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Like a Virgin…Again?: Secondary Virginity as an Ongoing Gendered Social Construction

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Abstract Secondary virginity—a sexually-initiated person's deliberate decision to refrain from intimate encounters for a set period of time and to refer to that decision as a kind of virginity (rather than "mere" abstinence)—has largely eluded sociological scrutiny, despite its increasing popularity as a concept and practice among American youth. This study explores beliefs and experiences regarding secondary virginity, drawing on qualitative interviews with 61 socially diverse women and men, of whom four were avowed secondary virgins, five likened their experiences to a second virginity/virginity loss, and 16 had phenomenologically similar experiences which they did not frame in terms of virginity. Respondents who endorsed the concept of secondary virginity were disproportionately White conservative Christian women born after 1972. Secondary virginity reveals the social construction of gendered sexuality and the heterosexual imaginary as it reinforces privilege along gender, racial, religious, and sexual dimensions.

Keywords Sexuality · Virginity · Abstinence · Gender · Religion · Adolescence

In the mid 1990s, popular media from *Newsweek* to MTV began to herald a new sexual custom among American teens: "secondary" or "born-again" virginity (Dobie 1995; Ingrassia 1994). Referring to the decision of a person who is no longer a virgin to refrain from intimate sexual activity for a set period of time, often until marriage, the terms were popularized in the late 1980s by abstinence-focused sex education curricula like *Sex Respect*, *Teen-Aid*, and *Human Sexuality: Values &*

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Choice.[1] These curricula, which were widely adopted by public school districts across the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, promote sexual chastity until marriage as the only effective means of preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Irvine 2002). Several national organizations, including True Love Waits, Pure Love Alliance, and Silver Ring Thing, promote explicitly Christian versions of these ideas and publish materials used in many churches. For young people who have already had sex—synonymous with vaginal intercourse in pro-abstinence materials—these organizations and curricula recommend pledging secondary virginity until marriage, via written, web-based, or public ceremonial declarations. At this level, secondary virginity appears to be a novel phenomenon in U.S. sexual culture.

Yet, on another level, secondary virginity closely resembles a pattern of sexual conduct observed by researchers for decades. Studies from the late 1970s onward found some young people actively deciding, after one or two painful, boring, or romantically disappointing sexual encounters, to postpone future, similarly intimate sexual encounters for months or even years (Thompson 1984, 1990). Some scholars called this phenomenon "regretful" non-virginity (Herold and Goodwin 1981; Schecterman and Hutchinson 1991), although that term does not appear to have entered the popular lexicon.[2] Young people who fit a "regretful non-virgin" profile do not appear to refer to their celibacy as a form of virginity, and the vast majority intend to postpone sex not until marriage but until they feel sexual desire or find a more suitable partner (Thompson 1995). Whether this practice is gendered is difficult to determine, as most of the literature focuses on women; however, the fact that women find generally virginity loss (if via vaginal sex) less enjoyable than do men—and therefore might have less desire to repeat the experience—suggests that it might be (Higgins et al. 2010; Holland et al. 1996; Sprecher et al. 1995; Tolman 1994).

Nor is regretful non-virginity particularly widespread. Only 3.7% of 16- and 17-year olds in a 1995–96 national survey reported having had sex just once, either because they regretted having sex or they had not had a second opportunity (Regnerus 2007). A Minnesota-based study found that 7.8% of sexually-experienced ninth- to twelfth-graders were "no longer having intercourse," but did not distinguish deliberate abstinence from abstinence for other reasons (Loewenson et al. 2004). Another study estimated that 12.5% of sexually-experienced Texas college students were practicing deliberate abstinence (Rasberry and Goodson 2009); this estimate may be high, however, given an apparent selection bias (the online survey had a 20% response rate) and not generalizable to U.S. young adults overall, given the omission of non-students and relatively conservative sexual norms in Texas (Laumann et al. 1994).

Another related phenomenon, neglected in research but immortalized in popular texts like Madonna's hit song "Like a Virgin," occurs when people have sexual experiences which they feel resemble a second virginity loss, but have not previously

[1] The earliest reference to secondary virginity I found during my systematic reading of the historical literature and searches of library databases and other authors' bibliographies comes from a 1973 *Time* article quoting psychologist Joel Moskowitz on women who postpone second acts of vaginal sex.

[2] Bromley and Britten (1938) observed, but did not name, a similar phenomenon among women in the early 1930s.

thought of themselves as having regained their virginity. This phenomenon—which I will term *second virginity*—has not to my knowledge been investigated by scholars.

Although popular media coverage and the expansion of abstinence-only sex education curricula increased public awareness of secondary virginity as a concept—and possibly increased its practice—from the 1990s onward, beliefs about and experiences of secondary virginity have received little scholarly scrutiny (Sprecher and Hatfield 1996). Most published studies have relied on survey methods (Loewenson et al. 2004; Rosenbaum 2006; Rasberry and Goodson 2009) and have neglected to distinguish among phenomena that seem superficially similar but may mean quite different things to those who practice them—such as intentional celibacy that youth frame in terms of virginity versus intentional celibacy that youth do *not* frame in terms of virginity. More attention to the subjective aspects of secondary virginity is therefore warranted.

This study draws on in-depth interviews with 61 women and men from diverse social and sexual backgrounds to reveal the contours of secondary virginity and related phenomena in the contemporary U.S. Research questions include: What range of beliefs about and experiences of regaining virginity exist? How they are patterned by gender, generation, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and religion? Who finds second(ary) *virginity* (as opposed to intentional chastity) appealing and why? How is secondary virginity linked to broader social changes? Is it a distinctive new phenomenon or a novel term for an old practice? My analysis reveals how secondary virginity is an ongoing gendered social construction which supports, and is supported by, the persistent sexual double standard (Schwartz and Rutter 1998). It further shows how secondary virginity is implicated in the heterosexual imaginary, that manner of thinking that disguises the extent to which heterosexuality structures social life, including gender relations, and privileges some social groups over others (Ingraham 1996).

Terms Defined

Most Americans—and most sex education curricula—define virginity loss as occurring the first time a person engages in vaginal-penile sex (Advocates for Youth and SIECUS 2001). Yet, not everyone subscribes completely to that definition (Carpenter 2001). In my study, all of the heterosexual participants who identified themselves as non-virgins, and most of their bisexual counterparts, said they lost their virginity the first time they engaged in vaginal sex. But one-third of non-virgin lesbians, and all but one of the non-virgin gay men, reported losing their virginity via first oral or anal intercourse. (Participants also disagreed as to whether forced sex could result in virginity loss.) The present analysis focuses on whatever experiences individual participants themselves called virginity loss.[3]

[3] Recognizing virginity and its loss as social constructions, I allowed participants to determine whether or not they should be viewed as a "virgin" or "non-virgin" (or neither, though no one chose that designation). This represents a dramatic departure from studies that place participants in "virgin" and "non-virgin" categories based on whether they have engaged in a particular act (typically vaginal intercourse) as opposed to the individual's own subjective understanding.

This study also uses several specific terms to distinguish among distinctive, if closely related, varieties of sexual experience. *Secondary* and *born-again virginity* refer to the practice of actively reclaiming a virgin identity following virginity loss (however defined). These terms circulate in popular parlance; I apply them only to participants who applied them to themselves. *Second virginity* indicates experiences that participants who had never seen themselves as secondary virgins explicitly likened to a second virginity or loss thereof. Although participants used the word "virginity" to describe these experiences, they are not "named" in U.S. culture as such; rather, this is my way of designating certain people as fitting "second virginity" profiles. The (admittedly awkward) phrase *second(ary) virginity* encompasses both secondary and second virginity. This locution refers to two sets of practices which ordinary Americans socially construct in terms of virginity, but it is my analytic device rather than an extant popular term. I do not include participants who practice deliberate abstinence without describing their conduct in terms of virginity under the rubric of second(ary) virginity.

The Social Construction of Sexuality, Gender, and Social Identities

This analysis approaches sexuality and gender as socially constructed, that is, as powerfully shaped by social and cultural forces in addition to biological and psychological factors (Schwartz and Rutter 1998). More specifically, I take a symbolic interactionist perspective, conceptualizing both sexuality and gender not as something that people "are," but as something that they "do"—that is, that they accomplish in social interaction (Gagnon and Simon 1973; West and Zimmerman 1987). Individuals develop identities as sexual beings by (more or less consciously) continuously assessing their desires, adopting (or rejecting) particular attitudes, and engaging in (and revising) various practices.[4] Likewise, they become gendered through ongoing experiments with gender rules—conforming to some, breaking others—assessing others' reactions, and adapting their gender performances accordingly (Lucal 1999).

Although analytically distinct (Rubin 1984), sexuality and gender are intimately interrelated, mutually constructed in distinctive ways in specific social and historical locations (Valentine 2004). Pascoe (2007), for instance, has shown how adolescent boys simultaneously construct masculinity and (typically hetero)sexuality at individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Dubbing certain male peers with the sexualized label "fag" enables boys to confirm to themselves and to demonstrate to others their masculine self-identity. Conversely, "acting like a man" means pursuing girls as sexual and romantic conquests. Such socially-constructed sexual and gender identities are, moreover, co-constructed with other aspects of identity, including race/ethnicity and social class (Pascoe 2007; Bettie 2002).

Constructionists and interactionists see the very categories that people and societies use to designate gendered sexual identities—such as "virgin," "non-virgin," and

[4] Although sexuality identity is often (especially in popular parlance) used as a synonym for sexual orientation, the term also refers to a person's sense of "What kind of sexual being am I?"

"secondary virgin"—as socially created (or constructed) by people in interaction. We understand ourselves to be particular kinds of individuals—to have particular identities—by placing ourselves, or being placed by others, in those categories and/or by resisting such placements. Insofar as U.S. society has become increasingly fragmented and individualized since the early 1900s (Budgeon 2003; Giddens 1992), young Americans are increasingly able to choose the manner in which they "do" gender, sexuality, and other identities.[5] For example, young men and women in the "Goth" scene deliberately adopt nonconformist gender and sexual identities and practices (e.g., androgyny and polyamory) whereas members of college-based conservative Christian organizations embrace gender and sexual identities and behaviors that are atypically traditional for their age cohort (e.g., female deference to men and abstinence from most sexual contact, sometimes even kissing, until marriage) (Wilkins 2008).

For centuries in the West, sexuality and gender have been constructed partly in relation to having or not having sex (Carpenter 2005; Schlegel 1991). Specific constructions of virginity have changed over time, although expectations for women have been consistently stricter than those for men. Early Christians saw sexual abstinence as natural to women but requiring cultivation by men (Kelly 2000). Women's virginity was valued and monitored more closely than men's throughout the Christian era, with distinctive treatment of the two genders becoming especially pronounced in the mid 1800s. Many Victorians believed that women could lose their inherent "virtue"—seen as synonymous with virginity—not only through sexual intercourse before marriage but also through kissing or even visiting adult men unchaperoned (Nathanson 1991; Welter 1983). Women who "fell" from virtue were, with few exceptions, "ruined," and thus unmarriageable.[6] Unmarried men, on the other hand, were encouraged to be chaste but—since they were not thought inherently pure—their lapses were seen as less tragic and more forgivable (White 1993). The gulf between approaches to women's and men's virginity narrowed from the 1890s onward, due to broad social changes including urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of consumerist mass culture; but the expectation that "good" women would remain virgins (by avoiding vaginal intercourse) until marriage persisted until the late 1960s (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988). Thereafter, "premarital" sex became increasingly acceptable for women, as it already was for men, although women were still expected to reserve sex for love or deeply affectionate relationships (Schwartz and Rutter 1998).[7] By the 1980s, some young women began to see virginity as shameful, as did (already) many (more) young men

[5] Certain constraints apply, of course. For example, it is difficult, though not impossible, to construct a gender identity that diverges from one's biological sex (as pre-operative transgender men and women do) (Budgeon 2003).

[6] Even so, numerous reformers endeavored to "save" such women, typically through employment in "respectable" occupations, as opposed to prostitution, one of the few options then available for unmarried women whose birth families did not support them (Nathanson 1991).

[7] Ideals notwithstanding, from the 1920s onward, many women had sex with men they intended to marry (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988).

(Thompson 1995). Not coincidentally, these latter shifts map to broader social changes such as the Baby Boom and youth counterculture, second-wave feminism, and development of highly effective contraception (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988).

In sum, gendered beliefs and practices around virginity are constantly being (re)constructed by individuals and social groups in specific socio-historical contexts. The development and naming of secondary virginity—due in part to the expansion of religious conservatism and concern about HIV/AIDS—is no exception. The construction of new social identity categories appears to be accompanied by a certain degree of ambiguity and confusion about their definition and application. For example, as men and women with same-sex orientations have gained greater power and visibility, new terms have emerged—with "homosexual" giving way to "gay" and "lesbian," to be replaced in turn by "queer"—and debates have ensued over when and to whom they should apply (e.g., does one sexual encounter with a same-sex partner necessarily make one homosexual/gay/queer?) (Rust 1996). The following analysis charts the social construction of second(ary) virginity and related phenomena, attending not only to the ways that gendered expectations prompt people to adopt certain beliefs and behaviors, but also to the ways in which embracing those beliefs and behaviors enables people to construct particular versions of gender and sexual identity.

Sexual Activity, Abstinence, and Religion

Although second(ary) virginity has largely eluded scholarly attention, studies of the broader (scholarly) construct of secondary abstinence provide some insight. According to Rasberry and Goodson (2009), women are more likely than men to practice secondary abstinence (13.5 and 11.1%, respectively), as are people who have high levels of religiosity, hold positive personal attitudes toward abstinence, feel that others approve of abstinence (especially those whom they desire to please), and report negative prior experiences with sex (e.g., guilt, coercion, negative effects on relationship or self-image).[8] Loewenson et al. (2004) found that top reasons for abstinence among sexually-experienced youth were fear of pregnancy, parental objections, not wanting to have sex, fear of sexually transmitted diseases, and having chosen to wait until marriage. Neither study presented data on how frequently, or with how many partners, abstainers had engaged in sex (defined as vaginal intercourse), factors which may shape individuals' preferences for secondary virginity versus "mere" celibacy. Nor did their surveys include boring or non-pleasurable sex among the reasons participants could cite for ceasing sexual activity.

Research on adolescent sexuality, religion, and abstinence pledges is also informative. Attitudes toward virginity (which most studies equate with vaginal sex)

[8] Loewenson et al. (2004) reported higher rates of secondary abstinence among boys than girls (3.3 and 2.0%, respectively); however, they did not limit that category to those actively committed to abstinence.

vary by religious affiliation and levels of religiosity, with the latter having a stronger effect on sexual decision-making (Regnerus 2007). Conservative Christian organizations have spearheaded efforts to promote sexual abstinence among unmarried adolescents. Not surprisingly, the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) found that three-fourths of evangelical youth idealize abstinence until marriage, compared with about half of their mainline Protestant counterparts (Regnerus 2007).[9] Religious youth are more likely to delay first sex, largely due to their less permissive attitudes about sex compared with other youth (Meier 2003).

About 13% of the teenagers who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) reported having "ever made a verbal or written pledge to remain a virgin until marriage" (Bearman and Brückner 2001). Pledging was most common among evangelical Protestant and Mormon youth and rare among Jewish and non-religious youth (Regnerus 2007). Highly religious teens and those who frequently attended worship services were also more likely to pledge. Pledgers tend to delay sexual intercourse longer (by about six months) than non-pledgers (Bearman and Brückner 2001), largely because religious youth are both more likely to pledge and less likely to have sex, regardless of pledge status (Regnerus 2007).[10] Sixteen percent of girls in AddHealth had taken abstinence pledges, compared with 9% of boys (Bearman and Brückner 2001). The NSYR found that boys' regrets about sex, which were few, centered on partner choice, whereas girls reported more negative experiences and more regrets about having had sex (Regnerus 2007). Popular accounts suggest that women are more likely than men to seek virginity restoration (Hayt 2002).

Longitudinal analyses of abstinence pledges shed further light on second(ary) virginity. Adolescents who reported being non-virgins at wave 1 of AddHealth but virgins at wave 2 were disproportionately likely to have become born-again Christians or to have taken an abstinence pledge between the waves—implying that at least some had embraced secondary virginity (Rosenbaum 2006). Conversely, youth who renounced a born-again Christian identity between AddHealth waves tended to retract their abstinence pledges, as did those who experienced first (vaginal) sex (Rosenbaum 2006). (Whether the recanting of pledges preceded sex or vice versa is unknown.) AddHealth participants who reported only one sexual partner at wave 1 were twice as likely as those with two partners to "reclaim" virginity between waves, suggesting that having minimal sexual experience, which can be cast as "experimental," facilitates the (re)adoption of virgin identity (Rosenbaum 2006). Mormon, evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, and Roman Catholic teens were significantly more likely to have had sex only once than teens from other religious backgrounds, suggesting that they may be especially apt

[9] I have categorized Protestants as "mainline" (e.g., Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran) and "conservative" (e.g., Assemblies of God, Southern Baptist) according to the schema employed by Laumann et al. (1994).

[10] Pledgers are significantly less likely to practice safer sex when they do have sex (Brückner and Bearman 2005). Private pledges are as effective as public ones, as they tend to stem from internal conviction rather than external social control (Bersamin et al. 2007).

(or able) to adopt second(ary) virginity (Regnerus 2007). Qualitative interviews can illuminate the subjective experiences underlying these patterns.

Methods

Data come from in-depth interviews with 61 young adults from diverse social backgrounds, collected as part of a broader study on the meaning and experience of virginity loss in the contemporary U.S. (Carpenter 2005). Of the 33 women and 28 men participants, approximately two-thirds (39) self-identified as heterosexual and one-third (22) described themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ). (See Table 1 for details.) To ensure that my sample would be diverse enough to permit comparisons across sexual identity, I deliberately oversampled for LGBQ respondents using the snowball sampling method described below. Respondents came from varied racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds, though the majority were White (79%) and middle class (67%), as measured by parental education and occupation. (Fifty-five percent were both White and middle class.) Most (77%) were raised in Christian traditions and most retained their religious affiliations (or lack thereof) as adults. About three-fifths described themselves as practicing or devout (16) or "spiritual" (19) and two-fifths (26) as not very or non-religious. Jews and conservative Protestants were significantly more likely to be practicing or devout (50 and 60%, respectively) than Mainline Protestants (14%) or Roman Catholics (19%).

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 35 when the study was conducted. Interviewing young adults rather than adolescents allowed me not only to situate virginity loss in the broader context of individuals' sexual careers—which could include experiences such as second(ary) virginity—but also to explore the impact of broader social changes. Participants aged 26–35 were born between 1962 and 1972 and therefore reached adolescence largely prior to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and resurgence of moral conservatism in the 1980s, while those aged 18–25 were born between 1973 and 1980 and felt the brunt of those shifts, including the expansion of abstinence-focused sex education curricula. (These changes should have an even greater impact on people born after 1980.) Most participants lived within 2 h of Philadelphia, although nearly half had grown up elsewhere in the U.S. (See Laumann et al. 1994 on regional variations in sexual attitudes, religious affiliation, and religiosity.)

Fifty-six of the 61 participants identified themselves as non-virgins. Most became sexually active as teenagers, losing their virginity at age 16.4 on average. Four of the non-virgins described themselves as current or former secondary virgins and five reported second virginity experiences. Another 16 recounted experiences that were phenomenologically similar to second(ary) virginity—such as consciously deciding to postpone sexual activity after having sex once or twice—but which they did not characterize in terms of virginity. These two groups—second(ary) virgins and secondary abstainers—respectively represent 16% (9) and 29% (16) of non-virgins in the study. Second(ary) virginity and similar experiences typically took place in late adolescence or early adulthood.

Table 1 Beliefs about regaining virginity by selected social characteristics

	Never possible	Possible under some circumstances	Total
Gender			
Women[a]	28.1 (9)	71.9 (23)	(32)
Men[b]	71.4 (20)	28.6 (8)	(28)
Sexual identity			
Heterosexual	42.11 (16)	57.9 (22)	(38)
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual	59.1 (13)	40.9 (9)	(22)
Race/Ethnicity			
White	44.7 (21)	55.3 (26)	(47)
African-American	83.3 (5)	16.7 (1)	(6)
Latino/a	25.0 (1)	75.0 (3)	(4)
Asian-American	66.7 (2)	33.3 (1)	(3)
Social class background			
Middle	42.5 (17)	57.5 (23)	(40)
Working	60.0 (12)	40.0 (8)	(20)
Age/Generation			
Women			
18–25	13.3 (2)	86.7 (13)	(15)
26–35	41.2 (7)	58.8 (10)	(17)
Men			
18–25	70.6 (12)	29.4 (5)	(17)
26–35	72.7 (8)	27.3 (3)	(11)
Religious affiliation (Current)[c,d]			
Mainline protestant	55.0 (11)	45.0 (9)	(20)
Conservative protestant	50.0 (5)	50.0 (5)	(10)
Roman Catholic	43.8 (7)	56.3 (9)	(16)
Jewish	50.0 (4)	50.0 (4)	(8)
None/Atheist	33.3 (2)	66.7 (4)	(6)
	48.3 *(29)*	51.7 *(31)*	(N = 60)*

* One respondent—a 21-year-old, heterosexual, non-virgin, White, middle-class, practicing Lutheran woman—was not asked about her beliefs about regaining virginity

[a] 22 women described themselves as heterosexual, seven as lesbians, and four as bisexual

[b] 17 men self-identified as heterosexual, nine as gay, and two as bisexual

[c] Current religious affiliations match religious backgrounds with the exception of one mainline Protestant and one Roman Catholic who became conservative Protestants as adults

[d] Beliefs were not patterned by levels of religiosity

Study participants were located via purposive snowball sampling methods. After identifying initial informants through professional contacts (healthcare providers, religious leaders, and local colleges' administrative staff) and special-interest organizations (a support group for gay youth and an evangelical Christian student

association), I asked each respondent if they could recommend others who might be willing participate. Such personal referrals help researchers identify members of groups that are numerically rare, relatively "invisible," or unevenly distributed throughout the larger population—such as sexual minorities and secondary virgins (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Recruiting people through their social networks can also help overcome reluctance to participate in research on topics perceived as private, such as sexuality (e.g., Sterk-Elifson 1994). My deliberate attempts to locate secondary virgins yielded only three recommendations, which produced two completed interviews. With the exception of these two individuals, I did not know whether participants were cognizant of secondary virginity until I interviewed them. Every interview included the question, "Once someone has lost their virginity, do you think they can ever be a virgin again?," but I did not formally define secondary virginity; respondents introduced the concept themselves. I developed the term "second virginity" during data analysis.

Because snowball samples are neither random nor representative, findings from them cannot be directly generalized to a broader population. (The percentages reported below are intended to be informative rather than statistically generalizable.) But when snowball samples are used to gather extensive, detailed data from diverse types of people, they do allow the researcher to discover the *range* of beliefs and behaviors that exist in a given culture at a particular time—such as those related to second(ary) virginity in the present-day U.S.—and to see how individuals negotiate among those possibilities (Miles and Huberman 1994). To ensure a more varied sample, and to offset the potential for bias resulting from similarities within social networks, I drew on a total of 17 snowballs, none of which included more than five members. Even a small sample can provide highly valuable information about a phenomenon so seldom examined as second(ary) virginity.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and lasted from 1 to 3 h. Most questions were open-ended, allowing participants to speak freely about what they perceived as the salient aspects of virginity loss; but every interview asked about the same categories of information—the meaning and definition of virginity loss, learning about virginity loss, personal sexual history, and virginity-related social interactions—facilitating comparisons among respondents.

To code and analyze these data, I relied primarily on a modified version of the systematic procedures referred to as grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Emphasizing the inductive development of analytic categories, grounded theory helps the researcher focus on study participants' own understandings of the social world. To uncover patterns in respondents' talk about virginity loss, I read transcripts of each interview multiple times, allowing salient themes to "emerge" from them. Using these emergent themes, along with key topics cited in the relevant literature, I developed a guide for coding the interviews, which I then reread, identifying these themes and topics as they appeared. I present my data using a combination of qualitative expressions like "many" and "seldom" and percentage statistics. These percentages should not be taken to imply that the distribution of phenomena in my sample can be generalized to a broader population; rather, they are meant to highlight important patterns that may be obscured by the vagueness of words like "many."

Findings

Beliefs About Second(ary) Virginity

Participants' responses to the question, "Once someone has lost their virginity, do you think they can ever be a virgin again?" revealed considerable disagreement.[11] Nearly half (29) of the people I interviewed believed that no person could ever be a virgin, or lose his or her virginity, more than once. Eleven made this argument on physiological grounds. Cindy Passmore (32, heterosexual, White, Roman Catholic) offered the analogy: "I mean, if I lost fifty dollars I could probably earn another fifty dollars. But it's not going to be the same fifty dollar bill." (All respondent names are pseudonyms.) Even more (21) claimed that the one-time-only nature of virginity loss stemmed from its experiential qualities.[12] Said Tony Halloran (21, heterosexual, White, Roman Catholic):

> I've seen commercials about [secondary virginity], but I don't see how they do it. Like, they can't forget that experience…. I think just because they, they'll always have that memory of when they lost their virginity, for the first time. So I don't see how they can become a virgin again.

The remaining 31 women and men believed that a person could be a virgin more than once, but disagreed as to the circumstances under which this could be the case. Nine suggested that regaining virginity was particularly relevant for people whose first sexual encounter was not voluntary. Marcy Goldberg (27, heterosexual, White, Jewish) said:

> Like, if somebody was raped and that's the only sexual experience they've ever had, then, yeah, they can be a born-again virgin. Because when you have sex again for the first time, hopefully it would be more intimate, and more special and more romantic. And it'd be like losing your virginity for the second time, all over again.

Eleven contended that a person could be an virgin more than once in an emotional, mental, or psychological sense. Referring to his own experience, Terence Deluca (27, heterosexual, White, Roman Catholic) said:

> There is a different feeling when you love somebody and when you just care about somebody. So I would, I would have to say if you feel that way then I guess you could be a virgin again. Christians get born all the time again, so…. When there's true love involved, yes, I believe that.

Another nine argued that people could be virgins more than once in an experiential sense, referring to the type or quality of sexual experiences. Tim Davis (18, heterosexual, White, Roman Catholic) mused, "[If] you attach gaining some

[11] Several raised the issue before I inquired. I neglected to ask one respondent, a 21-year-old, heterosexual, White, middle class, practicing Lutheran woman; she did not bring it up herself.

[12] Three of the 29 dismissed the possibility of second virginity on both physiological and experiential bases.

sort of wisdom or something like that [to virginity loss], I guess then…they could be a virgin again. If they don't gain enough wisdom from it, or if they don't learn from the experience." Others brought up the sex of the virginity-loss partner. According to Tessa Hauser (32, lesbian, White, Episcopalian), "I guess you could…if you were thinking about like, from gay relationships to straight relationships. I mean, some people might consider, sort of, two separate virginities" (though she herself did not).

Four participants believed that a person could be a virgin a second time in a spiritual sense, as a result of God's forgiveness. Linda Jenkins (26, heterosexual, White, devout Presbyterian) explained:

> In a physical sense, no, absolutely not. And I know that I was not in any way, in the physical, a virgin again when I married my husband. But I thought of myself as being absolutely forgiven [for sex with a previous boyfriend she had expected to marry]…. And I had been true two years of dating my husband and felt very cleansed and very renewed and very much a virgin again…. In that sense, I think that you can be. But not the physical level, you know, you can't take back what you've already given.

The belief that physiological virginity could be regained was exceedingly rare.[13] Only one respondent raised this as a serious possibility, saying that she had heard that a woman's hymen would be restored after 7 years without vaginal intercourse (she did not know whether this was true). Several people joked about their virginity "growing back," however. Quipped Kelly Lewis (24, heterosexual, White, Lutheran):

> It's funny because when I came today, my boyfriend's like, "You'll have to tell her your virginity's grown back," 'cause you know we haven't sex in so long. [Laughs] So, no, I don't believe that. I don't think that you can become a virgin again.

Four respondents raised the topic of surgical hymen reconstruction, although none of them believed that such a procedure would truly restore virginity.[14]

Taken together, participants' comments indicate disagreement not only about the plausibility of secondary virginity, but also about whether virginity loss should be understood as a physiological or as an emotional/experiential phenomenon.[15] The two sides of this debate map onto the prototypically (if contradictory) American

[13] Because most people who believed that virginity could be regained explicitly stated that this was not true of physiological virginity, I assume that virtually everyone who did not explicitly distinguish physiological virginity from mental, emotional, spiritual, or experiential virginity, believed that it is impossible to regain virginity in a strictly physical sense.

[14] Surgical restoration of the hymen is not uncommon in societies where women's premarital virginity is highly valued (e.g., Egypt, Turkey, Mexico) (see González-López 2005; Kandela 1996; Skene et al. 1994); it was performed by U.S. physicians as late as the early twentieth century (Brumberg 1997). On artificial hymens historically, see Gwilliam (1996).

[15] Notably, both resistance to the idea of secondary virginity and the conviction that virginity can be lost through non-physical means resemble Victorian beliefs about (women's) virtue and its fragile nature.

values of "making the best of one's mistakes" and always giving people a "second chance."

Gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, generation, religion, and social class all shaped perspectives on secondary virginity in my sample. (See Table 1.) Patterns by gender were particularly pronounced, with three-fourths of men declaring secondary virginity to be impossible, compared with about one-fourth of women. Opinions differed strongly by respondents' racial/ethnic background as well. Four-fifths of African Americans and two-thirds of Asian Americans dismissed the possibility of regaining virginity, compared with only two-fifths of Whites and one-fourth of Latino/as. Beliefs diverged less by sexual identity, with 58% of heterosexual respondents contending that secondary virginity was sometimes possible, compared with 41% of LGBQ respondents. Generation affected notions about secondary virginity among women, but not men. Women aged 26–35 were over three times more likely than women aged 18–25 to argue that a person could under no circumstances be a virgin more than once (41 and 13%, respectively); men's beliefs were not patterned by age. (I discuss likely reasons for these patterns below.)

Beliefs about regaining virginity also varied by religion, although these patterns were less striking than might have been expected, given conservative Christian organizations' role in popularizing the born-again virginity concept. Attitudes toward secondary virginity varied little by current religious affiliation for women or men in my sample and not at all by religiosity. (Patterns by religious background were almost identical.) Respondents who described themselves as non-religious were most likely to accept secondary virginity, followed by Roman Catholics, Jews and conservative Protestants, and mainline Protestants. Yet, religion did influence the grounds on which people believed that a person could resume her or his virginity. The four respondents who claimed that a person could be a virgin a second time in a *spiritual* sense were devout and active members of doctrinally-conservative Christian churches (three identified as conservative Protestants, the fourth was Presbyterian) (they were also all White heterosexual women; see below). Religion and race interacted strongly: The three Black conservative Christians in the sample (two women, one man) all declared second(ary) virginity to be impossible, compared with only two of seven (29%) White conservative Christians (one woman, one man). Middle class respondents were somewhat more likely than their working class counterparts to deem second(ary) virginity possible (58 and 40%, respectively).

Experiences of Secondary Virginity and Second Virginity Loss

Non-virgin study participants described three kinds of experiences falling along a continuum of second(ary) virginity. (See Table 2.) Four people had actively adopted a secondary virgin identity; five recalled experiences that they explicitly likened to a second virginity/virginity loss, and 16 spoke of experiences that resembled secondary virginity in a phenomenological sense but which they did not describe in terms of virginity.

Table 2 Second(ary) virginity experiences (among non-virgin respondents) by selected social characteristics

		Secondary virgin	Second virginity	Phenomenologically similar experience
Gender				
Women	(30)	10.0 (3)	13.3 (4)	30.0 (9)
Men	(26)	3.8 (1)	3.8 (1)	26.9 (7)
Sexual identity				
Heterosexual	(37)	10.8 (4)	8.1 (3)	24.3 (9)
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer	(19)	0.0 (0)	10.5 (2)	36.8 (7)
Race/Ethnicity				
White	(44)	6.8 (3)	9.1 (4)	27.3 (12)
African-American	(6)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	50.0 (3)
Latino/a	(3)	0.0 (0)	33.3 (1)	0.0 (0)
Asian-American	(3)	33.3 (1)	0.0 (0)	33.3 (1)
Age/Generation				
Women				
18–25	(13)	7.7 (1)	15.4 (2)	15.4 (2)
26–35	(17)	11.8 (2)	11.8 (2)	41.2 (7)
Men				
18–25	(15)	6.7 (1)	0.0 (0)	26.7 (4)
26–35	(11)	0.0 (0)	9.1 (1)	27.3 (3)
Religious affiliation (Current)				
Mainline protestant	(21)	4.8 (1)	4.8 (1)	28.6 (6)
Conservative protestant	(8)	12.5 (1)	12.5 (1)	25.0 (2)
Roman Catholic	(15)	0.0 (0)	13.3 (2)	33.3 (5)
Jewish	(7)	0.0 (0)	14.3 (1)	28.6 (2)
None/Atheist	(5)	40.0 (2)	0.0 (0)	40.0 (2)
Religiosity				
Devout/Practicing	(16)	50.0 (2)	40.0 (2)	31.3 (5)
Spiritual	(19)	0.0 (0)	40.0 (2)	31.3 (5)
Non/Not very	(26)	50.0 (2)	20.0 (1)	37.5 (6)
Social class background				
Middle	(36)	100.0 (4)	80.0 (4)	75.0 (12)
Working	(20)	0.0 (0)	20.0 (1)	25.0 (4)
	(N = 56)	(4)	(5)	(16)

Secondary Virgins

Four of the 56 non-virgins explicitly referred to themselves as former or current secondary (or born-again) virgins. Linda Jenkins (26, heterosexual, White, devout Presbyterian) and Kate O'Connor (24, heterosexual, White, evangelical Protestant)

became born-again virgins for religious reasons. Both lost their virginity in committed relationships then, some time after those relationships ended (immediately for Linda, several years for Kate), came to believe that God wanted them to refrain from additional sexual encounters until they were married. Explained Kate:

> All of my beliefs about sex are going to go along with what the Bible says. So, that's always going to be….[only] married people [should have sex]…. Now my goal is…to find the person that I want to marry and then have a relationship that's not based on sex, but…on friendship and love and a commitment to God and not just emotional and physical things.

For people like Kate and Linda, secondary virginity represents a religious framing of celibacy.

In contrast, although Charlotte Brandt (28, heterosexual, White, nonreligious) and Andrew Lin (19, heterosexual, Chinese-American, atheist) had called themselves born-again virgins, religious beliefs played no part in their experiences. In fact, both had grown up outside organized religion. For Andrew, the term born-again virginity offered a way of describing his decision to refrain from coitus after a pregnancy scare:

> I had sex once and then I stopped for a long time because my first experience was bad…. Well, not bad, but it just wasn't, I wasn't happy with it. And then so I said, "Fine, I'm not going to have sex until I'm sure I want to have sex with someone." And I basically considered myself a born-again virgin until about two months ago.

Charlotte called herself a born-again virgin as a humorous way of coping with a serious issue. At the small college she attended, where "recreational sex was the [only] extracurricular activity," Charlotte felt set apart because "I just, I didn't participate in that." In fact, she "didn't have sex when I was in college at all" because she never met "anyone who fit that basic criteria [of] a man who I could relate to." Notably, both Andrew and Charlotte intended to postpone sex until they were in stable relationships, not until they were married. In effect, they both appropriated a religious framing of celibacy for more secular ends (more on this below).

Gender influenced the way secondary virgins in my sample presented themselves to others. All three women indicated that they had routinely shared their status as born-again virgins with others, including people they did not know well. In contrast, Andrew said that he explained his feelings and self-designation only to very close friends, most of whom were women. For example, he said that if one of his fraternity brothers had asked him if he was a virgin, he would have said no (honestly, as he saw it) and declined to volunteer anything further. These divergent approaches appear to stem from widespread beliefs about gendered sexuality, and specifically the notion that sexual inexperience is more acceptable among women than men.

Second Virginity

Another five participants told me about personal experiences that they explicitly likened to a second virginity or loss of virginity; but they had never referred to

themselves as secondary virgins. These experiences were of several types. Dana Hagy's (30, heterosexual, White, evangelical Protestant) sexual history resembled Kate and Linda's in every respect except that, although devoutly religious Dana likened her decision to remain celibate (when dating the man she later married) to born-again virginity, she did not apply that term to herself.

Emma McCabe (24, heterosexual, White, disaffected Roman Catholic) likewise decided to eschew intimate sexual encounters for a period of time, but for altogether different (secular) reasons. After a series of particularly "pointless" sexual encounters, she briefly entertained the idea of "becoming a virgin again." Yet, while she found the idea of a second virginity appealing, Emma ultimately decided that equating her temporary abstinence with virginity amounted to lying to herself. She explained:

> Redeclaring yourself a virgin has a lot of, there's a strong element of denial there, you know? It's like…trying to capture something that I don't think is possible—to have, like, a perfect first experience. For something like that, it's never going to be exactly what you expected or necessarily what you wanted or things like that.

Another variety of "second virginity-like" experience involved sexual encounters in which people *felt* as though they were losing their virginity a second time. Missy Blum (24, bisexual, White, Jewish) described her experience with the new man in her life:

> A couple of weeks ago…we were fooling around. And we didn't necessarily get as far as to be having sex in the traditional sense. But I was thinking to myself, "It feels like I'm a virgin again." You know, it feels like I'm being touched for the first time…. Clothes were still on, but the touching made me feel like, innocent almost. And like I've never been touched in that way before.

Terence Deluca experienced a similar feeling the first time he had sex with the woman who later became his wife. As he saw it, "The experience [second virginity loss] is basically a little similar [to first VL]. But a lot deeper…like the rush of jumping out of a plane." Neither Missy nor Terence had *intended* to experience virginity or virginity loss a second time. For Emma, Missy, and Terence, "second virginity" seemed to serve as shorthand for the popular idea that "having sex" can and should be distinguished from "making love."

Finally, Miranda Rivera (29, lesbian, Puerto Rican, mainline Protestant), who lost her virginity when she was raped by an acquaintance, felt that the second time she engaged in vaginal sex—intentionally—was tantamount to a second virginity loss. She said:

> I mean technically….I'm like, "Well, I guess that [the rape] means I'm not a virgin anymore"…. [Then] I decided to take that. Virginity then became a matter of, like, going to sleep with someone willingly. So, but still with a guy. So I think I did have a sexual encounter with a guy for, just for the sake of, like, saying, "I'm taking this, nobody else is."

Although she had conceptualized first consensual sex as a kind of virginity loss prior to engaging in it, Miranda did not call herself a secondary or born-again virgin.

Phenomenologically Similar Experiences

After losing their virginity, 16 study participants voluntarily refrained from engaging in virginity-loss-level sex for several months or even years.[16] Although these experiences were very similar, in phenomenological terms, to the secondary virginity and second-virginity experiences described above, the people who underwent them neither used the term secondary virginity nor compared their experiences to virginity. Their accounts help illuminate the distinctions people make between virginity and "mere" abstinence.

Five women and five men deliberately postponed their second sexual encounters because their virginity-loss experiences had been extremely unpleasant in physical and/or emotional terms. Jon Laumann (27, heterosexual, White, Lutheran), for example, was so confused and upset by losing his virginity with his girlfriend, only 3 weeks after she'd been raped and not long after his father had entered a 12-step recovery program ("it was too much, too fast, too far"), that he decided to avoid sexual activity—and dating altogether—until he felt more in control of his life, 2 years later as it turned out. But unlike the secondary virgins whose conduct Jon's resembles, Jon had been pleased to no longer be a virgin and he never compared his temporary celibacy to virginity.

Another participant, Lavinia Thompson (30, heterosexual, African American, evangelical Protestant), decided to remain sexually celibate until marriage after breaking up with the man with whom she'd lost her virginity (they had dated for 10 years). She was currently "trying to wait, and hopefully the guy that I…end up having sex with, we'd marry." With regard to secondary virginity, however, Lavinia was quick to point out that, "I just think one time is it…. You can, like, I have a couple girlfriends who are celibate, but I don't think they're virgins." Lavinia was one of several respondents who made a point of saying that, although they admired non-virgins who decided to practice celibacy, they disapproved of referring to that practice as a kind of virginity. (Despite similarities in Lavinia and Emma's beliefs and experiences, I have placed Emma in the preceding group because she decided that secondary virginity was implausible for her but not for others, whereas Lavinia believed that born-again virginity was impossible for everyone.)

Five additional participants (three women, two men) effectively postponed their second sexual encounters on purpose by choosing to lose their virginities with partners who would not be available afterwards or with whom they did not wish to continue having sex. For example, Lisa Orlofsky (35, lesbian, White, Jewish) deliberately chose to have sex with a stranger at a party so that she would no longer feel embarrassed about being a virgin, even as she planned not to have sex again

[16] Another three men and one woman involuntarily refrained from further sexual encounters because their first partners refused to continue having sex with them. Even young people who want to engage in sexual activity often do so only sporadically when they first become sexually active (Laumann et al. 1994), typically as a result of limited opportunities. This was the case for 12 participants in my study.

until she was in a caring, committed relationship. (The stranger was male; she self-identified as heterosexual at the time.)

The Relationship Between Beliefs and Experiences

Beliefs about and experiences of second(ary) virginity were closely intertwined. People whose personal sexual histories included the experience of reclaiming their own virginity or feeling like a virgin (or loser of virginity) at some point after virginity loss were substantially more likely to perceive second(ary) virginity as possible under some circumstances. None of the 29 respondents who declared second(ary) virginity to be impossible had any personal experience with it, whereas nine (29%) of the 31 who believed it possible had. In four cases—all devout or practicing Christians—beliefs about regaining virginity preceded and shaped the experience, as when Kate O'Connor determined to become a born-again virgin after a fellow evangelical Christian told her about the practice. For the other respondents, experience appeared to shape belief, as when Terence Deluca decided that second virginity was possible when the first time he had sex with a new girlfriend left him feeling like he had lost his virginity all over again. (Three in this latter group were non-religious; one was spiritual, raised Roman Catholic; and one practicing/Jewish.)

Discussion

A Continuum of Experience

The women and men who took part in my study held divergent opinions as to whether, and under what circumstances, it would be possible for a non-virgin to regain her or his virginity. Their own experiences with second(ary) virginity also varied. Although a majority believed that they had been virgins or lost their virginity only once, some had personally adopted secondary virginity and others explicitly compared incidents in their sexual careers to a second virginity. Furthermore, many of the once-only virgins reported behaving in ways that resembled second(ary) virginity in phenomenological terms. This diversity suggests that young Americans are actively constructing a new identity—secondary virgin—and negotiating its applicability to themselves and others. Over time, as the concept and identity become more familiar, the ambiguity currently exhibited around them may subside.

Second(ary) virginity and other forms of deliberate celibacy are distinct, as my analysis indicates, and researchers will benefit from making that distinction. For example, doing so might help illuminate some of the counterintuitive patterns reported by Rasberry and Goodson (2009) and Loewenson et al. (2004). Yet, second(ary) virginity and "mere" abstinence also share much in common. Conceptualizing them as points on a continuum, rather than as wholly discrete phenomena, could give researchers better insight into the processes through which early sexual careers progress.

Patterns by Social Identity

My respondents' beliefs about and experiences of second(ary) virginity were strongly patterned by social identity, especially gender. Women were three times more likely than men to claim that non-virgins can sometimes regain virginity; and three of the four self-identified secondary virgins were women, as were four of the five individuals who recounted second virginity experiences. Altogether, 23% of non-virgin women and 8% of non-virgin men experienced second(ary) virginity. In contrast, men and women were equally likely—27 and 30%, respectively—to report practices which bore a phenomenological resemblance to second(ary) virginity, but which they did not compare to virginity.

Although it is not possible to generalize from my sample to larger populations, these patterns are consistent with gendered approaches to sexuality in general—and virginity in particular. Historically and today, women are encouraged to—and do—place higher value on virginity than men. Abstinence pledges are more popular among girls than boys (Bearman and Brückner 2001) and women tend to see virginity as a gift (to be given to a beloved partner) whereas men tend to view it as a stigma (to be eradicated as soon as possible) (Carpenter 2005). Compared with men, women feel more justified and less judged by others if they limit sexual activity to love relationships (Lees 1986; Rubin 1990; Tolman 1994). For example, Higgins et al. (2010) found that being in a committed relationship with one's first sex partner greatly increased psychological satisfaction for both genders, but particularly for women. Women also are more likely than men to find first (vaginal) sex physically and emotionally painful or dissatisfying and to regret having sex (Carpenter 2005; Higgins et al. 2010; Holland et al. 1996; Regnerus 2007; Rubin 1990; Sprecher et al. 1995). Physiological sex differences (i.e., in ease of orgasm and pain at penetration), power dynamics in heterosexual relationships (privileging male pleasure), gendered interpretations of virginity's meaning, and unrealistically romantic expectations of first sex all underlie these patterns. Moreover, more women than men experience coerced sex and thus have sexual experiences they would prefer not to "count" as part of their "true" sexual histories. In short, women's greater emphasis on romance and commitment and greater disappointment with virginity loss (compared with men) helps to explain their stronger disposition not only to sympathize with the desire to start sexual life anew, but also to do so in fact. That women in particular are encouraged to favor "making love" over "having sex" may be one reason that women are disproportionately likely to report second virginity experiences.

Second(ary) virginity was also racialized in my study, with African Americans being particularly disinclined to accept or adopt it (though see Rosenbaum 2006). (I interviewed too few Latino/as and Asian Americans to venture any conclusions.) Over four-fifths of Black participants claimed that people could never regain their virginity, compared with less than half of their White counterparts. Moreover, although none of the non-virgin African Americans reported a second(ary) virginity experience, half of them had been intentionally celibate for some period of time. In contrast, one-sixth (7) of White non-virgins reported having a second(ary) virginity experience and one-fourth (12) took "time off" without likening it to virginity. On one level, African-American participants' disdain for second(ary) virginity is

surprising, given high rates of conservative Christian identification among African Americans (in my study as nationwide) and the fact that Blacks' sexual attitudes are relatively more conservative than Whites (Mahay et al. 2001). However, African Americans typically become sexually active before Whites. This tension originates in efforts to counter stereotypes of Blacks as hypersexual even as a relative lack of resources limits marriage options (Wyatt 1997). Consequently, although sexual restraint is valued by African Americans (especially women, who are more likely to be involved in Black Protestant churches), they may feel less pressure than Whites to "redeem" their sexual activity by resuming a virgin identity (Barnes and Bynum 2010).

The relationship of second(ary) virginity to religion was less straightforward among my respondents than expected, given the concept's origins as a religious framing of deliberate abstinence. Beliefs differed little by religious affiliation overall; but conservative Protestants were disproportionately likely to claim that people could reassume virginity on spiritual grounds. Second(ary) virginity experiences were, moreover, especially common among conservative Protestants and devout/practicing participants; whereas mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish non-virgins tended not to interpret experientially-similar practices in terms of virginity (nor did the spiritual and non/not very religious). These patterns are consistent with research on abstinence pledges (Regnerus 2007; Rosenbaum 2006). Yet, non-religious women and men were overrepresented among second(ary) virgins, suggesting that the concept of secondary virginity—initially a religious framing of celibacy—is taking on a new, secular interpretation as it becomes popularized beyond its conservative Christian beginnings. Although secondary virginity carries a distinctively religious meaning to devout Christians like Linda, Kate, and Dana, for less religious individuals—like atheists Charlotte and Andrew and disaffected Roman Catholic Emma—it may simply serve as a convenient shorthand for a particular lifestyle choice.

Second(ary) virginity to some extent appears to be a generation-specific phenomenon (at least in my sample), belonging to the cohort that came of age in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and resurgence of moral conservatism in the 1980s. Although younger women respondents (18–25) were over three times more likely than their older counterparts (26–35) to believe that a person could regain her/his virginity, second(ary) virginity experiences were just as common among younger and older respondents (14 and 18%, respectively), as were phenomenologically-similar experiences (38 and 36%, respectively). (Experiences were patterned similarly across gender.) That said, five (71%) of the seven second(ary) virgins were 28 or younger, compared with 9 (56%) of the 16 experientially-similar group. Juxtaposing Kate and Linda's sexual careers to Dana's highlights the importance of generation. When Linda and Kate first learned of secondary virginity, they were both relatively young (in their late teens and early 20s, respectively) and in fairly early stages of their sexual careers—a time when it was appropriate for them personally to become secondary virgins. Dana, in contrast, did not hear of secondary virginity as a concept until she was in her late 20s and married (i.e., after she practiced intentional celibacy with her husband-to-be). These generational differences suggest that the term secondary virginity, initially promoted by

conservative Christians, permeated mainstream sexual culture during the early 1990s, via mass media coverage and the proliferation of abstinence-only sex education curricula (Irvine 2002; Landry et al. 1999).

Finally, second(ary) virginity was more appealing, as concept and practice, to heterosexual men and women in my study than to their LGBQ counterparts. A larger proportion of heterosexual than LGBQ respondents believed that secondary virginity was sometimes possible, and almost twice as many heterosexual as LGBQ participants reported second(ary) virginity experiences (19 and 11%, respectively). Conversely, LGBQ individuals were more likely to report experiences that resembled secondary virginity but which they did not describe in those terms (37 and 24%, respectively). If these patterns hold true in the general population, it would appear that secondary virginity is primarily the province of heterosexual women and men, even though LGBQ non-virgins are no less likely to abstain deliberately from sex. These patterns make sense given historical and prevailing definitions of virginity loss as entailing vaginal sex (Carpenter 2001), the fact that the sex education curricula that promote secondary virginity also tend to deride or ignore same-sex sexuality (SAM 2006), and the likelihood that LGBQ youth find issues such as combating homophobia and negotiating the process of coming out more pressing than assessing their sexual status vis-à-vis virginity (Herdt and Boxer 1993; Savin-Williams 2003).

Why Virginity?

That social identity should so profoundly affect beliefs and experiences of second(ary) virginity raises the question: “Why virginity?” Why is secondary virginity a more appealing concept than deliberate celibacy—for people who are female, White, heterosexual, and conservative or devout Christians (at least in my sample)? The concept of the heterosexual imaginary offers some purchase on this phenomenon. According to Ingraham (1996: 169), “The heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution.” The heterosexual imaginary additionally obscures the extent to which institutionalized heterosexuality privileges some social groups over others. Practices such as Valentine’s Day, the “white weddings” Ingraham (1999) studied, and—I would argue—secondary virginity help to (re)produce the heterosexual imaginary.

The key question here is: How does secondary virginity, as imagined and enacted in U.S. culture, help maintain gender, sexuality, class, and racial/ethnic privileges? To the extent that virginity loss is defined in terms of vaginal-penile intercourse—an assumption propagated by many advocates of born-again virginity—it works to naturalize and privilege heterosexuality. Historically, virginity has also been associated with women (particularly young women), traditional gender norms for sexuality (the sexual double standard), Whiteness, and religious devotion (Carpenter 2005; Kelly 2000). Men, Whites, Christians, and heterosexuals all benefit from the valorization of this view of sexuality, because it reinforces social arrangements in which they enjoy greater power than other social groups. It is not surprising, then, that in my study, second(ary) virginity was endorsed and adopted disproportionately by Whites, heterosexuals, and conservative or devout Christians.

But why should women (in my study, or in general) embrace a concept that effectively restricts women's sexual expression more so than men's, thus reinforcing male privilege? Adopting conventional gender identities no doubt plays a role; but women who benefit materially from traditional gender arrangements may also find secondary virginity appealing. For instance, Luker's (1984) study of abortion activists found that pro-life women were more dependent on marriage, given lower education levels and limited employment options, than pro-choice women. Secondary virginity can be seen as reproducing a system in which women's sexual purity is a resource to be exchanged for economic support from men (Schlegel 1991). Yet, in my study, whereas one-third (8 of 22) of non-virgin women from middle-class families experienced second(ary) virginity, none of their working-class counterparts did. Conversely, half (4 of 8) of non-virgin working-class women reported "phenomenologically similar" experiences, compared with only one-fourth (5 of 22) of their middle-class counterparts. (The only working-class second(ary) virgin was Terence.) These counterintuitive patterns make sense, however, to the extent that middle-class heterosexual women are more likely to anticipate marriages in which the husband is the primary breadwinner. (Beliefs were less strongly patterned: 58% of middle-class and 40% of working-class respondents saw resuming virginity as sometimes possible.)

Something Old, Something New

At the outset, I posited that secondary virginity simultaneously represents a new phenomenon and a novel way of describing an enduring pattern of sexual conduct—although many voluntarily celibate non-virgins eschew the latter usage. Secondary virginity is also new in the sense that it represents an emerging social identity, a sexual status currently "under construction." Creating and popularizing a specific name for intentional celibacy after sexual initiation has, in effect, produced a distinctive option for disappointed non-virgins. Whereas previously, deliberate chastity was a "solution" that each individual "invented" anew, it is now possible for unhappy youth to think, "I could become a secondary virgin." Secondary virginity furthermore constitutes a distinct category from regretful non-virginity (aka, secondary abstinence) insofar as it is institutionalized in pro-abstinence sex education curricula and conservative Christian organizations. My interviews show that old-style regretful non-virginity *and* religiously-motivated secondary virginity are both practiced by young men and women today. A few participants pursued a middle path, as when secular people like Charlotte and Andrew adopted the term secondary virginity without accepting its religious connotations. Generational differences in attitudes and self-identifications are consistent with the timing of the broad societal changes that led to the social construction and popularization of secondary virginity as term and concept.

Conclusion

These findings raise several issues of interest to researchers and policy makers. As an early step toward developing a body of empirical research on a new-yet-old

phenomenon, this study extends previous research on secondary abstinence and regretful non-virginity and breaks new ground by illuminating young Americans' beliefs and experiences related to second(ary) virginity. Future inquiries could examine these phenomena among a wider range of social groups (especially in terms of racial/ethnic and religious background) and using random, representative samples to permit generalization to the broader population. Including younger respondents (i.e., pre-teens and teenagers) would also be beneficial, insofar as virginity is typically more relevant to their everyday lives and they have grown up in an era when secondary virginity has been presented as a viable option. Cross-cultural research could help to determine to what extent these phenomena (especially the religious variant of secondary virginity) are specific to the U.S. context. This article should also remind investigators that the common assumption that first sex entails a transition to regular partnered sexual activity may lead to spurious conclusions (Singh and Darroch 1999).

Regarding public policy, the extent to which secondary virginity has gained currency beyond its conservative Christian origins, even as the concept remains tinged with religious ideology, indicates a need for a secular alternative, especially in sex education curricula. Current constructions of secondary virginity may encourage young people to deny the possibility that they will have sex, thus to practice contraception and safer sex at lower rates (Brückner and Bearman 2005). (On the ineffectiveness of abstinence-focused curricula, see Kirby (2002).) Moreover, by advocating sexual abstinence until marriage, current constructions of secondary virginity may encourage early marriage (associated with higher divorce rates) and may also forestall sexual experimentation which, for many teens, can be a positive aspect of personal development (Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg 1989). Because the idea of secondary virginity may ring "sex negative" to some youth, especially those who view virginity as a stigma (a not inconsiderable group; see Carpenter 2001), there should be a sex positive way to say, "If you want to take time off, you should feel free to." Furthermore, a model of secondary virginity that is infused with conservative Christian ideology may be irrelevant to teens who subscribe to different religious doctrines or who are nonreligious.

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