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TRADITION AND TRANSITION: AMERICAN ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN

PREPARING AND BECOMING
SEXUALLY ACTIVE WITHIN MARRIAGE

BY

SHOSHANNAH D. FRYDMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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SHOSHANNAH D. FRYDMAN

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
 Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare to satisfy the dissertation
 requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Professor Deborah Tolman

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Professor Harriet Goodman

Date

Executive Officer

Professor Martha Bragin

Professor SJ Dodd

Professor David Ribner
 Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Tradition and Transition:
American Orthodox Jewish Women Preparing and Becoming
Sexually Active within Marriage

By

Shoshannah D. Frydman

Advisor: Professor Deborah Tolman

The purpose of this project is to expand knowledge about the lived experience of married Orthodox Jewish women's preparation and transition into sexual activity in marriage. When Orthodox women get married, they are undergoing a significant shift, for many, this is their first experience having a sexual relationship. In addition to the prohibition of premarital sexual behavior, the Orthodox Jewish community has a number of rituals, laws, and practices specifically related to menstruation and sexual relations within marriage. These laws, *taharat hamishpacha*, or family purity, are a set of laws and practices that regulate sex within marriage for both men and women. Most community members attend a premarital class that trains them in the laws of family purity and sexual education.

In this study, I looked to understand how women who are faithful to the traditions of the rituals, laws and customs of Orthodox Judaism experience their premarital education and early sexual experience within marriage. I was interested in understanding more about what makes premarital educational helpful to women. In addition, I looked to conceptualize the experience of early marital sexual experience and capture the experience of women as they transition into marriage and into a sexual relationship with a focus on sexual subjectivity.

This expanded knowledge informs clinical practice, education and program development to address their needs and to contribute to the broader conversation regarding female sexuality,

particularly within cultural context. Specifically, this project generated new knowledge on the subject of sexuality, sexual education and help seeking behavior through the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

The goals of this project were to gather descriptive and inferential data about the women's experience and to elicit supplementary narratives to illuminate this data. Research about sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community has been limited. The research in this project allows the otherwise silenced voices to surface and to have their experience acknowledged and supported. Project findings support social workers who provide services to, design programs for, and create community policy that concerns Orthodox Jewish women and their families by illuminating their experience.

I utilized a mixed methods study to collect data that included both an online quantitative survey and an online guided narrative with self-identified married Orthodox Jewish women. Both data collection tools were implemented through the use of Survey Gizmo, a secure website. The quantitative data was analyzed using SAS and is summarized using descriptive and inferential statistics. NVivo9, the qualitative data management software, and Excel were used for the analysis of the written narratives.

The purposive sample includes 398 self-identified married Orthodox Jewish women that conform to the criteria that they are currently married, identify as Sabbath observant, observe kosher dietary laws, and go to the *mikvah* (ritual bath) monthly, as necessary.. Participants were recruited online, primarily through Facebook, emails and word of mouth. In addition to this final dissertation project, findings will be submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals and presentation at professional conferences in the fields of social work, Jewish studies, and gender and sexuality.

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I would like to start by thanking the women that participated in my study and shared intimate parts of themselves with incredible generosity, honesty and openness. Their enthusiasm and courage was inspiring to me. The women are the experts of their own experiences and I hope that this work accurately represents their stories and is an agent for awareness and meaningful change.

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The trademark of sexuality is its complexity. Human sexuality is a diverse and sensitive phenomenon. Few of us question whether individuals are born with a capacity to be sexual, but the manner, in which this is expressed, understood, practiced, and experienced is multifaceted. Sexuality has multiple meanings, layers, and explanations. In this dissertation, I investigate and document an aspect of female sexuality in the American Orthodox Jewish communities to inform social work practice and research.

The study of female sexuality is somewhat limited and only recently entered social welfare scholarship. Literature related to Orthodox Jewish women is even scarcer. Little scholarly attention has been paid to how Orthodox Jewish women experience their sexuality. This study addresses an under-researched subject of how religious women experience their early marital sexual lives. By examining what these religious women have experienced sexually and how they think about and understand their sexuality and sexual relationships in their early marital sexual lives, this study will address a number of broader clinical and community needs.

Female Sexuality as a Social Welfare Issue

One role of social welfare research is to develop knowledge that can impact and strengthen clinical interventions, services, and policy. Social work research is specifically and uniquely positioned to address female sexuality because of this focus on social justice and applied practice (Bay-Cheng, 2010). Within popular and academic literature, the discussion related to sexuality focuses primarily on its risks, dangers, and difficulties. Particularly as related to female sexuality, common topics include sex workers (Blissbomb, 2010; Brown, Blas, Cabral, Carcamo, Gravitt, & Halsey, 2011; Duff, Shoveller, Dobrer, Ogilvie, Montaner, Chettiar, &

Shannon, 2015, Kang, Liao, Jiang, Zhang, Mao, Zhang, & Jia.,2011), sexually transmitted disease (Forhan, Gottlieb, Sternberg, Xu, Datta, McQuillan, & Markowitz, 2009) unintended pregnancy (Finer & Henshaw, 2006), sexual assault (Houry, 2015), sexual violence (Henry & Powell, 2016, NNEDV, 2006) and intimate partner violence (Edleson, et al., 2015, Novello, Rosenberg, Saltzman, & Shosky, 1992: Walker, 1994), and sexual dysfunction (Brandon & Morgentaler 2016, Laumann, Paik & Rosen, 1999).

Although sexual health and satisfaction is considered part of overall well-being (Davison, et al., 2009, Stephenson & Meston, 2015), much of this research reflects a continued focus on the risks associated with sex and, as will be explored, this negative focus continues to oppress and objectify women (Impett & Tolman, 2006; McClelland, 2010). Most Americans are familiar with the problem-oriented discourse surrounding sexuality. This negative public dialogue influences legislative and public policy in regard to regulating sexuality (Fine & McClelland, 2007; Bay-Cheng, 2010). These interventions are often part of health and public policy. Particularly for women, such statistics highlight the rhetoric of risk.

Sex certainly can be unhealthy and associated with negative outcomes. In 2010, an estimated 12,350 young people aged 13-24 reporting to the CDC were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, representing about 26% of the persons diagnosed that year. Each year, there are approximately 19 million new STI infections, and almost half of them are among youth aged 15-24 (www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/sexualbehaviors). An estimated 45% of all women's pregnancies in the United States are unintended (Finer & Zolna, 2016). These statistics have a significant impact on maternal and infant health (Santelli, et. al., 2003), in addition to the fact that untreated STDs can lead to severe disease and even death (World Health Organization, 2014).

Often sex is coercive. National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey states that 19.3% of women have been raped in their lifetimes; An estimated 43.9% were victims of other forms of sexual violence (Breiding, 2014). Other studies report that at least half of sexually active American female undergraduate students report having consented to unwanted intercourse (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Moreover, past coercion is highly associated with future risk. Women who have experienced coercion in the past are more likely to be re-victimized (Classen, Palesh & Aggarwal, 2005; Tjaden & Thoenns, 2006), more likely to have unprotected coitus (Harlow, et al., 1998; Raj, et al., 2000) and to have higher rates of unintended pregnancy (Dietz, et al., 1999; Raj, et al., 2000).

Sex labor, prostitution, and sex trafficking are other risks associated with sexuality. These industries have global attention and concern (Farrell & Fahy, 2016, Raymond, 2003; Sanders, 2005). According to the Department of State (2005), within the United States, over 50,000 women and children are trafficked for sex labor and that the global commercial sex trade exploits one million children each year. There is a long history of scholarly and political debate about the health and social impact on such legislation (Cree, 2008; Konstantopoulos, et al., 2013).

There are many studies that look at the negative aspects of sex; related diseases, abuses, and dysfunctions have been the focus of most sexual research and therefore have informed much social work practice. The continued focus on the risks and dangers of female sexuality continue to maintain an environment and culture where women remain objects and are passive and in which women live in fear of the risks of sex and sexuality. Fine (1988) noted how the education of adolescents is infused with fear-based cautionary tales, as well as the absence of any mention of female sexual desire and pleasure, which is maintained (Fields, 2008; Fields & Tolman, 2006). When sexuality is presented in this way, women are denied exposure to alternative

models and scripts, thus leaving them few opportunities to imagine themselves as anything but victims (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). This negative focus prevents the development of an entitled sense of female sexual subjectivity and ability to be active, safe, and empowered.

Sexuality research often neglects concepts of desire, pleasure, and agency. Inherently, this perspective of women as passive sexual beings is an issue of social welfare (Bay-Cheng, 2010). It reflects the structural and ingrained inequalities that jeopardize women's sexual wellbeing (Hooks, 2000; McClelland, 2015, Tolman, 2006). Research preoccupied with the dangers related to sex diverts consideration from the systems of injustice that put women at risk and continually perpetuates these risks and this oppressive perspective. As feminist scholar Carol Vance (1984) eloquently states, "it is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression; it is necessary to move toward something: toward pleasure, agency, self-definition" (p. 26). The exclusive attention to the risks and dangers of sex has yielded the marginalization and obfuscation of female pleasure and sexual agency.

A strengths-based approach to sexuality allows women to explore their agency and promote sexual well-being. This social work framework illuminates how when society is support of women having greater sexual agency, women become more empowered and may be less vulnerable and fewer dangerous incidents might occur (Dodd & Tolman, in preparation; McCave, Shepard & Winter, 2014). Ultimately, women would feel entitled to safety. Sexuality can become a place of potential strength. A view of women's sexuality as independent and proactive challenges a more traditional restrictive, reactive script, allowing women to pursue and initiate pleasurable experiences (Gavey, 2005). If society supported female sexual agency (and therefore women's safety and well-being), women would be empowered to embrace desire and

pleasure as rights and as vital components of human thriving and protest, and they would feel entitled to respond to and challenge the dangers of sex (Bay-Cheng, 2010; Fine, 1988).

Past research has contributed to many important policies and practice in social work, although to focus solely on a danger perspective continues to deny a strong female voice and reflects continued objectification of women (Bay-Cheng, 2010). Historically, social services and policy have responded to these risks and have been on the forefront of issues such as the feminization of poverty (Chant, 2008; Lister, 2011), sexual trauma, and intimate partner violence (Campbell, 1995; Lorber, 2005; Schechter, 1982). All of the standard services and policies — shelters for victims of domestic violence and homeless LGBT youth (Shelton, 2015), access to birth control, and rape response teams in hospitals — provide services to respond to the dangers of sex. These social work practices and policies are critical to these interventions and demonstrate a response to social issues and marginalized populations. Although this work is crucial, this approach responds only to the negative aspects of sexuality and therefore continues to perpetuate a perspective of injustice and fails to promote a positive female sexuality. Most research has, to date, focused on risks, fears, and dangers; social welfare scholarship is positioned to manage the complexities of sexuality and acknowledge and promote positive female sexuality as an aspect of well-being, thus promoting the whole person (Bay-Cheng, 2010).

The issue of promoting and examining the concept that women have sexual pleasure and a positive and complex sense of sexuality may, at first, appear not to have a place on the social welfare agenda. Using a wider lens and a perspective that advocates for the promotion and explication of positive and complex female sexuality has implications for a spectrum of social work practice. For example, these findings will help clinicians work better with individuals

seeking help, and will create more effective sexual and premarital education. There remains limited sexual research within social work. However, by developing a positive approach toward sexuality, while not denying real dangers and risks, social work practice and policies can support sexual well-being and empowerment and manage the complexities of sexuality, contributing to education, interventions and community organization.

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH

In my dissertation project, I seek to expand knowledge about the lived experience of heterosexual Orthodox Jewish women by collecting and analyzing quantitative surveys and written narratives from North American Orthodox Jewish women on how they prepare, transition, and experience becoming sexually active within marriage. The purpose of this venture is multi-layered. Using a feminist and intersectional perspective (Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1995; Tolman & Diamond, 1995, 2015), this research will allow the otherwise silenced voices of these women to surface and to have their experience acknowledged and supported.

This perspective promotes recognition of external structures of oppression, internalized norms and social scripts, and employs a focus on consciousness raising, all of which allow the experience to be voiced (Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008). By shedding light on this critical life transition that is an anchor point for women's sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish communities, this study seeks to build knowledge and encourage enhanced clinical practice. Additionally, study data will inform the design of premarital education courses, community education, and social services for women by providing insight into this population's early marital experience. A comprehensive understanding of what early marital sexual experience entails and how premarital education shapes marital readiness and helps seeking behaviors is essential for social workers and other professionals who work with women, families, and couples in the Orthodox Jewish community.

I could have designed this project in many different ways. For this study, I choose to focus on the experience of women reflecting about their experience with premarital education and early marriage. There were several reasons to focus on Orthodox Jewish American women and this moment in their lives. The scarce research available about the sexual experience within the Orthodox Jewish population creates a dearth of important information for social work practice and knowledge. This is due, in part, to the fact that discussions about sexuality are still a very taboo subject in this historically insular community. Although research about sexuality is important for both men and women in the community, my project is focused particularly on women and their experiences. My clinical career is focused on working with women impacted by domestic violence and sexual abuse in the insular Orthodox Jewish community. Our social work practice and interventions are able to respond to the risks and dangers and are in line with the tradition of focusing and acknowledging the dangers and risks of sex (Bay-Cheng, 2010) without attention to empowerment, sexual subjectivity, and pleasure. My experience reflects what research has identified, that there is little language or dialogue around positive sexuality.

I have worked with many women who are part of this insular community. Within my clinical work, it is clear that many of these women were never exposed to positive sexuality, and some do not have the language to communicate about sexual issues within their marriage. Often, women who have been to many other therapists in the community will mention how most therapists do not ask about sexual aspects of their lives. Specifically, in my work with victims of child sexual abuse and intimate partner abuse, this lack of language and subjectivity makes intervention a challenge. Many of the women do not have a sense of sexual subjectivity and are often not able to identify sexual assault or coercion in their relationships. With this abused population, women are often not able to simply describe their experience and will, literally, have

no language. As part of the healing process, we imagine together what a healthy relationship could look like, and there I introduce ideas of sexual subjectivity and explore desire and entitlement; this is new to these women. Most of these women are married, and attended premarital education, and do not recall discussion about positive sexuality.

I was interested in exploring sexual subjectivity in a population that was not abused. This interest not only stems from my professional work, but as community member who recently got married. I attended such premarital education, and I became curious about how others navigate this milestone and their experience in premarital education. Even amongst my cohort of friends, primarily Modern Orthodox educated professional women, there is a sense of privacy and silence about speaking with others about our intimate lives. To me, this represents a balance of respecting the privacy and sanctity of our relationships, but I wondered how this balance might be preventing women from getting the help or reassurance that they need. While I was not sure that women would easily write narratives, my hunch was that women would complete the survey, as it feels less personal. The 102 narratives I collected is evidence that some women do have the language available to speak and had a desire to be heard.

My dissertation examines Orthodox Jewish women's sexual experience using an intersectional feminist perspective anchored in sexuality as socially constructed within the contexts in which it is embedded. Social work's deep commitment to social justice, to a strengths-based perspective, and to cultural competency provides justification for this study. By illuminating these experiences, the project findings will support social workers who provide services, design programs, and create public policies that concern Orthodox Jewish women and their families. I will discuss some specific implications for practice and future research with

women (and men) in these and other communities as women experience early sexuality and transitioning into new roles.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project builds on a number of bodies of literature. First I will present a brief history of sexuality theory and review the development of sexuality theories. This will lay the groundwork for the theoretical underpinnings of my inquiry. In particular, I will focus on a social construction perspective and highlight sexual script theory, feminist theory, and intersectional theory. This sexual theory literature will create a key foundation for the theoretical framework to study and understand sexuality. Next, I will present a review of the literature that demonstrates the role that sexuality has in wellbeing and then provide an overview of the Orthodox communities and the literature around sex, sexuality and intimacy in those communities. Because understanding the context in which this phenomenon occurs is critical to this inquiry, I will present the religious laws, customs, and traditions of Orthodox Jewish communities. This review of the research serves as a foundation of past studies and positions this study to further address the complexities of female sexuality within this understudied population.

Early Theory in the Study of Sexuality

Early scientific study of sex began in Europe, based in Germany, because of public concern about issues such as prostitution and venereal diseases (Foucault, 1978, Irvine, 1990). By the early twentieth century, there were some major works written about sexuality (Ellis, 1896; Freud, 1905; von Krafft-Ebing, 1912). The formal conception of the study of sex is ascribed to German physician Iwan Bloch; he created the term *Sexualwissenschaft*, or sexology (Irvine, 1990). Bloch (1907) presented the need to study the sexual life of individuals within the context of medicine and social sciences.

Even during these early years of research, there was tension between biological and social science perspectives about sexuality. Social science, to the extent that it relies on scientific method, was accepted but primarily to complement natural sciences. As Irvine (1990) asserts, “commentators portray early German sexology as a monolithic scientific enterprise directed by progressive scholars. A closer look reveals the presence of many of the same internal tensions and controversies that plague contemporary sexology” (p. 6).

Historically, Freud is often credited for developing the principles in psychology with regard to sexuality (Rosen & Weinstein, 1988). Central to his writings, in his seminal work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (1905) suggested that individuals are born with an instinctual libido, a basic sexual drive, which develops and is shaped by socialization over a person’s life span. This psychosexual development is characterized by different stages and impacts an individual’s overall wellbeing or what he posited to be “normal” development. Freud proposed that if the child experienced anxiety, upsetting his or her sexual appetite during any libidinal development stage, this anxiety would persist into adulthood and could be the root of neurosis and other psychological issues. Although Freud believed that sexual behavior was shaped by both biological and environmental factors, he stressed the importance of biological drives. One of his major contributions is that he established that sexuality is normative and normal, and we should expect it to develop.

This focus on biology, with the goal to define normal sexuality, is the foundation of much sexuality research. It is based on an essentialist perspective that primarily values biological aspects of sexuality (Irvine, 1990; Seidmann, 2003). Early researchers (Kinsey, et al, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1966) utilized this positivist perspective to study human sexuality and viewed sexuality and sexual behavior using this traditional scientific lens. This approach was

borrowed from their work in biology and zoology, and physiology and medicine, respectively, and views sexuality as a product of an innate, fixed, ahistorical physiological drive. The focus of this work examined the individual as the unit of analysis, adhering to the scientific method that was believed to be value-free. Kinsey was convinced of the relevance and necessity of applying a traditional scientific model to study human sexuality. Kinsey (1953) argued that psychology and philosophy “ignored the material origins of all behavior” (p. 9) and that framing it with in scientific terms would allow the advancement of understanding sexuality.

In this epistemological tradition, studies document and verify quantitative dimensions of sexual behavior and sexuality. This approach does not consider the larger contextual influences. An individual’s sexuality is understood as being primarily motivated by a biological need and is orgasm-focused (Weeks, 1986). Individual variations of drive, sexual orientation, or desire are explained as a result of psychological and biological individual differences (Seidmann, 2003). This research remains focused on discovering “normal” sexual behavior (Attwood & Klucinec, 2007), assumed to be heterosexual in desire and expression, as well as contained by monogamous marriage (see Rubin, 1984, below).

In retrospect, research such as that of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson was far from “value-free.” Kinsey’s research was based on the dominant culture, focusing on the experience of white, middle-class heterosexual males (Irvine, 1990; Jackson 1984), although he later did include women (Kinsey, 1953) and a homosexual population (1948). Kinsey also claimed objectivity, but his values permeate his work, espousing the belief that “sex is good, more is better, thus affecting an important ideological shift for sexology” (Irvine, 1990, p. 37).

The research conducted by Masters and Johnson (1966) described a singular human sexual response cycle (HSRC), and identified physiological functions of subjects who had the

experience of particular sexual responses in laboratory settings and presented this as normative sexual experience. Tiefer (1995) and other scholars (i.e., Parker, 1998) questions the implication of these findings that assumes everyone experiences sex similarly and leaves little room for individuality, individual life experience, and an array of social contexts. Although these studies often are critiqued because of their methodology, sampling, and biases, they can be credited for expanding the dialogue around sexuality in the United States (Attwood & Klucinec, 2007). New theories since have been developed to understand sexuality through broader lenses.

Social Constructionist Theories

A variety of social constructionist theories offer insight into human sexuality and sexual behavior. As an orienting perspective, Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1978) was critical at the beginning of social constructionist scholarship in sexuality studies as he laid the groundwork for understanding sexuality as "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power" (p. 103). Foucault often is credited for introducing a social constructionist perspective as the intellectual context that challenges the biological determinism of sexuality (Attwood & Klucinec, 2007; Weeks, 1986). In his pivotal work, Foucault articulated a new understanding of sexuality. He suggests that "sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct, not a furtive reality" (p. 105). Foucault articulates that as the church and the monarchy diminished in power, a not-easily-detected externally and internally reinforced belief and value system manages the masses at the individual and societal levels. He questioned specifically how sex is located within discourse (p. 11). This central insight was to examine sex as positioned in and created through discourse, meaning the ways in which sex is embedded in speech but also practices, attitudes,

and norms. This discourse and how it is deployed, used or leveraged, constitutes relations of power that explain and control sexuality. Foucault asserts that controlling sexuality is a means of focusing, channeling, and transmitting power, which he theorized is a set of relations rather than something that some have and others do not. Weeks (1986) described that, “for Foucault, sexuality was a relationship of elements and discourse, which had history — with complex roots...but achieving a modern conceptual unity, with diverse effects, only within the modern world” (p. 18).

Social constructionists call for a “radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world” (Gergen, 1985, p. 2). This radical doubt questions the existence of normative behavior or development as a naturally occurring, ultimately objectively true phenomenon. Social constructionism is a response to and fundamental challenge to essentialist, deterministic, biological claims about the nature of sexuality; social constructionism posits that the body is always understood through social beliefs and constructs (Rubin, 1984), “the intricate and multiple ways in which our emotions, desires and relationships are shaped by the society we live in” (Weeks, 1986, pp. 18-19). Many social constructionists (Giles, 2006) and feminists (Rubin, 1984; Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Vance, 1991) assume a less radical approach and posit that one’s sexuality is a dynamic interplay between biological/physiological sources and socio-cultural contexts (Goetsch, 1989; Jacobsen, 2006). Social constructionists are anchored in a perspective that what is considered sexual has very different social significance and subjective meaning dependent upon a number of factors, including particular culture, historical period, and location of behavior (Vance, 1984; Weideman, 2015).

Although literature suggests that no single theory is comprehensive (Giles, 2006; Weis, 1998), these theories offer a foundation to ground human sexuality research. As I will elaborate,

a socially constructed perspective grounds this study of sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community and informs the web of theories (Tolman, 2002) that works together to ground my research. The following discussion lays out one particular social constructionist sexuality theory, sexual script theory, along with an intersectional lens, and a feminist perspective that anchors the theoretical underpinnings of this project.

Sexual Script Theory

Gagnon and Simon (1973, 2005) use a social constructionist lens in the development of the sexual script theory to offer an in-depth social interpretation of sexual behavior. They reject the importance of biology and instead adopt a social interpretation of sexual behavior. They seek to replace biological theories of sexual behavior with a social theory of sexual scripts (Gagnon, 1990) and focus on the complex relationship between the individual's scripting of sexual behaviors on three levels: cultural scripts, interpersonal scripts, and intrapersonal scripts.

In their book *Sexual Conduct* (1973), they argue that individuals use their interactional skills, fantasy materials, and cultural myths to develop scripts by which they then organize and understand their sexual behaviors. These distinct levels of scripting have specific functions: Cultural scripts provide instruction on the narrative requirements of broad social roles, interpersonal scripts are institutionalized patterns in everyday interaction that can vary in each circumstance, and intrapersonal scripts are details that an individual uses in his or her internal dialogue with cultural and social behavioral expectations and in specific experiences of interpersonal interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Scripting theory is built in part on the understanding that there are different scripts in different cultures. This perspective argues that the patterns of sexual conduct in a culture are derived from that local culture. Therefore, what is considered to be sexual and what is “engaging

in sex” is dependent on the individual’s culture. This acculturation and shaping of sexual scripts begins at birth, and lasts throughout one’s life and thus, plays a role at all life stages. As an example of how cultural scripts develop as understanding, and experience of sexual behavior shaped by the local culture, Lee Rainwater (1964) examined the patterns of marital sexuality within the poorer populations of four countries: the United States, England, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. He found significant similarities in the generally negative attitudes toward wives' enjoyment of sexual relations in these cultures of poverty that he asserts reflects a general hypothesis: In societies where there is a high degree of segregation in the role relationships of spouses, the couple will tend not to develop a close sexual relationship, and the wife will not look upon sexual relations with her husband as gratifying.

In addition to looking at culture, research has concluded that sexual scripts are also influenced by many specific factors, including gender, and are often different for males and females within the same culture (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). Therefore, it is understood that not only do scripts differ between cultures, but also within groups where males and females assume different scripts (Laumann, et al., 1994; Seidmann, 2003). As feminist sexuality theorists articulate, male and female sexual scripts differ in ways that produce gender hierarchies (Rich, 1980; Vance, 1986; see below), fundamental in producing and reproducing institutionalized heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). A relevant example of a specific sexual script is one that produces and reinforces a sexual double standard. Comedian Billy Crystal succinctly expresses a common script that “women need a reason to have sex. Men just need a place” (<http://www.quotationpage.com/subjects/sex/03/25/16>). The sexual double standard posits that men have greater sexual freedom than women and that society expects, accepts, and tolerates from men certain sexual behaviors, such as premarital or extramarital sex, that it does not from

women (Fugère, Escoto, Cousins, Riggs, & Haerich, 2008). A related binary gender script also states that women “should” be passive sexually and be a “good girl” and that if she is proactive sexually or acts outside of this role, she is then labeled as a “bad girl” (Vance, 1984). For social welfare scholarship on sexuality, it is important to move away from essentialist assumptions about the nature of male and female sexuality to a social understanding which reveals the social production of inequities. These inequalities perpetuate the assumption that male sexuality as uncontrollable and constant.

Even with the sexual revolution and feminist and gay liberation movements, a heterosexual sexual double standard remains (i.e., Bay-Cheng, 2015; Tanenbaum, 2015; Tolman, 2015). This script that “implies that male and female sexual behaviors should be judged by different standards, such as the belief that casual sex is acceptable for men but not for women” (Peterson & Hyde, 2010, p. 26) consequently restricts women’s sexual freedom and reinforces women’s subordination to men. The script raises men’s status for having many sexual partners, while the same behavior stigmatizes women (Conley, Ziegler & Moors, 2013). This is an example in which gender is a factor determines a sexual script and what is allowed and expected. This understanding that sexuality is embedded in multi-layered, complex sociocultural contexts which shape sexual scripts is relevant for the study of sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community and lends a framework to look at women’s experience to inform social work practice.

Intersectionality Theory

The term *intersectionality* was introduced by feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1995), making visible how the simultaneous effects of multiple categories of social group membership (i.e., race, gender, and class) shape people’s experience, such that studying or

theorizing about women as a monolithic category was problematic and partial. Intersectionality has become a central precept of the feminist thinking and our present understanding of gender (McCall, 2005). Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for studying "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). This analytic approach opened feminist dialogue about gender to recognize and thus include marginalized and diverse positions of women (Cole, 2008), which yields different experiences.

The evolution of intersectionality as a theoretical framework has been traced to Black feminist response within the confines of the accumulated disadvantage model (Mullings, 1997). It also asserts the recognition that the intersections of gender with other dimensions of social identity needs to be the starting point of theory (Crenshaw, 1996, 2005). This movement was led by women of color, who challenged the notion that women are a homogeneous group that shared the same life experiences. This perspective is also located in standpoint theory (Nielson, 1990), revealing how white middle-class women did not accurately represent the feminist movement as a whole. Intersectionality recognizes that forms of oppression experienced by middle-class, white women differed from the experiences of women of color, poor, and disabled women. Feminists sought to understand the ways in which gender, race, and class intersect (Cole, 2008; Shields, 2008).

A fundamental assumption of intersectionality is that intersectional identities are defined in relation to one another, and an intersectional lens examines the linkages between sexuality and gender, race-ethnicity, class, and space/place. This formulation of intersectionality can incorporate an array of structural and cultural dimensions: i.e., ethnicity, nationalism, and religion (Cole, 2008). A feminist intersectional lens can be used to examine how various socially

and culturally constructed categories such as gender, race, class, disability, and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality and life experience (Cole, 2009; Warner, 2008).

This lens offers a particularly relevant perspective to my study of Orthodox Jewish women, as this population is ‘multiply positioned’ in complex and contradictory ways. They are not only women, a starting point for the inquiry, but women who identify as Orthodox Jewish, not a monolithic identity, but one that interacts and intersects profoundly with gender. Women also occupy other axes of identity such as education, professional roles, motherhood, and socioeconomic status that all simultaneously interact and contribute to their life experiences.

Feminist Theory and Sexuality

Although there is great division in the feminist movement and history (Beauvoir, 1952; Butler, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Vance, 1984), particularly around the profound division within feminism about the obfuscation of women of color and their different experiences from white, middle class heterosexual women (hooks, 2000; Collins, 2002), there are key dominant themes (hooks, 2000; Schick et. al, 2010; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010). Feminism is a movement that is aimed at identifying multiple inequities related to gender and to establishing and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and opportunities for women.

Feminist research and theory is focused on understanding the nature of gender inequality, women’s social roles, and the lived experience of women. In particular, feminist theory and research are committed to “consciousness raising and promoting awareness of external and internal structures of oppression of women as well as unlearning the internalized norms of sexism” (Schick, et al., 2008 p. 226). hooks (2000) also envisions how feminist theory is central to sexual liberation, which not only should end sexual violence but also liberate “socially

constructed sexuality based on biologically determined definitions of sexuality: repression, guilt, shame, dominance, conquest and exploitation” (p. 151). This awareness can lead to greater sexual subjectivity and may help women to feel more sexually satisfied (Schick, et. al, 2008). Therefore feminist theory is important to this inquiry, because it is focused on understanding the lived experience of Orthodox Jewish women and looks at their sexual subjectivity and sexual scripts as they assume this new role in a traditional community.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as part of the sexual revolution, numerous feminist writers started to address the question of female sexuality from their own female perspectives, rather than allowing female sexuality to be defined in terms of largely male studies (Vance, 1984). This was also a time that was marked by what has been dubbed the “feminist sex wars” (Leidholdt & Raymond, 1990; Vance, 1984) in which there was harsh debate among feminists about what constituted ‘female’ sexuality. This conflict was characterized by a deep schism in academic and political feminism that was represented by anti-pornography and pro-sex groups that had disputes regarding sexuality, sexual representation, pornography, sadomasochism, and other sexual topics. The feminist movement was deeply divided on many issues regarding the nature, experience and practice of women’s sexuality (Duggan & Hunter, 1995).

The matter of a woman’s right to personal sexual autonomy was one of the key questions animating feminist theorists in the seminal work of *Pleasure and Danger* (Vance, 1984). This view emphasizes that sexuality is created through the intersection of political, social, and economic forces, which vary over time. Carol Vance (1984) elaborated the dichotomy of danger and pleasure as it organizes female sexuality. Her perspective argues that the tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful and fundamental one in all women’s lives under patriarchy. She asserts that sexuality is always a domain of both oppression and of pleasure for

women under patriarchal conditions. Vance demonstrates how the interrelated binary of the good girl/bad girl and gendered sexual double standard constricts female sexual agency and pleasure, while accepting male desire, entitlement, and empowerment. This binary notion of good-girl/bad-girl (Vance, 1984; Rubin, 1984; Maglin & Perry, 1996) is evident across many diverse ethnicities and classes, although not all women have the same experiences of pleasure and danger (Hurtado & Sinha, 2008; Kawahar & Espín, 2012; Skeggs, 2008).

Fellow anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1984) introduces various constructs to illustrate the contrast between socially appropriate forms of sexuality and those regarded as unacceptable, less respectable, or even despised. One concept that Rubin presented is that of the “charmed circle” of sexual respectability and the opposite “outer limits,” which constitute unacceptable and “bad” sexuality. Rubin’s examples of this contrast are monogamous heterosexuality versus promiscuous heterosexuality or vanilla sexual practices versus sadomasochistic behaviors (p. 281). Same sex desire, lesbian and bisexual relationships and gender non-conformity would fall outside this “charmed circle” and therefore do not derive the societal benefit of being within the “circle.” Concrete rewards for those that fall within the circle include being considered mentally healthy, institutional support, material benefits (for example social security benefits or right to citizenship), and social and physical mobility that are associated with respectable forms of sexuality. For those who resist “respectable” forms of sexuality experience, concrete sanctions can ensue, such as presumed mental illness or criminality, lack of familial rights, and poverty. These formulations reflect and constitute a feminist framework for analysis, recognizing how monogamous heterosexual marriage is privileged, that it applies discrete gender roles, and that it is a relationship both privileged at the expense of homosexuality and non-monogamous marriages. This elevated status is reinforced by the economy, the State, and religion.

Rubin (1984) describes a dynamic of “sex negativity” in which sex is treated with suspicion and views most sexuality and sexual behavior as negative if outside the charmed circle. This dynamic is based on the premise that only heterosexual monogamous marriage, reproduction, and marital love legitimize sexuality and sexual behavior. This construct can be seen as an example of Foucault’s notion of relations of power, by which sexuality is managed, contained, and controlled. Heterosexual monogamous marriage is the privileged site of sexual behavior, reinforcing the ideology that the function of sex is reproduction that is sanctioned within marriage, and in which the pleasure is very narrowly defined and absent. Rubin argues that a goal of feminist sexual theory and research is to challenge the notion of this single universal privileged form of sexuality and the institutions that reinforce it (e.g., family, religion, and the media).

Vance (1984) highlights that sexuality poses a unique challenge for feminist inquiry, since “it is the intersection of the political, social, economic, historical, personal, and experiential, linking behavior and thought, fantasy and actions” (p. 16). Because of its complexity, feminist research has utilized diverse research methodologies and analyses to be more inclusive of the sociological understanding of women’s experiences (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

A key feminist theory about sexuality is Adrienne Rich’s (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality. In her work, she argues that heterosexuality is not natural but imposed by culture and society to position women as subordinate and dependent on men. She describes eight characteristics in which male power suppresses female sexuality and therefore controls creativity, economic advancement and importance of women. Among those characteristics, she views heterosexual marriage as a means of controlling women within patriarchy, denying women

sexuality and forcing male sexuality upon women. She also suggests that women are kept from speaking to other women and this denies knowledge to women. Rich concludes that these characteristics contribute to a culture that convinces women that heterosexual relationships and marriage are inevitable. She holds that women receive messages every day that promote heteronormativity in the form of cultural norms perpetuated by society.

Contemporary feminist scholarship has been expanded by the development of queer theory (i.e., Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990, 1995, Warner, 1993), which has deep roots in feminist theory. The notion of heteronormativity reflects what Butler calls “the heterosexual matrix” (1990, p. 47). The focus of heteronormativity is on the constraints and regulations that the privileging of heterosexuality places on queer sexuality — gay, lesbian, bisexual — more than on how heterosexuality itself is managed and maintained (Jackson, 2006; Sedgwick, 1985), and this theoretical framework has spawned a relatively new body of research that addresses topics such as the experience of lesbian women and sexual fluidity (i.e., Diamond, 2009; Drury, 2011; Jagose, 2009). In addition, there remains dynamic and compelling research focused on heterosexual women and adolescent girls. This scholarship has expanded to sexualization (Impett & Peplau 2003; Tolman, 2001), sexual desire, agency, subjectivity and empowerment (i.e., Bay-Cheng, 2010; Fine, 1988; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; McClelland, 2012; Tolman, 2002; Tolman & Diamond, 2001), challenging the categorization of women’s sexual “problems” only in terms of physical diagnoses problems or “broken bodies” (Kaschak & Tiefer, 2001; Tiefer, 2010), which is evident socially in norms of appropriate female sexual bodies, resulting in, for instance, cosmetic genital surgery (Braun, 2005).

In particular, scholarship focused on women’s sexual agency, subjectivity, and experience is relevant to my inquiry. Female sexuality can be studied with a range of methods

focused on bringing to the fore the experience of women's lives. This research is oriented to demonstrate the importance of women's perspectives and voices, bring to the surface the history of inequalities, and promote future equality and empowerment. My goal is to examine the experience of Orthodox Jewish women and use these findings to effect change. In 2001, Tolman and Diamond pointed out that:

There has been surprisingly little discussion on how cultural and biological factors may intersect to shape the subjective quality of men's and women's desires....Such questions are, in our view, far more interesting and informative and have crucial implications for attempts to design effective educational programs and social services regarding sexuality (p. 35).

This lens that embraces and promotes an understanding of the significance of culture offers a relevant framework to study sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community. To examine this complexity, an integration of sexual scripting theory, feminist theory, and an intersectional perspective provides a theoretical framework for this inquiry to include the role of religion in the experience and construction of sexuality for women.

Scripting theory is built in part on the understanding that there are different scripts in different cultures. Utilizing this social constructionist view of sexual script theory allows me to mobilize the critical idea that culture informs the multilayered expression and meanings of sexuality. Feminist research is focused on understanding the nature of gender inequality, women's social roles, and the lived experience of women. A feminist perspective lends itself to explicate the lived experience of Orthodox Jewish women. Intersectionality asserts this idea of being positioned in complex and contradictory ways is important when analyzing a traditional community in a modern world. Religion is known to be an important factor in individuals' lives and in particular their sexuality.

Together, this web of theories has enabled me to examine how women who practice Orthodox Judaism and multiple identities (for example, as Orthodox Jews, as wives, mothers, professionals, Americans) experience their preparation for marriage and early sexual experiences within marriage.

Well-Being and Religiosity

Religiosity has long been considered an important variable in the study of well-being. Within this literature, researchers have studied the connection and examined the relationship between religiosity and components of emotional health and marriage (Turner, Center & Kiser, 2004; Ullery, 2004). Many studies have examined the protective factors associated with religion and mental illness specifically as related to depression, anxiety, and mood disorders (Jensen, Motley & Hovey, 2010; Ventis, 1995). There has been an increase in understanding the influence of religiosity on psychological health and emotional coping (Lease, Home & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). Some of this literature established mediators include a sense of meaning, interpersonal and self-forgiveness, and belongingness to community (Leondari & Gialamas, 2009; Murray-Swank, Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Sternthal, et al., 2006).

Religions act as a mechanism to regulate sexual behavior. Historically, religion is important to any discussion about sexuality, because it contributes to people's constructions of sexuality (Foucault, 1978) and their sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). For many individuals in religious communities, marriage sanctions sexual intercourse (Christopher & Kisler, 2004), religious law restricts sexual behaviors (Cochran & Beeghley 1991), and religious doctrine influences family planning. Although sexual health and satisfaction are considered part of overall well-being (Davison, et al., 2009), research specifically addressing religion and its connection with sexuality is growing but remains limited. Because of religion's role in defining

sexual norms, creating sexual scripts, and penalizing what is therefore considered deviant, addressing both the constructs of sexuality and religiosity together can enhance our understanding of people's experience.

Within the existing literature, the connection between specific sexual behaviors and religious practices has been examined (Davidson, Darling & Norton, 1995; Jensen, Newell & Holman, 1990; Lefkowitz, et al., 2004; Mahoney, 1980). Previous studies have used a number of diverse methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, meta-analyses) to explore the relationship between religiosity and sexual behavior (Davidson, et al. 1995). This literature examines associations between particular religious behaviors and isolated sexual behaviors, evaluating associations between variables, such as religious services and church attendance among women, and engaging in premarital intercourse or masturbation (Sternthal, et al., 2006; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). Other research has demonstrated religion plays a role in adolescent sexuality (Regnerus, 2007; Rostosky, et. al, 2004), marriage, parenting (Kor, et al., 2012), fertility, child rearing, and gender roles (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). This research is important but primarily is looking at isolated sexual behaviors and religious behaviors and does not include the individual's and communities' experiences or the meaning these behaviors generate.

Within this body of research there are mixed results about the association of religiosity with sexual satisfaction (Davidson, et al., 1995; Tavris & Sadd, 1977; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). Woodruff (1985) cites approximately a dozen studies showing the inverse relationship between religious belief and/or church attendance and sexual activity. There are few published studies that study the role of religion in marital sexuality. One of the few demonstrates, in a sample of 839 married Americans, that was no relationship between perception of God's view on

sex (good or bad), religious commitment, and sexual satisfaction (Young, Luquis, Denny & Young, 1998).

Within this small literature some studies suggest that couples who pray together experience greater sexual satisfaction (Greeley, 1992); however Bell (1974) found no link between religious service attendance and sexual frequency. Recent conceptual and empirical work offers a framework that “fills the gap in scientific research on intersection, religion and sexuality” (Hernandez, et al., 2011, p. 775). This research highlights the idea of interlinking religiosity and the sanctification of sexuality to sexual quality. They define sanctification as having divine character and significance (Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). In the study of 83 individuals, 72% Christian, who were newly married (4 months to 18 months), they found that the greater perception of sanctification of sexuality predicted greater marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and spiritual intimacy over global religiousness and demographics (Hernandez, et al., 2011). Hernandez and his colleagues (2011) suggest that their findings thus begin to “unlock new avenues for researchers to pursue that can also inform premarital and marital psychoeducation and interventions that attend to healthy sexuality” (p780).

This research highlights the intersection of religion, sexual behavior and sexuality, and the need for more research. All of these studies highlight the need to look at the experience of Jewish women and their premarital education and experience of sexuality.

Orthodox Community or Communities?

This study is focused on research within a specific religious community: the American Orthodox Jewish community. According to the most recent National Jewish Population Study (2004), the Jewish population in the United States is 5.2 million individuals, including adults and children. This study states that there are 529,000 self-identified Orthodox Jews (Kotler-

Berkowitz, Cohen, Ament, Klaff, Mott, & Peckerman-Neuman, 2004). It is important to understand that the Orthodox Jewish community is not a monolithic community. There are many communities within this community that will be an ongoing factor, and perhaps a variable, in this study.

For the sake of this study, identifying as being part of the American Orthodox Jewish community indicates that one adheres to at least these three specific practices: keeping *Shabbat* (Sabbath) laws, conforming to kosher restrictions and attending *mikvah* (ritual bath) as needed for family purity. Although each subgroup of Orthodox Jews presents idiosyncratic differences, a number of similarities are shared, such as: the community generally is centered around the synagogue; the necessity of geographic proximity for walking to synagogue on *Shabbat* and other holidays, which provides a sense of belonging to a close-knit community that shares many life-cycle events and has frequent interactions; and that the *Torah* (Jewish Bible) and the *Talmud* (oral law) provide strict guidelines for daily living, including marriage, divorce, sexual behavior, charity, interaction between men and women, observance of the Sabbath and holidays, and *kashrut* (kosher dietary laws), among others (Margolese, 1998).

There is a large amount of diversity within the Orthodox community. In America, there is a range of Orthodox communities including Chasidic, Litvish, Modern Orthodox, and Yeshivish Orthodox. This discussion may seem to be extensive for this project, but it is important to have an understanding of this diversity for this study, because it relates to the way in which individuals are exposed to the general (secular) world, how closely they adhere to traditional gender roles, and other factors that may influence their exposure to sexuality and sexual experience. Some of the differences among the communities can be related specifically to the role of women, cross-gender relationships, and openness about sexuality and sexual education.

Each subgroup has a unique history, distinct beliefs, and different customs. An example of these differences is that in the Modern Orthodox Jewish community, members merge traditional values and modern world practices and encourage the pursuit of advanced education for both men and women. In the Yeshivish communities, there is a tolerance for secular culture, but this merger is not encouraged, and the pursuit of higher education for both men and women is primarily for vocation and not for intellectual development. Chasidim have a distinct dress and language, distance themselves from the secular world, and refrain from popular culture, such as watching television or attending movies. They often live in insular communities, typically centered on a particular rebbe (rabbi), and usually consult him before making personal, religious, and social decisions.

Sex, Sexuality, and the Orthodox Jewish Community

An overview of Judaism's sexual attitudes, laws, and narratives is rich and complex. Sexuality and marriage is the topic of many religious texts and well-known philosophical writings. One complete volume of Talmud is devoted to issues of marriage and sexuality (Lamm, 1980). These laws and perspectives are central to Jewish spiritual and family life. It is the subject of several well-known scholarly works, including Biale's *Eros and the Jews* (1997) and Boyarin's *Carnal Israel* (1995). As an illustration of its complexity, Talmudic and Midrashic lore (sacred interpretations and elaborations of the Torah) are saturated with references to sexual practices, injunctions and ethics (Gochros, 1986).

There appears to be a common misunderstanding about the Jewish sexual ethic. For instance, in McMullen, et al. (2011), the authors claim that "the traditional Judeo-Christian view that the purpose of sex is for reproduction has greatly influenced American attitudes..." (p. 195). This narrow representation does not in fact reflect a Judaic perspective. Popular discourse

often presents a “Judeo-Christian” tradition, and that is applied erroneously in the realm of sexuality. This misunderstanding reflects a lack of knowledge and the infiltration of negative messages about sex, especially within those Jewish communities that reside within the larger world community (Ribner & Kleinplatz, 2007).

Judaism views sexuality “as natural and neutral” (Ribner and Rosenbaum, 2007). However unlike other human needs or desires, sexuality is considered “good” when expressed in a culturally sanctioned manner and “bad” when expressed in culturally unacceptable ways. Jewish law considers sexual desire and activity within marriage as very positive, when acted upon according to specific regulations. Sex within marriage traditionally has been viewed as a divine gift to be enjoyed as a form of devotion (Friedman, 2005; Rosenfeld & Ribner, 2011). This is in contrast to Christian writings, which accept marriage as a concession to human frailty. To wit, in Corinthians 7:9, Paul says “but if they can't exercise self-control, they should get married; because it is better to get married than to keep burning with sexual desire.”

There is a biblical commandment that a man should find a wife, “It is not good for a man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). This idea of “being” according to the Talmudic commentators (Yevamot 61b) is that “being” with a wife is an obligation beyond procreation, emphasizing the importance of completing one another (Soleveitchik, 2000).

The obligation of sexual relations is not only about reproduction but also about pleasure and connection. In Jewish law terms, marital sex, *ona*, is a duty incumbent upon a husband to satisfy his wife’s sexual desires (Lichtenstein, 2005). This duty to satisfy one's wife is articulated throughout Talmud, even outlining various standards on frequency of relations (Ketuvot, 62b). The physical side of marriage is considered essential to creating and maintaining

a healthy relationship (Rosenfeld & Ribner, 2011); both spouses are also expected to fulfill each other's desire for sexual intimacy (Freidman, 1996).

Various traditions in Judaism emphasize the importance of female sexual pleasure. In the essay called the *Iggeret Hakodesh* (the Holy Letter), an unknown twelfth-century Jewish scholar addresses the divinity of sexuality and directly encourages men to arouse their wives and bring them to orgasm before ejaculation. In a scholarly debate in the Talmud (Babylonian, Nedarim 20a), there is an extensive discussion about which sexual acts are permitted, forbidden, or ideal according to some Jewish traditions. Within this debate, the guiding consideration that informs which acts are acceptable is whether the act brings satisfaction to the wife. Within this theology, there is a complete rejection of celibacy as being virtuous (Ribner & Kleinplatz, 2007).

Although in American society in general, traditional marriage is no longer the only option for a societally sanctioned relationship, this remains a mandate in the American Orthodox Jewish community. The Orthodox Jewish society is organized around the assumption that individuals will marry and have a heterosexual relationship. Orthodox Jewish women, historically and currently, enter conventional gender arrangements (Ringel, 2007).

The emphasis is on an active sexual life strictly within a context of marriage, with some religious sources explaining that these laws create an atmosphere within marriage where sex is sanctified, mutually pleasurable, and satisfying (Forst, 2006; Friedman, 2005; Rosenheim, 2003; Zimmerman, 2005).

Religious Law

In practice, individuals who identify as Orthodox Jews subscribe to a number of laws and rituals that impact their sexual behavior and interpersonal interactions. In order to set the stage to understand sexuality in marriage, it is essential to introduce the idea of *tsnius*, a group of laws

and customs that relate to modesty, to the dialogue. The value of *tsnius* is central to all Orthodox Jewish cultures and communities. This value is derived from the biblical verse, “and you shall walk in modesty with your God” (Micha 6:8). Modesty can be defined in many ways.

Commentators explain that when the term is used, it refers to modesty both as a character trait and as a group of laws (Ribner, 2003). This principle is applicable to many aspects of daily life. Although the most recognizable manifestation of this principle is in dress, it has wide-ranging applications governing community standards related to aspects of daily life including use of language, topics of neighborly conversation, display of wealth, gender roles, and professions.

This principle has translated into an attitude that guides behavior (Rier, Schwartzbaum, & Heller, 2008). For example, discussions in public of things that are sexual or romantic in nature are considered inappropriate (Silverstein, 1995). Within some Orthodox Jewish communities, this privacy is maintained even within the family home, and many parents do not display overt romantic affection for each other in front of their children (Ribner & Rosenbaum, 2007). Some communities exercise modesty by instituting different regulations in order to control sexual improprieties, including sexual thoughts. In recent times, there has been a great focus on modesty of dress and segregation of the sexes (Feit, 2013).

In regard to dress, the actual custom of dress varies between communities but, in general, women do not wear slacks, must wear shirts that cover the collarbone and elbows, and skirts that cover their knees, at the very least. Some communities mandate wearing stockings or socks. Married women cover their hair — some with only a hat, some with a wig, and some with both. Men also have a general custom to wear modest clothes and to be mostly covered, but the restrictions are more lax. In some communities there is specific dress (i.e., white button-down shirt and dark slacks), but again it varies.

Modesty can also limit what one can speak about and with whom. A qualitative study found that concerns about modesty inhibit American Orthodox Jewish women from speaking up about their personal situations and receiving assistance (Ringel & Bina, 2006). Similarly, adherence to modesty prevents victims of sexual abuse from accessing services and reporting such incidences to the criminal justice system (Feit, 2013)

Mainstream Orthodox Jewish tradition prohibits any physical or sexual contact with members of the opposite sex outside of family. Any premarital and extramarital sexual activity is forbidden. This practice, often referred to as being *shomer negiah*, includes not only actual intercourse but also any form of affectionate touch between men and women (Klein, 1994; Rosenheim, 1980; Schachter, 2004). While according to mainstream practice there is some allowance for non-intimate physical touch, such as handshaking at work, most other forms of extramarital physical contact with the opposite sex remain prohibited.

Physical touch with immediate family members is permissible, though some stricter authorities prohibit touch between siblings of the opposite sex after a certain age. Whether contact is prohibited with extended family members also is debated among authorities (Frances, 2009). Being alone with one other member of the opposite sex in an enclosed room also violates a well-known prohibition called *yichud*, since it may lead to sexual relations (Rosenheim, 1980). As part of this culture, Judaism always has encouraged men and women to marry young so that one's single life, and the potential for sexual impropriety, would be limited (Biale, 1997).

In addition to restrictions related to premarital sexual behavior, the Orthodox Jewish community has a number of rituals, laws, and practices specifically related to menstruation and sexual relations within marriage. These laws, *taharat hamishpacha*, or family purity, are a set of laws and practices that regulate sex within marriage for both men and women and dictate a

variety of behaviors during and after a woman's monthly menstruation. The Orthodox community considers the observance and practice of these rituals an identifying tradition that categorizes and identifies one as Orthodox or Traditional. These regulations are embedded in a larger context of religious life. Families who observe *taharat hamishpacha* and identify as Orthodox Jews typically also observe kosher laws, observe the Sabbath and holidays, educate their children in Jewish schools, and otherwise maintain a high degree of religious affiliation. The focus of this study is on a population in which the practice of *taharat hamishpacha* is central. Because these practices are associated so closely with sexuality and sexual experience, they are especially salient to this study.

***Taharat Hamishpacha* (Family Purity)**

At the onset of her menarche, a girl is considered a *niddah*, or ritually separate. Within the confines of the *halacha*, Jewish law, a *niddah* is not permitted to be sexually active. She remains in this state of *niddah* until right before her wedding. Prior to her wedding, the bride immerses herself in a *mikvah* (ritual bath) and becomes *tahor*, or spiritually pure, and is then permitted to be physically intimate with her husband (Forst, 2006; Zimmerman, 2005).

Within marriage, each month, when a woman menstruates and therefore again becomes a *niddah*, a couple is instructed to refrain from sexual intercourse and intimate touching. As part of this practice, the couple sleeps in separate beds, and they refrain from a variety of endearing behaviors. According to the strict law, this practice may restrict spouses from actions such as hugging, kissing, passing food, making each other's beds, and any form of touching. The woman waits seven days after her period has ended (for a total of 12-14 days) and then immerses herself in the *mikvah*, after which the couple may return to a physical relationship. Prior to immersion in the *mikvah*, the woman follows a regimen of physical self-inspection to ensure the end of her

bleeding. This inspection includes internal self-checking of the vagina for seven consecutive days to confirm the absence of uterine blood. During that time, some call it the white days, women wear white undergarments to ensure no further bleeding. The woman is responsible for following the laws, and she is trusted to decide the right time to go to the *mikvah* and resume sexual relations (Forst, 2006; Greenberg, 1981; Rockman, 1993; Zimmerman, 2005).

There are differences between the roles and scripts for males and females within the community. In general, men have a more public role, for example as the rabbis, as being counted in the *minyan* (quorum) for prayer, or as more public participants in torah study. In the realm of this ritual, of family purity, the responsibility to practice *taharat hamishpacha* is considered a ritual for women, although the men must comply and respect it. Men and women have prescriptive yet different scripts. Marriage represents the culturally sanctioned “when and where” sexual behavior is allowed. The different laws and rituals create the how, and the theological discussion influences the cultural and intrapersonal meaning of sexuality and sexual behavior to an Orthodox Jewish woman.

Religious literature reflects the centrality that adherence of these laws has on a God fearing wife/women’s identity as part of the Jewish culture. In Fonrobert’s (2000) book exploring gender in relation to rabbinic culture, she argues that menstrual laws are instrumental in establishing women’s Jewish identity. She also suggests that this notion creates a parallel ritual to the ethnic identity of Jewish men created through ritual circumcision. The act of immersion in the *mikvah* is a central act in conversion to Judaism and is critically symbolic and powerful in the culture (Fonrobert, 2000; Grumet, 2008; Rosen-Zvi, 2003).

Community members appear to accept a script of how Jewish and feminine identities are formed through these practices, and therefore defend them as part of their role and identity

within the larger Jewish community (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1990; Kaufman, 1991; Koren, 1999; Ginsburg, 1987). Many Orthodox Jews consider the practice of family purity to be the foundation of holiness and spirituality in the home. It is considered unique in its centrality to married life and its “pervasive influence on moral value” (Zimmerman, 2005, p. 15). *Halacha* (Jewish law) demands that a community first construct and finance a *mikvah* before constructing a synagogue, day school, or any other institution. This reflects the community’s commitment to *taharat hamishpacha*. For example, even on Masada, in what is now the ruins of the ancient fortress in southern Israel, there is a *mikvah*, recognizing how important it was to have a *mikvah* even during times of war (Marmon, 1999; Zimmerman, 2005). Grumet’s (2008) research suggests that the practice of these rituals as central to the identity definition of an Orthodox Jew remains true. Evident in her recent research (2008) of Modern Orthodox couples she found that members of the community do not identify as orthodox if they do not keep this ritual.

These rituals, as in many cultures, can be the way societies make sense of life’s complexities (Douglas, 1986). *Taharat hamishpacha* can be seen as a set of rituals that creates categories of behaviors; it authors a key part of the cultural sexual script for couples as it determines the timing of sexual intimacy. The *taharat hamishpacha* custom is complex, ritualistic, and multi-layered. Several philosophical and theological sources attempt to explain this practice. A number of explanations underlie traditional Jewish concepts of spirituality. One significant idea in the religious literature communicates a practice of sanctifying mundane acts (i.e., sex) and infusing them with holiness. These laws act to sanctify sex by using these practices to infuse the physical acts of sex with holiness by inviting God’s presence as a partner in creation (Harris, 1984).

Additional literature explains how these laws of *taharat hamishpacha* — including the obligatory separation and going to *mikvah* — are based on a perspective of exhibiting self-control and respect for women (Forst, 2006). Another opinion posits that these rituals signify a mourning of the loss of potential life (Forst, 2006; Zimmerman, 2005). Others promote adherence to this set of rituals, because it creates a freshness and intensity to the sexual aspect of marriage (Blass & Fagan, 2001). Religious texts state that those who transgress the laws of *niddah* will be punished through *koret*, which is best translated as an early physical or spiritual death (Greenberg, 1981) and is considered the most severe type of punishment.

Within the philosophical literature there is also diverse discussion. Some maintain that the practice of *niddah* and *taharat hamishpacha* can symbolize the devaluation of women in relation to men. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990) elaborates that male “circumcision coincides with the end of a boy’s impurity caused by the mother’s blood at birth” (p.180). In this work, he compares male and female blood and contrasts the practice that male blood is considered to have the power to create a covenant (i.e., circumcision) and female blood represents contaminations. A feminist perspective maintains that these traditions are created by men and interpreted by male rabbis and are indeed oppressive and patriarchal (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1990). This concept continues to frame the belief that the practice is antagonistic in nature and propagates patriarchal power (Adler, 1993; Hartman & Marmon, 2004) and suggests that the Jewish community and laws reflect fear, danger, and contamination.

Cook (1999) presents a lengthy textual analysis of religious liturgy that analyzes the *niddah* blood within a context of sacrificial and literary systems. She concludes that the practice does not devalue women. She understands *halacha* to be directed to reconstructing harmony and for women to be equal to men in this spiritual mission. Thus *niddah* represents the world as a

“harmonious system of differences established through a series of divine acts of separation” (p.43). Cook’s outlook considers *taharat hamishpacha* practice as a spiritual, holy, and powerful system and includes themes of female empowerment and sexual agency. As women are responsible for the adherence of these laws, and deciding when to go to the *mikvah*, Wasserfal and Eilberg-Schwartz (1992) suggest that women conveyed a theme of empowerment and control of sexual interaction in the marriage that allows women to assert power in a community that generally ascribes power to men (Wasserfall & Eilberg-Schwartz, 1992).

Understanding the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* is critical to understanding the experience of women as they prepare and transition into early marital sex. It sets the cultural context for both the ideology and also provides a structure for the timing for permitted marital sexual intimacy.

Premarital Education: The Transmission of Traditions through *Kallah* Classes

The vast majority of couples access premarital education through their clergy or religious institution (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Most premarital education is focused on communication, values, roles, conflict resolution, finances, and managing expectations (Berger & DeMaria, 1999). These programs work on teaching couples to be able to affirm one another, foster empathy, and display positive regard. Research suggests that when couples work on these skills there is an increase in overall marital satisfaction, including sexual satisfaction (Larson, et al., 1998; Henderson & King, 1994).

Shirpak, et al. (2008), conducted a qualitative assessment of the sex education needs of married women in Iran. Because of the high value placed on modesty in Iran, sexual matters generally are not discussed in the public domain, so this research was conducted with four all-female focus groups. These groups consisted of 21 female clients (23-45 years old) and 18 reproductive health providers using a non-probability sampling. Although Iran has a modern

health care system, there is minimal sexual education or literature. The findings included data about sexual practices, sexual agency and empowerment, incompatibility of sexual interests and desires, and commitment to marriage. Two main themes that emerged were issues of modesty and maintaining a strong marriage and indicated the need for culturally appropriate sexual education.

Premarital education within the Orthodox Jewish tradition differs from premarital education in the other communities. One topic that is universally taught is Jewish laws pertaining to intimacy and sexuality. As suggested in the limited literature about the Orthodox Jewish community (Labinsky, Schmeidler, Yehuda, Freidman, & Rosenbaum, 2009; Maybruch, 2014; Ribner, 2007; Schnall, 2010), the required premarital education serves as a gatekeeper to sanctified sexual relations and may impact on a couple's sexual life and the building of sexual subjectivity, practice, and satisfaction. Historically, Jewish families taught their children about sexuality as they matured and especially in preparation for marriage (Lerner, 2007). Sexuality is seen as an intimate and private matter, appropriate for discussion within the home and family and in the context of other Jewish studies but with little public discussion (Goshen-Gottstein, 1984; Ribner & Kleinplatz, 2007; Zalcberg, 2009). Ribner and Kleinplatz (2007) suggest that as a result of multiple factors and because of the historical trajectory of the Jewish family being interrupted by many changes — including secularization, the European Enlightenment, and the Holocaust — in combination with emigration patterns and socioeconomic and acculturation experiences, most parents do not teach their children about the particular laws or explicitly transmit traditions about Judaic sexual ethics. Frequently parents and educators are uncomfortable with, and reluctant to discuss sexuality and as a result individuals have inadequate opportunities to engage in discussions about sex and relationships. Mirroring this apprehension

to discuss topics related to sexuality, young adults may have minimal information about sex and sexuality (Diament, 2007).

It was traditional for parents to teach their children about the laws of family purity prior to marriage. Women and men still study the laws and traditions concerning *taharat hamishpacha* shortly before marrying but typically not with a family member (Ribner, 2008). Generally, these laws are taught separately (not as a couple) and in a variety of formats. The implementation of these courses ranges from private tutors/mentors to classes offered at local synagogues. Classes are taught by a same-sex instructor, another application of *tsnius*, either trained formally as instructors or teaching from personal knowledge. Although there is a train-the-trainer model to produce instructors, there is little regulation as to the content or format of the class. There are no universally approved curricula, admissions standards, or quality controls; there are some current movements to formalize this process, but there is no current way to regulate and evaluate the content or method of instruction (Ribner, 2008; Zalcborg, 2009).

In a community in which individuals generally marry young, these courses specifically address issues related to their upcoming roles/scripts as spouses and about sex within the marriage. After inquiring informally with community members and reading some popular materials, it appears that the course of study generally contains three main modules. The instructor addresses the philosophy and ideology underlying the family purity ritual, the actual ritual practices, and basic sex education. This course introduces the practices through which a woman can become “pure” and therefore be permitted to engage in marital sexual intercourse and intimacy. I could not locate any research about men’s experience attending their *Chassan* (Bridegroom) classes. My understanding, as a community member, is that these classes also present the laws of family purity and provide sexual education and relationship guidance. For

some, this may be the first time the young adult is being educated formally about sexuality, intimacy and relationships (Zimmerman, 2005).

This education represents a very significant change for a couple as they shift from absolute abstinence to the cultural expectation to consummate the marriage on the wedding night or shortly thereafter (Ribner & Rosenbaum, 2007). Ribner (2007) discusses the role of premarital instructors using limited case studies and personal clinical experience. He offers a frank commentary about his clinical experience and also the need for more extensive education with the Jewish community. Maybruch (2014) conducted a quantitative study that looked at the religious service delivery model of premarital education among married Orthodox Jews. Her results indicated that education that religious approach as regarding sexual relationship is significantly associated with greater marital quality but also indicated a need for more focus on relationship and conflict resolution skills. . None of the research looks at the experience of sexual subjectivity of women. All express the need for greater and more extensive premarital education (Labinsky, et al., 2009; Maybruch, 2014; Schnall, 2010).

Understanding the role of premarital sexual education is critical to my study. In a review of this limited literature that exists outside the Jewish community, Slatar and Aholu (2009) studied sexual health promotion within marriage and asserted the importance of raising the topic of sexual health in premarital counseling. They conclude that if premarital education does not include discussion about sexual health, it is “an oversight with possibly terminal repercussion, as what is unknown about sexual health may be fatal” (p. 239). Vural and Temel (2009) studied the effectiveness of premarital sexual counseling program on sexual satisfaction of recently married couples in Turkey, where discussion about sexual matters is often taboo. In their quasi-experimental research they aimed to identify the effectiveness of the premarital sexual education

program and its impact on marital satisfaction. Although the two groups, one that received sexual education and one that did not, exhibited minimal differences in pretest knowledge, the experimental group that had the sexual education exhibited higher levels of sexual satisfaction.

Research on Orthodox Jewish Women's Sexuality

The limited existing research about Orthodox Jewish women's sexuality is primarily qualitative literature that focuses on the practice of *taharat hamishpacha*. This research illuminates some of the first-hand experiences of women in specific communities and cultures who adhere to these rituals and reflect conflicted and complex voices. While this research may have limitations, such issues of internal and external influence to provide a socially desirable response, self-selection of samples, and power dynamics in face-to-face interviews, it begins to capture the experiences and the internal negotiations among women who identify as Orthodox and practice *taharat hamishpacha* (Adler, 1993; Dicker, 1992; Greenberg, 1981; Owens, 1991).

A qualitative study of Ethiopian Jewish women and menstrual rituals, concludes that the empowered female identity formed at the time of the onset of these women's menarche is shaped by the meaning the community gives to menstruation and its regulations within marriage (Tal, 2005). Anteby (1999) studied the practices of recently immigrated Ethiopian Jews in Israel. In Ethiopia, the women removed themselves to a separate hut during menstruation. Although this is no longer the standard practice, the women adhere to rituals of separation as part of their identity, and the Ethiopian Jewish husbands defend this practice as a vehicle of asserting the purity and legitimacy of their community within the larger Jewish community.

Ginsburg (1987) studied women in the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, New York. In her anthropological work she performed her research when the community was constructing a new *mikvah*, and the community leadership encouraged a renewed commitment to

adherence to the traditions. She observed that the women in the community were enthusiastic about the practice of *taharat hamishpacha* and going to the *mikvah*. She reported that the women communicated a sense of respect and autonomy gained through these rituals. It appears that this practice allows women in this Syrian Jewish community as a group to maintain social power, moral authority, and control over the mores of men. Ginsburg suggested that women were not adhering passively to these rituals, but that they were embracing them as a means to create order in a community that was increasing its secular contact, and it allowed both young and older women to create boundaries against secular threats. It appeared that women used these traditions as a way to ensure the continuity of cultural norms in which their status is respected and recognized and was a symbolic opposition to the degradation and objectification of women.

Kaufman's (1991) work explores the experience of American Ashkenazi *baalei teshuva* Orthodox Jewish women living in American Orthodox communities. *Baalei teshuva*, commonly called "returnees," are individuals who currently are practicing Orthodox Judaism but were raised as secular Jews. In a qualitative study, Kaufman examines the experiences this population has with the laws of *mikvah* and *taharat hamishpacha* within marital sexuality. The fact that the respondents were not Orthodox from birth informed the findings and the women's experiences. She reports that almost all of her respondents (approximately 150 women) noted the positive functions of the family purity laws. She discovered that younger and more newly married respondents struggled more with the restrictions, but those married for a longer time and with more children agreed that the laws were positive for the marriage. They referred to the increased sexual interest and pleasure in the marriage over time.

Through in-depth one-on-one interviews, Kaufman discovered other themes. Women voiced how the rituals afforded them some kind of control over their sexuality, increased time for

themselves, and personal space. Women struggled with the length of time that is required to be separated from their husbands. One respondent shared, “Where we were first married, I found it hard to consider sexual separation as a positive thing. In fact during my menstrual cycle, I felt I wanted to be held and loved more than at other times of the month. But I must admit, over the years, it truly serves as a renewal...it is really like being a bride again...well, almost” (p.

77). Another theme was the respondents’ assertion that women in an Orthodox marriage are entitled to an active and satisfying sexual life. This practice appears to give sex and marital intimacy a meaning beyond the private experience of the couple and nuclear family, linking them to a community ritual. Although practiced in private, to them this ritual reflects a community value of *tsnius* (modesty) and reflects sanctity.

Wasserfall and Eilberg-Schwartz (1992) studied the Moroccan Sephardic Jewish immigrant community in a settlement in Israel. Through interviews conducted in both Hebrew and English, the researchers attempted to craft an opportunity for their informants to speak for themselves. The data reflect that *taharat hamishpacha* appears to be intrinsic to the women’s identities and the community reinforces that these laws occupy a central place in the way these women think about their Jewish identity. This research demonstrates that the Moroccan Jewish women view menstrual blood as essential to female identity and that it is a universal symbol of femininity. Rather than identifying menstrual blood as impure, the blood is a metaphorical link between a woman’s individual identity and the collective identity of the larger Jewish community. The participants conveyed how these practices left them with a sense of empowerment and, furthermore, gave women control of sexual interaction in their marriage, allowing women to assert power in a community that generally ascribes power to men.

Marmon (1999) studied 46 self-identified Orthodox Jewish women in Boston to find out what their experience was with the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*. This community is primarily of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) descent, though Marmon did not identify this demographic variable and therefore may be a different ethnic group than the studies examining the Sephardic Moroccan and Ethiopian women. Her qualitative study employed in-depth interviews, and she reported her subjects' subjective perceptions and experiences of *taharat hamishpacha*. The voices of these women were not monolithic but represented a diverse community shaped by numerous factors. The author outlines a variety of ways the study participants experienced the advantages and disadvantages of *taharat hamishpacha*. Advantages included promoting respect, creating a female community, providing personal space, health benefits, a sense of renewal in the marriage, enhanced communication, and elevating sex. Alternatively, the women reported that observance could be a logistical nightmare and could also be intrusive. It could create pressure to have sex when it was permitted and increase tension in the marital relationship. The women's perceptions about adherence to the purity laws appeared to be shaped greatly by the stage of the marriage and the stability of the marital relationship. Marmon termed these constructs as the life-cycle period and quality of marriage. The participants' experiences did not coalesce around a particular theme or specific experience, however informants expressed that they experienced *taharat hamishpacha* differently throughout their lives and this experience had both positive and negative aspects

In their later research, Hartman and Marmon (2004) utilize qualitative interviews of 30 Orthodox Jewish women in Israel to investigate women's experience practicing the laws and rituals of family purity. This study, steeped in the tradition of grounded theory, sought to "map out the lived landscape of *niddah* observance in all its provocative complexity" (p. 391). Their

findings were mixed; the participants voiced a range of experiences and expressed that the family purity practices elicited many emotions including sadness, being burdensome, and feeling powerful and beautiful. Some participants reported that this practice enhanced their marriages and positively impacted their sexual interest. Other participants shared that they found the *halacha* responded to women's needs, and through this practice they felt empowered and were granted an "oppositional patriarchal voice" (p. 401). Some participants reflected a "coercive element" to the practice. The authors reflect the multiplicity of the participants' experiences and suggest that there be a deepened understanding of the "complex negotiations and nuanced responses" (p. 408) that could offer further elucidation about the Orthodox Jewish and other insular cultures. They highlight the need to allow for the diversity of experience. Throughout this literature multiple meanings surface, and this varied and conflicted complex experience suggests the need for further research to further elucidate the phenomenon. No previous study looked at the specific transition into sexuality in marriage for women.

Intimacy, Marriage, and Sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish Community

There is even more limited research on actual sexual behavior within the Orthodox Jewish community. These inquiries are starting to surface as the taboo of talking openly about sexuality have started to dissipate, and there appears to be more willingness, perhaps in part because of the recognized need to assist the community (Frances, 2009; Guterman, 2007; Rosenfeld & Ribner, 2011). Within this limited research, studies examined a variety of issues including culturally specific sex therapy interventions (Ribner, 2003; Petok, 2001), modern Orthodox Jewish men, and premarital sex (Frances, 2009), and the actual practice of family purity laws (Guterman, 2007). This research is grounded in the understanding of the Orthodox Jewish community and the norms and restrictions that serve as guidelines to sexual behavior

within marriage that constitute sexual scripts. As outlined, laws and rituals shape the sexual scripts within the community and convey how, when, what, and with whom one is intimate; the theology looks to offer meaning to sexuality within marriage.

Little is known about how strictly couples adhere to these scripts and how they experience them. One researcher has investigated this dynamic. Guterman (2008) studied a Modern Orthodox community in New York and found that there is significant variation in this practice, particularly in the way the prohibitions relating to “endearing behavior” are practiced. He reported that 92% of women and 96% of men refrain from vaginal intercourse during the time of *niddah*, but many will engage in other endearing behaviors such as handholding (38.95%), kissing with tongue (23.97%), and sitting together on the same cushion (57.68%) during that time.

A recent study (Schnall, 2010) was conducted by the Orthodox Union, in collaboration with Yeshiva University and Aleinu Family Services of Los Angeles, to examine marriage in the Orthodox Jewish community. This study used a large online survey and had over 3,000 respondents in the United States. They found that 71.5% of men and 73.5% of women rated their marriages as excellent/very good. Furthermore, 80% responded that their spouse meets their expectations, and 75% would remarry the same person. Although this study did not address sexuality and sexual satisfaction specifically, responders listed intimacy as a major stressor to couples. One particularly compelling finding is that 83% of respondents would be willing to access mental health services when in need, and 31% had already accessed services. The researchers suggested that there should be a general focus on providing better premarital and sexual education. In particular, they noted educators need to learn better ways of teaching about

intimacy and specifically must learn to work and guide couples to relate in an intimate way when the woman is in *niddah* and they cannot relate physically.

Labinsky, et al. (2007), documented women's sexual experiences within the Orthodox Jewish community in a quantitative study. The researchers created a survey based on the study entitled the "National Health and Social Life Survey," which examined many aspects of the participants' sexual lives (Laumann, Paik, Glasser, Kang, Wang, Levinson, & Gingell, 2006). In this study, they reported that 43% of the participants (n = 1,749) experienced some level of sexual dysfunction, but when they looked at a subset of married participants, this percentage dropped to 20%. In response to this striking discrepancy, Labinsky, et al., were curious to study the experiences of married Orthodox Jewish women. Instead of performing a face-to-face study, because observant women generally value modesty and privacy, they designed a written questionnaire that was completed by a self-selected group of women who picked up the surveys at doctors' and therapists' offices and in locations in the community. The surveys were completed anonymously and submitted by mail. They received 380 responses.

Their findings are informative and direct future research. The survey questions included information about women's attitudes about going to the *mikvah*, sexual education, frequency of sexual intercourse, and sexual problems within marriage. They reported that the women who participated in the study reported significantly less physical and emotional satisfaction as compared to married women in the Laumann, et al., study. The respondents also reported greater sexual dysfunction on many of the comparable variables, including a higher percentage having never experienced an orgasm during sex (9% as compared to 1%), a more frequent lack of interest in sex, and higher incidences of pain during intercourse. The authors suggested that lack of education about sexuality in the observant community might account for these findings. The

reported lack of communication skills between husbands and wives specifically regarding sexual life is a likely contributor to physical and emotional dissatisfaction among observant women.

This study is primarily quantitative and includes many important findings in relation to women's sexual experience. In their discussion, they strongly suggest that the community look at how it can provide more resources to address educational needs. They do report that women find their premarital educational inadequate and would like more sexual education but do not expand much of about the content and experience attending Kallah classes. This study lays part of the groundwork for my study to further inquire, in the women's voices, about premarital education and early marital sexual experience.

Literature Review Summary and Project Rationale

There is limited research available about sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community. This review provides a number of reasons to conduct this research and an appropriate theoretical framework in which to anchor my inquiry. Little is known about the individuals' experiences of women's premarital and sexual educational needs and female sexual subjectivity. Past research indicate that premarital education can be an indicator to marital satisfaction and wellbeing (Maybruch, 2014; Schnall, 2010). Much of what is known about Orthodox marriage and women's experiences is focused on the experience of practicing the family purity ritual in married life, these studies look at the varied and diverse experience women and men (Hartman and Marmon, 2004; Grumet, 2008; Kaufman, 1991; Marmon, 1999; Wasserfall and Eilberg-Schwartz, 1992) have with these laws. Little is known about how women prepare, transition, and experience becoming sexually active within marriage. Research that has been done about women's sexuality is focused generally around risks and dangers of sex and sexuality. Little is known about the actual transition and early marital sexual experience and the

meanings that women ascribe to sexuality. There is a growing community of scholars and researchers in the Jewish community, but the knowledge about these phenomena is in its infancy. This work will be part of a small yet budding academic community that is focused on growing the scholarship and awareness of human sexuality within the Orthodox Jewish community.

The existing theory and literature demonstrate that research includes an understanding of the population's context. My study is informed by a web of theories (Tolman, 2002) that work together to ground my research. I utilized sexual script theory along with an intersectional lens, and a feminist perspective to anchor the theoretical underpinnings of this project. A sexual script theory lens offers a framework to study the preparation, transition, and experience of becoming sexually active in marriage. Sexual script theory allows me to recognize the socially constructed nature of sexuality (Weiderman, 2015). In fact, whether taught formally or informally, sexual script theory lends not only a theoretical structure but a very tangible framework within which to organize these findings as women quite literally “learn a script” and, to push the analogy, “get into character.” The limited research that does exist about female sexuality and Orthodox Jewish marriage suggests that collecting both quantitative data about this population and qualitative narratives about the lived experience is a feasible and productive way to build knowledge about how Orthodox Jewish women prepare, transition, and experience becoming sexually active within marriage.

This study will contribute to the social work profession by providing information about a population for which little empirically based knowledge exists. Research surrounding sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community is important because it will normalize and contextualize individuals' sexual and emotional experiences and inform service providers, communal leaders,

clergy, and educators so that they will be better informed to create programs and culturally sensitive materials.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

This study addresses a critical gap in the current literature and captures the experience of Orthodox Jewish women, who are faithful to the Orthodox Jewish traditions, rituals, and laws as they transition into sexual intimacy within marriage. In particular, the focus of this project is to document how this subpopulation of women prepares for marriage and their experiences of transitioning into postnuptial sexual activity and intimacy.

I conducted a quantitative/qualitative sequential design study (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 2008; Patton, 2002) in which I integrated the qualitative and quantitative findings during the analysis and then in the discussion. As will be described, I used an online quantitative survey to collect a wide array of data from the participants. This quantitative survey, comprised of 99 questions, was linked electronically to the qualitative portion of the study and offered participants the opportunity to participate sequentially in the narrative portion of this project. I utilized an Internet-based guided narrative method (see: Frost, 2010; Guterman, 2008; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2008) to collect the qualitative data. These tools together enabled me to produce new knowledge about the lived experiences of this under-researched population.

Methodology and Design Rationale

Among the number of factors that informed this research design, first and foremost the study question drove its design (Tolman & Szalacha, 2000). My basic question examined several components of the experience of Orthodox Jewish women entering into their sexually active lives within marriage. Therefore, this study is situated within a phenomenological approach (Davidsen, 2013) as well as a narrative methodology, because the goal was to capture both the variability of women's experiences as well as their similarities (Josselson, 2011).

Phenomenological research is the study of what people experience and how they interpret the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1983); this approach, broadly construed, is used for studying topics about which little is known. The study is predicated on a constructivist perspective (Patton, 2002), consistent with a research tradition in feminist and sexuality studies (Tolman & Diamond, 2010, 2014) on aspects of women's and other marginalized populations' experiences that are often obscured by dominant beliefs and/or practices. Though most often implemented using qualitative methods, quantitative approaches that are situated in this epistemological perspective are also appropriate

One way to operationalize a phenomenological methodology grounded in a constructivist perspective is to combine quantitative and qualitative methods that are grounded in this perspective. Mixed method research, often called the third path (Gorard & Taylor, 2004) or the third paradigm (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), has emerged as an alternative to the dichotomy of qualitative and quantitative research, used "for the broader purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007, p. 123). A sequential mixed methods study (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 2008) uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to expand and "to extend the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components" (p. 127). I used this framework for my study.

The quantitative segment creates a broad picture of these women's experience. The quantitative survey is a combination of closed-ended questions that require numerical answers, Likert scale responses, and semantic differential items with phrase completion answers (e.g., very comfortable or very uncomfortable). These questions document the study participants, the specific behaviors they have experienced, and ways to categorize those specific experiences according to a set of salient individual characteristics. Quantitative methods enabled me to map

preliminary descriptive data to develop an initial understanding of the sample and a variety of variables, including content and method of women's premarital education, current state of marital satisfaction, and help seeking behaviors. The quantitative data also enabled me to examine what content was included in classes that were considered helpful, the relationship of premarital sexual experience and reflections on early marital sexual experience and experience of premarital classes the relationship with early marital sex. Using qualitative methods allowed individuals to express different perspectives and offer different meanings for their shared experiences and for the researcher to construct an understanding of those experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1983). Bogdan and Bilken (1983) suggest that phenomenological studies attempt to "understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 31). Gagnon and Simon's (1973) conceptualization of sexual scripts provides an orienting theory that helps deconstruct the experience of women in Kallah classes, early marital sexual experience, and related sense of sexuality. The qualitative segment enabled me to develop an understanding of the construction and enactment the participant's sexual scripts as they experienced them in relation to premarital education and early sexual activity within their marriages.

Some of the existing research around the experience of practicing *taharat hamishpacha* would suggest that this transition (Adler, 1993; Fine, 1988; Hartman & Marmon, 2004; Kaufman, 1991) is not a monolithic experience. Qualitative methods served as a good fit because it highlighted how specific experiences are perceived and consequently shared (and not shared) by those who experienced them (Patton, 2002). As will be described, this inquiry empowered participants to share narratives that inform an understanding of the women's experience and expanded the findings from the quantitative data.

Epistemological principles also inform the type of design that is most appropriate to answer a research question by asking, “what can be known” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). There is a lot to learn about this population and their experiences of marriage preparation and early marital sexual experience. My goal was to learn specifics about behaviors and also about experiences of the sexual scripts that informed and shaped these women’s individual experiences. The quantitative study allowed me to collect basic information about this transition, using closed-ended questions in an online survey to capture descriptive data and perform inferential statistical analysis. The qualitative portion enabled the women to articulate their experiences in their own language rather than constrain their experiences only within structured questions. This strategy operationalizes the significance of bringing the voices of Orthodox Jewish women to the surface. As a population that is silenced by the mores of their own communities and larger society’s resistance to understanding female sexuality, this study’s qualitative section begins to provide a record of the women’s experiences in their own voices (Gilligan, 1982). The dynamic of silencing these voices became apparent even as I was collecting the data in this survey in the response by some community members.

My constructivist framework asserts there is no single reality, that we can “never fully know” reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111), and that reality is multiple rather than one fixed truth. While each woman experiences preparation for and transition into marriage in different ways, few human experiences are entirely unique (Patton, 2002). The coupling of quantitative and qualitative findings produced a fuller documentation and understanding of this experience and its variability. Qualitative design embraces the multiplicity of human experience, while the quantitative data informs us about the “scaffolding” (Tolman & Szalacha, 2000). Integrating the

two sources of data make it possible to start to reveal both similarities and differences among the women in navigating this life milestone and enabled me to give those a voice.

Target Population

The target population for this study is currently married adult females (aged 18 and older) who identify as Orthodox Jews. As discussed, the community is not a monolithic community. For the purpose of this study, I operationalized the membership in the target population to three criteria of Jewish religious practice that Orthodox Jewish women share, as I described in the literature review above: observe the Sabbath laws (*Shomer Shabbat*), conform to kosher restrictions, and attend mikvah as needed to adhere to family purity rituals.

Sample

I recruited purposive samples to complete the quantitative and qualitative components of this study distributed in one online instrument. The focus of this study is on internal validity, with my goal being to establish that the experiences and stories of the women in the study have been captured, interpreted, and understood consistently and substantiated with “good enough” evidence (Luttrell, 2000). The purpose is not to make claims about all or most married Orthodox Jewish women. Instead, this project weaves together quantitative and qualitative data about this sample of women to begin to create a rich and nuanced understanding of this life experience.

This purposive sample strategy enabled me to recruit appropriate participants who could contribute to the study. My goal was to collect data from enough participants to provide enough quantitative data to explore basic demographics, frequencies and a limited correlation analysis. I recruited adult (aged 18 and over) currently married women within the subpopulation of Orthodox Jews. Participants confirmed that they fit the criteria that they are currently in their first marriage, identify as Sabbath observant, observe kosher laws, and go to the mikvah

monthly, as required. I recruited one sample, and then a group of those women self-selected to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. Once someone met the criteria for the quantitative segment (online, see below), they completed the survey; after completing the survey women could then choose to participate in the qualitative portion.

The primary purpose was descriptive rather than serving to establish correlations or draw inferences, Teddie and Yu (2007) suggest that a sample of at least 50 is sufficient to establish a basic understanding of the parameters of this phenomenon in the community. But, as will be described, there was a large response and I was able to draw inferences and perform some correlational analysis. The Labinsky, et al. (2007) study had a sample of 380 paper questionnaires, and this enabled them to report a number of findings including prevalence of history sexual abuse, overall marital and sexual satisfaction. A more recent Orthodox Union Internet-based study about marriage (Schnall, 2010) had a sample of 3,000 participants. Gutterman (2008) recruited a sample of 267 participants for his online study examining observance of the laws of family purity in the Modern Orthodox community. These recent studies using similar purposive samples encouraged me to accept the feasibility of recruiting a viable sample for this study, and I had the goal to reach a sample size of at least 400 to be able to conduct a comparable meaningful analysis of prevalence and frequency data. As will be described, the study drew a tremendous amount of interest and the study was opened online 809 times and more than 398 surveys were completed. Because the survey was de-identified, I do not know how many were repeats or people who opened and returned to finished it.

Surveys were considered completed when participants reported demographic background including religious self-identification, addressed queries related to comfort with sexual topics in relation to their level of religious observance. Typically, qualitative samples are small and focus

on enabling the collection of in-depth narratives rather than covering a broad swath of the population. While I couldn't predict precisely how many participants would complete the qualitative portion of this study, based on standard practices, I sought at least 20 participants for analysis, with a good possibility of a much larger sample and data set. The fact that the two segments were linked gave me an opportunity to collect many narratives. My goal was to have sufficient data to reach saturation in analysis and produce findings of quality, depth, and credibility that indicate trustworthiness (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A total of 102 participants submitted completed narratives. As will be described, for this dissertation, I analyzed 36 narratives that were representative of the population being studied. These particular narratives were selected, because of their richness and their representation of the religious self-identification of the larger sample, and representing their reports that their premarital sexual education was helpful and those who found it unhelpful. I used more narratives of women who stated that their premarital education was unhelpful, because more narratives from this cohort were submitted. Although I collected much more data – both quantitative and qualitative – than was necessary or appropriate to analyze for this dissertation, I plan to conduct further analyses of these data to develop my research program after the dissertation.

Recruitment

As described, this study was Internet-based, and I conducted my recruitment online. David Frost (2010) asserts that the Internet is advantageous because it can provide a sense of anonymity and safety that allows participants to be more likely to discuss sexuality online compared to traditional face-to-face interviews. In particular, when studying sensitive topics such as sexuality, web-based studies allow further privacy and anonymity that will increase participation (Gutterman, 2009; Schnall, 2010). The Internet allows researchers to sample a

broader diversity both in terms of demographic characteristics and relational experiences for hidden or hard-to-locate populations, compared to geographically restricted convenience samples (Frost, 2010; van Eeden-Moorefield, et al., 2008).

One limitation of an Internet-based recruitment and data collection strategy may be that it limited my ability to access some of the more insular populations. There are Orthodox Jewish women in more insular Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox communities who do not access the Internet for cultural reasons. This subgroup is less engaged with the secular community and popular culture, and their experiences may be different than those of participants who do interact more with the secular community (Ribner, 2003) and were able to respond to an Internet-based study. This is one of the study's limitations.

Because of my access through my career and personal circumstances of working in the Orthodox Jewish mental health community and identifying as a member of the community, I was uniquely positioned to conduct this research. This served as a strength to gain entry and recruit a relevant sample. I had planned to recruit through both the community and online, including sending out requests for participation in a variety of synagogue bulletins, newspapers, Jewish organizations, and Jewish-oriented web sites and listservs. Although this study was online, this community is very close-knit, and I planned to forward it through community leaders and members who would have lent it credence. I also identified community members who are both willing to participate anonymously and willing to ask others to participate. I also knew a number of *rebbetzins* (rabbi's wife) and premarital instructors who offered to send the survey link to their former students and congregants. As will be described, I received a very enthusiastic response to the study, and so this more elaborate recruitment strategy was unnecessary. Over the past few years, there have been a number of studies in the Orthodox Jewish community that have spread

online and were able to recruit viable samples (Schnall, 2010; Gutterman, 2008). I was confident about the feasibility to collect a robust sample.

As I started to implement my project, I simply posted a link to my study with an explanation of the study on my personal Facebook page and asked friends to share it with other friends. I sent around 10 emails to friends and colleagues asking them to spread the word. Over a nine-day period I received an incredible response, far beyond any expectations that I had had: More than 800 people opened the study, 398 completed the survey, and 102 submitted narratives. In a word, it went viral. Additionally, 48 people emailed me at the study email address inquiring about the study and thanking me for conducting the study. The data collection process is in and of itself data, a story of its own. This process underscores the importance and also the subversiveness of sexuality research in general and for this population in particular.

Participants' demographic information does not simply reflect the sample, but illuminates what is permitted to be said about sexuality and who has the power to speak. As is expected when exposing silenced voices, I received mixed feedback about conducting this project. I received many encouraging emails and Facebook messages expressing encouragement and gratitude for conducting this study. I was struck and humbled during this journey, in particular by the appreciation for starting this dialogue, the women's incredible honesty and genuine interest and concern. However, I was asked by the Chief Operating Officer on behalf of the Chief Executive Office of my place of employment to shut down the study after nine days. This strong request and insistence was not made directly to me, but through my workplace.

Although I was never told who insisted that I stop the study, my understanding was that some women approached their premarital instructors to talk to them about the study. These instructors spoke their rabbis, who then reached out to my executives with concern that someone

in my position in the mental health field, who they rely on to assist with sensitive issues, would conduct this study. One way I understand this “shutdown” is that I was documenting voices that are rarely heard, and possibly suppressed by the enactment cultural scripts, and I was literally suppressed for giving these women voice. My colleagues were very supportive of my work, but there was strong community pressure to my senior executives that I close the survey, and out of respect to my workplace and my employment, and the fact that I had collected sufficient data, I complied. This premature shutdown of the study is part of the story and the context for this project. As social workers, we aspire to treat the whole person, and this includes acknowledging and supporting sexuality. This study serves many purposes and as I present the findings they can certainly inform social work practice, but the fact that it acknowledges and validates a critical component of humanness is, in itself, a poignant finding. Ken Plummer (1995) writes that

Sexual stories ooze through the political stream...power is not a simple attribute or a capacity, but a flow of negotiations and shifting outcome...sexual stories flow through this power. The power to tell a story, or indeed not to tell a story, under the conditions of one's own choosing, is part of the political process (p. 26).

As I describe this sample, and move into the findings, I want to emphasize that the women who participated represent those who were able to exercise their power to choose to share their sexual stories. As described, this study was available only for a limited time and some did not have the opportunity to participate. I received many emails asking to participate, and I was inspired by the desire of women to engage in this dialogue. The personal narratives serve to reflect on the cultural conceptualization and social construction of women's sexuality and the tensions it brings to the surface. Central to this construction is the role of silence and the silencing of women, women's sexual subjectivity and agency. This is evident in the premature closing of the study, and this provides a context for a discussion about sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish communities.

Foucault (1972) specifically theorized how sexuality is constructed within discourse. He maintained that it is critical to examine how sex is positioned and created through discourse, particularly the ways in which sex is spoken, who does the speaking, whose speaking holds authority, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, and the institutions that prompted people to speak in particular ways. Although I am not presenting a discursive analysis of the narratives, as I outline the participants and the sample's background, this idea of power and the capacity to choose to participate stays with me. Central to this study is to first examine who participated as it reflects who had—or took the invitation for--the “power” to speak.

Data Collection

Both segments of this study were administered via the Internet. The primary reason that I used the Internet is that this study is examining a sensitive topic, and participants would find an Internet-based anonymous study less intrusive and be more willing to be open and candid (Frost, 2010; Meyer & Wilson, 2008; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2008). Additionally, there are a number of online communities of self-identified Orthodox women (and men) that discuss many of these intimate issues. These websites suggested that community members are open to share when there is anonymity and in this context and enabled me to recruit a sufficient number of participants.

Within the existing research that looks at this population, two research groups have utilized anonymous studies. In Labinsky, et al. (2009), surveys were available with a self-addressed envelope at doctors' offices known to serve the Orthodox Jewish community, and they were able to recruit a viable sample. In two studies that focused on adherence to the laws of family purity, the author utilized anonymous Internet surveys (Guterman, 2008). In his work, he suggests “that the main strengths for this study [Internet study] is in its straightforwardness and

anonymity” (p. 345). He suggests that future work on human sexuality should also take advantage of Internet surveys.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected using SurveyGizmo; this ensured anonymity and confidentiality, maximized comfort, and allowed accuracy of data management. All data were collected anonymously, and I never had access to identifying information of the participants. This is an option provided by SurveyGizmo, and therefore there is no risk of exposure to the participant. IP addresses are not collected at any point of the data collection. Data was stored on SurveyGizmo’s secured servers as well as on my password-protected personal computer. SurveyGizmo uses the Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) to secure survey links, which transmit data to their servers. This is the encryption method used by the U.S. government, including the National Security Agency for classified information (see www.SurveyGizmo.com/Security for more information). Additionally, no identifying information, including IP addresses, location or any way of identifying the participants was collected.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were asked to complete a 99-item online quantitative survey (See Appendix A). The measures in the survey are reflective of the theoretical framework and existing literature. When creating this survey, I reflected on what I wanted to know and also used other surveys as a reference. Prior to conducting this study, I was in contact with Dr. David Ribner and Dr. Anna Wruble of Bar Ilan University and Hadassah Hospital; Dr. Ribner is serving on my dissertation committee. They shared with me a survey they were using in Israel, and I used portions of it to help me organize some of my ideas.

Participants answered several sets of questions. The first section asked for basic demographic and background information about the participants. This included age, length of marriage, number of children, educational background, and religious identification. The second section asked about the individual's experience preparing for marriage with a focus on sexual education. As modeled by the Bar Ilan/Hadassah Hospital questionnaire, I included multiple-choice questions on how they decided to prepare, if they attended a class, what that class included, what the overall approach of the instructor was toward sexual topics, were questions encouraged and answered and what information was included in the class. I asked if their premarital education course covered (as indicated on a 5-point Likert scale) topics such as if sexual anatomy and physiology, how to have sexual intercourse; and positions for sexual intercourse were included in the course. I also inquired if there was discussion about understanding female and male desire and arousal and practical suggestions for the first night. Additionally, I asked if discussion about relationship were included such as achieving clear and open sexual communication or conflict resolution.

I then asked the central question of, looking back, how helpful was the class in preparing you for the sexual part of your marriage (multiple choice answers). I then progressed to ask participants to report on their initial post-marital sexual experience and, using a Likert scale, to rate their feelings including such choices as confusion, satisfaction, anxiety, romance, and pleasure. These sections helped me develop a sense of what the women experienced in premarital education and their initial marital sexual experience.

The next section consisted of a modified version of the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI) (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). This scale was developed and validated as a multidimensional inventory of female's sexual self-conceptions, i.e., sexual subjectivity. This

instrument (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006) measures these three elements: sexual subjectivity, sexual body-esteem, and sexual desire. I decided not to include the FSSI items asking about masturbation because of the community's discomfort discussing masturbation and its minimal salience to my research question. I modified the items to use language that is sensitive to the community and more comfortable to this population, for example, substituting *husband* for *partner*. I will focus on analyzing this data at a later date.

The final section asked individuals about their marriages. Participants were asked to rate their overall marriage and relationship and then were asked about help seeking behaviors to determine whether and where women go for help if they are having problems. I ended the survey by asking about length of courtship and included one item about premarital physical intimacy. While I was developing this survey, the question order struck me as being very important. I began the survey by asking less intrusive, basic and non-threatening questions. As the survey continued, the items became more personal and intimate. I believe this made participants more comfortable in answering. Though in retrospect, as I will discuss in limitations, I should have framed this question with more details. I kept it ambiguous to be sensitive to the community, but should have managed it differently.

Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis for this project is very focused on answering pointed questions at this time. I collected a huge amount of data, which will be analyzed for future publications. For this project, I used SAS 9.3 for my data analysis. I focused the statistical data analysis on understanding more about the women who participated, their experience in premarital classes, early marital sexual experience and help seeking behaviors. Participant information is summarized using descriptive statistics, such as means, medians and standard deviations for

continuous variables and frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. I looked at the associations between whether women found the classes to be helpful or unhelpful and content of classes, the level of comfort of both the instructor and the student, and the demographic background of the participants. I also analyzed the relationship between how the participants experienced their premarital classes and their recollections of early marital sexual experiences using tests of associations (Wilcoxon Rank Sum Tests, Fisher's Exact Test and chi squares analysis) and premarital experience and their their recollections of early marital sexual experiences using correlational methods (t-tests and chi square analysis). I identified where participants go for sexual information and help seeking behaviors.

In order to develop a systematic understanding or mapping of the sample, differences between groups on variables such as age at marriage, number of children, elements of sexual subjectivity, and help seeking behavior were explored using Chi-Square tests for categorical variables and T-Tests for continuous variables. Tables will be presented with summaries of the results.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative study captured narratives written by the participants. As a group of Orthodox Jewish women, I anticipated that they had common experiences and shared meanings around their transition into marriage. Central to my research design is the fact that intimacy is so silenced and sensitive a topic throughout the Orthodox Jewish community that I sought to use a structure that emphasizes safety, control, and anonymity. I anticipated that a sufficient number of participants were open to sharing their narratives in order for my analysis to reach saturation (Morse, et al., 2002; Patton, 2002)

Beckett and Clegg (2007) describe the use of postal questionnaires to collect qualitative data. Their assertion is that, when exploring sensitive issues such as sexuality and sexual identity, qualitative written questionnaires are useful. They argue that this strategy can provide “rich, thick data” and may achieve “a proper distance and closure” that can better protect the participant (p. 307). They discuss that proximity may not be the only way to produce genuine information and that by maintaining space, it may allow participants to reflect more and provide information but also protect themselves from over-sharing and feeling too vulnerable. I collected qualitative data using an Internet-based questionnaire that elicits a narrative (Foley Center for the Study of Lives, 1997; Frost, 2010). There is a precedent to use written anonymous narratives (Beckett & Clegg, 2007) and the Internet to collect narratives about sexuality (Frost, 2010; Meyer & Wilson, 2008; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2008).

Particularly when the participants may identify immediately with the researcher, in my case, as an American married Orthodox Jewish female, it was important to create a safe distance. Because of this possible identification, participants may have felt compelled either to share more than intended or to feel uncomfortable being candid and participating genuinely. This tool gave participants more control and diffused issues of power in research and still permitted me to elicit these narratives in a way that allowed proximity and anonymity with the respondent (Beckett and Clegg, 2007).

This approach did have some drawbacks. I was not able to pose follow-up questions to the participants and further query them, which limited my ability to be flexible with the questions. It also is possible that participants may have needed some support after the narrative, and they were left without the opportunity to speak to an actual person. Consequently, they may have felt vulnerable, and I addressed this as an ethical concern; each participant was informed

about where to call for more help and also had my and my advisor's contact information. Indeed, a few participants did reach out to me to clarify their narratives and wanted to touch base personally.

In order to elicit narratives of Orthodox Jewish women, I created an online guide (see Appendix B) that prompted participants to write narratives about their experiences. This guide is based loosely on McAdams's work with guided autobiography (1997) in which he asks participants to construct their own autobiographies by focusing on particular "episodes" or "scenes" in their life stories and to describe each of these in some detail. I used McAdams's method of focusing on a particular episode and then following up with specific questions. This guide focuses on two key elements that involve participants' developing sexual "autobiographies" in relation to their marriages as articulated through Jewish tradition. I used this framework to ask participants two basic questions:

1. Before getting married, Orthodox women prepare for the sexual part of marriage in a number of ways. Many women go to kallah classes and read books or speak to friends or mentors. Please share your experience and thoughts about preparing for marriage.
2. For everybody, getting married is a big life change. In particular, as an Orthodox woman, this transition is often the first time you have been sexually intimate with someone. In particular, your wedding night or early sexual experiences are very significant for many reasons. Please choose to reflect on a specific early marital sexual experience.

I included anchor points (Beckett and Clegg, 2007) that helped guide their writing. These anchor points were specific questions to guide the participants to fill in information about their stories that would enable me to answer my research question. Following the anchor points, I

asked some open-ended questions with space in which to write their narratives, for example, “I prepared for sexual relations in marriage by _____.” In addition, I included some follow up questions to enable the participants to write full narratives, i.e., “What were you thinking? What were you feeling emotionally? Physically?”

This structure garnered meaningful data, and this approach catered to a range of participants in order to include those who are more literate and those who may have more difficulty writing. As Beckett and Clegg (2007) report, this mixed approach of both fill-ins and open questions encourages participants to feel comfortable enough to write their stories. It provides enough structure to elicit a narrative and gives direction but also allows for openness and inclusivity. Ultimately, the quality, depth, and credibility of the narratives are indicators of their trustworthiness (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994); saturation, the point where themes and content are repeated and no new information is emerging from narratives, provides appropriate reliability (Morse, et al., 2002). This approach worked for many of the participants, but there was great variation in the length and depth of the narratives. The inaccessibility to the participants to follow up presents an obvious limitation, though the anonymity was critical to perform this research.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data are considered to be the “rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying; they are the particulars that form the basis of analysis” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 106). There are a number of steps to analyze qualitative data, to transform the “rough materials” into meaningful findings. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, there are different goals to analyzing qualitative data; this project is a narrative inquiry that is thematic in

nature. Narrative research is “distinguished by a focus on narrated text that is either a whole life story or part of it” (Josselson, 2011, p. 224).

Titon (1980) defines a life story as a “person’s story of his or her life, or what he or she thinks is a significant part of that life” (p. 276). I analyzed the data of one part of a life story, specifically the premarital education and early marital sexual life story. The participants wrote about an aspect of their lives that is often complex and multilayered, and this allowed me to gain a glimpse into their experiences (Massey, et al., 1998). I performed a thematic analysis, in which I focused on finding codes that later informed my creation of themes to create an understanding of the experience of women. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within in data and is outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). They describe a six phases that moves from becoming familiar with the data until being able to produce a rich and meaningful report. By not imposing categories onto the data in an attempt to fit the data into predetermined classifications, using an emic approach (Patton, 2002), both similarities and great variability between participants’ stories emerged.

Gagnon and Simon’s (1973) conceptualization of sexual scripts suggests that sexual scripts create what is considered sexual and how sex is enacted. They suggest there are three distinct levels of scripting have specific functions: Cultural scripts that provide instruction on the broad social roles, interpersonal scripts are patterns in everyday interaction, and intrapersonal scripts as the internal experience (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Borrowing this theater language, individuals can thus be understood as “actors” who are employing “scripts” to understand and shape their sexual interactions. These sexual scripts help these “actors” identify and navigate sexual encounters. This theory guided how I eventually understood what the women said and

helped me organize what they said by allowing me to track cultural scripts as well as where women reflected interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts in their narratives.

Throughout all these phases and a critical part of this process, it was important to be aware of my own sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002), which could cloud my interpretation of the data. The threat of researcher bias is ever-present in qualitative research; it can distort the data and threaten the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative study (Padgett, 1998). Qualitative studies can be a very personal form of research, and it was indeed sometimes challenging to remain open to hearing other women's stories. Therefore I engaged in an ongoing process of reflexivity (Ely, et al., 1999; Padgett, 1998) by writing memos throughout the process of analysis as is standard practice to insure my ability to engage effectively with these data (Padgett, 1998). To lessen the possibility of research bias, I wrote memos as I was analyzing the data. This act of memoing supported my ability to become aware of personal bias or beliefs carried over from my past experiences and to gain clarity while minimizing any preconceived notions that might impact my ability to conduct an investigation without imposing too much meaning too early in the process. This was constant during the process, particularly because of my strong identification with the participants, my personal experiences, and the intimacy of sexuality research. The more I became immersed in the data, the more I became aware of my own role in the research as a member of this community, as a social worker in this community who works primarily with abused women, and also being recently married. At times, I identified with a participant's experience, as it mirrored my own. The content of the memos include my own reactions to the participants' stories. I experienced some strong personal responses and needed to check in with colleagues to process them. According to Ely, et al. (1991), keeping a journal and memos will allow a researcher's personal feelings to surface. I kept ongoing notes, and in a

journal kept track of my responses in general and memos for my analysis of each participant's narratives (Charmaz, 2009), to help attenuate my experience interfering with my ability to listen to the women's narratives.

Following the reading of one particular narrative, I wrote in my journal about my own premarital education experience. It was important for me to process my own feelings and questions about this particular part of the participant's experience and of my experience. I also spoke with colleagues about my reaction. This allowed me to remain open. At one point, deep into the writing stage of this project, I was struggling with presenting the materials. After discussion with my advisor I became keenly aware that I was resisting hearing what the women were actually saying and was hearing beyond to confirm what I wanted them to say and hear. For example, I was reading into the narratives to find my definition of sexually entitled women, and it was not there. This reflexive practice is critical. Active engagement in the process of reflexivity is a tool to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis and lend credibility to the findings (Patton, 2002).

The initial phase that Braun and Clarke (2006) describe in this analysis is to become familiar with the data set. Because all the narratives were submitted in writing, I did not have to transcribe them; I spent time organizing the data using NVIVO9 and Excel spreadsheets, and simply reading through the narratives and the emails from participants to really make contact with the material. I chose 36 women whose narratives were especially deep and articulate that represented the sample in experiences in premarital classes, age at marriage, previous sexual experience (or lack thereof) and religious self-identification. I felt that these variables were a relevant and pragmatic way of choosing which narratives to use. I started to hear the voices of the women. I then moved into the second phase of generating vast initial codes and started to

collapse the codes into overarching themes. I also used narrative analysis techniques to enable to me to look at how themes played out for different women. I then returned to parts of the text to further comprehend its meanings thematically and consider more global meanings. I continued to read and re-read the narratives to identify and define salient, emergent themes within each narrative (Charmaz, 2009; Tolman, 2002), across the narratives of individuals and ultimately across the participants (Josselson, 2011) to create an understanding of how these different “pieces” interacted with each other and created a coherent yet complex understanding of the experience. The goal of this analysis was to move beyond identifying themes and to “illuminate the human experience” (Josselson, 2011, p. 240) of sexuality in these women’s lives that these narratives reflect. I identified overarching themes and subthemes that were also reflected in the literature, such as transition, modesty, pleasure, subjectivity/agency, and submission (Adler, 1993; Marmon, 2008; Hartman & Marmon, 2004; Kaufman, 1991; Tolman, 2002) and used these to help me mobilize some of the themes and used this terminology to help me organize my findings.

After reading and re-reading (and re-reading) the narratives, I constructed a matrix for each overall theme with related narratives to enable me to develop “cases” that will serve as exemplars. For example, one theme that I found was modesty. This theme was present throughout the narratives and I looked at the theme across the women and points in their experience. I then identified quotes from the narratives I had analyzed that best exemplified each of the primary themes.

The final step of this process was to develop interpretations of the patterns that I recognized within participants’ narratives (a series of case studies of sorts) and across participants’ narratives. This final stage of analysis led me to identify the three “acts” in which I

describe how women prepare for marriage, their initial sexual experience and the experience of modesty, silence and sexual subjectivity. In many ways, this was not a separate step, but one that is woven into and created from the entire process.

Data Integration

Sexual scripting theory lends not only a theoretical structure but was for me a very tangible framework within which to organize these findings as women learn a script and, to push the analogy, “get into character.” Using this theory it helped me focus the way I was looking at the data and how I listened to the narratives. Onwuegbuzie and Combs (2011) suggest that the most complex step in mixed methods studies is the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to present an analysis in “a coherent and meaningful way” (p. 2). The findings reflect quantitative data and are joined with qualitative data that expand and further illuminate the findings. For example, I used my statistical analyses of women who report the premarital class as helpful or helpful to inform how I report what is included in these classes. This helped give me build the scaffolding of what content was included in the class as it represented the bones of a cultural sexual script. Then I use the qualitative data to illuminate the experience of the women, give it flesh, and provide a nuanced understanding of themes. As I explored how women experienced their initial sexual experience, I looked at how women reflected on their experience using the quantitative data, again, this gave me a simple description of the interpersonal experience. The qualitative data helped create a deeper understanding of both the interpersonal and intrapersonal experience of this complex and dramatic experience in the voice of the women. My goal, by weaving together both the qualitative and quantitative findings and extending “the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components”

(Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 2008, p. 127) is that this study will contribute to the understanding of this understudied population.

Ethical Concerns

As described, this study addresses sensitive and taboo topics that potentially can expose distasteful (or distressing or uncomfortable) self-knowledge to participants. As outlined above, an anonymous survey can serve as a better mechanism to study a sensitive topic and may be considered less intrusive and may elicit more honest and candid responses (Frost, 2010; Guterman, 2008; van Eeden-Moorefield, et al., 2008). Individuals are self-selected and anonymous; I did not have the opportunity to exclude individuals who might present as more fragile. From my clinical experience, while not a great concern, it did pose a certain amount of risk. Some participants could be more vulnerable or sensitive, and this survey may have been difficult for them. To address this risk, in the informed consent section I included resources (e.g., counseling centers, community resources, domestic violence hotlines, and sexual education websites).that all participants could access, at no fee, if they felt they needed more assistance. The resources cater to the observant community, and I identified resources that have both national and international phone numbers that would then refer clients to local resources.

As each participant accessed this survey through the Internet, they were prompted to read an informed consent disclaimer and indicate that their consent prior to participating. This informed consent included a statement of affirmation in which the participants attested to being over 18 years of age; this is considered legal age and is common ethical practice (Levine, 1988). As part of the study introduction, the participants were assured both anonymity and confidentiality. The online survey program automatically de-identified the data and preserved the dignity of subjects. I applied for a full Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval because of

concerns about risk to the participants; the IRB committee categorized this project as exempt. After each revision of the survey, I refiled for IRB approval because of the concern and continued to be granted an exempt status.

The Actors: Participant Information

Using descriptive statistics, I documented the characteristics of the women in this sample. The median age of the participants was 31 years old (range: 20-68), they were married for a median of 6 years (range: 0-45), married at age 23 (range: 18-55) and had 2 children (range: 0-11). Of the 398 completed surveys, 98% of the respondents reported being in their first marriage. The survey sample consisted of individuals who identified across the spectrum of the Orthodox Jewish community. Self-identification was distributed as follows: 46% identified as Modern Orthodox Machmir, 24% as Modern Orthodox Liberal, and 21% as Yeshivish or Chasidish. The remainder of the participants self-identified as Sephardi (2%), other (7%), or non-observant (1%), although they affirmed at the onset that they were eligible for the study and fit the criteria. Within these designations, 27% also identified as baal teshuva (a returnee to observance) which is defined as not being born into an Orthodox families.

Reflective of the population being studied, most participants attended single-sex high schools, either an all-girls yeshiva (37%) or a Modern Orthodox girls school (21%). Others attended co-ed religious day school (18%), public school (19%), or private non-Jewish school (4%). Of the 90 participants who attended non-Jewish high schools, 77 were baal teshuva. The majority (90%) of the sample reported obtaining at least an undergraduate college education (37%), and 59% of the sample majority obtained a Masters/advanced professional degree. Other results about educational levels within the total sample indicated that 14% obtained a vocational degree, and 6% reported a high school diploma as their highest level of education. Most

participants knew their husbands between 3-6 months (22%) or 6-12 months (26%) prior to marriage. Other participants knew their husbands for more than two years prior to marriage (24%) and one to two years prior to marriage (19%); only 9% knew their husbands for under 3 months.

There is a range of premarital sexual experience reported by the participants. Thirty-eight percent of the participants reported being *shomer negiah* that is, having no physical contact before marriage. Sixteen percent reported hugging and kissing, and 35% of the participants engaged in “Intimate Touch.” Twenty percent of baalei teshuva had sex with her husband prior to marriage, in contrast to 6% of the non-baalei teshuva participants. Interestingly, 43% of baalei teshuva had intercourse with other partners prior to marriage, while only 4% of the non-baalei teshuva participants reported this experience. This difference in premarital sexual intercourse experience can be explained by understanding that the women who self-identified as baalei teshuva adopted a religious life only when they became young adults or older, and thus may have been sexually active prior to that time. Many factors can influence a person’s decision or circumstance to becoming sexually active. The percentage of non-baalei teshuva women that engaged in sexual intercourse prior to marriage, though minimal, may simply represent that individuals depart from religious observance in all sorts of ways and can still identify as being part of the community. It may also be that the Orthodox community resides in a larger modern society where there are fewer barriers to being sexually active prior to marriage.

Both the survey sample and the participants who contributed narratives present similar demographics (see Table 1). The most notable difference between these samples is the response to the central question about the helpfulness of the premarital class. A larger percentage (see Table 2) of the narrative writers found the experience to be unhelpful (43% v. 34%) than did the

overall sample respondents. Only 26% of the narrative participants found the course to be helpful versus 34% of the overall sample respondents. The percentages of those who indicated a neutral response to the premarital class were similar, both in the narratives and in the overall sample.

I included a list (Table 3) of the characteristics of the 36 participants whose narratives of I analyzed and used for integration of findings. For fluidity sake, I assigned names to each participant to make it easier to integrate and report the material.

Table 3
Summary of Narrative Participants

Assigned Name	Age at Marriage	Length of Marriage	Premarital Sexual Experience	Perception of Premarital Class	Religious Self Identification
Adina	24	8	SN	Unhelpful	Yeshivish/Black Hat
Aliza	27	28	SN	Unhelpful	Yeshivish/Black Hat
Ariella	20	12	HH	Helpful	Modern Orthodox – Liberal
Chana	19	11	SN	Unhelpful	Yeshivish/Black Hat Modern
Chaya	20	12	Kiss	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir
Chumi	21	10	Kiss	Helpful	Chassidish Modern
Dalia	22	1	Kiss	Helpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Dasie	23	21	Kiss	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Devora	21	4	SN	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir
Elisheva	24	1	SN	Helpful	Yeshivish/Black Hat Modern
Elissa	32	2	IT	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Esti	26	2	HUG	Helpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Faigy	24	4	SN	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir
Fraida	20	13	IT	Helpful	Chassidish Modern
Hindy	22	3	SN	Helpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Jenny	23	25	IT	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Liberal

Keren	21	2	IT	Unhelpful	Modern Orthodox – Machmir
Leora	21	5	SN	Unhelpful	Modern Orthodox – Machmir
Malky	18	3	SN	Unhelpful	Chassidish Modern
Miechal	35	2	SN	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Miriam	21	14	Kiss	Helpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Molly	27	1	IT	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Naomi	32	8	Sex	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Ora	20	3	IT	Helpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Rachel	22	2	Kiss	Helpful	Orthodox – Machmir Modern
Rena	24	2	IT	Helpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Rozie	21	8	IT	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Ruchie	23	32	Kiss	Unhelpful	Yeshivish/Black Hat Modern
Sarah	26	4	IT	Helpful	Orthodox – Liberal Modern
Shani	21	3	SN	Helpful	Orthodox – Machmir Yeshivish/Black Hat
Sharon	23	1	SN	Helpful	Yeshivish/Black Hat
Shayna	18	8	SN	Unhelpful	Chassidish Modern
Tamar	22	3	IT	Unhelpful	Orthodox – Machmir
Tsippora	34	1	Kiss	Helpful	Yeshivish/Black

Yael	24	8	IT	Unhelpful	Modern Orthodox – Machmir
Yehudis	23	9	Hug	Unhelpful	Modern Orthodox – Machmir

SN = *Shomer Negia* (no premarital touching)

HH = Hand-holding

Hug = Hugging

Kiss = Kissing

IT = Intimate Touching

Sex = Sexual Intercourse

CHAPTER FOUR

LEARNING THE SCRIPT

Introduction to Findings

The purpose of this project is to expand knowledge about the lived experiences of married Orthodox Jewish women in their preparation and transition into sexual activity in marriage. In the following chapters, I present the depth and breadth of data obtained through this study. I attempt to share these findings in a way that adequately reflect the complexity and nuances of the lives of the women in my study. Gagnon and Simon's (1973) conceptualization of sexual scripts provides an orienting theory that helps me understand the experience of women in *kallah* classes, early marital sexual experience, and related sense of sexuality. This theory suggests that sexual scripts create what is considered sexual and how sex is enacted. Scripts emerge in the interaction within three distinct levels of human experience: the cultural scenario or social context, the unique interpersonal experience of the individual with another person, and the unique intrapsychic or intrapersonal experience of the person (Atwood & Dershowitz, 1992; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Borrowing this theater language, individuals can thus be understood as "actors" who are employing "scripts" to understand and shape their sexual interactions. These sexual scripts help these "actors" identify and navigate sexual encounters.

I have divided the findings into three chapters. First I will examine the women's experiences with premarital *kallah* classes and what they perceived as helpful and unhelpful during this process of "Learning the Script." Next I will present how the women describe their initial and early marital sexual experiences — in a sense their "Opening Night" — and about the major life shift it represents to them. Last I explore the "The Stage:" and the relationship and backdrop women describe using the dynamics of silence, modesty and pleasure. Paired with the

quantitative survey data, exemplars of themes from the narratives serve as the voices of the women and are incorporated through the inclusion of direct quotations from their written narratives that are representative of my analysis of the qualitative data.

Learning the Script: Premarital Education

I had an extremely hazy understanding of physical anatomy and had no idea where exactly my husband was “supposed to go in” at first. – Rena

As previously described, premarital education offered within the Orthodox Jewish tradition is unique because of its focus on religious family purity ritual and sexual education. It is traditional for all members of the Orthodox Jewish community to participate in premarital education; this education for women commonly is referred to as *Kallah* (bridal) classes. Men also attend classes or learn one-on-one with a rabbi or instructor; these classes are referred to as *Chasson* (groom) classes. Courses are offered by a private teacher — often the local *rebbetzin* (rabbi’s wife) teaches the women — or as classes at synagogues. The functions of the *Kallah* classes are multifaceted. In addition to providing instruction about the family purity laws, for some women this may be the first time they are being educated formally about sexuality, intimacy, and relationships. As participants reflect on their educational experiences, this study helps outline what is helpful and what could have been helpful during their transition from an unmarried woman into a new role as a married woman.

Consistent with the practices in the communities, the vast majority of Orthodox Jewish women do attend some premarital education, and it continues to serve as a community gatekeeper and step prior to marriage. Of the 398 respondents to the study, 97% participated in formal premarital education. Women often choose their course based on convenience, recommendations, and availability. Women reported that they were referred to their instructor

most frequently by a friend, their mothers, or by their *rebbetzin*. Most respondents studied with an instructor one-on-one (76%) and only 24% attended a formal class. The instructors typically were identified as a *rebbetzin* (49%) and teachers (37%). Other instructors were identified as siblings or friends. Only 53% of the participants knew whether their instructor had formal training in premarital education. The average length of study was 6 sessions of 2 hours.

If sexual scripts are considered blueprints of how we define our sexual expression, sexual behaviors, sexual desires, and the sexual component of our self-definition, then premarital instruction — such as *Kallah* classes, which emphasize sexual behavior and expression and educate about religious sexual ethics — can be seen as central to transmitting these scripts and one vehicle through which this cultural script is taught. Marriage represents the culturally sanctioned when and where sexual behavior is allowed, and these classes teach the what, when, and how. In turn, the classes relay cultural sexual norms.

I was interested to examine if the participants' demographic background is significant in whether they perceived a premarital course as helpful (Table 4). I looked at factors of each respondent's background, including age at marriage, educational level, religious self-identification and length of dating prior to becoming engaged; none of these factors was significant in indicating helpfulness versus unhelpfulness of the premarital education. However, there is a statistically significant relationship between participants' report of sexual knowledge prior to marriage and their experience in the class (Fisher's Exact Test ($N = 246$), $p < .0001$). Of participants who found the class helpful, 56% were *shomer negiah* as compared to 27% that reported the class unhelpful ($X^2(4, N = 248) = 27.2, p < .0001$). Only 2% that had had sex prior to marriage found the class helpful as compared to 12% that perceived the class as unhelpful ($X^2(4, N = 248) = 27.2, p < .0001$).

Literature indicates that getting married, similar to other large life transitions such as divorce, death of a close family member, and major personal illness, is known to be a life stressor (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In this population, getting married, also introduces, for many, first intercourse as an added dimension. I asked the women to indicate, using a Likert scale of how much they completely agreed or not agreed to a list of feelings (i.e., anxious, confusing, pleasurable) to this question: How would you describe your first experience having sexual intercourse after your wedding? As women report about their initial sexual post-marital experience, the level of helpfulness of the *Kallah* class was significant. The women reported experiencing early marriage as a stressful transition; both groups — those who found the course helpful (63%) and those who found it unhelpful (67%) — describe their first marital sexual intercourse as “anxious” reflecting the literature that this transition of getting married, with this added dimension of “first intercourse” is a life stressor.

However, there were some differences between these groups, of those who found the class helpful vs. unhelpful.. Individuals who reported that their premarital classes were unhelpful were more likely to answer that their initial post marital sexual experience was confusing ($X^2(4, N = 233) = 21.1, p = .0003$), embarrassing ($X^2(4, N = 238) = 16.8, p = .0021$) and frightening ($X^2(4, N = 238) = 14.5, p = .0058$). In contrast, those that found the course helpful reported more positive outcomes including satisfying ($X^2(4, N = 239) = 16.27, p = .0027$), romantic ($X^2(4, N = 243) = 13.28, p = .0100$) and exciting ($X^2(4, N = 243) = 22.73, p = .0001$). This difference suggests that beyond the primary function of providing instruction about Jewish family purity laws, *Kallah* classes may play a role in the initial marital sexual experience and, in some way, may set the stage for the bride as she enters this new role and helping her manage expectations and emotions.

It is important to note that respondents report a variety of components that contribute to their *Kallah* class experience as either being helpful or unhelpful. Because there is no central institution that regulates and coordinates the *Kallah* courses, each instructor determines the class curriculum, which results in a wide range of information being disseminated. Understanding the range of components included in the classes is key to understanding fully the women's experiences and their assessment of what was and was not helpful. This understanding of the resulting data could have a significant impact on future instruction and the development of community programming. Documenting this experience is critical in understanding premarital education and also sets the stage for understanding the complexity of the Orthodox Jewish sexual script(s).

Women are expecting to learn the what, when and how of marital intimacy. Standard for all *Kallah* classes is teaching the *taharat mishpacha* laws, which dictate in great detail the "when" of the sexual relationship within marriage. There is still variance in how these rituals and laws are taught and practiced. Additionally, these classes typically include components of sex education and discussion about relationships and communication. Again, this is unregulated and the presentation of these components falls on a continuum, but they are also a way that informs the women's transition into their new roles as married community members and as sexual partners.

In my analyses of both the survey and written responses of the women who indicated that their class was helpful, I found that they report about two general themes. I constructed these two themes from analyzing the survey data and examined what components were associated with women reporting that the class was helpful. I then analyzed the narratives to further understand this experience. The first theme is that classes are helpful (or would be helpful) if the instructor

includes inclusive and explicit sexual education. In a sense, women are looking for explicit information about the ‘what and how’ of having a sexual relationship. In addition to more extensive information, women report that the ambiance or the environment of the class and the viewpoint of the instructor is critical. The environment of the class allows either for the normalization of this transition or can further reinforce taboos around sexuality. This second theme encompasses several components, including the level of comfort with which the instructor and the bride discuss sexual topics, and the capacity and approach of the instructor. Women describe that it is helpful when the class is an open and safe space to learn.

Women report a large range of what topics were covered in the class including addressing transition into intimacy, how to have intercourse and practical suggestions for the first night. For example, only 33 participants reported that sexual anatomy and physiology was covered thoroughly in their Kallah class. More women that reported the *Kallah* class as helpful reported that there were more extensive educational components and information included in their class than those who reported the class was unhelpful (Table 5). The women who considered the class helpful were more likely to report that their class included information about sexual anatomy and physiology ($X^2(4, N = 241) = 59.68, p < 0.0001$), positions for sexual intercourse ($X^2(4, N = 240) = 60.72, p < .0001$), discussion about the possibility for pain during intercourse ($X^2(4, N = 234) = 68.55, p < .0001$), and practical suggestions for the first night ($X^2(4, N = 241) = 81.42, p < .0001$) They also were more likely to report that their class included discussions about the transition into permissible intimacy ($X^2(4, N = 240) = 84.19, p < .0001$) and other relationship guidance, such as how to achieve clear and open sexual communication ($X^2(4, N = 241) = 98.89, p < .0001$) and resolve conflict ($X^2(4, N = 236) = 68.07, p < .0001$).

My analysis of the narratives confirms and expands on these findings. In particular, I will outline what participants stated are their specific educational needs. The narratives of both cohorts (helpful v. unhelpful) contain observations and comments about what would have been helpful. As part of the prompts women were asked to state what they “wished” they would have known, so I have included exemplars from both groups. Overall, women report and describe that they find the Jewish law aspects of the class valuable but express that the topics need to be more inclusive. They reported that they wanted more technical sexual and physiological information, more information about what the women describe as medical sexual pain disorders, and more discussion around transitioning into being sexually intimate. The narratives reflect that this additional information would alleviate anxiety and enhance early marital sexual intimacy.

“Just sex”

As a basic foundation, women indicated that one helpful aspect of the classes was that they did learn the laws and rituals related to *taharat mishpacha* adequately. When asked what specifically was helpful in the class, even those who expressed a lack of sexual education and other deficits indicated that the class, as Rena commented, “ensured [that] I understood *taharat hamishpacha*” and taught them “to follow *halacha*” (Sarah). Hindy expanded on this theme and stated that the class “brought it [sex] out into the open within a Jewish and spiritual context, she gave spiritual as well as practical advice, and explained in detail the procedures for *taharat hamishpacha*.” These remarks ground the *Kallah* class in its primary role as transmitting a specific cultural script that frames sex and sexuality within a “Jewish...context” and that is structured by laws, rituals, and ethos, i.e., “spiritual context.” This is critical, because for women in this community, *taharat hamishpacha* is central to their identity as married women and enables women to be sexually active. But this Jewish context is not always helpful. As Dasie

describes it, sometimes “just sex” is also important. She indicated that her *Kallah* classes were unhelpful and writes:

It's almost like intimacy and sexuality can ONLY be discussed in a halachic framework. Obviously, the halacha is important, but if you are married, etc., then you are allowed to be in sexual relationship, so why can't it be discussed without bringing in halacha?... What is everyone so afraid of? Knowledge is power, and I think it's totally irresponsible of the rabbinate to continue educating people this way... Maybe I expect too much...but sex/intimacy is not ONLY about halacha. It's a very complicated subject and there are many different ways to look at and approach it. Maybe it's time to approach it as just plain people, instead of only as Orthodox Jews.sometimes it's just sex, and someone needs to stand up and say that that is ok.

Dasie’s observation reflects her frustration about how the rabbinate and those in authority or in positions to encourage, model, and provide a different model of providing sexual education, remaining focused on the *halacha* and the “spiritual context,” in this very culturally specific way, This focus and limited approach is “important” to her, but she is also challenging this as being the sole perspective offered, stating that it is “time to approach it as just plain people” and acknowledge the complexity of sex. She argues that infusing sex with too much of a spiritual framework “puts a lot of pressure” on the couple, when it can be “just sex.” This narrow focus does not validate the couple’s reality and educational needs, and she is looking for a more practical and explicit approach.

“Simply MORE about sex”

Adina, who was 24 when she got married, reflects on what she wished she would have learned in her *Kallah* class. She found her class to be unhelpful and although it prepared her for “the *halachos*... it was grossly inadequate in helping the sexual aspects of married life.” As she reflects:

I wish I would have known simply MORE about sex, men, their needs, women's needs, practical graphic information about the sexual process such as the need to for a man to go back and forth during sex... Can you believe I did NOT know

that? I had no idea that a man needs lubrication.... What the hell kind of Sex Ed is that? Lucky we could figure it out but the whole culture of *tzniyus* has created a very damaging characteristic of silence and silence is not the way to go when it comes to education.

Adina's comments serve as an introduction for women wanting to "simply [know] MORE about sex...." This is the first aspect of what women need to find classes helpful. They are looking for straightforward, basic information.

She also introduces the theme of silence and how damaging it is, and she relates this directly to her premarital education. This theme is strongly present throughout the narratives. Adina articulated, under the pretense of a culture of *tzniyus* (modesty), there is silence around the dialogue around sexuality and basic sexual information, even within a "special" space, the *Kallah* class, which is created to provide that information. In a later chapter, I present the role of silence and modesty and how that manifests as part of the sexual script as well as reproduces it. Although *tzniyus* in the context of *Kallah* classes has particular implications, when it silences and suppresses information, it creates a contradiction in the expected function of the *Kallah* classes.

Like Adina, other women assert that they want to "simply [know] MORE about sex" including "men, their needs, women's needs, practical graphic information about the sexual process." Women further expanded on what specific content was helpful or would have been helpful, which is more than the basic anatomy but also the social, interpersonal and corporeal dimensions of having sex. Rozie reported that "I wish I would have known about sexual arousal and response cycles. I wish I would have known about a better brand of lube." Others continued in a similar vein and added that they would have liked to know more. Hindy wrote, "I did not realize semen was so messy!" Keren bluntly shared, "I wish that I knew what the hymen really was so that it would cause me less anxiety. I wish that I had understood how my husband would

penetrate me and where my vagina was located.” Keren is able to identify that the lack of basic physiological information “caused [her].. anxiety.” Rena expressed a similar experience, as she “had an extremely hazy understanding of physical anatomy” and “had no idea where exactly my husband was supposed to go in” at first. Both Keren and Rena later described how they were diagnosed with sexual pain disorders and wished they had more sexual education. As expressive participants, they were able to describe how they struggled in their new role partially because of this lack of information and, as I explicate below, particularly about sexual pain disorders.

Even those who report having a helpful *Kallah* class wished for more information about actual sexual behavior. Ariella remarked that she would have liked “more specific tips on the first time - positions, etc., that could make it easier to consummate the marriage on the first night.” Malky said, “I also wish we would have been given practical tips on how to deal with the initial physical pain, inadequate lubrication, and how to arouse your partner...” Dalia wrote that she felt prepared and that she “was not shocked by things that my husband and I ended up doing together. I had practical tips that he really enjoyed in the bedroom, and it helps bring creativity and new ideas into our sexual life.” Tzipora reflected that “(the class) did not prepare me well enough for the actual experience. I feel I could have been much more prepared and given more info. If not just about the first night but in general about what to expect from sex and intimacy in general.” Tzipora appears to be looking for something beyond just technical information, for insight about the role of sex and intimacy in her life and how to adjust into this new role.

I understand the women’s desire for more technical information and guidance beyond the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* as an expression of looking for help in transitioning into this new role. They want guidance to figure out what to do, what to expect, and how to behave in their sexual interactions. It also confirms that women expect to receive a sex education in the *Kallah*

class, and the lack of this information is part of what made the experience unhelpful. The women sincerely want concrete information about sex in all its aspects. Anything less does not serve them well.

“Without intervention, intercourse can be painful”

Incorporated in the need for technical sexual information is the issue of sexual pain disorders and the fact that this topic was missing from their sexual education. This topic encompasses two distinct experiences. One is addressing the need to make sure women are prepared for the possibility of pain during early sexual encounters and to reassure new brides; the other is women specifically writing about sexual pain disorders. In the latter group, participants were very clear to distinguish that they were not describing initial pain during early sexual encounters. They had first tried to address the pain by addressing the emotional and transition-related aspects only to discover later that there were medical pain disorders. These participants seemed particularly motivated to share their experience. They emphasized the need to educate women and instructors about sexual pain disorders and to introduce the idea of seeking competent medical and mental health help early in the marriage.

In reflecting about initial pain or discomfort during sexual intercourse, Elissa remarked, “sex can be — it was in my case — extremely painful for the first few weeks...Couples should very specifically prepare — through talk — for their first sexual experiences...failure to do this out of ‘modesty’ leaves people vulnerable to be shocked, hurt and scared.” She asserts that a negative outcome of modesty is that it silences important information and leaves couples without a script and creates “vulnerab[ility] to be shocked, hurt and scared.” Elissa is also indicating the need for guidance about the transition into sex. In response to the question about what women wished they would have known and what they would tell their friend or sister, Dalia shared, “I

would tell my sister to prepare for pain and discomfort, but to get used to the idea of sexuality and not being uptight because that will just increase pain and discomfort...I would tell her to read articles from Cosmo [*Cosmopolitan*], no matter how cheesy, to help her loosen up and get new ideas for the bedroom once they are married.”

Elissa refers to pain during early sexual encounters and reflects that feeling prepared and calmer also could help with making intercourse less painful. The pain that these women are describing may reflect the body expressing their fear, anxiety, and confusion during this transition. Although Dalia does not indicate having pain, she connects anxiety to increasing the initial pain and wanting to help her sister by explaining that it is helpful to “get used to the idea of sexuality.” Earlier in her responses she shared that that in addition to attending *Kallah* classes, she prepared by “reading erotica or magazine articles with sexual tips,” as a way of becoming more comfortable with this new role. Dalia also indicates that she did not grow up religious, “was not *shomer negiah* prior to becoming religious,” and that her husband had been married before. She indicates this previous experience that allowed her to “get used to” sexuality helped them “very comfortable physically with being with each other.”

Dalia’s and Elissa’s cautionary references to painful sex and the need for preparation are very different experiences than those of women who described pain and later were diagnosed with medical sexual pain disorders. Tsippora was diagnosed with a pain disorder. She stated: “I cried often afterwards because I felt pain and I was so frustrated that it was only a good experience for my husband and I was in pain.” Tsippora is also reflecting a larger meaning of this pain for her: Beyond physical pain, she is experience the emotional pain of having an opposite, “frustrat[ing]“ and impoverished experience from her husband, and she is looking to

make sense of that, searching for a way of managing this and at the same time expressing her entitlement to sexual pleasure.

More pointedly, Michal exclaimed: “I wish I would have known that without intervention, intercourse can be painful all the time for a percentage of women.” Michal wants to introduce sexual pain disorders to women’s education. Rena, who opened this chapter, expands on this and shares the following in her extensive narrative:

Unfortunately I have two related medical conditions that cause sexual intercourse to be very painful and (so far) almost entirely impossible: vaginismus — a disorder where my pelvic floor muscles are abnormally tense — combined with vulvodynia — a problem where the tissue at my vaginal opening interprets any touch as painful instead of the normal neutral/pleasurable. These were only discovered when my husband and I tried (and failed) to consummate our marriage, two years ago....It was a major, major surprise that intercourse (or attempts thereof) was so excruciatingly painful. I really, really wish that we had known that sexual pain disorders exist and how to find treatment (it took several doctors and several months to figure out what was going on, and most of the doctors were somewhat traumatic experiences until we found knowledgeable and compassionate healthcare practitioners). It felt incredibly isolating and shameful and bizarre that we could not figure out how to have intercourse, especially before we knew about sexual pain disorders. I wish it had been mentioned somehow that these conditions, while thankfully rare, are real (and treatable) medical conditions, so that the initial months of marriage were not so sad and painful and confusing.

Rena shares several aspects of having a sexual pain disorder and her experiences. She appears to have a strong relationship with her husband and together they are finding ways of working through this struggle. In particular she shares that it was “a major, major surprise that intercourse...was so excruciatingly painful.” She was unaware about the possibility of sexual pain disorders and because of this lack of awareness, a manifestation of silence, and a specific unmet educational need, she felt “isolat[ion], [it was] shameful” and felt that it was “bizarre that we could not figure out how to have intercourse.” This lack of information had a drastic effect on her ability to transition into this new role. Rena continues to describe how she reached out to her Kallah teacher:

My *kallah* teacher was really nice, knowledgeable, and open, ... My impression from my *kallah* teacher and from my own expectations was that it would all just somehow work out after a bit of trying. But it didn't, and I think some more explicit instruction would have been a good idea. I went back to my *kallah* teacher shortly after the unconsummated wedding — at the time we did not yet know there was a medical diagnosis to come, and thought I must just be “too nervous,” so we talked about some of the emotional aspects of a new sexual relationship and she suggested I drink some wine to relax. She certainly meant well, but this was so inadequate a response. Clearly, she did not know about sexual pain disorders either, or I am sure she would have mentioned it as a possibility when I raised so many red flags (that I didn't know yet were red flags).

Rena (and her *kallah* teacher) thought that this transition will “somehow work out after a bit of trying.” This is part of the script she was both taught and she (re)created; when it didn't “work out” she returned to her teacher, the culturally sanctioned adviser of sexual issues, and although she believes her teacher meant well, she was not well trained or equipped to help Rena recognize or manage her sexual disorders. They initially imagined that she was “too nervous” or that the complications were attributable to “emotional aspects,” and they tried to address it this way. Nowhere in this script was there room for sexual pain disorders; it even “took several doctors and several months to figure out what was going on,” and to add insult to injury “most of the doctors were somewhat traumatic experiences.” Rena and her husband are now in the care of “knowledgeable and compassionate healthcare practitioners” and they are hopeful that she will get better and they will have “satisfying and painless sexual connections.” The lack of education concerning ‘normal’ sexual challenges versus complications that require more complex levels of treatment and intervention is in this case another aspect of the ‘unhelpfulness’ of *kallah* classes.

Keren, another very articulate participant, started a blog to document her experience of suffering from a pain disorder. She shares her experiences of seeking medical treatment, and her journey toward obtaining a sexually satisfying marital relationship. Keren directed me to read specific blog entries on her own blog she created; she, too, emphasized the need for education to

include more information so others can also get effective help. She has pushed back against the community norms and is promoting awareness and support.

In the narrative she directed me to read, Keren re-lived going for help early in her marriage:

So there I was, alone at the gynecologist. I told her about the pain and she made some sort of comment about how it usually takes six months for people to sort of figure out sex if they've never done it before. I tentatively said that maybe the problem was that we hadn't even had sex yet. Her eyes opened wide and she said, "Oh, I'm sure it's not that." Once she checked me out, though, she said, "I'm afraid your hymen is still intact." I burst into tears. Hot, furious tears. I was humiliated, savagely so. I felt incredibly stupid. She had me sit up, shined a little light down there and taught me about my anatomy and where the hole was...I walked out of that office furious with my husband and everyone who had failed me, including the entire Orthodox system, my kallah teacher, my mom, and most of all, myself. I couldn't believe that I was that stupid person who had to be told by my gyno that we just hadn't broken through the hymen and that's why it had hurt so much. I couldn't believe I was still a virgin. I didn't want to face anyone with this failure imprinted on my face.

Keren so vividly recalls her pain, frustration, and shame about her education and at the "entire Orthodox system" for failing her. She felt she should have known more. In her blog, she shares how she was diagnosed later with Congenital Neuro Proliferative Vestibulodynia, and she explains this condition to be "a proliferation of nerves...pain of the vestibule area in the vagina...is such that it presents as a burning, cutting, raw, searing, 'hot knife' kind of pain." She since has completed successful treatment and states that she and her husband can now "enjoy normal intimacy" and that she feels pleasure. Like Rena, she was not aware of sexual pain disorders and, like Rena's "traumatic experiences" with doctors, Keren met with an uncompassionate physician, where she cried "hot, furious tears" and felt that she "was that stupid person." This only added to her sense of shame and self-blame.

Keren was not given the sexual education she needed to manage this transition on the most basic level. She commented "I wish that I knew what the hymen really was so that it would

cause me less anxiety... I wish that I knew what the hymen.” She needed more than basic sexual education that provides more extensive information including about sexual pain disorders. She was “furious with [her] husband and everyone who had failed [her], including the entire Orthodox system, my *kallah* teacher, my mom, and most of all, myself.” She felt betrayed by the systems that she expected would protect her from pain, shame, and sadness.

On a deeper level, Keren could be reflecting feelings of failure in her role as a new wife and a woman, taking upon herself the responsibility for knowing information to which she had never been exposed. One might ask, “Why does she believe she should have known?” Throughout the women’s narratives, many use the language of failure or success; this seems to reflect women describing how they perceive their performance in their new role as a Jewish wife and adult woman. Most women — and Orthodox women in particular — are raised to get married and have families. Marriage is central to their adult roles, and central to that is the ability to be sexually involved with their husbands. Keren may be projecting a feeling of failure and isolation as a woman in a traditional community. She struggles when the script does not play out as planned and agonizes about how to readjust her role with her husband and her sense of self as they figure out her next steps.

“I was too shy to ask”

The second central theme that women report as a vital component of helpful premarital education is what I labeled the environment of the class. Leora helps me introduce this aspect of the class:

I wish I would have known more basics about sex. I didn’t really know much and my *kallah* teacher didn’t really go over much information. It would have been helpful to start from square one, and teach me information as if I knew nothing, and then gone from there. That way, if I was too shy to ask, I would still know what I need to know.

Leora is reflecting on the need for more information, but more importantly, she shares that not only did she expect more but that she was too shy to ask questions; she hoped that her basic education would be given by default and not be dependent on her ability or capacity to ask questions. She is also reflecting that the *kallah* class did not feel like a safe enough space to have the direct conversations and ask the questions she needed.

There are a number of components that present as important when women describe the environment of the educational experience. In particular, 93% of women from the helpful group reported that their instructors had a comfortable or very comfortable approach to sexual education. This is in contrast to the 44% of women from the unhelpful cohort who reported a comfortable environment. When the *kallah* teacher is able to communicate her own comfort with the sexual component of the course, it seems to be helpful to the women. When the instructor relays discomfort, it seems to increase the unhelpfulness sensed by the women. Similarly, when women responded about their personal comfort with the sexual component of the course, 74% of the 124 women in the helpful category reported being comfortable or very comfortable, while only 21% of the 125 women in the unhelpful cohort were comfortable or very comfortable. If women entered the class with a level of comfort with sexual materials, they found the class helpful. This speaks to the diversity among the participants and the instructors and that their personal comfort is one of many factors that affect how the class is experienced. Other factors that were reported as significant in providing a “helpful” experience were if questions were encouraged and, when question were asked, were the answers satisfactory.

“This normalized my experience”

Among women who reported that their *kallah* classes were helpful, the narratives further illuminated and expanded on these findings. Esti shared, “She discussed sexual intimacy with me

in a calm, upfront and honest way. This normalized my experience.” Hindy described that “She [the instructor] normalized sex, brought it out into the open within a Jewish and spiritual context, she gave spiritual as well as practical advice.” Similarly Rachel highlighted that the class helped her learn about her role and feel more comfortable. She shared that the “rabbi and *rebbetzin* were never embarrassed by my questions and that the classes were informative and a private place that I could safely ask questions.”

The phenomenon of normalizing surfaced throughout many of the narratives. Normalization suggests that there is a framework for understanding an experience and by which it provides ways of thinking, working, and organizing the experience and ultimately incorporating it into everyday life. Normalization seems to work as a way women learn their new scripts, as they make sense of and organize their new roles. The *kallah* class offers a way of expressing socially expected patterns of behaviors and normalizing this critical transition. *Kallah* classes are a vehicle to teach the cultural sexual scripts and give a framework to understand the changing script from being unmarried and frequently not engaging in sex, to marriage and the expectations to be sexually active.

By providing sexual education and information, by default the instructor automatically shares ideas and values around gender roles, pleasure, and desire; consequently the role of the instructor can be pivotal to the student’s experience. These ideas are communicated in a variety of ways. They can be addressed directly and may encompass messages of positive female sexual subjectivity. Other instructors may reinforce or suggest other scripts that do not introduce entitlement or pleasure. The omission of information could be reinforcing previously held concepts about sexuality, either sex positive or negative. The classes and the messages from the instructor outline the cultural scripts and also inform interpersonal and intrapersonal

scripts. Both the said and unsaid produce snapshots of the “typical” or “normative” sexual patterns. As I will illuminate more in reporting the findings about the women’s transition into their marital sexual relationships, these scripts around pleasure, desire, and modesty loom large with the participants.

Although Rena’s early marriage was complicated by her sexual pain disorder, she reflects positively on her *kallah* classes. Rena sums up her experience by recalling: “My teacher ensured I understood *taharat hamishpacha* and provided a way to talk openly about my nervousness and uncertainty about emotionally preparing for sexual intimacy.” *Kallah* classes can be a vehicle that can be helpful by normalizing individuals’ experiences, creating a dialogue, and addressing fears and anxieties. It appears that an instructor who is comfortable with the material and establishes a safe space to explore and question can provide a positive and helpful experience. The woman uses the updated “script” to interpret and respond to the new life stage; in other words, this suggests that when the script is positive and inclusive it can lend the individual a healthy blueprint to move through this transition and access help when needed.

“I still felt it was a taboo subject”

In contrast, when women shared that the course was not helpful they reflected on the experience of the instructor and the tone of the class. Adina reported: “I don’t think she [the instructor] was experienced or knowledgeable or aware enough to assess what her students needed to know in areas of sexuality and it caused a lot of problems in my sexual life.” Other participants who found the instruction unhelpful echoed similar concerns, particularly about the instructors and class environment. These experiences reflect participants’ feelings that the course not only did not serve as a vehicle to find a positive way of understanding this new experience but may have contributed to distress. Leora wrote that she “didn’t get a lot of my questions

answered” and “was too shy to ask,” while Devora shared that the “the *kallah* teacher did not respond sensitively or helpfully to some of my concerns.”

As evident in the quantitative data, the approach of the teacher and the atmosphere of the class colored the participants’ experiences and perceived sense of helpfulness. Jenny noted this dynamic:

I felt a little alienated in the class because many of the other members of the class were more naive and clearly uncomfortable talking about intimacy. I think this led to the class being more technical, which as I said was what I was looking for, but it would have been nice for a more open atmosphere. While I had knowledge of sex and intimacy, I still felt it was a taboo subject, and the class only reinforced this.

The reinforcement of sex being a “taboo subject” is the opposite of normalizing this transition. Jenny describes that she “grew up in a house where no one really talked about intimacy or the body.” In Jenny’s experience, she felt that the “other members of the class were more naive and clearly uncomfortable,” and this “uncomfortable” environment further reinforced the opaqueness around sex and intimacy. Instead of being a safe space to learn more than the “technical,” the class was a continuation of a cultural script of silencing sex.

As previously explored, the Orthodox community is not monolithic. As classes are unregulated, and heavily dependent on the instructor, therefore somewhat subjective and reflective of the instructor’s personal perspectives of and feelings about sexual subjectivity and interpretation and practice of the law. One way this is expressed how some instructors espoused a rigid and strict understanding of *Taharat HaMishpacha* laws and permissible sexual behaviors. This approach further stressed the transition into sexual activity within marriage. By presenting a rigid approach, this informs the student’s sexual script about permissible sexual behaviors. This brings to light different ways people within the communities understand the Jewish law, sexuality, and what is considered permissible.

Naomi wrote:

It [the class] placed rigid rules about sexual behavior on our marriage that led to a lot of marital conflict....I wish I had had a more permissive and less rigid kallah teacher who had given the range of halachically permissible sexual behavior and not just given me all of the stringencies on sexual intimacy. She basically endorsed only missionary position sex with the lights off while fully undressed in a bed only and that you both had to orgasm at the same time and kiss on the lips when it happened that way (as if it always does for all married people)....Although I didn't need a kallah teacher to prepare me for sexual relations....I did need her to tell me that although some rabbis espouse the view she was teaching, that there are other viewpoints and we should ask our local rabbi. Instead she made things so strict that my husband and I fought about our sex life for almost a year until we finally went to a rabbi and he undid much of what she and my husband's instructor had dictated.

Naomi is sharing how the presentation of a strict script impacted her personal experience and how she and her husband engaged this cultural script at the interpersonal level. This strict script of “rigid rules about sexual behavior” had in turn “made things so strict that my husband and I fought about our sex life for almost a year.” Naomi is a 40-year-old woman and was married for eight years. She reported that she became Orthodox at the age of 27 and had been sexually active when she was single. She also related that she and her “husband did not succeed at being *shomer negiah* or anything near that before we got married.” She explained that although she “didn't need a *kallah* teacher to prepare...for sexual relations,” she wanted to take the course to learn how to practice *taharat hamishpacha*. Naomi conveys that she likes the *taharat hamishpacha* laws. She felt that the rhythm of *mikvah* helped her marriage, because when they were “having so much conflict over the nuts and bolts of sex,” it structured their routine and encouraged them to be intimate.

That part of the cultural script worked for her, because it created a structure to have sex. But the presentation of the “rigid rules” hurt her. She needed to hear that “some rabbis espouse the view she was teaching but that there were other viewpoints.” She wanted the instructor to

acknowledge varied sexual desires, all that can be permissible — with consent — within marital sex. She states that later they “finally went to a rabbi...” It is within cultural norms to find counsel with a rabbi, and like the *kallah* teacher, he is a culturally sanctioned advisor. After consulting, “he undid much of what she and my husband’s instructor had dictated...” and Naomi reports that things improved as “there are many practical solutions that can make things better and they aren't always so intuitive or obvious.” Naomi is not rejecting the instrumental role of the instructors teaching a script, but rather that they teach it with rigidity and little room for personalization.

Yael also engaged a rabbi to receive a “dispensation” to divert from a strict script. Yael shared her experience:

I also wasn't lubricating naturally and using KY Jelly and Astroglide gave me a burning sensation. I was taught that a man can't “kiss down there.” I learned that oral sex was the only way I could become lubricated and since I couldn't use any other lubricants it was really my only option, however I felt tremendous guilt that we were doing something wrong. Years after marriage I was able to get a *heter* [dispensation] for him to “kiss down there.” I wish I would have known earlier that it is possible to get a heter. I wish my *kallah* teacher would have discussed everything in the questionnaire or at least encouraged me to call her with questions.

Yael’s *kallah* teacher presented a strict version of the cultural sexual script, and this presentation made it impossible for her to become “lubricated.” She and her husband veered from this rigid script and “felt tremendous guilt” until they received a “heter,” something she, and presumably he, didn’t know that they could get. They did return to the cultural norms of including the rabbi in their intimate life, although Yael does not share what was the ultimate impetus of consulting with the rabbi at that particular time. She does wish that more was “discussed, including everything in the questionnaire” and that her instructor would have encouraged additional conversations. Yael would have benefited from an instructor who

expanded the script to include pleasure, sexual agency, and as many wrote, more help with transition and initial sexual encounters.

Conclusion

Kallah classes serve as a gatekeeper to marriage and the marital sexual relationship. As I looked at what made the *kallah* class a helpful vs. unhelpful, Dasie introduced, “Knowledge is power,” and central to the helpfulness of *kallah* classes is the inclusion of comprehensive sexual education taught in a safe learning environment. Women specifically wanted to be taught more about the ‘what and the how’ of being a sexual partner. In particular they were looking for more information about anatomy, sexual positions, arousal, and the myriad aspects of “how” to have sex. While some participants expressed how important it was to feel prepared for initial sexual pain and to manage the stark transition, women with sexual pain disorders wished they would have known that these disorders existed and the means to access compassionate care. Women found that the environment in the class was important to how they experienced the instruction. If both they and the instructor were comfortable with sexual materials, the class was more helpful. Furthermore, it was helpful when instructors were able to normalize sexual transition, address questions, and provide support. Women found the class unhelpful when they were not comfortable enough even to ask questions, when their questions were not answered, and when a rigid approach to sexuality was espoused.

Helpful premarital education can alleviate anxiety, confusion, and fear during early marital sexual experiences. As will be discussed in the next chapter, participants experienced a plethora of emotions while transitioning into their sexual relationship. These emotions often are shaped by the women’s initial window into the sexual experience and the range of preparedness that they report following their *kallah* classes. Technical sexual knowledge, the ability to

understand sex within the context of religion, the distinction between normative and non-normative sexual discomfort, and basic communication skills are all tools that enhance a woman's ability to approach this significant and swift transition in this new role.

CHAPTER FIVE

OPENING NIGHT: EARLY EXPERIENCE AND THE *QUICK SHIFT*

The transition was weird. Because you always feel like it isn't allowed and all of a sudden it is allowed. You have to all of a sudden change something in your brain to say, "I'm not a slut for doing this. This is actually what we are supposed to do." — Sarah

First of all, I'm a very sensitive person and the idea of the wedding night (going from 0 to 100 and then back to 0) concerned me very much... We took it very slowly and didn't consummate the marriage for the first few days, and this was very helpful. — Devorah

The women's narratives reflect the juggling of multiple and often contradictory mandates, deeply sacred relationships, real and layered ambivalence about changing roles, expectations, disappointment, entitlement and sexual subjectivity. Cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts, though they may seem distinct, actually intertwine, and this complex interplay makes it "difficult to describe, capture, or examine in all its richness" (Wiederman, 2015, p. 9). In this chapter I move from a focus on the respondents' experiences in *kallah* class to an analysis of their initial sexual experiences and the development of their sexual selves within marriage." This transition illustrates the enactment of the complex interplay of scripts. It is important to note that in addition to premarital sexual education, the participants' experiences are also a product of many lifelong and personal circumstances that influence their sexual script and meaning-making. This will be explored further in the next chapter, as I present what I consider the larger stage and look at some of these dynamics.

Throughout the narratives, women reflect that they perceived marriage as a major life-cycle milestone that is magnified further by becoming a sexual partner, often for the first time, which shifts their sense of self. Not surprisingly, this transition is more momentous for women who were not sexually active with partners prior to marriage. There were statistically significant differences in feelings associated with this transition for sexually active women (defined as

sexual intercourse) prior to marriage and those who had not had partnered sexual experience, including less confusion ($X^2(2, N = 368) = 30.82, p < .0001$), (Chi-Square; $<.0001$), more satisfaction ($X^2(2, N = 375) = 42.21, p < .0001$), less anxiety ($X^2(2, N = 376) = 39.92, p < .0001$), more pleasure ($X^2(2, N = 379) = 33.43, p < .0001$), less embarrassment ($X^2(2, N = 371) = 15.88, p = .0004$) and less fear ($X^2(2, N = 371) = 35.28, p < .0001$) in contrast to those to those who did not have sex prior to marriage. There was no significant difference between the two groups when they reported levels of excitement and romance.

This chapter addresses the women's initial foray into being sexually intimate within marriage, often on the wedding night or shortly after. To continue the theater construct I have presented thus far (e.g., scripts, getting into character), I look at this, and at the way women recall their early marital sexual experiences, as "Opening Night." I have identified what I am calling *the quick shift* to represent an overall theme of the early transition into marriage, including the rapid change of the women's social and personal status and their new sexual activity. This transition encompasses both challenging and empowering dynamics. As I will explicate, this quick shift represents the complex and layered place sexuality occupies and the negative and positive impact on the lives of these women.

As a phenomenological study, I am seeking to develop an understanding of this complicated experience: there are five different aspects of this quick shift that help conceptualize this transition. There are aspects that are challenging to the women, including the shift in the meaning of sex, knowing themselves as sexual beings, the shift in boundaries of modesty, the shift within the context of *niddah*, and the shift that is full of expectations as well as disappointments. This all occurs simultaneously with positive, pleasurable and even empowering components such as the sudden autonomy over one's own body, being free to express love

physically, and learning to negotiate physical intimacy. As I present both the positive and negative aspects to this experience, I also note that the women find different ways to navigate this tension as needed by employing various strategies, primarily by having open communication, allowing themselves the space to learn, resisting the mandate to have intercourse right away, and even challenging the institutions (including the premarital classes) that define sex in narrow terms. This process is also part of the *quick shift*.

Yehudis, who was 23 years old when she got married, recalls her early sexual experience nine years later. This extensive narrative raises a number of the shared themes that best helped me conceptualize this *quick shift* and touches on many aspects of this collective experience.

My first sexual experience was not what I expected at all. I thought it would be very romantic, that my husband and I would know exactly what to do to pleasure each other, and we would both be happy and satisfied in the end. What actually happened was, I was extremely embarrassed to be naked when he was in the room, even with all of the lights turned off and the covers over me. My husband wanted to touch me, but I was so sensitive, that I felt a little uncomfortable. I could not relax. It was hard to relax because I had never done this before, and all of a sudden, it was completely allowed AND expected. I didn't know what I was supposed to do to give pleasure and I felt really badly because I didn't know what to do. He was nervous as well, but not as much as me. I was so nervous, anxious, and could not relax, that in the end, my husband could only penetrate a tiny bit before he ejaculated. I was too nervous, he was too excited, and we both ended up being disappointed. It took us a long while before we figured things out.

This narrative serves as an introduction to a number of the women's reflections. Yehudis touches on different components of her experience with *the quick shift*. She had expectations of the experience being "romantic" and that they would "know exactly what to do to pleasure each other"; she did not have expectations of feeling anxious, nervous and disappointed. She touches on feeling "embarrassed to be naked...even with the lights turned off." She also mentions that suddenly the script changed from being "not allowed" to being "completely allowed AND expected." Yehudis also shares that it took a while to figure it out, but that she and her husband

ultimately do. As I will illuminate, these represent some of the subthemes that encompass this experience of a *quick shift*.

“I’m not a slut for doing this” — The Quick Shift in the Meaning of being Sexually Active

One aspect *the quick shift* signifies is the change from “not allowed” to “completely allowed AND expected” and a redefining of what it means to be sexually active. This dramatic change takes part in a larger life context where women describe that there are evasive messages about sexuality and a notion that sexuality prior to marriage would sully them; further, there is often minimal dialogue about sexuality or sexual development. Then suddenly, upon marriage, there is a dramatic script change: It becomes culturally permissible and encouraged and *necessary* to engage in sexual behaviors. Part of transitioning into this new role as a successful wife is one’s ability to relate sexually and be sexually intimate with your husband.

As Rena describes her experience, she shares that she found quite difficult the emotional aspects of transitioning toward sex being “permissible” and mandated. For her, this is part of *the quick shift*, as she writes:

I found challenging the emotional aspects of transitioning towards sex being permissible and even encouraged. This was a profound identity shift from the “I’m a good and responsible girl; see, I’m not sexually active” self-image during my pre-marriage years, and was initially (for the engagement and first few months of marriage) very challenging emotionally to switch.

Rena’s reflections go beyond “allowed AND expected” to questioning a value system and meaning that is ascribed to being sexually active. Similar to that in Sarah’s opening comment, as she shared, “I’m not a slut for doing this. This is actually what we are supposed to do.” The use of the language of “slut” indicates the strong social stigma attached to anyone who crosses this forbidden line. Rena’s reflection that being a “good and responsible girl” which she equates with not being sexually active reflects the premarital cultural sexual script. Then, once the women

entered into marriage, this script changes abruptly — an event rather than a process — and there is a message that sexuality and sexual activity are more than permitted but are even holy and mandated.

Malky describes this *quick shift* as well: “I was confused, and kept thinking of it as a non-Jewish thing to do. I was also pretty grossed out by physical intimacy. I looked forward to being *niddah*.” Malky conveys that she always thought of sex as being “non-Jewish,” perhaps as unholy, unsanctioned, or wrong. Now within marriage, she is confused by sex having a different meaning. The quality of this dramatic and sudden shift in the cultural script and the meaning of sexuality is at the heart of what these women must accomplish: a profound, even a 180-degree and instantaneous shift in the meanings of the fundamental concepts that have comprised what it means to be good Jewish women. She describes her internal experience that being sexually intimate “grossed [her] out” and that she looks forward to being a *niddah*, a time when according to Jewish law she is not allowed to be sexually intimate, and in some way able to return to a more familiar and comfortable role.

Yael describes her early experience:

Four days after our wedding we still had not had complete intercourse. This was frustrating but we were still elated to be newly married....I put on very sexy lingerie and felt confident in it. My husband was very turned on and we were finally able to consummate our marriage. I was thinking that it was a very special and spiritual moment and I even cried due to the emotion.... it was hard to fully believe that being together was permitted...I knew it was permissible but feeling it was a different story. I feel strange having my husband in my bedroom in my parents' house — even 8 years later. I feel like it's scandalous that he's there. I know it's silly but the thought crosses my mind....I didn't feel badly about myself or impure in any way.

Yael, though she and her husband did not consummate the marriage on their wedding night, still feels “elated” and has a positive sense of sexuality. She holds this complexity in which she remembers her “opening night” as a special and spiritual experience, while at the same

time she found it “hard to believe that being together was permitted.” The *quick shift* in meaning and script, that now she can have her husband in her bedroom in her parents’ home “even 8 years later,” still feels “scandalous.” She makes the distinction of knowing something while having other feelings. She is able to move from knowing that sex is now permitted and within role, and even though it feels “strange,” she feels confident and does not “feel badly about myself or impure.” While she is able to make this shift in meaning, the residue of her previous understanding of herself lingers.

“Years of trying to be asexual” — The Quick Shift in Knowing Self as Sexual

Another aspect of *the quick shift* is knowing themselves as sexual beings, including the enactment of an intrapsychic script, the actual experience of being sexual and being culturally allowed to be sexual, and seeing themselves in this new role. Women make an explicit connection between their premarital sexual selves and the challenge of the adjustment into being sexual and sexually active; this is also about connecting to desire and creating a new sexual subjectivity.

When Chana described her transition and becoming sexually active, she stated:

[We] didn’t know how to have sex correctly....only after I contacted my *kallah* teacher, he (my husband) went and learned to thrust in and out so it wasn’t so painful...I did buy *Sex for Dummies* a year into marriage. Many of my friends had some similar experiences, we had never looked at a guy and here to have sex with a complete stranger! After all these years of focusing on *tznius* and no boys it was a hard adjustment. Miracle we all don’t end up lesbians!

Chana begins by sharing that she did not know how to have “sex correctly” and how she navigated that aspect of her new role by reaching out to her *kallah* teacher. She and her husband recognized the teacher as an expert to help direct them to have “sex correctly.” She spoke to her *kallah* teacher on her husband’s behalf. She also bought a book, and not just any book, but *Sex*

for Dummies, somewhat symbolic of Chana recognizing that she felt as if she was a “dummy” and needed to start from a basic approach.

As part of the challenge of this *quick shift* is an expectation to move from “never look[ing] at a guy” to having sex with a “complete stranger.” As she shares her experience of a focus on modesty and “no boys,” she sees this as part of why it was a hard adjustment. This idea, initially introduced by Devorah as “zero to one hundred,” symbolizes the experience of the expectation of minimal sexual or social contact with males to consummating the marriage on the wedding night (or soon after). Chana describes it as “never look(ing) at a guy” to having sex with a “complete stranger.”

My particular focus on this narrative is Chana’s poignant remark that “after all these years of focusing on *tznius* and no boys it was a hard adjustment, miracle we all don’t end up lesbians!” There are several ways to understand this remark. One meaning might be that if sex with a man is so unpleasant and/or difficult, women might be more comfortable having sex with other women, and not become the good Jewish woman. It may also highlight her experience growing up in a primarily gender-segregated society with a focus on modesty and how this focus may have made Chana feel disconnected from her sexual self. In a community where there is separation, women feel close to other women, and Chana has never had the experience of developing emotional and subsequent sexual intimacy with a man. She does appear to have close relationships with female friends, sharing that “many of my friends had similar experience” and seems to know about their sexual experiences. She later expresses that she now finds sex pleasurable and even “maybe once or twice a month it’s pretty good.” For her, this *quick shift* encompassed a shift in understanding her “sexuality and all the new roles” and the suddenness of the *quick shift* into being a sexual person did not work for her. She suggests that the *quick shift*

be slowed down and that “ideally there should be a 6-month course that spans premarital to adjusting to marriage, including some husband/wife sessions to help them understand their sexuality and all the new roles.”

Shani reflected on this particular internal transition and knowing herself as sexual:

Reading about something and doing it is not the same thing. I thought all my reading meant that I was ok with being a sexual person but I was actually more repressed than I thought...I wish I had become comfortable with my sexuality before my marriage instead of subconsciously feeling guilty about it for years.....I thought that understanding sex intellectually before marriage meant that I would be prepared and everything would be smooth sailing. But it wasn't. Years of trying to be asexual for religious reasons made it hard to transition to a sexual relationship and the 2 weeks on 2 weeks off of *taharat hamishpacha* made it even more difficult.

Shani is speaking to this internal shift, both at the interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts level, on how to manage her sense of self as a sexual being after having been “asexual.” She anticipated that she would find the transition to be smooth because she felt she had an intellectual understanding of sex. She learns that an intellectual grasp of sex is not the same as connecting to embodied feelings of sexuality. She connects the difficulty in her *quick shift* to the long tenure of the former cultural script that she navigated, the “years of trying to be asexual for religious reasons.” She then speaks of the additional complication of adhering to *taharat hamishpacha* — the family purity laws of separating during menstruation and the subsequent *niddah* time — that make it hard to transition into and out of the sexual relationship with her husband. This rhythm and its related restrictions, as I will expand, also surfaces as part of this shift.

Like Shani, Tamar expresses this aspect of her *quick shift* as “confusing.” She shared, “It was confusing to come to terms with being ‘allowed’ to feel feelings that I had had since adolescence. It was difficult to adjust to not trying to stifle sexual feelings.” Tamar

confirms that for her this idea of connecting to oneself sexually and that part of the shift, from “not trying to stifle” to “being allowed to feel” her sexual feelings, is “confusing.”

Molly had a different premarital experience, but also touches on this transition:

We had been together for such a long time, waited for marriage to have sex, but still did pretty much everything but sex....I also think that going from a couple who was physically intimate, but drew the line at not having sex to suddenly being able to have sex, was terrifying. When I reflect on it, I feel like I had been repressing an urge for sex for so long and as a result, turned off my interest in it. The whole transition was really just so challenging for me.

Although Molly shares that she and her husband “did pretty much everything but sex,” she still admits it “was terrifying” transitioning and a difficult adjustment into having intercourse, something she and her husband “drew the line” at previously. She expresses that she had been “repressing an urge for so long...” that, somewhat counterintuitively, what should have been a release or relief seemed to “turn off [her] interest” in sex. Actual sexual intercourse represents a meaningful shift to her, and though she may have been sexually active prior to marriage, sans intercourse, her shift includes this transition. Molly seems to suggest that although they had been sexually intimate but adhered assiduously to the purity laws by not having intercourse, thus maintaining her “good Jewish woman” status, the shift into having actual sexual intercourse after repressing the urge for so long made the transition into having sexual intercourse even harder. Both Molly and Tamar reflect on the experience of being permitted to connect to their sexual agency, sexual desire, and feelings after “stifling” and “repressing” them as part of their premarital script as a component of the struggle of the *quick shift*.

“Self-conscious about being naked” — The *Quick Shift* in Sense of Modesty

Another component of this *quick shift* is the sense of a shift in modesty and the fast-changing boundaries around modesty. This too represents part of the *quick shift*, from always being expected to dress modestly to quickly being naked. Similar to the dramatic shift of

connecting to being sexual and from viewing sex as “slut(ly)” to being holy, the shift from being clothed to being naked can be a stark one. Within these communities there is great value and attention given to dressing modestly, and people adhere to standards of dress that include primarily wearing modest dresses that cover knees, elbows, and collarbones. This is a very culturally specific aspect of an opening night, which for many women may be the first time they are naked in front of a man. The contrast from assiduous covering of all body parts to no covering of any, which is not simply allowed but expected, is jarring.

Chana describes her wedding night as “hard and scary. I was self-conscious about being naked in front of him even though it was dark.” She found herself being scared, a different emotion than the shift from modesty to nakedness had for her. Like Chana, Yehudis’s previous description of her opening night conveyed the difficulty presented by the quick shift from being dressed modestly to being “naked.” Efforts to protect her modesty and perhaps slow the shift — “even with all of the lights turned off and the covers over me” — weren’t sufficient to traverse such a profound change. She was “extremely embarrassed,” an understandable reaction given her previous role of an unmarried Jewish woman.

Chaya also recalls the change of her sense of modesty as a dimension of the *quick shift*:

I hardly knew anything when I got married. I was soooo uncomfortable and nervous on my wedding night. It was anything but romantic! It was awkward. Neither knew what we were doing. Because sex is such a private thing it was very hard for me to “let go” during sex because you’re going from not talking about it at all to all of a sudden having sex.

Her experience is of moving from one extreme to another, that of not even being able to talk about sex and then the expectation “let(ing) go” and having sexual intercourse. Modesty, even during their engagement period, would deter some couples from “talking about it at all.” Her comments also touch on expectations. Chaya’s expectations were that her wedding night be

romantic, and she describes it as “awkward,” something she connects to the fact that there is such a jarring shift in sexual awareness and activity.

“He wouldn’t be able to hold me” — The Quick Shift in the Context of Niddah

Another element of the *quick shift* is the implementation of the family purity laws, particularly in reference to the wedding night. This is the enactment of interpersonal and intrapersonal scripts emerging in the face of the change of the appropriate cultural script. As previously described, the timing of sexual relations within an Orthodox marriage is regulated by the woman’s menstrual cycle and her subsequent *niddah* status. Weddings are planned around the woman’s menstrual cycle to ensure that she can go to the *mikvah* shortly before the wedding, therefore allowing the newlywed couple to be physically intimate. Once a couple consummates the marriage, a virgin bride automatically is presumed to be a *niddah* again, and the couple may not engage in any physical or sexual touch until she is able to return to the *mikvah*, typically a 12-14 day wait. (There is an expectation that a couple should consummate the marriage prior to the next menses to avoid having to wait an additional two weeks until the next ritual bathing.) Following the *mikvah* visit, after the first post marital menses, couples fall into an on/off pattern of physical and sexual intimacy regulated by the woman’s *niddah* status and *mikvah* visits. This timing and ritual pattern provides a backdrop for the wedding night and for sexual intimacy throughout a marriage. It also increases the pressure to consummate the marriage soon after the wedding night. This impacts this experience.

Ruchie shared, “Being allowed to be sexually intimate was intoxicating but having to stop for 2 weeks every month was hard and remained difficult for more than 25 years.” She can relate to the “intoxicating” aspects of being sexually intimate, in which she and her partner are permitted to be sexually intimate, but also her internal experience of refraining remains

“difficult” to “have to stop.” She is describing experiencing pleasure so strong as to be “intoxicating” though it is regulated by rituals that are out of sync with her desires and pleasure in “be[ing] sexually intimate.” This is in stark contrast to other women who describe finding comfort in the structured break and the return to a non-sexual relationship. This difference represents how sexuality maintains a complicated place in life and is an example of how people can experience the same things differently, some as difficult and others as comforting.

Illuminating the subsequent *niddah* as part of the shift, Esti elaborated on the complex interplay amongst her many emotions, her husband’s and her mutual navigation of the challenges inherent in the cultural mandates, and the contradictions between her feelings and what she needed to do:

During the week of our *sheva brachot* [celebratory first week of marriage], we consummated our marriage. I was a total wreck. Mostly because I knew that once we “successfully” had sexual intercourse I would be considered a *niddah*, even if we saw no blood, and we would need to separate. This was very very very difficult for me to process, and also deal with. The few nights prior to this experience we had been enjoying each other with the knowledge that we wouldn't have to separate at the end of the night. For me, that “safety net” so to speak was crucial. After finally being allowed to have a physical relationship with my love, being told that that physical relationship would need to be “on hold” for close to two weeks so shortly after it began was heartbreaking. Feeling like there was the pressure that you “had to have sex,” when it was something completely foreign and somewhat scary didn't help either. What if it was painful? What if I wouldn't enjoy it? What if he wouldn't enjoy it? There were so many things to worry about, and then to know that he wouldn't be able to hold me at the end of all of it, was very overwhelming. I held on for as long as I could. I cried that night.

Esti brings up a number of the components of the *quick shift*. In particular, she described that she was a “total wreck” particularly because “we had ‘successfully’ had sexual intercourse...considered a *niddah*.” This pressure informed how they slowed down their *quick shift* by not having intercourse the first night, but at some time that first week; she used this as a “safety net.” Esti, like Ruchie, experienced the separation as “heartbreaking,” strong language to

describe her emotional experience and consistent with her use of endearing language of “after finally being allowed...*with my love*.” She too reflects on the aspects of the *quick shift* of feeling that sex was “completely foreign and somewhat scary” and she had many questions on how to make this shift successfully, for example, that both she and her husband “enjoy it.” She expressed the pressure to manage this new role in the context of an activity dictated by a cultural script that would not allow her husband “to hold [her] at the end of it all.”

“Wow, this is it, this is THE night” — The Quick Shift in the Context of High Expectations

Esti also raises a subtheme around the expectations and disappointments particularly about whether she and her husband “enjoy it.” Here is an example that illuminates this additional component of the *quick shift* for many of the women in which they describe expectations, disappointments, and pleasure. There is also pressure during the *quick shift* to consummate the marriage successfully, and the expectation to know how to give and get enjoyment. This dynamic surfaces throughout the narratives. Yehudis, in her earlier description of her opening night, writes, “I thought it would be very romantic, that my husband and I would know exactly what to do to pleasure each other, and we would both be happy and satisfied in the end.” Yehudis later writes that part of her anxiety that opening night was that she “didn’t know what [she] was supposed to do to give pleasure...and felt really badly....we both ended up being disappointed.”

Part of the internal climate of this *quick shift* is this anxiety about expectations for “successfully” having sex, which is not only the technical consummation of sexual intercourse but for some participants, making sure that there is pleasure and enjoyable sex. Like others, Yehudis uses language that references pressure to be successful at this new role, that of a good Jewish wife. Then there are the related disappointments and concerns.

Women sit at the intersection of many distinct cultures and influences that inform their sexual scripts. Although these women identify as members of the Orthodox Jewish communities, many also are engaged in secular communities and are exposed to contemporary media and entertainment. This also informs their sexual scripts and expectations. They have their own personal backgrounds that undoubtedly influence their expectations. This dynamic surfaces throughout their stories. Shari reflects:

My husband and I were new at this and although we both grew up non-observant, the first time is always the first time — we did not know how to do it “right.” It took a few trials to get to the point and complete the intercourse. I was feeling silly not knowing what to do. I was feeling excited that I can finally do it, despite some bumps on the road. I was thinking that with time it will get better...I wanted it to be more romantic and less technical, more effortless.

Shari describes that she and her husband “grew up non-observant” perhaps to speak to her background and imply a level of fluency and comfort with sex assumed to be more common to those from less-insular background, but she is sure to mention that this is also her opening night, and that she felt the pressure to “do it ‘right.’” She, too, felt “silly” for not knowing what to do, and although she expresses holding both feelings of excitement but also wanting something more. This narrative is an example of the interplay of sexual scripts, when there are expectations around what it means to do “it ‘right.’” For Shari, that means “more romantic and less technical” and feeling “silly” and disappointed. Of note is her ability to tell herself that “with time it will get better.” This ability to self-talk and self-soothe is one strategy to manage this transition.

Miriam shared that “I thought that I had watched enough movies, read enough books, was well-informed without being experienced sexually. I was very, very wrong. I think that that was the biggest eye-opener for me. It's not like I lived in a bubble or grew up in a sheltered environment.” Miriam is highlighting that her expectations, because she “watched enough

movies [and] read enough books,” were that she would understand how sex plays out. She learns through her experiences that she was “very, very wrong.”

Like Miriam, Hindy connects the influence of popular media as part of her transition

I did not realize it would take so much practice to become “good” at it. In that way I wish I had not seen so many Hollywood movies depicting people delighted by the amazing sex they had the first time, I now know it just is not realistic for most people. The imagery of the film and TV industry, I found did not help my sexual relationship it only exposed us to false expectations, rather than letting us experience sex on our own term.

Hindy thought that her experience would play out like the “Hollywood movies depicting people delighted by the amazing sex they had the first time,” literally scripted, idealized first-time sex circulating in the popular culture to which she had been exposed. In retrospect, with experience, she realizes that is not realistic. But she states that her expectation that her opening night would mirror a Hollywood scene hurt her sexual relationship with her husband, where she would “rather...experience sex on [their] own term[s].”

Ariella echoed this experience, saying “I was nervous on our first time. I was excited but very apprehensive....We had these glorious visions of having movie sex, but it was just awkward and it hurt. ...” She expected her opening night to unfold like a movie, and she and her husband both had “glorious visions of having movie sex,” but their debut was “awkward.”

In contrast, Rachel reflects on her opening night as positive, as she also remarks on the major change in their status as a couple:

Gosh, our first time was weird. It was awesome because I really felt comfortable and loved, but it was weird. I was imagining an awkward, fumbling 2-minute experience, but it was way better because my husband wanted me to feel good too. It was strange to all of a sudden be allowed to touch openly (well, not too openly — we didn't want to scar anyone) after months of not being allowed to touch....it was weird to be allowed to do anything!

The tone of Rachel's note is playful and excited; her opening night was "awesome," and not as "awkward" as she anticipated. She had expectations of a "fumbling 2-minute experience" but it wasn't, which she attributes to how her "husband wanted [her] to feel good, too." Like Devorah, who opened this chapter, Rachel also narrates "the zero to one hundred" aspects; describing it as "weird to be allowed to do anything....all of a sudden" it seems that they managed this new experience together, and with her husband connecting to her pleasure. Her sense of humor reflected in her comment that "it was strange to all of a sudden be allowed to touch openly" but not "want[ing] to scar anyone," reflects a sense of empowerment and almost sounds flirtatious and fun, but also of conforming to community norms that remain even during marriage.

Chumi's narrative reflects many layers of complexity in this transition and further illuminates her expectations and excitement of the opening night. Even though she felt "warned" of possible complications, she had high expectations for what she calls "THE night."

On the first night we first just touched (finally!) a while for the first time, tried to figure out how to kiss through trial and error, and it was scary and exciting and thrilling and unbelievable all at once. As I was getting ready I remember thinking wow, this is it, this is THE night everyone imagines and dreams of their whole life and I'm here! It was very exciting, blissful, and happy. When it was time to finally have relations he ejaculated too early, which I was warned about might happen, so that didn't come as a surprise, so that was that. We just went to sleep but we didn't sleep the whole night, too excited by the prospect of being allowed to sleep with each other. The whole rest of sheva brachos we tried and it didn't work! It killed me every time we tried, and I was thinking there's no way this thing is fitting inside of me....My kallah teacher told me all these different positions to try....How is a bulldozer supposed to fit inside a mouse hole, I always wondered. After a month after we got married we finally were successful in having actual relations...we're together like normal now.

Chumi shares her excitement and the tangle of emotions at being able to touch "finally" and that it was "was scary and exciting and thrilling and unbelievable all at once." At the same time, she also communicates that she set high expectations — that it is "THE night" — mirroring

a larger cultural script about the blissful wedding night and unrealistic expectations. She is able to connect to her internal experience and feelings of “exciting, blissful and happy” while simultaneously describing the physical and instrumental difficulties that they experienced and navigated together. Her concerns about the physiology of sexual intercourse (“How is a bulldozer supposed to fit inside a mouse hole”) reflect a lack of basic sexual education. With the help of her *kallah* teacher, she was able to divert from the original script and access a larger repertoire of “different positions” that ultimately helped them be “successful.”

Navigating the *Shift*: Ways Women Make It Work

Embedded in examining the opening nights is the exploration of how these women manage this new role and their transition. Many of the ways women manage this are illustrated in the narratives shared previously. The *quick shift* encompasses many different elements and women look for ways to ways to understand and manage their new roles. To introduce one way women navigate this shift, Leora shared how she and her newlywed husband managed their opening night: “It was weird that it was finally ok to touch. I didn't want to rush into anything, since everything was completely new to both of us. After the wedding, we just sat in our room and cuddled. Something so nice and so simple.”

One unifying characteristic of how women make it work is that of empowerment and choice. Like Leora, many women were able to recognize their anxiety and slow down the transition. They found ways of altering the expectations for this new role. Those who describe managing this transition well appear to take control and rewrite their own scripts to meet their needs for intimacy, often by not rushing into sex and giving themselves space to mediate the challenging parts of the *quick shift*. This delayed timing allows an easier shift in the meaning of being sexual, a reconnection to one’s own sexuality, and a less drastic change in modesty.

Despite it being “weird,” Leora conveys confidence and care in how she and her husband navigated their new status and shifted into the sexual dimension of their relationship. Unlike other women who felt pressured to consummate their relationship on their wedding night and attend to the array of difficulties entailed in fulfilling this mandate, Leora was clear. She “didn’t want to rush into anything.” Leora and her husband gave themselves space and resisted the expectations to have intercourse right away; they “sat” and “cuddled,” getting used to and enjoying this new intimacy. They were able to experience a positive and pleasurable experience, as “nice,” without the anxiety of the quick shift. Their decision also broadened the narrow definition of sex to include “cuddling” and getting to know each other as being sexual.

This decision to slow down the transition is employed by others; Devora shared her experience as well:

First of all, I'm a very sensitive person and the idea of the wedding night (going from 0 to 100 and then back to 0) concerned me very much. No one I spoke to thought this was a big deal (except my then-fiance, who B”H [thank God] I was able to talk to openly about these issues long before the wedding) and basically everyone told me I’d be busy with other things and it wouldn’t bother me. Well, it did. We took it very slowly and didn’t consummate the marriage for the first few days, and this was very helpful. Fortunately we are great communicators....and our sexual relationship blossomed very quickly.

Devora recognized her anxiety and concern about “going from 0 to 100 and then back to 0.” She and her fiancé were able to talk openly, and their ability to negotiate physical desires with one another via communication enabled a transition in which her “sexual relationship blossomed very quickly.”

Michal shared a similar experience, knowing and trusting her feelings about what she was supposed to do on her wedding night and bringing that knowledge into her relationship prior to the marriage. She wrote, “I always had an issue with going from nothing to everything on the first night. I spoke with my husband about it before we got married and we decided not to have

intercourse on the wedding night unless we both wanted it.” She and her husband’s ability to negotiate this transition with communication lessened the negative aspects of the *quick shift*. She was able to know herself well enough to communicate with her husband that they would wait, slow down, and resist the expectation to have intercourse on the wedding night. They gave themselves the space they needed to make this shift together. Unlike Chaya, who remarked that “because you’re going from not talking about it at all to all of a sudden having sex,” she was able to talk with her fiancé. This allowed her to express her concerns and lower the expectations.

Although Rena reports that she suffers with both vaginismus and vulvodynia, and that her transition became complicated by this, she still expresses a positive reflection about how she and her husband managed the *quick shift* into intimacy.

My husband and I decided before our marriage to not try to consummate our marriage on our wedding night. I felt nervous about jumping from our relatively low-level physical intimacy practices to intercourse in one night (especially a night when we both expected to be exhausted). We spent a few days getting used to not having clothes on and focusing on cuddling and taking romantic, sensual baths together, and it was very calming to know that the “pressure” was off and we could take things more slowly. I think this was a really good idea. (As it turned out, consummation wasn’t possible when we tried, due to a sexual pain disorder yet to be diagnosed. But we didn’t know that yet then, and this didn’t diminish the value of not rushing the physical intimacy).

Rena and others were able to manage the multitude of emotions present at this transitional moment through personal choice and direct communication. She and her husband also allowed themselves the space to take the “pressure” off and “take things slowly.” They made that decision before their wedding, and they, like other participants, figuratively wrote their own script to how to transition into this new role. This allowed them to express and love sensually and even become comfortable being undressed and physically touching, “cuddling and taking romantic sensual baths.” The sense of empowerment, which allowed Rena and others like her to create an expanded definition of what is sexual, is what enabled them to manage the

transition through the quick shift. She asserts, even with her struggle, that this gave her ownership over this new experience.

Conclusion

The complexity of the transition into marriage is vast. The adoption of this new role encompasses a multitude of shifts. As Rozie recalls,

The first time my husband and I succeeded at having sex I was crying and begging him to finish....Nonetheless, the idea that we could have sex now was very empowering. We felt like superheroes whose power was intercourse(!).

Women experienced a *quick shift* that can be both challenging, with “crying” and at the very same time be positive and empowering, in Rozie’s words, as they become “superheroes whose power was intercourse.” This shift includes a redefining of what it means to be sexually active and incorporating being sexual as part of being “a good and responsible girl.” It also includes a new (or renewed) connection to sexual subjectivity, a drastic switch for some from “years of trying to be asexual.” Others describe a challenge of this *quick shift* as being the redrawing of the boundaries of modesty, of transitioning into no longer being “self-conscious about being naked.” Many women struggled with the management of “THE night” and all the expectations and related disappointments, which are yet another category of issues encompassed in the *quick shift*. These myriad shifts are all happening almost simultaneously. They are also placed against the background of the laws of family purity within which the women must negotiate.

Women who narrated with an empowered voice coupled with a sense of entitlement and an open and healthy relationship were able to be active participants in their new roles while they mastered this critical shift. Women found different ways to navigate the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamic of this significant change. They would slow down the shift by delaying

intercourse, and this allowed them the space, as a couple, to mitigate the negative aspects of this transition. They had time to become more comfortable with each other, as an example, as Rena shared, “focusing on cuddling and taking romantic sexual baths...the ‘pressure’ was off. Like Rena, others broadened the definition of intimacy to allow for a marital sexual relationship that did not violate the family purity laws yet still allowed the women and their husbands to feel satisfied and loved. In the next chapter, I will continue to explore the complexity of sexuality and expand on the layered ambivalence about modesty, silence, entitlement, and sexual subjectivity.

CHAPTER SIX

THE STAGE: MODESTY, SILENCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF PLEASURE

Although this project is focused on women's premarital education and early sexual marital experience, this is not a discrete experience; through their narratives, the women expand beyond that particular milestone to also include their reflections on a fundamental aspect of their experience of female sexuality in the context of their traditional communities: modesty, and the ways in which it silences and informs behaviors and their navigation of familiar and new cultural sexual scripts. By entering marriage, women are transitioning from a script that reconfigures modesty from laws and practices that keep women's sexuality at bay into a new script in which they are permitted, and mandated, to have a sexual relationship. This central theme that permeates all aspects of this transition into this new role in these women's narratives is their developing sense of sexual subjectivity. Sexual subjectivity can be defined as "a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure...and who has an identity as a sexual being" (Tolman, 2002, p6). I am using this shifting concept of modesty as a kind of metaphorical stage for the women's experiences, within which the set is being changed for the next act or scenes in which these women enacted and engaged with cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal scripts.

On a basic level, women describe a need for reassurance, validation and, at times, outside intervention around sexual aspects of their marriage and face barriers that are rooted in this sense of modesty. Modesty also informs behaviors and creates interpersonal and intrapersonal sexual scripts that often negate women's sexual subjectivity and privileges male sexuality. In particular, I was drawn to what some women said about a particular and one might say resistant script, one about their own sexual entitlement. As women transition, they are challenged to

adopt and/or rewrite the cultural sexual script predicated on a premarital concept of modesty, often without sufficient guidance of which they are aware or that is evident in how they describe the experience. This involves challenging and managing cultural norms around male sexuality, the place of female sexual pleasure and insisting on an agentic sexual subjectivity.

The Role of Silence

As I reported in previous chapters, tension related to modesty pervades women's experiences of education and their early sexual experiences and emerges throughout my research. It is present in the *quick shift* where women expressed this stress to encompass a number of elements, most concretely, from being dressed to being naked. Modesty is infused with new meanings, confusion and contradiction, with the dramatic change in the meaning of being sexually active from being "slut[ty]" to "holy", and as women are being allowed to know themselves as sexual and connecting to their sexual desire. *Tsnius* and the subsequent silencing of basic sexual and physiological information is also part of the experience for some women while attending *kallah* classes, leaving women unprepared and providing them with impoverished sexual scripts.

This value of *tsnius*, modesty, is central to the Orthodox Jewish community and culture. *Tsnius* acts as an organizing principle, regulating how individuals dress, speak and behave. Although the most recognizable manifestation is in dress, it has wide-ranging application. Modesty inhibits discussions about sexuality and doing so is considered inappropriate (Silverstein, 1995) as was evident in the request and insistence that I close down this study. The study itself broke this silence and to some, a code of modesty. The value of maintaining modesty also deters individuals from seeking assistance as victims of family violence (Ringel and Bina, 2006) and sexual abuse (Feit, 2015). The effects of *tsnius* for the women in my study were

palpable, including feelings of isolation and loneliness, as a barrier from obtaining help, and forming cultural sexual scripts around male sexuality and women's role in managing them.

Participants reflect that they felt isolated and lonely as they transitioned into early marriage and some women described how these feelings of loneliness persisted. Many feel that they have no one to talk to and do not have permission to speak out. To anchor this experience, Ariella reflects, in a community informed by modesty as a critical value, women expressed that marriage can be a very isolating experience. As one function of *tsnius*, women do not easily reach out for help, particularly around sexual issues. She shares,

There was a feeling of relief and freedom that we were finally allowed to touch... but also this tremendous pressure.... The first month of our marriage I ended up being a *niddah* a lot, which was very frustrating and depressing. I also had no one to talk to... anyway, being a newlywed, it was all very private and embarrassing, so I wouldn't have spoken about it anyway.

Ariella describes her *quick shift* simultaneously being a “relief” but also “full of pressure”. She found this new role, complicated by *niddah*, “frustrating and depressing.” Ariella uses the language of “very private and embarrassing” to describe this tension around modesty and privacy. She experiences her new role of “newlywed” appropriately, as “private,” but also as “embarrassing,” which thus creates the sense of isolation, not “talk[ing]” to anyone, not “speaking” because it is not something she “would” do. In this case, Ariella’s expression of what she “would” do may also convey what she feels she “could” do while maintaining her desired role as a proper newlywed. She is reflecting a careful balance that women are looking to find between respecting the sanctity of their marriage while connecting to others and normalizing their life experience and addressing personal needs. For some, this silence is anchored in their “unhelpful” *Kallah* class experience, a place and time that should be an opportunity for openness about sexuality, where some women report a lack of information and comfort with sexual topics.

Instructors may not be knowledgeable or open to real questions or straightforward in giving information about sex and sexuality. This reinforces the taboos within the communities related to sex and *tsnius* and further silences women from getting the help and information they need.

“Cosmo has taught me much more than my Kallah teacher”

As Adina introduced earlier, she stated that, “I wish I would have known simply MORE about sex, men, their needs, women's needs...Lucky we could figure it out but the whole culture of *tzniyus* has created a very damaging characteristic of silence and silence is not the way to go when it comes to education.” Adina ties this value of modesty to the silencing of critical information. Faigy remarks,

This [study] is so important. It took my husband 3 years to figure out how to give me an orgasm. Cosmo has taught me much more than my Kallah teacher or anyone else combined. I don't feel that I have anyone I can turn to with questions on how to enhance our physical relationship.

Both of these women voice the distress that the silence that came from *tsnius* caused them; Adina describes this effect as “damaging” and contrary to “when it comes to education;” Faigy and her husband struggled with his giving her sexual pleasure. Both express the wish that they had more information and understanding, and Faigy was particularly looking for information about female sexual pleasure; she has a sense there should have been more pleasure in their relationship, but didn't know how and a sense of loneliness in feeling she didn't “have anyone [she could] turn to.”

Some women assumed a position of empowerment in which they assumed they became enabled to gain authority to make and enable a change. Faigy reports that she did not get the information she needed in *Kallah* class, and that she looked outside their community, to “Cosmo.” This helped her find ways of navigating this new role and “to enhance [their] physical relationship.” This is another manifestation of silence, where women expect their *Kallah* classes

to provide the information they need, and are basically being told they are being told, but are left ill equipped. Shayna, in describing her early sexual experiences in her first marriage, writes,

I didn't really understand what was supposed to happen - I was only given vague info. emotionally - I was just "not there". physically, I was embarrassed and nervous. I just wanted it to be over FAST! none of it was satisfying or good at all, and I wasn't thinking in terms of pleasure or anything like that, as I wasn't told about any of that.

Shayna's transition has many of the components of the *quick shift*, as she was "embarrassed and nervous," but most interestingly, that, in terms of pleasure, "she wasn't told about any of that," she didn't have a frame of reference to consider this aspect of her marriage. There was complete silence. Earlier in her narrative she wrote, "I was really ill prepared. My *Kallah* teacher taught me all the *halachos* but then told me that my mother would 'tell me the rest.' I was too embarrassed to ask anyone else." When questions arise, there does not appear to be a safe space to access information within the community. Only twenty percent use their *Kallah* teacher as a resource after marriage for sexual information, reflecting perhaps their experience of their teachers as inadequate in providing information in the first place or possibly because of concerns of *tsnius*, women don't reach out.

Shayna is currently in her second marriage, which she describes as happy but "still working on the sexual relationship being more physically satisfying for me." She felt it was important to share her experience of her first marriage; she was 18 years old when she was first married and identifies as a Chassidic woman, ostensibly from a more insular community. She shared that she was only taught the laws of family purity and was directed to talk to her mother for "the rest," and then felt "too embarrassed." Again, embarrassment, likely a derivative of modesty, was a barrier to access information. She still stated that she felt that *Kallah* classes were "good, if taught by a teacher who addresses sexuality and doesn't just ignore it." Shayna

feels that *Kallah* teachers should not “ignore” the need to be direct about pleasure is critical need of the women during this transition.

Ruchie, 55 and married at 27, is an example of that *Kallah* teacher who is empowered and acknowledges positive female sexuality. Ruchie noted that she attended *Kallah* classes, because “that was what was done” and that “there was not enough information given.” Now, many years later, she is a premarital instructor and shared,

I would have liked much more information about...how to achieve pleasure in a sexual relationship. I now prepare young women for marriage and provide them with the information I would like to have gotten prior to my own marriage....each only one to one and am very explicit about the sexual aspect of the relationship. I show diagrams and spend a lot of time teaching *kallos* [brides] how to have a sexually satisfying relationship.

Ruchie recognized the silence in her education and how she needed more information and reassurance during her transition and now is actively and very mindfully changing the script: She “provide(s) them with the information [she] would have liked to have received” and she specifically focuses on explicit information and promoting sexual satisfaction in marriage.

“It would also just have given me a lot of reassurance if someone would have told me”

As part of this transition into marriage, women not only expressed loneliness and isolation but also specifically their need for reassurance and validation, particularly around managing expectations and how to make sex “work” and pleasurable or at least comfortable during this *quick shift* time. As Rozie said, simply, “I wish I'd had someone to talk to in an open way.” There is evidence of an inherent tension, of wanting validation and help, but at the same time, feeling the need to uphold this sense of modesty of what and whom one can talk about.

Tsipporah’s remarks are reflective of many participants: “I found the adjustment really hard.... It would also just have given me a lot of reassurance if someone would have told me that I will need a period of adjustment and it's not going to be a simple one night transition to being

good and comfortable with sex.” Central to Tsipporah’s remarks is her wish that “someone would have told me”, that she needed this information, not silence, to help her through this transition and give her “reassurance,” and in particular about “being good and comfortable with sex.” This silence makes it a challenge for women feeling “good” about this shift into being a sexual being and toward gaining sexual subjectivity.

Like Tsipporah, Hindy echoes a sense of loneliness and need for reassurance, particularly early in her marriage: “I had no one to talk to, and it was lonely. I wish someone would have told me that it takes time and there is nothing to worry about if things don't happen instantly or it does not feel great or wonderful instantly. That [is] what I would tell my sister or best friend.” Hindy’s comments directly relates being “lonely” to this silence and she “wish[ed] someone” would have reassured her by “[telling her] that it takes time” and that “if things don’t happen instantly” or if it is not pleasurable right away (“not great or wonderful instantly”) not “to worry.” She would have wanted to be less lonely about understanding things are not “great or wonderful instantly” and that is okay. This loneliness is an effect of the silence and she needed reassurance specifically around this transition as she engages with her sexual subjectivity and possible entitlement and pleasure.

Shani reports that she still remains silent:

I was really frustrated because it was nice physically and made us feel very close emotionally but my husband enjoyed it so much more and I still don't know how to orgasm 3 years later. Everyone had said sex would be the best thing ever but it wasn't and that was hugely disappointing and I can't talk to anyone about it because that wouldn't be *tznius*.

She is looking for guidance and support specifically because she still does not “know how to orgasm 3 year later” something she identifies as problematic. She had had hopes that “sex would be the best thing ever” and is “hugely disappointed.” Her practice of *tznius* precludes her

from accessing this support; she “can’t talk to anyone because that wouldn’t be *tznius*.” She appears to feel that if she could reach out and access support or help, she would be able to “orgasm” and sex would be “the best thing ever,” or at least, more pleasurable.

Women also share the desire to help others through this transition, to provide the validation and reassurance that they felt they had not had and needed, but struggle with figuring out how to do that in way that is respectful to their marriage, upholding a belief that sharing is a “violat[ion]” and against an overall community norm of modesty. Ora’s reflections demonstrate this conflict, as she struggled with this sense of modesty while wanting to help friends through their transition:

I wish I would have known that.. that it would be difficult for us to actually have intercourse...that my husband would be just as nervous and uncomfortable as I was.... I am not sure what to share with friends because I don't want to violate my husband's and my own privacy but... it may be a big adjustment even trying to have sex and that things will get better with time. I would also recommend that they read sex books (not Jewish ones) to learn and get more comfortable with the idea.

In Ora’s response, she wasn’t sure what she could share because she didn’t want to “violate” the privacy of her marriage. She does want to be helpful and acknowledge the “big adjustment” and demystify early marital sex but because she is maintaining modesty as a wife and protecting her husband’s privacy she has no sufficient script that allows her to share.

“I wasn't comfortable speaking about it with a therapist until 8 years after marriage.”

Others shared specifically how *tsnius* serves to silence and therefore can be a barrier to seeking help that is rooted in this sense of modesty. This has negatively impacted their marriages and prevented or delayed obtaining critical help. While fifty-six percent of the women report that they would go for help, and that they most frequently turn for help to friends, mental health professionals and family members for help. It is unclear what women mean by help, or how long they would wait to access services if they did. Although there are mores in the more insular

communities against Internet use and speaking with others about private matters, women in the study report that they most frequently turn to the Internet and close friends for sexual information. This speaks to the strength of women's desire to access information, even when accessing this information may be pushing against codes of modesty and community norms. By accessing more information in these various ways, women become empowered to rewrite their scripts. Other sources of information are written materials, physicians and their *Kallah* teacher.

Michal expressed the tension of silence as a barrier to accessing help as she shared, "I would tell a friend or sister to find someone to talk to if they're having issues. I spoke to a friend pretty early on but I felt as though I was betraying my husband by speaking about intimate issues. She was the one who referred me to our therapist." Michal goes so far that she engaged in what she identifies as a "betray[al]." This strong language reflects her experience of sharing intimate information with a friend, as she too, breaks the silence about her "intimate issues." Although she felt like she "betrayed" her husband, she ultimately, with the support of a friend, sought out a therapist; she too, would in retrospect encourage her friends to talk to someone and get help.

Yael specifically addresses the effect of this tension,

Also I was taught that sex is a very private matter and not to be discussed with others - and for that reason I never spoke to anyone, even friends about my troubles. After about 6 years of marriage I finally spoke with a friend a bit and 2 years after that consulted a therapist. I wasn't comfortable speaking about it with a therapist until 8 years after marriage.

Both Yael and Michal articulate their personal, internal conflict, as they struggle to maintain modesty, respect their marriages' privacy while also seeking help. Yael specifically stated how she was "taught that sex is a very private matter..." This cultural value of modesty, expressed as "sex is a private matter" became a barrier to accessing help.

Yael was 23 when she got married and identifies as Modern Orthodox-Machmir. It took her six years to reach out to a friend and even longer to go for professional help. In an earlier reference to Yael and her husband, they were the couple that received a dispensation to engage in oral sex, and that she had wished she had known to ask for this earlier, or at the very least, felt comfortable reaching back out to her *Kallah* teacher for further guidance. Yael explained that she sought help because her husband was not religious from birth and had been sexually active prior to becoming religious. She describes that she was always concerned that “he'd compare "my performance" to his previous experiences. I had difficulty achieving orgasm and being fully comfortable for many years until I finally decided to seek therapy from a sex therapist”

She struggled to move into this new role as an intimate partner, particularly because she was concerned about their disparity of sexual experience. When she was able to reach out for help and break this silence, she found a way to feel “comfortable” and gain her sexual subjectivity and seek pleasure in sexual relationship. She shared that “It all paid off. I still don't achieve orgasm every time but at least some of the time.” Both her delay in getting professional help, but also her delay and asking for a rabbinical dispensation reflects how her being “taught that sex is a very private matter” served to silence her (and her husband) and delay obtaining the help and intervention they needed. Yael, in tandem with her husband, through seeking rabbinic counsel and professional help, worked to rewrite their script to include her sexual pleasure and subjectivity.

Confusing sexual scripts

Through this study I have yet to discover a singular cultural sexual script. There are variations of a script that appear complex and, at times, contradictory. On one hand, there is Jewish theology that promotes sexual pleasure, with an emphasis on female sexual satisfaction

(Eruvin 100b). But few women voice this sense of independent entitlement or agency. Only eleven percent of women report learning about female sexual pleasure in their *Kallah* classes. At the same time, the sexual script also endorses privileged male sexuality. When women do voice sexual subjectivity, it seems to be primarily accessed through their husbands, and his sexuality and his access to knowledge about how female sexual pleasure is part of a condoned sexual script.

Yael is one of the few women that expressed a sense of sexual entitlement and pleasure. In her narrative, she described her development from “not speaking” to anyone to breaking her silence with a friend, which led her and her husband to seek professional help with attaining mutual sexual pleasure. She sought help specifically to work toward attaining her sexual pleasure, and to “achieve orgasm” with her husband. Her husband entered the marriage with previous sexual experience, and although this made her feel uncomfortable, this seemed to lend them a larger repertoire of sexual activity. She describes how she had learned that oral sex was prohibited (until they asked for a dispensation) but that was the only way she would become aroused. It is possible that his previous experience allowed them to make these concessions and look for ways to find more sexual satisfaction. She now describes that returning from the *mikvah* (after the prohibited *niddah* period) to be together is like a “honeymoon.” Her narrative does not go into any more details about why they needed help, or how they together moved in this direction.

Adrienne Rich’s (1983) concept of compulsory heterosexuality as a means of controlling women with patriarchy, denying women sexuality and forcing male sexuality upon women helps to illuminate women’s experience of this contradiction. Rich concludes that these characteristics contribute to a culture that convinces women that heterosexual relationships and marriage are

inevitable. Although Rich's theory is not perfectly aligned with Jewish thought within Orthodox Jewish communities, this theory does give a framework to understand part of the communities' script. Judaism differs, as there is theology that promotes female sexual entitlement within the confines of marriage. The practice of modesty resonates with Rich's conceptualization of male sexuality controlling women. It is both an explicit and implicit message in the community, that men have strong sexual drives, and therefore women are taught to maintain modesty; both in dress, relationships, and behavior specifically to help men in the community manage men's acknowledged sex drive (Falk, 1998). Here modesty is a driving force of recognized or even sanctified sexual scripts.

Female sexuality is not acknowledged in any comparable way to men's sexual drives and needs, and is not as explicitly addressed--thereby silenced (Grumet, 2008). In Naomi Grumet's (2008) research about couples' experience practicing the Family Purity rituals of *niddah* and *mikvah*, she found that men's sexuality was acknowledged and validated by religious educators, though they were directed not to act on these desires until marriage. Grumet (2008) describes, "Girls were not supposed to speak or even think about matters related to sexuality let alone familiarize themselves with her bodies...and the image of the 'truly religious girl' was one for whom sexuality had been exorcised from her being (p.15)." Women in the community generally marry young and are considered "girls" until they marry, yielding the *quick shift*.

"My husband was (is) a typical male"

As women are learning to manage their sexual relationship with their husband's, there is an expectation of their husband's sexual entitlement. Men are assumed to have high sexual drives and experience sexual pleasure, and although it must be consensual and within the confines of appropriate timing (non-*niddah* status) women are encouraged to have a sexual

relationship with their husbands, if they desire. As women describe their early sexual experiences, they are not only navigating the cultural sexual script and how they experience their sexual relationship with their husbands and as they discover their own sexual selves.

Miriam met her husband in high school and admits that they “had fooled around when we were younger and were VERY well behaved while engaged.” She reflects on her experience with this process, she shares that

I think that orthodoxy does an insufficient job of explaining to girls how to achieve sexual pleasure...We were on the verge of divorce because of our sexual incompatibilities (aka him being male and me being female). I'm confident that things are getting better...I had always wanted to have sex... Everyone said sex was great. Books, TV, movies, etc, so I thought that sex was just naturally great. That the act itself would feel good. After that I thought the pleasure would come, but it never came. I learned many years later that a woman does not necessarily achieve orgasm from intercourse. I literally thought something was wrong with me. My husband was (is) a typical male who is very sexual and very sexually in tune with himself. I was never taught or thought to be. It was like we were trying to get on the same train, but we got on different cars and we couldn't find the same car to ride the train.

Miriam is describing how even though she had previously “fooled around” when she was a teen, she did not feel that “orthodox” education helped prepare for the transition into finding sexual pleasure within marriage. By not teaching or acknowledging female sexual subjectivity, she may be expressing that she felt that the value of female sexual pleasure is dismissed or negated. She had expectations that “sex was great” and she thought it would be easily and “naturally” pleasurable. She resented that her husband as a male had permission to know himself sexually and she reports she “was never taught or thought to be.” She blames both “orthodoxy” for doing an “insufficient job explaining...how to achieve sexual pleasure. But also blames herself for not “achieving” pleasure and she “thought something was wrong with [her].”

She continues to perpetuate the norm of privileged male sexuality where he was “typical male” and “aka him being male” and this is the core of their “sexual incompatibilities.” This

male's sexuality as privileged is enacted where he was allowed "to be in tune" with his sexual needs, while she was not. This script privileged his sexuality and his sexual needs, while hers were dismissed and were "insufficiently" explained. She has a sense that she is supposed to have pleasure but is ambivalent about how that works within in their relationship. This disparity had a negative impact on their marriage, and that they were on the "verge of divorce";, with the help that they did eventually seek, they are on the right track.

"It's not necessarily because of you"

In contrast, several women shared that their husbands were not 'typical' men, and describe how they experience this variant of the script. In some way this is an invocation of an alternate script where women express their sexual entitlement through the absence of their husband's 'typical' role—that is, his sexuality not being as they were taught or led to believe it would be. Ora, quoted earlier continues and shares, "I wish I would have known...that my husband wouldn't always want to have sex. I feel like I always heard from Orthodox and other sources that men always want to have sex- not always true (and it's important to know that it's not necessarily because of you)." Ora's statement is consistent with a cultural script that men would "always want to have sex." When that doesn't happen she wants to reassure others that it isn't "because of you;" her sense of empowerment is evident in her insistence that "it's not necessarily because of "the woman, pushing back on the assertion about the male sexuality as insatiable.

Ora's ability to recognize the fact that her husband does not "always want to have sex" as not a personal rejection sits in contrast to several women who share that they negatively internalized that their husbands did not "always want to have sex." Within the 'typical' cultural script in which the women have been socialized, women's sexuality complements notions about

men's sexuality such as men have high sexual desire, and women respond to their desire. Yet when some women's husbands are not typical, the women are challenged to discover their own sexual subjectivity independently. For instance Tamar wrote, "I wish I was told either in *Kallah* classes, or by others, that sometimes women want it more- and that I'm allowed to have desire and drive- I still don't understand why my husband doesn't want sex as much as I want it- and it's very shameful." Shari wrote, "we are always taught that men are animals and will always want sex, but in our relationship, I want more. I didn't know how to express that- and it's still a big problem. I am embarrassed to talk to friends and although I love my husband this bothers me all the time." Shari directly reflects the sexual script that men "are animals and will always want sex." Perhaps by trusting her own body, she is able to recognize that she has her own sexual desire. Tamar also connects to having more of a sexual drive, she is looking for permission in her cultural script to "want it more."

Both Tamar and Shari express "shame" and "embarrassment" that are a result of entering marriage and their sexual relationship with a set of assumptions about male sexuality- that men "will always want sex" and the complementary notion that women do not. Tamar and Shari share about their experience do not conform to the scripts of the "typical" male that they were taught. Not only are their husbands not 'typical,' they express knowing they have more desire than their husbands. They share one consequence of internalizing cultural sexual scripts that emphasizes male sexuality and this was experienced as painful and shameful. They may have felt rejected and undesirable. Tamar wished that she was told that she is "allowed to have desire and drive" and Shari "want[s] [sex] more" than her husband. They want their sexual needs acknowledged and met. They are challenged to understand their roles and rewrite the script. They do this by acknowledging that they were (mis)led to believe this 'typical' male script, and are able to state

that they know their own bodies and their own desires. Yet even as the women voice this lived experience, they both acknowledge their own sexual desire while simultaneously feeling shame and rejection. Although disappointed, they reworked the sexual script that at least allows them to recognize their sexual entitlement. As some of the other women, such as Yael, who pursue going for help, these women could own this sense of sexual entitlement and pursue intervention, that would help move the relationship to satisfy their sexual needs.

“[M]y husband set out on a goal to bring me to climax”

As women transition into being sexual partners, there are limited narratives that express a sense of sexual pleasure. A few women in the study do express this sense of entitlement and sexual subjectivity. These women adopt a script, where modesty does not silence or hinder the women’s possibility to seek pleasure, but where the definition of modesty shifts and where they are able to acknowledge, recognize, explore and enjoy sexuality. For many, central to this recrafted script is that the women develop this in relationship with their husband. This can look very different. Some, like Tamar and Shari, develop a sense of sexual subjectivity even without their husbands’ sexual validation. Others, like Miriam and Yael, recognize they wanted something more, and pursue means to attain sexual pleasure. And others work in tandem with their husbands within marriage and create this other script that reflects how they, as a couple, imagine what it means to be a good Jewish woman/couple and balances both male privilege and female entitlement.

Sharon embodies this complex script of connecting to her own entitlement while also privileging male sexuality. Early in her narrative she wrote that she spoke to her local *rebbetzin*, not her *kallah* teacher. This *rebbetzin* empowered her with lots of information she told her “about various positions, what to wear and what not to wear, what to expect sexually ... what positions

are recommended... she also answered all my sexual questions.” This offered her an alternative script that may have given her permission to connect to her sense of sexual entitlement. She connects this process to knowledge, communication, male pride, and validation. She reflects this alternative script and stated that physical pleasure did not come immediately and that a “kallah [bride] needs to understand that learning about each other and what is stimulating and satisfying just takes time and to have patience and confidence that her husband can give her pleasure if she believes that he can.”

She refers to a “husband [ability] to give pleasure,” while also burdening the wife with believing he can, and being patient and confidence. Her narrative continues to state that

together you must learn to help him take longer. make sure you give him only positive feedback and COMMUNICATE what feels good to you. Men get a lot of pride from giving their wife pleasure. :) The biggest turn on for your husband is his ability to satisfy you. (so allow yourself to be selfish sometimes :) and even often...I liked having my sexual needs validated by my husband and his consciousness to my concerns. I loved going to the *mikvah* the first time. I love the ability to excite my husband and give him pleasure and I love the exclusivity of our relationship....

Sharon is a woman who carries the contradictions of the sexual script. She points out that

“together [a couple] must learn to...men get a lot of pride from giving their wife pleasure.” She

speaks of this confusing and contradictory script that both privileges male sexuality but also

encourages female pleasure. She connects to her sexuality while also subscribing to a ‘typical’

male script by suggesting that it helps to play into your husband’s pride and to “only give

positive feedback. Sharon feels entitled to sexual pleasure, “(so allow yourself to be selfish

sometimes :) and even often” and privileges her sexual subjectivity, “that [her] sexual needs

validated” by navigating it *with* her husband. She described that her rebetzin, although not her

Kallah teacher, shared with her this script that how women’s sexual entitlement and pleasure are

possible to integrate into a [good Jewish marriage].

Chumi's husband introduced to her the concept of experiencing pleasure and a sense of sexual subjectivity, She identifies as Chasidic, 31 and is married for 10 years,

I wish that I had been taught more regarding the importance of my sexual needs being met. Fortunately, my husband received a lot of guidance and education in this area and was able to pass this information along to me. This is a credit to my husband because he could have ignored this information and I would have been none the wiser....Regarding the female orgasm, it did not happen on the wedding night which in itself was a somewhat exciting but awkward sexual experience - a lot of fumbling and discomfort. When I was done with being *niddah*, my husband set out on a goal to bring me to climax which I willingly participated in. It did take several months before we finally achieved this goal, but it brought us closer in our relationship. At no time did I feel guilty, embarrassed or wrong to seek this during intimacy, rather proud that I was capable of attaining orgasm and proud that my husband was able to satisfy and wanted to satisfy my needs.

Although her premarital education did not validate her sexual agency or address the “importance of [her] sexual needs,” her husband did. She recognizes that he had access to this alternative script and gives him “credit...because he could have ignored this information and [she] would have been none the wiser.” His knowledge enabled the development of her sexual subjectivity- this redrafted script still reflects male privilege and power though it did introduce her to sexual needs. She states that this allowed her to express that “at no time did I feel guilty... or wrong to seek this (orgasm)” as if those feelings would have been the appropriate response. His offered her this alternative script of sexual equity. The couple worked together to attain mutual sexual satisfaction within the confines of the culture, “When I was done with being *niddah*.” She and her husband, rejected a script that could have privileged her husband's pleasure, one created out of silence and instead, together, though under his lead, focused on her sexual needs. While it was his decision to share it with her, she “participated in. It did take several months..... it brought us closer in our relationship.”

Like Chumi, Tsipporah's husband offered an alternative script. Hers also included female sexual entitlement but again complicated by the fact that the male remains leading, though

choosing to acknowledge the wife's needs. Although earlier in her narrative Tsipporah expresses the need for more reassurance around her transition into sexuality, she writes that

The first time we were able to be together... We both enjoyed being able to kiss and hug and lay together and just explore. My husband had been married before so he was very comfortable and he knew what to do more than I did. He was also willing to try to give me an orgasm and make me happy without him getting one at the same time so we explored and that was good.

Tsipporah's husband had previous sexual experience, "he knew what to do...." This knowledge helped him mobilize a script that emboldened him to "try to give [her] an orgasm and make [her] happy" and not privilege his own sexual climax. Tsipporah, like Chumi and Sharon exhibit a sense of sexual entitlement to pleasure. This sexual entitlement and pleasure exists in tandem with their husbands as they develop together a sense of sexual subjectivity. In these scripts with the possibility of pleasure, the notion of modesty shifts, and is no longer as restrictive within marriage. These marriages reflect more closely the Talmudic and Jewish law teachings that allow and encourage sexual desire and pleasure within the sanctification of marriage.

Conclusion

Modesty permeates the narratives throughout my research and sets the stage for women's experience of sexuality. In this chapter, I explore how, in the name of modesty, the women describe silence and silencing regarding their own sexuality, development of sexual subjectivity and possibility for pleasure. The women report that it is part of the Kallah classes, a place where women expect openness, and where critical information, specifically sexual education and sexual subjectivity, is missing. Modesty also inhibits women from reaching out and finding the support they need. They feel isolated and alone as they try to figure out the quick shift and "can't talk to anyone about it because that wouldn't be *tznius*." They are looking for reassurance. This barrier

rooted in modesty is present as women are “taught that sex is a very private matter and not to be discussed” and therefore delay reaching out for professional help.

Throughout the narratives, some of the women challenge the role of modesty and *tsnius* and acknowledge the ways it silences and negatively impacts their transition. Some struggle with how to overcome this barrier, others try to impact change and become empowered to resist this silence in different ways. One woman shared that she teaches others and “provide[s] them with the information I would have like to have gotten...how to have a sexually satisfying relationship.” Others encourage friends to get help and many access information from outside the community (“Cosmo”). And some remain silent because she “can’t talk to anyone because that wouldn’t be *tsnius*.”

Central to this transition into being a sexual partner is managing complicated and often contradictory sexual scripts. In many ways, the cultural script privileges male sexuality and asserts men as sexual beings with desire and sexual entitlements. Male sexuality is reinforced by practices of modesty that are assumed to help men control their sexual urges. This exists along Jewish theology that emphasizes the responsibility to attend to female pleasure, though female sexual needs are not acknowledged as needing to be managed and are somewhat dismissed and silenced. Women are carrying all of this as they enter marriage.

Within the narratives, there were a few voices of female pleasure, in which some of the women described that they developed an alternative script around, with or in spite of their husband. For some, when they experience their husband as a “typical” sexualized male, they look to find ways to access their pleasure, realizing they need more. For some, when their husbands do not present as ‘typical’ they are able to trust their bodies and connect to and acknowledge their sexual subjectivity and needs. The few women that express sexual entitlement

to pleasure do so in tandem with their husbands. The husbands appear to mobilize an alternative script and this allows them to transition into this new role with possibility for pleasure.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to expand knowledge about the lived experience of married Orthodox Jewish women's preparation and transition into sexual activity in marriage. Research about sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community has been limited. In particular, little is known about the individual experiences of women's premarital and sexual educational needs and female sexual subjectivity. When Orthodox women get married, they are undergoing a significant shift; for many, this is their first experience having any kind of sexual relationship.

This inquiry is produced within the context of a community with myriad traditions and mores as related to sexuality and even in speaking about sexuality and intimacy. This is part of a larger value, that of *tsnius*, which encompasses a group of laws and customs that relate to modesty. In practice, individuals who identify as Orthodox Jews subscribe to a number of laws, rituals, and customs that impact their sexual behavior and interpersonal interactions. An overview of Judaism's sexual attitudes, laws, and stories is rich and complex. The Orthodox Jewish communities are organized around the assumption that individuals will have a heterosexual relationship and marry. Orthodox Jewish women, historically and currently, enter conventional gender arrangements (Ringel, 2007). Jewish thought emphasizes an active sexual life strictly within a context of marriage (Forst, 2006; Friedman, 2005; Rosenheim, 2003; Zimmerman, 2005). Jewish law and philosophy consider sexual desire and activity within marriage as very positive, when acted upon according to specific regulations. Sex within marriage traditionally has been viewed as a divine gift to be enjoyed as a form of devotion (Friedman, 2005; Rosenfeld & Ribner, 2011).

In addition to the prohibition of premarital sexual behavior, the Orthodox Jewish community has a code of rituals specifically related to menstruation and sexual relations within marriage. These laws, *taharat hamishpacha*, or family purity, are a set of laws and practices that regulate sex within marriage for both men and women and dictate a variety of behaviors during and after a woman's monthly menstruation. The Orthodox community considers the observance and practice of these rituals an identifying tradition that categorizes and identifies one as Orthodox or Traditional. Most women in the community attend premarital education, referred to as *kallah* classes, and the functions of the *kallah* classes are multifaceted. One primary function is to provide instruction about the family purity laws, but in addition, for many this may be the first time they are educated formally about sexuality, intimacy, and relationships.

In this study I looked to understand how women who are faithful to the traditions of the rituals, laws, and customs of Orthodox Judaism experienced their premarital education and early sexual experience within marriage. I was interested in what makes premarital education helpful or unhelpful to these women. In addition, I wanted to conceptualize and capture these women's early marital sexual experiences as they transitioned into marriage. I also explored how women did or did not express their sexual subjectivity as entitled sexual beings. This is where I further examined the presence of cultural sexual scripts and how they are created and acted upon within couples.

Gagnon and Simon (1973, 2005) use a social constructionist lens in the development of the sexual script theory to offer an in-depth social interpretation of and engagement in sexual behavior. Their theory asserts that sexuality is embedded in multilayered, complex sociocultural contexts which shape a cultural sexual script and offers a framework for research about sexuality. They suggest there are three distinct levels of scripting with specific functions: cultural

scripts that provide instruction on the broad social roles, interpersonal scripts that are patterns for everyday interaction, and intrapersonal scripts as the internal experience (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Their (1973) conceptualization of sexual scripts provides an orienting theory that I used to help deconstruct the experience of women in kallah classes, early marital sexual experience, and related sense of sexuality. Sexual script theory allows us to recognize the socially constructed nature of sexuality (Weiderman, 2015). Sexual script theory lends not only a theoretical structure but a very tangible framework within which to organize these findings as women learn a script and, to extend the analogy, “get into character.” I looked at how women managed multiple and sometimes conflicting scripts interpersonally with their husbands and how then, in tandem with cultural and interpersonal scripts, they developed and experienced their own sexual subjectivity, their intrapsychic script.

I conducted a quantitative/qualitative sequential designed study (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 2008; Patton, 2002) in which I integrated the findings during the analysis and discussion. Three hundred ninety eight women completed the online survey and 104 submitted narratives describing their transition. Using both the quantitative and qualitative data, I produced a rich conceptualization of the unique experiences and needs of Orthodox Jewish women as they travel toward the milestone of experienced sexuality within marriage. In this chapter I will summarize the study findings and their significance and contribution to the existing literature.

Summary of Findings

Participants’ reports and reflections on their transition into sexual intimacy within marriage illuminated how it is complex and multilayered. This study provided a unique venue to bring to the surface the experiences, concerns, and voices of Orthodox Jewish women and to

reflect on their premarital education, early sexual experience, and sexual subjectivity. In particular, their responses to my questions provided important information about barriers to and access to the kinds of services that could support this transition. In their narratives, women write of positive and negative aspects of their experience. My adoption of theater language (of learning the script, opening night, the metaphorical stage) intended to highlight the ways in which sexuality is constructed socially and to analyze the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic aspects of this phenomenon. As I organized the chapters, I described three areas of findings that illuminate this transition.

In the first chapter of findings, I analyzed both the survey and the narrative data to understand what women found helpful and unhelpful as they “learned the script” by participating in *kallah* classes. *Kallah* classes are one vehicle through which the Orthodox Jewish cultural script is shared. Marriage represents the culturally sanctioned when and where that sexual behavior is allowed, and these classes teach the what, when, and how of that behavior. The classes relay cultural sexual norms.

There were no significant differences in the demographic backgrounds of the women who found the *kallah* classes helpful or unhelpful, though women with greater premarital sexual experience and knowledge found the class significantly less helpful. The women who considered that class helpful were more likely to report that their class included more extensive information such as discussion about sexual anatomy and physiology, positions for sexual intercourse, discussion about the possibility for pain during intercourse, and practical suggestions for the first night of marriage. They also were more likely to report that the class included components of relationship guidance including addressing the transition into permissible intimacy, how to achieve clear and open sexual communication and resolve conflict.

My analysis of the narratives confirmed and expanded upon these findings. Women clearly benefited from a robust education that provided more direct information about sex, sexuality, and this new intimate and sexual relationship. Additionally, women were definite about the need to discuss how to differentiate between normal and/or concerning pain during sex and how to find effective help. Some of what was identified as sexual pain could have been prevented if women had more education and awareness on how to have sexual intercourse and manage their anxiety. Others later were diagnosed with sexual pain disorders and obtained medical treatment. These women pointed out that they wished they would have known about the possibility of pain disorders so that they would have accessed assistance earlier and more easily.

In tandem with women needing more extensive information, I found that women reported the class as helpful when the teacher was comfortable teaching about sexual topics and, as the narrative expanded, created a comfortable and safe learning environment. Furthermore, it was helpful when instructors were able to normalize sexual transition, address questions, and provide support. Women found the class unhelpful when they were not comfortable enough even to ask questions, when their questions were not answered, and when a rigid approach to sexuality was imposed. Helpful premarital education provides clear expectations and can serve as a script for the newly married Orthodox Jewish bride to alleviate anxiety, confusion, and fear during early marital sexual experience.

The next chapter addressed the women's "Opening Night," and focuses on the interpersonal and intrapsychic enactment of sexual scripts. I identified what I labeled the *quick shift* to represent an overall theme of the early transition into marriage, including the rapid change of the women's social and personal status and their new sexual activity. This transition encompasses both challenging and empowering dynamics. This *quick shift* represents the

complex and layered place sexuality occupies and the negative and positive impact on the lives of these women.

Within this overall theme, I identified five components to this shift that women describe. First, women describe a shift in the meaning of what it means to be sexually active, a shift that not only permits sexual activity but in which it is now mandated and considered holy. The second aspect is that of women knowing themselves as sexual beings and allowing themselves to acknowledge and connect to sexual subjectivity, desire, and entitlement. This *quick shift* also describes a shift in modesty on the most concrete level. For many women this is the first time they are undressed in front of a male and are becoming comfortable with that aspect of this transition. Throughout all the elements of the *quick shift* women express that they wish they would have been told more, given a more robust and accurate script.

Another element of the *quick shift* is the implementation of the family purity laws, particularly in reference to the wedding night. Once a couple consummates the marriage, a virgin bride automatically is presumed to be a *niddah* (ritually separate) again, and the couple may not engage in any physical or sexual touch until she is able to return to the *mikvah* (ritual bath), typically a 12-14 day wait. This timing and ritual pattern provides a backdrop for the wedding night and for sexual intimacy throughout a marriage. It also increases the pressure to consummate the marriage soon after the wedding night, to make sure they are able to be together sexually before she would be a *niddah* because of her menstrual period. At the same time, once consummated, they would need to be separated and cannot be physically intimate. This pressure impacts this new and unfamiliar experience. The women described how the *quick shift* also contains many expectations, disappointments, and anticipations. They experienced pressure

during the *quick shift* to consummate the marriage successfully, coupled with expectations to know how to give and get enjoyment.

The women describe these challenging aspects, which all occur simultaneously, with positive, pleasurable, and even empowering elements such as the sudden autonomy over one's own body, being free to express love physically, and learning to negotiate physical intimacy. I identified that some of the women find different ways to navigate this transition by employing various strategies, primarily by having open communication, allowing themselves the space to learn, delaying having intercourse right away, and working with their newlywed husbands to manage this new situation together.

The third chapter of findings I entitled “The Stage: Modesty, Silence, and the Possibility of Pleasure” to highlight that its overall themes of modesty, silence, and the potential of pleasure comprise a backdrop to some of the women’s experiences during *kallah* classes, during their opening nights, and throughout their socialization as Orthodox Jewish women. The central theme is of modesty. I wanted to separate this theme to look at the ways in which silence informs behaviors and configures sexual scripts. The central theme that permeates all aspects of the transition into this new role in these women’s narratives is their developing sense of sexual subjectivity.

As referenced in previous chapters, tensions related to modesty emerge throughout my research. As women attend *kallah* classes, explicit and important information is silenced as it is rooted in ideas of modesty. This leaves women sorely unprepared for their new role. Silence is also present during the *quick shift* where women expressed tension around modesty as their boundaries change around dress (from being dressed to undressed) and becoming sexually active are present.

In particular, silence rooted in this sense modestly serves as a barrier for women to find the reassurance that many described as needing from others during this transition. Additionally, silence and a sense of modesty prevents reaching out for intervention and delays women from getting the help they need. Women also experience this silencing as lonely and isolating; they often struggle alone. The tension between needing or wanting help and remaining silent represents a difficult balance of respecting the sanctity and privacy of marriage while also addressing personal needs.

Modesty in the Orthodox Jewish community is often framed as women needing to be modest in dress and behavior to help men manage their sexual urges. This creates a sexual script that perpetuates male sexual privilege. Although this sexual script is not what is prescribed in the Talmud, this idea of protecting men from their own sexuality and acknowledging male sexuality, while having no equivalent acknowledgement for female sexuality, reinforces men as “typical men” with high sexual desire and needs. The patriarchal script that privileges male entitlement/sexuality is positioned to obfuscate the role of and even the obligations about women’s sexual entitlements in marriage.

Although I was not able to locate a singular sexual script, these scripts play out with women and their new husbands as they navigate them and finds ways of managing within them, or rewriting them. As I explored, in the few cases in which this script became available to women it was via their husbands. The women rewrote the script in tandem with their husbands. Like the women who were able to better manage the *quick shift*, couples that work together are best able to manage the transition into being sexual partners. In these cases, the husbands were able to mobilize an alternative script, one that also acknowledges women’s sexual needs, and together they were able to find the possibility for pleasure.

Significance and Contributions

This dissertation set out to examine the experiences of Orthodox Jewish women as they prepare for and transition into their partnered sexual relationship within marriage. The examination of this particular subgroup within insular and religious communities shed lights on their educational and social service needs. Little is known about how women prepare, transition, and experience becoming sexually active within marriage. I hope that this research contributes to our understanding of the construction of female sexuality and informs culturally competent intervention and practice.

There is limited research around Jewish marriage, the premarital classes, and women's experiences with sexuality. Similar to previous research, women express the complexity of sexuality. Past research indicates that premarital education can be an indicator to marital satisfaction and well-being (Maybruch, 2014; Schnall, 2010). Much of what is known about Orthodox marriage and women's experiences is focused on the experience of practicing the family purity ritual in married life; these studies look at the varied and diverse experiences women and men (Hartman & Marmon, 2004; Grumet, 2008; Kaufman, 1991; Marmon, 1999; Wasserfall & Eilberg-Schwartz, 1992) have with these laws.

Most relevant is Labinsky's (2007) research about the women's sexuality in which the authors indicate the need for further examination of premarital education. Their research collected quantitative data and although women wrote in some comments, did not examine the lived experience of women. My research starts to fill in the gaps in the current body of literature, in which little is known about Orthodox women's experience in Kallah classes and their early marital sexual experience. As I will elaborate in the final chapter, this project can serve to both guide future research and inform practice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

In this mixed methods study, I have examined Orthodox Jewish women's and their experience of their premarital education and transition into sexual relations within marriage. Using both the quantitative and qualitative data, I presented a complex conceptualization of the unique experience and needs of Orthodox Jewish women as they transition into marriage. In this final chapter, I will propose some of the implications and conclude with a review of the study's potential limitations and direction for future research.

As the findings demonstrate, participants' reflection on their transition into sexual intimacy within marriage is complex and multilayered. This study provided a unique venue to surface the voice of Orthodox Jewish women and to reflect on their premarital education, early sexual experience and sexual entitlement and subjectivity. In their narratives, women write of positive and negative aspects of their experience.

“With H-SHEM’S (God’s) help”

Throughout the implementation of this study I was in awe of the response of the women who responded and reached out to me. There was a real sense that women wanted to participate and be heard. It felt to me that by simply asking these questions, I was giving permission and validation to women's lived experience. There was a sense, from the women I spoke to, that it was radical, and one senior colleague called this study, “gutsy.” In addition to the findings I presented, I received emails from 48 participants during the study. In addition to communicating an interest in finding out the results of the research, the emails indicated that the women felt that they could help make a positive impact and produce change by choosing to participate in this

study and that these questions were needed. They were grateful for this venue in which they were heard and validated. As one correspondent wrote:

I just wanted to thank you for your exhaustive research in this vital study and let you know how vital such studies are with H-SHEM'S [God's] help have a marked impact on how marriage and relationship are viewed in the Torah community.

She felt that this study was “vital” to helping marriages in the “Torah community,” indicating her attachment to the Orthodox community. Her use of “with H-Shem's help” is also quite typical of dialogue in the more insular Orthodox Jewish communities. Her note also implies that because she sees how this study can help the community, she ascribes it the status of serving a greater purpose and therefore she felt it was acceptable to participate even though it is against community norms of talking about marital intimacy. This speaks to the tension that exists to merely participate in the study, how it breaks a code of modesty. Other emails included the remarks “Wow, I am so happy you are researching this” and “I just wanted to thank you for doing this study. I found the survey therapeutic and hope that it makes things different for others in the future.” These messages reinforce the expressed desire for challenging the silence and further signify the importance of having a voice. When women are asking for “things [to be] different for others in the future,” what are their needs and in what ways can social work practice and the community. There are many ways that women can be better supported through this transition. I will outline some that are relevant to social work practice.

Practice Implications

The mandate for social worker practice is to challenge this silence in a way that is culturally acceptable to allow for healthier transitions, a positive sense of sexuality, and to enhance relationships. This study offers insight into what seems not to be plausible. The role of social welfare research is not only to convey information but to resist this silence and its negative

impact while also honoring the women's right to holistic health within the context the women's commitments to their faith and their desire to be good Jewish wives. As NASW Code of Ethics (<http://socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>) social workers we are committed to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people" and to do this while being "mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity." There can be a systemic approach to translate these findings into helping women (and their husbands) navigate all the aspects of this transition.

One area in which to impact change is to work directly with *kallah* teachers. It is important to create ongoing and accessible education for *kallah* teachers. By acknowledging their vital and important role in women's sexual development, there needs to be more information available to them. This is important across the Orthodox spectrum. In particular, this effort needs to find ways for *kallah* teachers themselves to become more equipped and comfortable speaking about anatomy and sexual information, sexual pain disorders, explaining "how to" have sex, give permission to women to expand the narrow definition of sex, and to acknowledge pleasure for both men and women. Specifically, *kallah* teachers need to validate and address women's anxieties around this shift and offer concrete suggestions for engaging in non-sexual intimacy to help with the transition and to help women feel more comfortable. This may pose *halakhic* (Jewish law) conflicts for some, but the teachers should work with the women to manage those conflicts on a case-by-case basis. It is standard in the mental health community for therapists to engage in clinical supervision and manage their transference and personal reactions to patients. *Kallah* teachers may benefit from a similar process. Intimacy and sex is genuinely personal. It is important for *kallah* teachers to "check in" with how they feel about sex and sexuality and to

ensure they are communicating a positive approach to their brides. Social workers can provide this support to *kallah* teachers.

It is also important to find ways for women themselves to have more access to information. Even since I conducted this study in 2012, there have been more and more online forums addressing sensitive issues in the Orthodox community. The explosion of the the Internet has allowed people to remain anonymous and obtain more information and find support. Websites catering to Orthodox married women, for example, *Imamother: Connection Frum Women* (<http://www.imamother.com/forum/portal.php>), allows women to exchange recipes and menu ideas, but also has closed forums to discuss topics such as mental illness, infertility, and “intimate” concerns. As a therapist in many of these communities, I have witnessed that although some communities ban the Internet, in reality the community members are connected.

In the more Modern Orthodox community, there is a new podcast entitled “The Joy of Text.” In this podcast (2015-present) an Orthodox sex therapist and a rabbi discuss issue of sexuality such as masturbation, when to get intervention, and the Jewish approach to premarital sex. This program is very professional and informative. The facilitators are affiliated with the more modern “Open Orthodox” community. For the comments online and within my more Modern Orthodox community, for some, it is a great resource. There are community members that would find this way of accessing information helpful and validating, but because they are from more insular sects, the community would not access this particular podcast. They would be more comfortable with less modern facilitators. Perhaps something like this could be reproduced within the more insular community.

The Internet is one way women can access information and find community without feeling they are “betraying” their marriage. Women also attend the *mikvah* regularly, a woman-

only space, and perhaps this is a space where information and/or discussion can be made available. In particular, it is clear that women, and perhaps their *kallah* teachers, need to be more proficient in understanding basic anatomy and sexual education. In this vein, Dr. David Ribner, with Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld, published *The Newlywed's Guide to Physical Intimacy* (2011) to address this lack of education and to support couples in obtaining direct and accurate information. A few participants referred to this book as helpful. Guides such as this should become more standard and available to couples as they navigate this transition and also be available to social workers to enable them to provide culturally competent support.

As therapists within these communities, we need to be comfortable addressing sexuality with a sex-positive approach and help manage preconceptions of modesty and promote sexual subjectivity. In treatment with women and with men, particularly during this time of transition, it is important to validate how dramatic this transition may be for some women, and examine what their experience to proffer support and additional intervention when warranted.

These are some initiatives that can be implemented in the communities to reframe the meaning of *tsnius* away from silencing and to allow healthy and celebrated intimate lives within the context the condoned cultural sexual script(s).

Potential Limitations

Inherent in a phenomenological research study involving an insular population are certain limitations. Namely, the results reported herein cannot be generalized to all Orthodox Jewish married women, or Orthodox women from particular communities, or all women transitioning into marriage. While this study does not provide generalizable findings, it does provide useful insights for social work practice and community education and programming.

The fact that this study was conducted online was an overall strength because of the capacity to reach a large sample, to provide complete anonymity and confidentiality, and to provide a safe place to explore the sensitive and often taboo topic of sex. But an online survey creates limitations. The primary limitation that an online survey such as this poses is that as the researcher I could not ask to clarify the narratives or ask any follow-up questions. This methodology provides no flexibility, which is often valuable in qualitative research. In particular, I would have liked to have been able to ask women more about how they define their sexual subjectivity and if they found their sense of sexual entitlement, how they found it. This would provide more depth to this story and give me more insight about how women navigate this transition and create alternative scripts.

Another limitation that the online format imposed is that only those with access to the Internet can participate. Many of the more insular communities do not use the Internet easily and would be more hesitant to participate. As explained, the study was only online for nine days, and that limited the participants from the breadth of the community. Far more women who indicated they are Modern Orthodox participated, probably because of their familiarity with Internet research and perhaps they were more comfortable with the topic. I was asked to stop collecting data before I was able to do more strategic outreach into the more insular communities, and this limited my reach into those communities.

It may be that women who did respond were likely to have a level of awareness of their sexual subjectivity and were able and motivated to speak about their experiences. They were most oriented to talk about sex. Something made the respondents motivated and comfortable enough to complete the survey and/or submit a narrative. Perhaps a particularly compelling

personal experience, the topic itself, or the desire to make change motivated them to participate. Many respondents conveyed that this study would help change things.

In addition to barriers to access and the premature closing of the survey, women may not have responded for a number of reasons. Although I had enough respondents, the study was opened many more times than it was completed. I wonder if more women would have responded if the survey had been shorter. Perhaps women opened the survey and were not comfortable sharing such an intimate part of their lives. The value of *tsnius* is central, and even with confidentiality and anonymity, women may have felt sharing this part of them was a violation and immodest. Others may have found the survey to be too long. In retrospect, I might have created a shorter and more direct survey. Many of the items did not turn out to be that relevant to my inquiry, such as questions about elementary school education or how women accessed sexual information as adolescents. I have much more data that I have not yet analyzed; the survey was 99 items, and could have been pared down. Additionally, some of the questions could have been posed differently. For example, I could have done a better job differentiating between different subcommunities to better understand some of the relationships. In fact, some respondents offered that suggestion, asking that I include other categories for religious self-identification or at least a text box so they could self-identify. If this study were to be replicated, perhaps the use of focus groups going forward to get input for how to ask questions or even what else to ask.

In regard to women's previous sexual experiences, I felt that was a sensitive topic and used language to cater to community sensitivities, but I could have implemented this question differently to collect more accurate data. In particular, I think learning more about premarital sexual experience would be important, and I should have asked more explicit questions, using

technology only to allow access to the more graphic questions if a “yes” response was entered. This could have yielded better data.

This study is also limited by my own subjectivity (Patton, 2002). My position as a member of the Orthodox Jewish community, and as someone who got married shortly before I proposed this study, and attended *kallah* classes cannot be overlooked. Through journaling, memoing, and reflecting with others, I tried to remain aware of my potential biases, thoughts, or experiences that would make it hard to analyze data, and this enabled me to listen carefully, even when that might be hard on multiple fronts (Luttrell, 2010). This personal experience also informed my questions and general curiosity, looking at how others navigate the many facets of this shift. Furthermore, my experiences working with Orthodox women who have experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse further complicated my relationship with the data. It allows me to be open to hearing the difficult parts of the women’s lives, but also made me almost yearn to hear more about pleasure and joy.

As the researcher, my connections to the Orthodox community, the Orthodox mental health community, and my professional reputation possibly contributed to the success of this project. However, these connections could have been a limitation. Some women may not have felt comfortable participating in the project with a researcher they know or who is well connected to their community due to confidentiality concerns and not completely understanding the anonymity and confidentiality provided by the survey service.

It is important to recognize the limitations to this study, however these limitations do not diminish the insights generated by this dissertation. The research herein gives voice to a population whose stories are not often heard.

Future Directions for Research

This research adds to the social work literature in the areas of Orthodox Jewish women and of sexuality overall, in particular women's sexuality. Future research can build on this work and further clarify the educational and social services needs of this population. These findings may also be salient to other women. This research may also direct future research in other religious or ethnic communities in which sex and female sexuality are similarly regulated. One directly related project could be to implement a similar study with a sample I was not able to access. The more insular communities have less access to the Internet and may be more comfortable with other methods, perhaps a mail-in study available at target medical professionals (OB/GYNs) or possibly at the *mikvahs* (ritual baths). Although prohibited by religious leadership, community members are becoming more and more active online, and I would be curious if a study done even as soon as in 2016 would yield a larger response and be more representative of the insular respondents. Replicating this study with a mail-in option and a more strategic online campaign could expand the findings to include more voices.

Another project that would enhance the understanding of how community members experience premarital education and this transition is to look at the men's experiences in *chassan* classes (premarital classes for men), their transition and experiences of sexual subjectivity and sexual scripts. I have found that women who expressed a greater sense of sexual subjectivity and pleasure did so in tandem with their husbands, and I would like to know more about their experience. Their voices are also important, and in addition to helping to create a more holistic understanding of early marriage, there may be specific educational and social service needs.

I think it is important to study the *kallah* teachers and specifically examine their proficiency with basic physiological and sexual education. Future studies could also look at their

attitudes and perspectives about sexual subjectivity and discern what they communicate about sexual ethics and subjectivity and how they communicate. Further, the findings from this study could inform the study of other populations of women whose transitions into sexual activity and/or marriage have received little attention. The study findings could also inform the practices social work practitioners employ when working with these women, as well as how social workers support lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women's transitions into marriage.

One role of social welfare research is to develop knowledge that can impact and strengthen clinical interventions, services, and policies to promote sexual well-being. It is my hope that future researchers concerned with the lives and well-being of Orthodox Jewish women and families continue to examine and bring to light important aspect of humanity and help impact change and provide further support to those in need.

APPENDIX A

Online Survey

Tradition and Transition: Experience of Orthodox Jewish Woman

Introduction

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this study. You are being asked to take part in the following study: Tradition and Transition: the American Orthodox Jewish women becoming and being sexually active within marriage.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of how Orthodox Jewish women experience preparing for and transitioning into sexual intimacy within religious marriage. The ultimate goal of this study is to learn more about this important part of religious and marital life to provide to clinicians, educators and community leaders so we can better educate and assist women and families.

I am collecting and analyzing this data of Orthodox Jewish women's intimate experiences in their marriages. Essentially, I want to learn from you and capture women's experiences so that I may eventually learn more about Orthodox Jewish women's transition into marital life.

There is no right or wrong answer. There is no right or wrong way to fill out this survey or share your life story. Women enter marriage with very different experience and backgrounds. I am not trying to figure out what is wrong with you or to pass judgment. Instead, I want to learn about your experiences. I am trying to collect many different life stories so I can begin to understand women's experience.

PARTICIPATION:

Your part in the study will consist of completing an online survey, which should take approximately 20-30 minutes. If you choose, there is an additional section that asks you to write about your experiences, for an additional 20-30 minutes. You have been identified as a possible participant because you are over the age of 18. You also identify as a married Orthodox Jewish woman as defined as shomer Shabbat, shomer Kashrut and go to the mikvah regularly. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You have the right to skip any questions for any reason.

RISKS:

You may feel some discomfort answering questions about this topic. If you find this to be the case, please discontinue the survey. The risks should be no greater than those in ordinary life. If you are uncomfortable with the questions, or find that completing this survey elicits an emotional response and you would like to speak with someone you can call Shalom Task Force at 1-888-883-2323, SOVRI 888.613.1613, Yitti Leibel Helpline 1-800-HELP-023 or if you are interested

in finding a clinician to help you please call Relief 718-431-9501 or <http://reliefhelp.org>.

BENEFITS:

There are no direct benefits to you from completing this study.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT:

You will not receive compensation for this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All data is confidential. Completed surveys will be stored on a secure website and encrypted at the highest level. Your name and email address will not be collected and your IP address will not be stored anywhere. You are not required to provide an electronic signature on this informed consent. Your data can not be associated with your name or computer. This data will be stored for a minimum of 7 years.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY:

If you are interested in being notified of the results of this study please send a separate email to Traditionstudy@yahoo.com.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Shana Frydman at (212)666-3142 or send an email to traditionstudy@yahoo.com. The faculty sponsor for this project, Dr. Deborah Tolman is available at (212) 650-3152. You should contact the Hunter College Research Protection Program (HRPP) Office at (212) 650-3053, if you have questions regarding your rights as a subject or if you feel you have experienced a research-related injury.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE:

After reading the above, I hereby voluntarily consent to participation in this study. I affirm that I am over 18 years old and fit the study criteria and identify as a married Orthodox Jewish woman. I am aware that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. The information I provide is anonymous. No one, including the researchers, will know how I responded to these questions. By completing and submitting the instrument I am giving consent. Thank you.

*I affirm that I am over 18 years of age, and identify as an Married Orthodox Jewish woman.**

Yes

No

A Little About You:

Is this the first time you have been married?

Yes

No

How old are you?

How many years have you been married?

How many children do you have?

How old is your eldest child?

How old is your youngest child?

Where were you born?

- USA
- Canada
- Israel
- Europe
- South America
- Other

Where do you currently live?

- USA
 - Canada
 - Israel
 - Europe
 - South America
 - Other
-

Your Education

What type of elementary school did you attend?

- Co-ed Jewish Day School
- All Girl's Yeshiva/Bais Yaakov
- Modern Orthodox All Girl's School
- Private (non-Jewish) School
- Public School
- Other : _____

What type of high school did you attend?

- Co-ed Jewish Day School
- All Girl's yeshiva/Bais Yaakov
- Modern Orthodox All Girl's School
- Public School
- Private (non-Jewish) School
- Other: _____

Growing up, how much interaction did you have with males? (check all that apply)

- I hung out with my brothers

- I was friends with my male cousins
 I had male friends but not 'boyfriends'
 I had boyfriends
 Other: _____

Did you attend a year of school in Israel?

- Yes
 No

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- Less than HS Diploma
 High School Diploma
 Vocational School/AA Degree
 Bachelor's Degree
 Master's Degree
 Advanced Graduate Degree (PhD, DSW, PsyD, EdD, MD, JD, DDS)

If you attended college- where did you go? (check that all that apply)

- Yeshiva University- Stern College
 Touro College
 Public College or University
 Private College or University
 Seminary Program (e.g. Maalot, Reb. Assaf, Binah)
 Other : _____
-

Religious Identity

How do religiously self identify?

- Modern Orthodox – Machmir
 Modern Orthodox – Liberal
 Yeshivish/Black Hat
 Chassidish
 Sefardi
 Non-observant
 Other

If you are a ba'alas teshuva, how many years have you been observant?

Sexual Education

As a child, where did you receive sexual information? (check that all that apply)

- Mother
 Father
 Sibling
 Other relative
 Teacher

- Rabbi/Rebbetzin
- Friend
- Physician
- Therapist/Counselor
- Written material
- Internet
- No one/ No where
- Other: _____

As an adolescent, where did you receive sexual information? (check that all that apply)

- Mother
- Father
- Sibling
- Other relative
- Teacher
- Rabbi/Rebbetzin
- Friend
- Physician
- Therapist/Counselor
- Written material
- Internet
- No one/ No where
- Other: _____

How knowledgeable were you about sexual relations prior to marriage?

- () Very Knowledgeable () Somewhat Knowledgeable () Not Very Knowledgeable
 () Not at all Knowledgeable

When you were single, where did you receive sexual information? (Check all that apply)

- Mother
- Father
- Sibling
- Other relative
- Teacher
- Rabbi/Rebbetzin
- Friend
- Physician
- Therapist/Counselor
- Written material
- Internet
- No one/No where
- Other : _____

Now, when you need sexual information, where do you turn? (Check all that apply)

- Mother
- Father
- Sibling
- Other relative

- Teacher
 - Kallah teacher
 - Rabbi/Rebbetzin
 - Friend
 - Physician
 - Therapist/Counselor
 - Written material
 - Internet
 - No one/No where
 - Other: _____
-

Marriage Preparation

Did you learn about taharat hamishpacha before your wedding?

- Yes
- No

How did you prepare? (check all that apply)

- One on one instruction
- In a class
- On your own (reading a book or on the internet)
- Other: _____

Who recommended this specific way of learning to you? Mark all that apply:

- Parent
- Sibling
- Other relative
- Friend
- Teacher
- School
- Rabbi
- Rebetzin
- Other

If you took a class or prepared with someone, who was your main instructor?

- Parent
- Sibling
- Other relative
- Friend
- Teacher
- School
- Rabbi
- Rebetzin
- Other

Did your instructor have any formal training to teach this material?

- Yes

- No
 Don't know

If yes, from where?

If you took a class, how many people were in the class with you?

How many sessions did you attend (either in class or one-on-one)?

Approximately how many hours was each session?

Pre-marital education

What percentage of your classes/session were devoted to learning about and discussing intimacy and sexuality?

Was written material regarding intimacy and sexuality distributed?

- Yes
 No

If yes, was the material used in class/session?

- Yes
 No

Were questions encouraged?

- Yes
 No

Did you ask questions about sexual relations?

- Yes
 No

If yes, were you generally satisfied with the answers?

- Yes
 No

What was the overall approach of your instructor to sexual topics? Circle the appropriate number:

- Very Comfortable Comfortable Neutral Uncomfortable Very Uncomfortable
 Not Applicable

How comfortable were you with the sexual component of your class?

- Very Comfortable Comfortable Neutral Uncomfortable Very Uncomfortable
 Not Applicable

male desire and arousal						
Understanding the process of female orgasm	()	()	()	()	()	()
How to have sexual intercourse	()	()	()	()	()	()
Positions for sexual intercourse	()	()	()	()	()	()
Practical suggestions for the first night	()	()	()	()	()	()
Practical suggestions for achieving mutual sexual pleasure	()	()	()	()	()	()
Personal concerns and anxiety	()	()	()	()	()	()
Resolving conflicts	()	()	()	()	()	()
Insufficient lubrication	()	()	()	()	()	()
Premature ejaculation	()	()	()	()	()	()
Painful intercourse	()	()	()	()	()	()
Difficulty achieving or	()	()	()	()	()	()

maintaining an erection						
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Looking Back

How would you describe your first experience having sexual intercourse after your wedding?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Not Applicable
Confusing	()	()	()	()	()	()
Satisfying	()	()	()	()	()	()
Anxious	()	()	()	()	()	()
Romantic	()	()	()	()	()	()
Pleasurable	()	()	()	()	()	()
Embarrassing	()	()	()	()	()	()
Exciting	()	()	()	()	()	()
Frightening	()	()	()	()	()	()

More About You

Please indicate how you feel about the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Not Applicable
It bothers me that I'm	()	()	()	()	()	()

not better looking						
I worry that I am not desirable to others	()	()	()	()	()	()
Physically I am an attractive person	()	()	()	()	()	()
I am confident that my husband finds me sexually attractive	()	()	()	()	()	()
If my husband were to ignore my sexual needs and desires, I'd feel hurt.	()	()	()	()	()	()
It would bother me if my husband neglected my intimacy needs and desires	()	()	()	()	()	()
I expect my husband to be	()	()	()	()	()	()

responsive to my sexual needs and feelings						
It is important for my husband to consider my pleasure	()	()	()	()	()	()
My sexual behavior and experiences are not something I spend time thinking about	()	()	()	()	()	()
I do not hesitate to ask for what I want sexually from my husband	()	()	()	()	()	()
I don't think about my sexuality very much	()	()	()	()	()	()
I ask my husband to provide sexual stimulation I need	()	()	()	()	()	()

I show my husband what I want during intimacy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I spend time thinking and reflecting about my intimate experiences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I rarely think about the sexual aspects of my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think about my sexuality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Your Marriage Now

In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

Very Satisfied Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Dissatisfied Very Dissatisfied

How good is your relationship compared to most?

Very Good Good Average Worse than average Very Bad

How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?

Never Once in a while Sometimes Frequently all the time

In the past 12 months, how emotionally satisfying did you find your sexual relationship with your husband?

Not at all satisfying Slightly satisfying Moderately satisfying Very satisfying Extremely satisfying

In the past 12 months, how physically pleasurable did you find your sexual relationship with your husband?

- Not at all pleasurable Slightly pleasurable Moderately pleasurable Very pleasurable Extremely pleasurable

To what extent has your relationship meet your original expectations?

- Very Much A lot Somewhat A Little Not at all

How much do you love your husband?

- Very much A lot Somewhat A little Not at all
-

Getting Help

How many problems are there in your relationship?

- Many A lot Average Some Very few

When you do you feel there are problems, do you go for help?

- Yes
 No

Where do you go for help? (check all that apply)

- Friends
 Family
 Rabbi
 Mental Health Professional
 Doctor
 Other: _____

Have you found this help effective?

- Yes
 No
-

A Few More Questions

How did you meet your husband?

- Shadchan
 Friends set you up
 On an online dating website
 On your own- for example- At a Shabbos table, in high school, at shul, on the train
 Other: _____

How long did you know your husband before you got married?

- Less than 3 months
 3-6months
 6 months-year
 1-2 years
 2+ years

Is your husband the first male with whom you experienced physical intimate touch?

- Yes
 No

Before you and your husband were married, you would (check all that apply)

- Shomer Negiah
 hold hands
 hug
 kiss
 intimately touch
 have relations
 Other: _____

1) If you had a physically intimate relationship prior to your marriage (with someone other than your husband) you would

- hold hands
 hug
 kiss
 intimately touch
 have relations
 Other: _____
-

Almost done...

2) Please feel free to take a moment and let us know if there is anything else you would like to share.

Would you be interested in participating further and sharing more of your experience through answering two autobiographical questions?

- Yes
 No

APPENDIX B
NARRATIVE PORTION OF ONLINE STUDY

Intro to narrative
Why am I asking this?

The purpose of this exercise is to sample certain key events in your life. I will be asking you to construct a short story or narrative about your experience. I am collecting and analyzing these narratives of "normal" Orthodox Jewish women's intimate experiences in their marriages. Essentially, I want to learn from you and capture women's experiences so that I may eventually learn more about Orthodox Jewish women's transition into marital life.

I am not interested, therefore, in pathology, abnormal psychology, neurosis, or psychosis. I am not trying to figure out what is wrong with you. Nor will I pass judgment on the "goodness" of your life. Instead, I want to learn about your experiences. There is no right or wrong answer. There is no right or wrong way to fill this out. Women's experience varies tremendously, and women make sense of these experiences in a variety of ways. I am trying to collect many different life stories so I can begin to understand women's experience.

Before I was married I ...

Before getting married, Orthodox women prepare for the sexual part of marriage in a number of ways. Many women go to Kallah classes and read book or speak to friends or mentors. Please share your experience and thoughts about preparing for marriage.

I prepared for sexual relations in marriage by:

I decided to prepare that way because:

This was helpful because: _____

And was unhelpful because: _____

Please reflect about your preparation for marriage.

- What do you wish you would have known?
- What would tell a friend or sister before getting married?
- What else would you like to share about this experience?

My Wedding Night....

For everybody, getting married is a big life change. In particular, as an Orthodox woman, this transition is often the first time you have been sexually intimate with someone. In particular, your wedding night or early sexual experiences are very significant for many reasons. Please choose to reflect on a specific early marital sexual experience

How old were you when you got married?:

I knew my husband for (how long?):

We met (how did you meet?): _____

I describe our engagement as: _____

Please choose to reflect on a specific early marital sexual experience.

You may want to include some of the following:

- What happened?
- What you were thinking?
- What were you feeling emotionally?
- What were you feeling physically?
- What did you want to happen?
- What was it like to experience the transition into being 'allowed' to have a sexual relationship?

How do you think becoming Niddah and going to mikvah related to your transition and early marital sexual experience?

Thank You!

TABLE 1

Sample Demographics

	Survey Sample	Narrative Sample
	(n=398)	(n=102)
Age Married	23 (17-55)	24 (18-55)
Current Age	31 (20-68)	31(21-66)
Length Married	6 (0-45)	6 (0-45)
Number of children	2 (0-11)	2 (0-11)

Note: Median values listed. Range in parentheses.

TABLE 2

Sample Type and Perceived Helpfulness of Kallah class

Sample Type	Helpful	Neutral	Unhelpful
Survey Sample (N=368)	22 (33%)	124 (34%)	124 (34%)
Narrative Sample (N=104)	24 (26%)	30 (32%)	40 (43%)

TABLE 4

Participant Background and Perceived Helpfulness of Kallah Course

		Class Helpful (N=124)	%	Class Unhelpful (N=125)	%	P-Value	Statistic	df				
Education Level	High School	9	7	9	7	0.82 [^]	1.53	4				
	Vocational	5	4	5	4							
	Bachelors	51	41	43	35							
	Masters	42	34	46	37							
	Advanced	16	13	21	17							
	Missing	2		0								
Religious Self- Identification	Non- observant	0	0	0		0.35 [^]	5.55	5				
	Modern Orthodox	21	17	34	27							
	Liberal Modern Orthodox	59	48	55	44							
	Machmir Yeshivish	24	19	15	12							
	Chassidish	7	6	8	6							
	Sefardi	3	2	4	3							
	Other	10	8	9	7							
	Length of Dating	Less than 3 months	13	11	14				11	0.45 [^]	3.69	4
	3-6 months	31	25	20	16							
	6-12 months	31	25	32	26							
1-2 years	21	17	28	22								
>2 years	27	22	31	25								
Missing	1		0									
Sex Knowledge pre marriage	Very Knowledgable	0	0	6	5	<0.0001 ^{^^}						
	Somewhat Knowledgable	8	6	21	17							
	Not Very Knowledgable	53	43	53	43							
	Not At All Knowledgable	63	63	42	34							
	Missing			3								
Premarital Sexual Experience	Sexual Intercourse	3	2	15	12	<0.0001 [^]	27.20	4				
	Intimate Touch	37	30	52	42							
	Hug and/or Kiss	13	10	23	19							
	Held Hands	2	2	0	0							
	“Shomer Negiah” NO Touch	69	56	34	27							
	Missing			1								

[^]Chi-Square^{^^}Fisher's Exact Test

TABLE 5

Inclusion of Topics in *Kallah* Classes as “Helpful” vs. “Unhelpful”

		Class Helpful (N=124)	%	Class Unhelpful (N=125)	%	P-Value	Chi- Square Statistic	df
Sexual Anatomy and Physiology	Not Covered at All	16	14%	51	41%	<.0001	59.68	4
	Hardly Covered	10	8%	35	28%			
	Neutral	15	13%	11	9%			
	Covered	50	42%	21	17%			
	Covered	27	23%	5	4%			
	Thoroughly Missing	6		2				
Achieving Clear and Open Sexual	Not Covered at All	9	8%	66	54%	<.0001	98.89	4
	Hardly Covered	7	6%	25	20%			
	Neutral	18	15%	13	11%			
	Covered	50	42%	17	14%			
	Covered	34	29%	2	2%			
	Thoroughly Missing	6		2				
Mutual Respect and Understanding	Not Covered at All	1	1%	20	16%	<.0001	63.03	4
	Hardly Covered	2	2%	17	14%			
	Neutral	11	9%	18	15%			
	Covered	44	37%	55	45%			
	Covered	61	51%	13	11%			
	Thoroughly Missing	5		2				
Transition to Permissible Intimacy	Not Covered at All	9	8%	45	36%	<.0001	84.19	4
	Hardly Covered	1	1%	22	18%			
	Neutral	9	8%	17	14%			
	Covered	44	38%	34	27%			
	Covered	53	46%	6	5%			
	Thoroughly Missing	8		1				
How to Have Sexual Intercourse	Not Covered at All	18	15%	65	53%	<.0001	66.24	4
	Hardly Covered	11	9%	23	19%			
	Neutral	9	8%	9	7%			
	Covered	50	42%	25	20%			
	Covered	30	25%	1	1%			
	Thoroughly Missing	6		2				

Positions for Sexual Intercourse	Not Covered at All	25	22%	76	61%	<.0001	60.72	4
	Hardly Covered	14	12%	24	19%			
	Neutral	20	17%	9	7%			
	Covered	40	34%	15	12%			
	Covered	17	15%	0				
Practical Suggestions for the First Night	Thoroughly Missing	8		1		<.0001	81.42	4
	Not Covered at All	16	13%	46	38%			
	Hardly Covered	3	3%	30	25%			
	Neutral	5	4%	13	11%			
	Covered	47	39%	27	22%			
Personal Concerns and Anxiety	Covered	49	41%	5	4%	<.0001	95.48	4
	Thoroughly missing	4		4				
	Not Covered at All	8	7%	71	58%			
	Hardly Covered	9	8%	21	17%			
	Neutral	25	21%	14	11%			
Resolving Conflicts	Covered	41	35%	12	10%	<.0001	68.07	4
	Covered	34	29%	5	4%			
	Thoroughly Missing	7		2				
	Not Covered at All	10	9%	65	53%			
	Hardly Covered	9	8%	15	12%			
Painful Intercourse	Neutral	26	23%	21	17%	<.0001	68.55	4
	Covered	44	39%	15	12%			
	Covered	25	22%	6	5%			
	Thoroughly Missing	10		3				
	Not Covered at All	25	22%	79	65%			
	Hardly Covered	16	14%	22	18%			
	Neutral	12	11%	13	11%			
	Covered	35	31%	7	6%			
	Covered	24	21%	1	1%			
	Thoroughly Missing	12		3				

^Chi-Square

^^Fisher's Exact Test

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