious rights are under heavy attack, and Christians need to “protect the basic freedoms on which our nation was founded.” The Christian Right frames their loss of control over laws and culture as persecution. For Christian conservatives, this is not a paradigm shift or a simple change of generational thinking and beliefs, but Liberals trying to abolish Christianity. Thus, everything that the Liberal Left does or says can be translated as American Christian persecution. This emotional boundary maintenance allows them to be God’s people without having to concede that they have lost membership and believers; instead, they are enduringly fighting for God.

Anything that the Christian Right does not want to happen becomes religious persecution. Comprehensive sex education does not teach the moral values that the Christian Right upholds,

not because comprehensive sex education is about dispensing information, but because the Liberal Left is trying to silence Christians. Conversely, anything that the Christian Right wants to happen, even if it harms others, is religious freedom. If the Christian Right wants to prevent schools from talking about condoms, it is not a violation of free speech or a gag order, but exercising religious freedom. Freedom of speech is secondary to the freedom to teach all children the Christian Right's beliefs.⁴

The Christian Right views their claim to religious freedom as a reaction to the Liberal Left's religious persecution. Both claims work together to help the Christian Right's agenda. The Christian Right's fear of losing control and ability to pass the faith to the next generation is manifested by the new cries of religious freedom and persecution currently awaiting judgment with the Supreme Court in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. If the Liberal Left wants to teach youth about condoms, then the Christian Right will argue that no child should hear about contraception, because it is against Christian beliefs. Information is dangerous and should be filtered by the parent. This drives a wedge deeper between the Christian Right and the Liberal Left: there can be no compromise or examination of conscience. A person, group, or political party either upholds strict Christian moral values or they are persecuting Christians. There is no middle ground.

⁴ The Christian Right's mobilization of emotions gives the Liberal Left another tool, because the new fear for the Liberal Left is the threat that if the Christian Right wins this battle, then youth can contract STIs, become pregnant, and suffer the harm of teen parenthood because of widespread ignorance.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The advocacy organizations in this study are not talking to each other. The Christian Right organizations only talk negatively about the Left and do not attempt to persuade members of the Left to change their thinking. Instead, they seem engaged in stabilizing their base. By reaching out only to people who already lean toward their ideology, they are denying any form of conversation that could propel their case. While the Liberal Left organizations attempt to reach anyone who finds their websites, they are not communicating in a way that reaches anyone beyond their base. The Liberal Left organizations employ statements that may seem reasonable and measured, but by ignoring the moral undertones and overtones of this debate, they miss opportunities to communicate with the Right, if that is possible.

My analysis demonstrates how the debate over sex education is connected to many more divisive issues. For the Christian Right, the sex education debate is connected to a web of moral standings. If the Christian Right loses the battle for abstinence-only sex education, then they begin to lose ground on other debates. Because sex can be sanctioned only through heterosexual marriage for Christians to consider it sacred, then heterosexual marriage must be the ultimate gatekeeper of sex. If sex is permissible outside of heterosexual marriage, then the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman starts to fall apart and Right-wing Christians' "loving" homophobia is no longer justified. Equal marriage is now legal; if the Christian Right were to acknowledge this, advocates might then have to examine their stance on women's rights, because a man would not have to be the head of the household and traditional patriarchal roles could not be guaranteed within marriage. Marriage equality challenges the Christian Right's ultimate

dichotomy of good and evil. The Christian Right organizations currently ignore women's rights and equality and the existence of LGBT Christians; however, if heterosexual marriage is no longer a mechanism to regulate sex, then the Christian Right must reexamine their political, moral, and religious stances. Sex education opens the floodgate to other difficult moral issues.

The credibility and influence of the Liberal Left is understood only within their audience. The Liberal Left relies on science to document their conclusions on sex education. While some Americans accept science, the Left's attempt to prove that science defines reality has worked against them on sex education and a host of other issues. The Liberal Left's attempt to show that science is not a mere lens to view the world, but the world itself, has allowed the Christian Right to frame science as a worldview and not Truth or Reality. Moreover, while Liberal Left organizations took a hardline position on science regarding sex education, they kept silent on women's reproductive rights. If the cost of protecting science is ignoring women, the Liberal Left is losing the sex education debate on all sides. The Christian Right and progressive feminists may object to their claims to scientific legitimacy, and progressive feminists (characterized as "radical" by the Christian Right) express outrage that the Liberal Left decided that appearing "reasonable" means sacrificing women's values and rights. If women's rights are so easily ignored in a debate that intimately involves them, then women are being told that they do not matter to either side of the political debate. Women are politically homeless in this debate.

Overall, the Christian Right is not using science, but morality to justify their debate. The debate is cloaked in scientific claims, but the underlying framework and ultimate belief is in religion. If science mathematically disproved there was a God or that practices associated with belief were dangerous, the Christian Right would not stop practicing their religion as is. Christian

Right organizations thus do not support believing in science; they support using science to validate their beliefs and claims.

While the sex education debate may be about which sex education curriculum should be funded, the chief argument concerns what the next generation will be told is morally, socially, and sexually acceptable and expected for adults. The sex education debate highlights the problems of dialogue between political parties: they are not even talking about the same ideas. The Christian Right is talking about morality, and the Liberal Left is talking about science. While the values of both types of advocacy organizations are important, there cannot be a real discussion about how to move forward if there is not even a real conversation happening.

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