“I DON’T KNOW WHY I DID THAT BECAUSE THAT DOESN’T MAKE COMPLETE SENSE”: HOW UNDERSTANDING IS PREVENTED BY THE PRIVILEGING OF RATIONALITY

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Six female college students were interviewed multiple times about their experiences in nonacademic situations with other college students and members of the university community. I focused on situations in which these women could be seen as engaging in behavior that is dangerous to their physical or emotional well-being. Using the Reading Guide (Gilligan et al., 2003) I then read each transcript a number of times looking for different voices. The two voices I focused on were a “sure voice,” in which the women spoke confidently about their thoughts and experiences, and an “unsure voice,” in which the women seemed confused. I used these two voices in conjunction with other information I had gathered about these women throughout the course of our meetings in order to illustrate how each had been harmed by a cultural hegemony of rational discourse and explanation.
“I DON’T KNOW WHY I DID THAT BECAUSE THAT DOESN’T MAKE COMPLETE SENSE”: HOW UNDERSTANDING IS PREVENTED BY THE PRIVILEGING OF RATIONALITY

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for my younger sister Kimberly--may her journey through college be safe
I gratefully acknowledge my advisor, Roger M. Knudson, and my committee members, Ann Fuehrer and Karen M. Schilling, for their assistance and patience. I owe my deepest gratitude to the women who shared their stories, their time, and their trust with me. I would also like to thank Terri Messman-Moore for her early support of this project. My family and friends served as invaluable sources of support and encouragement throughout the duration of my work. Lastly, I would like to thank Matthew Allen for his unwavering faith in me.
The first and second waves of feminism revealed the many wrongs women have experienced and are still experiencing. Due to their efforts, laws have been passed, shelters have been created, and communities have been formed. Though many argue that this is not enough, this is at least an improvement. Certain things are clearly wrong: dragging a woman into an alley and forcing her to have sex or abusing one’s spouse or partner. These clear-cut cases of violence against women are understood to be such, but there are many more “fuzzy” cases than clear ones. What of the woman who drinks too much at a fraternity party and wakes up naked and confused in a stranger’s bed? Was it not her choice to drink at a fraternity party and should she not have known that this is what happens when one engages in such behavior?

It is these “fuzzy” cases that interest me, largely because traditional dichotomous ways of understanding seem to be largely unhelpful here. It is unclear who is right or wrong, who has the control and who does not, or even who has made what choices. When these situations are viewed dichotomously, when questions such as “whose fault was it?” are asked, women who have been assaulted by acquaintances, women who remain in abusive relationships and women who, seen from the outside, make “bad choices” appear to be either ignorant or masochistic. These women, examined from one perspective, can be seen as voluntarily entering and remaining in unhealthy dangerous situations.

Certain authors such as Katie Roiphe (1994) question the notion of date rape. Roiphe argues that it is disempowering to view women as innocent victims and men as perpetrators. When all the responsibility is placed on men, women are viewed as frail indecisive creatures; men are seen as full autonomous agents choosing not only their own destinies but also the destinies of the women around them. Roiphe believes that this view is a step backwards for feminism and thinks women should take responsibility for their choices. But Roiphe’s argument is grounded in a Cartesian view of the person, one in which each individual is fundamentally separate from all others in a society, and thus is solely responsible for her/his own actions. She is not interested in the subtle messages women receive every day about how to act, where to be, how to succeed in society, and how to find a suitable mate.
Women are embedded in a social sphere that we must navigate daily. Other researchers have examined women’s choices from inside the contexts in which we live, viewing women as part of a larger whole rather than as solitary agents. Gilligan (1982) stresses that women often make choices that we believe will maintain connectedness in our relationships. As such, we generally imagine ourselves as part of a community and not as single solitary agents responsible only for ourselves. One example of community, the one that I will study, is the undergraduate college community.

An area of research focusing on women’s roles in college examines how women fit into the Greek system, particularly in all male fraternities. As they help explain this particular phenomenon that has, for this researcher, some very troubling aspects; a number of researchers’ contributions are reviewed below. Although the Greek system will not be my focus, I discuss it at length since it presents an example of an organized college social scene.

Little sisters

A particular group of women who may be seen as placing themselves in dangerous situations are “little sisters.” Many fraternities include little sister organizations, that are groups of women who serve as half-time members to all-male fraternities (Stombler, & Padavic, 1997; Stombler, 1994; Stombler, & Martin, 1994). These women attempt to gain entrance into a male-dominated world by appealing directly to the gatekeepers, but remain half-time as they are only present at the fraternity when invited. Through her research Stombler examined the reasons why women join these organizations, with the assumption that there are benefits and drawbacks to being a little sister. Stombler and Martin (1994) determined that,

Fraternity men actively create and maintain gender inequality in these campus organizations and...the organizations act as structures that codify and perpetuate the already intense heterosexual peer culture in which men define women rather than women defining themselves. (p. 153-154)

Women, perhaps knowing no more than traditional “heterosexual peer culture,” join these organizations in order to enter campus life, make friends, engage in a “familial-like” structure, and find a mate.
Once deemed little sisters, these women often experience an ambiguous relationship with the fraternity. Though women are expected to attend most fraternity sporting events and parties, they cannot be sure when they are spending too little or too much time at “the house” (Stombler, & Martin, 1994). Sexual expectations are also ambiguous. These women need to consciously maintain a “collective sexual reputation” that is neither “too frigid” nor “too loose.” Fraternity men, aware of the effect of the reputation of their little sisters, actively seek to recruit both women that they can use for sexual pleasure (“slutties”) and sisters who will maintain an aura of purity (“buddies”) (Stombler, 1994). Women who are “slutties” risk having their jersey pulled, a slang term for being kicked out of the organization, for sleeping with too many men. However, women who view themselves as “buddies” are often vulnerable to sexual aggression because they consider the fraternity brothers to be protectors and not as potential aggressors. Sexual assault is so prevalent in little sister organizations that in 1989 many universities banned them (Stombler, & Martin, 1994). Women who maintain a relationship with the fraternity are used as commodities primarily for domestic chores, hostess duties, and general amusement. Whereas men receive a tangible service from little sisters, sisters themselves engage in the process in order to achieve abstract ideals such as “status.” Brothers would receive pleasure and domestic service from sisters, and sisters would receive status and greater access to men.

The sisters described above can only tell a story about White sisters. In their study of both Black and White sisters, Stombler and Padavic (1994) found that Black sisters were much more able to resist male domination by engaging in collective action. The authors hypothesize that this is largely because of the different sociocultural messages that Black and White females receive. Whereas White females are often socialized to attend college in order to find a suitable husband, Black sisters are taught self-reliance. They attend college in order to better themselves as independent women. Fraternity brothers on Black campuses seem to recognize this, and choose Black sisters based on different criteria. Not only do current Black sisters have a vote as to who is accepted into the organization, but also instead of using criteria based on looks and sociability, Black sisters are often chosen based on their strength and solidarity with the group (Stombler, & Padavic, 1997).
In short, little sister organizations seem to be a “back-door” through which women can gain entry into male high status organizations. Women who believe that they can gain acceptance and “brotherly love” from fraternities often find instead that they are treated as commodities and “eye candy.” These women know, through their upbringing, that in order to gain admittance to the larger White male dominated world, the best way is through the kitchen, the bedroom, or both. There are other women who often attend fraternity parties who are not official little sisters. These women are also at risk for sexual assault, sometimes in the form of a gang rape.

_Fraternity gang rape_

After one of Peggy Reeves Sanday’s (1990) students disclosed that she had been gang raped Sanday conducted an ethnographic study of fraternity gang rapes. Fraternity gang rapes often follow a similar script. The evening begins with the perpetrators targeting an intoxicated woman, coercing her into having sex with one fraternity member, and then letting other men into the bedroom to allow them to have sex with her without her consent. Threat is often not necessary. The victim, naked and vulnerable, often believes that she has “gotten herself” into a bad situation and must deal with the consequences (Sanday, 1990). Not only may the victim blame herself for the rape but also other women within the community, instead of being supportive, may blame her. Stombler (1994) found that, “Most little sisters conceptualized sexual abuse with a ‘victim blaming’ mentality by claiming that little sisters who were abused failed to control their own actions” (p. 315). Women who “put themselves” in situations in which sexual assault may have been likely were seen as willing participants. Many fraternity men have a similar myth. Once a woman has agreed to have sex with one man, they may wonder what difference it makes if she “has sex” with eight.

Sanday (1990), however, believes that gang rape is not primarily about sex. She concludes, “The sexual act [gang rape – or, ‘pulling train’] is not concerned with sexual gratification but with the deployment of the penis as a concrete symbol of masculine social power and dominance” (Sanday, 1990, p. 10). By using women as sexual objects, fraternity men reify their viewpoint that women are alien unimportant creatures, while men are dominant rational beings. In this vein, gang rape is a form of male bonding, it should be expected to occur, and a woman should know that certain actions ensure her
“participation” in group sex. Hirsch (1990) believes that gang rape is often viewed by the perpetrators (and others) as a “prank” or a “rite of passage.” When gang rape is normalized, when it is viewed as a “natural drive” of young men, the responsibility is placed on the woman, who must then successfully dodge male aggression. With this mentality, a woman who behaves in a certain manner at a fraternity party is as responsible for any sexual assault against her as a person who shakes up a hornet’s nest is responsible for the stings s/he receives.

Hirsch’s (1990) article also examines gang rape culture by looking at the typical response from a university. Hirsch (1990) found that the penalty for sexual assault is often equal to the penalty for plagiarism—one-year suspension. The university may not be entirely responsible; communities often rise up to protect men who rape if the perpetrators have high status within that community. One university attempted to permanently suspend a student who had raped a woman but had to readmit him after constant protests by the student body (Hirsch, 1990). In his study of the gang rape of a developmentally disabled woman by popular high school males (“jocks”), Lefkowitz (1997) was shocked to hear upstanding citizens say things about the rapists such as “it’s such a tragedy. They’re such beautiful boys and this will scar them forever” (p. 7). With this in mind, it is easy to see how a little sister, or any woman in general, may be reluctant to press charges when she believes that she has been raped.

Beyond the Greek system

Studies of sexual assault on college campuses usually revolve around fraternity men with the assumption that assaults are much more likely to occur at fraternities, however this does not mean that the Greek system itself is responsible for sexual assaults. Schwartz and Nogrdy (1996) found that fraternity men were no more likely than non-Greek men to endorse rape myths or admit to having sexually assaulted a woman. Though this may be interpreted as a positive sign for the Greek system, 20% of the entire sample (both fraternity and non-Greek men) were labeled as “victimizers” on a dichotomous variable (Schwarz, & Nogrdy, 1996, p. 156). What this indicates is that one out of every five men on this particular campus had admitted to either using coercion or force in order to have sexual relations with a woman. In this case, women who are
highly cognizant of sexual violence in fraternities are no safer for avoiding those fraternities. Educating women to avoid drinking at fraternity parties is not enough.

A study by Boswell and Spade (1996) also supports the notion that fraternities may not by definition promote an atmosphere that elicits sexual assault. The authors compared fraternities known to be “dangerous” for women with others that were relatively benign. One particular factor that they found was that fraternities in which sexual assault was more prevalent had fewer interactions between men and women and more alcohol consumption. There was much less dialogue between men and women at parties in “dangerous” fraternities. This lack of dialogue may serve to further objectify and position woman as “other.” Schwarz and Nogrady (1996) also found that alcohol consumption was a better predictor of sexual violence than fraternity status. Other researchers also believe that blaming the fraternity system itself is missing the larger picture. Though they limited their study to the experiences of sorority women, Copenhaver and Grauerholz (1991) insist that fraternity rape must be viewed in the larger context, that is, as a part of a White male dominated culture.

Lefkowitz (1997) took a cultural approach to understanding young men’s “drives” to commit rape when he examined the Glen Ridge gang rape. These sexual predators, high school students, belonged to no official Greek organization. The culture these men grew up in, one of White male privilege, instilled in them the belief that male bonding is sacred and women always come second. This culture may represent a fraternal culture that is operating outside of the Greek system. These men often engaged in deviant behavior that adults were quite aware of (such as underage drinking, vandalism and theft), and were simply given a slap on the wrist by the adults who simultaneously sighed, “boys will be boys.” Women, to these young men, were either “little mothers” (much like the little sister “buddies”) or “jockettes” (similar to little sister “slutties”). “Little mothers” were the boys’ cheerleaders, domestic workers and friends; “jockettes” were responsible for performing fellatio, among other things.

Even women at progressive liberal arts institutions experience these fuzzy situations. In a study of self-defined progressive college women Phillips (2000) also espouses a cultural approach in order to understand people. She discusses how
“messages” received by young women through parents, media, and the culture at large create a confusing mass of information. Phillips (2000) writes:

Although it has been politically essential to assert, simply, that ‘no means no and yes means yes,’ it is also important to explore what is not so clear [italics in original] in women’s experiences of their relationships and sexualities if advocacy efforts are to effectively help young women prevent and make sense of the various manifestations of sexualized aggression in their lives. (p. x)

In other words, even for women who have grown up in the heyday of liberal feminist politics there are webs of complexities and contradictions that women must travel through in order to understand their own hetero-relationships. Simply educating young women and demanding self-empowerment is not enough. These same women who bluntly rejected White male privilege and identified themselves as feminists still found themselves in situations in which they were coerced into having sexual relations that they did not wish to have. Although many of the women in her study described situations that would be labeled by law as rape, few were willing to name them as such. These women refuse to give up beliefs regarding their own autonomy by labeling themselves as “victims,” and even take responsibility for their own sexual assaults. A feminist self-in-relational message cannot be transplanted into a culture that values Cartesian autonomy and freedom. Broad social change is therefore necessary.

**Cartesian vs. self-in-relation model**

René Descartes’ ideas regarding dualism are central to Western philosophy and thus influence the general culture (e.g., Rozemond, 1998). According to Descartes’ logic, the “body” and “mind” are two separate entities. The mind is equated with the rational “true self” and the body is equated with the corporal irrational passions. In this conception, an individual is born into the world with an innate capacity to understand advanced concepts such as mathematics. It is through interactions with others, primarily caregivers and even one’s own body, that the mind becomes tainted (Descartes, 1984). There are two important conclusions that can be drawn from this perspective. First, humans are inherently isolated autonomous beings. That is, one has a mind that is essentially one’s own and this mind has existed before birth. Second, relationships with
other humans serve to hinder the self. In short, not only is the “mind” separate from the body but it is also separate from all other minds and all other bodies.

Dualism has been harmful for women in many ways. Overtly, women have been identified with irrational passionate impulses and thus are seen as inferior to men who are logical and, for the most part, “emotionless.” According to this idea, while women rely on “bodily cues” such as intuitions, “gut feeling,” and emotions – otherwise known as the “passions;” men make decisions by divorcing themselves from emotion and instead using the primary tool of the mind, logic. In other words, they are able to obtain complete objectivity. In a more subversive means of harm, women, innately or due to socialization, traditionally define ourselves according to their relationships with others and find it unhelpful to imagine ourselves as outside objective knowers (e.g., Oakley, 1981). Thus, not only are women stereotypically identified as “irrational,” we are also socialized to be aware of subtle emotional cues from children and relatives in our daily lives. While women are praised for being sensitive beings, we are simultaneously excluded from roles that involve important decision-making.

In contrast to the dominant Cartesian “isolated mind” model of person, feminism provides a different model of person: the “self-in-relation” (Jordan, 1997). First, there is no dualistic split between “mind” and “body.” Therefore, traditional feminine qualities such as “intuition” are valued as much as rational thought. Perhaps more importantly, identity is largely created through the relationships people have with caregivers, peers, and the culture at large. In this model there is no “true self” that can be tainted by outside influence. In other words,

Rather than a primary perspective based on the formed and contained self, this model [the self-in-relation model] stresses the importance of the intersubjective, relationally emergent nature of human experience. While there is still a “felt sense of self,” which is acknowledged by this point of view it is a “self inseparable from a dynamic interaction” (Miller, 1984, p. 4) an “interacting sense of self,” (Miller, 1984). (in Jordan, 1997, p. 15)

While a person can still have a sense of “I,” this “I” is viewed as part of a larger whole rather than as a separate isolated entity; as it is viewed in the traditional Cartesian model.
While academic feminists recognize and attempt to overthrow the male centric bias in academia (e.g., Morawski, 1997), it is most likely more difficult for everyday women to be attuned to the influence of Cartesian thought in everyday situations. For some women who are actively finding their way through this mass of mixed and incompatible messages, joining the Greek system may be a defensive reaction to the dominant cultural narratives. Handler (1995), in her study of sorority women, found that many women joined sororities largely to help themselves negotiate hetero-relationships. The author notes that by joining a sorority a woman simultaneously increases her dating pool and decreases competition. Because attempting to steal your own “sister’s” partner is shunned by sister sorority women, a woman gains a network of support for her relationship with a partner of the opposite sex. Within the sorority system women can band together, take care of each other, and develop strategies for dealing with the dominant male culture.

In summary, Western culture is based on a privileging of rationality. Miller (1992) writes:

Socrates and his student, Plato, are credited with articulating the fundamental moral and political dilemmas of Western civilization and demonstrating the virtue of rational discourse as the primary method of problem solving in human affairs through the use of the dialogue. (pg. 9)

If a person is faced with a dilemma the best course of action to choose, according to the most noted thinkers in our history books, is to work out a solution rationally. This also extends to a privilege of language in itself. In his study of the suffocation of image by language Shlain (1998) writes, “For many men, women fell into the category of ‘other’…Using ‘irrefutable’ logic, they ‘proved’ beyond doubt that the male was the standard and the female a defective version…Women’s rights and the attributes associated with the right brain suffered accordingly” (pg. 378). Non-rational experiences, those associated with the right brain, have a long history of not being valued in Western culture. If we cannot put it clearly in words it must be defective.
Implicit in the section above is a commentary on “power.” Within a Cartesian self-system power dynamics arise as supposedly autonomous egos interact. In Jordan’s (1997) words:

A system that defines the self as separate and hierarchically measurable is usually marked in Western cultures by power-based dominance patterns. In such systems, the self-boundary serves as protection from the impinging surround and the need for connection with, relatedness to, and contact with others is subjugated to the need to protect the separate self. (p. 16-17)

The definition of power in this case may be better understood as “power over,” as in maintaining dominance over a person or group of people. In this system, there is the powerful and there is the powerless. Power is shared only with others who hold the same belief systems. Traditionally, women have been the dominated group. Mary Pipher (1994) notes, “Simone de Beauvoir believed adolescence is when girls realize that men have the power and that their only power comes from consenting to become submissive adored objects” (p. 21). In this analysis women are not entirely powerless but rather gain a sense of power by attaching ourselves to powerful men. Times have changed since de Beauvoir wrote this and there are now other ways to examine power.

Another definition of power involves looking at it as more than a monolithic conception. Phillips (2000), citing numerous theoreticians notes:

Power is enacted within, but also transcends, particular moments or particular relationships. Power is not simply something we have, but rather something we exercise in relationship to others, through both resistance to and compliance with the discourses available to us (Bartky, 1990; Foucault, 1978; 1980; 1981; Lips, 1991, Sawicki, 1991). (p. 20)

This describes a sense of power that is fluid; it is a verb as well as a noun. One may have more power in one situation, but less in another. Perhaps there are two definitions of power inherent in this conceptualization. There is “Power,” as in a general summation of the amount of influence a person will have in all possible situations in a culture; and then there is “power,” which is a reference to the amount of power a person has in one particular interaction. This small “p” power, as noted above, can include resistance to
one who has more capital “P” Power. Thus, for women, although we have less Power, we may have more power in certain instances.

In any given situation of powerlessness there is a loss of voice. Jordan (1997) writes, “a woman’s voice often will not be heard, even when it is quite clear, if the woman’s reality is not congruent with dominant societal values” (p. 52). In other words, when a woman speaks against social norms from a position of Powerlessness, she cannot be heard no matter how loudly she yells. The term voice itself is two-sided. There is the more traditional voice, the one that speaks aloud and is heard, and also the voice that speaks to the self. This “internal” voice is not an entirely separate entity from the “external” voice and is furthermore fundamentally part of the constant dialogue, or lack thereof, of other voices. It is fluid; however, it is also me. “Me,” in a relational theory, takes on a different meaning, but it does not disappear:

In a paradigm that recognizes the relational and interdependent nature of our lives, we might replace ‘autonomy’ with the capacity to be clear in our thoughts, feelings, and actions; to act with intention; to be creative and effective, but always with awareness of the source of our energy in relationships and with recognition of the impact of our actions on others” (Jordan, p. 30, 1997).

To say a person has “voice” then is to assert that s/he speaks and is heard. With this voice there is an “I,” but this “I” is not an essentialized self. Brown (1998) notes, “While I acknowledge subjectivity as a process, I also acknowledge the agentic power of the felt experience or phenomenology or an integrated, conscious, more or less continuous, permanent subjectivity” (p. 92). She further cites Bakhtin: “One’s own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others’ words that have been acknowledged and assimilated, and the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely perceptible” (as cited in Brown, 1998). During this period when girls search for their own “I” voice, girls often engage in “ventriloquation” in which “other” voices are expressed through girls’ mouths, according to Brown. These are the voices of parents, peers, educators and the culture at large. Although, like Gilligan, I believe that we are able to hear our voices and learn about them in our early relationships, I do not believe that voices are formed this way. In short, when I speak of voices being “inside” a woman or “part of” a woman, I am using a metaphor.
For the purposes of this study I will refer to “rational voices” and “non-rational voices.” Based on Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) model of personhood—or, more specifically, womanhood—we have and hear many different voices at once and not all of these voices are rational. I argue that by being taught to value only the rational voices we neglect a large part of experiences. This provides women with an incomplete understanding of our own experiences. In direct relation to this project, we cannot understand why a woman would enter a dangerous situation if we ask her to look only for a rational answer. Even more damaging, by asking themselves for rational answers to these questions and not finding rational answers young women are imagining themselves to be stupid, defective, deficient, and inferior.

It is my belief that although people have phenomenologically unique experiences, these experiences are guided by cultural or social scripts. These cultural scripts are formed by the dominant social groups. Phillips (2000) refers to “messages” and “discourses.” She believes that there are competing ideas regarding what it is to be a “good woman,” what a normal (or dangerous) male is, what exactly victimization involves, and what a woman should expect to gain from relationships with men. These are a part of what I am calling cultural scripts. There are not only messages about how to act, but also how to be. Wiersma’s (1988) idea of the “press release” is similar in nature. According to Wiersma, there is a general, automatically supplied, and culturally sanctioned story that can be employed to explain any particular event in a person’s life. This story will tell nothing of a person’s individual experience; it is the version of the story that is “easy” to tell. These scripts are useful in the sense that they help members of the culture anticipate and understand the behavior of other members of the culture. However, they are dangerous when scripts are left critically unexamined, particularly if they are born out of out-dated moral systems.

These cultural scripts are present in approaches to dating. Warsaw (1994) described “dating rituals” in which:

The male initiates the date by asking the woman out, with him paying all of the expenses… [and he] has learned from seeing such behavior (or from the advice of other men) that women often say no when they mean yes. (p. 38-39)
The basic scene is as follows: man asks woman out, man makes plans, man picks up woman, man pays for date, woman smiles and giggles appropriately, man makes sexual advances, and woman doth protest too much. In this dance, the woman is passive until the man initiates sexual advances at which point she must actively fend off his natural primal urges. One consequence of this script, Warsaw notes, is that women are bound to protest even if they do want to have intercourse. How is a man to know if she does or does not want to have sex with him? Men who rely on the social script more than on the individual women flailing, crying, or cursing below him are at risk of becoming acquaintance rapists.

Not only are these scripts powerful tools at the time of contact, they also affect how individuals make meaning of their experiences in the aftermath. A study by Leibowitz and Roth (1994) examined the responses women who have been raped have following the rape. They note that,

The meaning attached to a traumatic event derives from the broader sociocultural context in which the individual lives and is traumatized. By sociocultural context, we mean the ideas, beliefs and metaphors which emerge from our cultural productions and institutions (e.g., literature, media, religion, law), which form a recognizable and coherent ideology and which are relevant for a particular event. The ideas and beliefs which emerge from this ideology are easily and generally recognizable, rather than individual and idiosyncratic (Leibowitz & Roth, p. 364). Thus, after a woman has been raped, she may rely upon the dominant narrative of society in order to help her understand what has just happened. This is often a lose-lose situation for women. For example, if the dominant narrative is “a woman who gets raped is a slut” she now may see herself as “soiled” and deserving of the rape; perhaps if she had not had consensual intercourse a year prior she would have never been raped. However, if the responsibility for the rape falls solely on the shoulders of the male, which, in the case of acquaintance rape, it rarely does; the victimized woman must now assimilate the harsh reality that she is not in control of her life. As may be inferred, these understandings are based in rational logic.

The scripts I am primarily interested in hearing about are similar to the ones that Phillips (2000) pointed out. Cultural scripts guiding the perceptions woman and men
have about themselves and others are fundamentally important to heterosexual interactions and victimization. She writes:

Yet we must also note a compelling *absence* of discourses of *male accountability* [italics in original]. The available discourses suggest that if only a woman were more pleasing, more ‘together’ (or both), if only she were better able to perceive the presumably clear lines between normal and dangerous encounters/men, if only she were not sexual, if only she attached to the right man, she would be safe and secure. (Philips, 2000, p. 77)

It is possible that the absence of these cultural scripts is, in part, responsible for women’s confusing meaning making processes after events such as acquaintance rape. The scripts available to women are those created within the dominant patriarchy and thus are not written for the self-in-relation. They speak to a masculine ideal; an ideal void of relational development, empathy, and emotional well-being. The current social scripts do not allow a space for women to hear conflicting voices and this is therefore a dangerous space for women to be in.

**Sexuality**

Recent feminist research has focused on reclaiming female sexuality. A good example of this is Sharon Lamb’s (2001) recent book studying girls’ sexuality and aggression. Lamb interviewed women about some of the experiences they had as children regarding sex play and aggression. Although it is positive that it is now recognized that young girls have sexual urges, it is important to note that many of the sex play activities described by the women were reminiscent of current patriarchal sexual scripts. For example, the book opens up as naked “Sarah,” playing the woman, pretends to be tied to the bed frame. “Lisa,” imagining herself as the man, performs a sexual act on her. Is that what little girls think of male and female sexuality? There seems to be a lack of positive stories for girls to learn about their own sexuality.

**Regaining focus: My research question/perspective**

As summarized above, there is a wealth of research supporting the idea that despite the efforts of well-meaning feminist politics women will continuously place ourselves in situations in which we are likely to be sexually assaulted. But the picture I am looking at is larger: not only are these contexts dangerous for women, they are also
silencing. **How do women understand our experiences in contexts in which we have minimal privilege, voice and power?** Do we believe that we have control over these situations? **What are our reasons for entering situations that may be dangerous, and what benefits are associated with these situations?** The answer, I believe, lies beyond college level organizations themselves (i.e. the Greek system). It is in the culture at large. I believe, like Phillips (2000), that from a very early age women are given confusing complex social messages that leave us with two options: remain subordinate in the dominant culture or create/join a counter-culture. In order to study this, I will focus on one particular culture. The women in whom I am interested are those who spent, or are spending, time silenced in the dominant White heterosexual male culture. Furthermore, I believe that these women are doing the best they can with the social scripts they have to work with. Operating inside the culture, these women have consciously or unconsciously weighed the risks involved in participating in a dangerous/demeaning social scene vs. the risk of being alone and have decided that it is much more risky to abandon cultural scripts.

In short, I am examining how women make sense of experiences in which we have minimal voice and power and in which we may have been victimized. Women appear to have two primary competing cultural scripts available to us in order to understand our participation in male dominated situations. One, we can understand ourselves as dependent victim-prone individuals who need the proper men to take care of us; or two, we can understand ourselves as similar to men, as autonomous entities who are responsible for our own stupid decisions. I argue that these discourses create unhelpful mixed messages for the woman who has been used, abandoned, silenced and/or raped. Furthermore, this dichotomous understanding is a product of an over reliance on rational explanation, and an ignorance of the non-rational voices that are essential to women’s experience. The very concept of voice, as I understand it, cannot be conceptualized using only rational means. I write to call for broad scale social change, to help carve out a space for these voices so that women can remember how to hear them.
Method

Method Utilized

My research method involved writing multiple case studies consistent with Rosenwald’s (1988) theory. According to Rosenwald, one reason case studies are important is that they examine the individual and the society at the same time. The traditional separation between the individual and society is eschewed, as it is easily seen that each influences the other to the point where it is impossible to draw the line of distinction. Furthermore, each case study builds on and influences the next. As I worked on this project I also discovered that the method influenced the researcher as well; I found myself at points adapting my method to fit my needs, and at other times adapting my needs to fit my method. As such, this methods section describes a fluid process, one in which the method is both the agent of change and is changed in the process.

The method I used was a qualitative methodology centered around “Listening Guide” Gilligan, Brown, & Rogers, 1990; Brown, & Gilligan, 1992). According to this method, the researcher reads each participant’s story four times while searching for different voices. The first voice is simply the “narrator” voice. The researcher looks for the narrative of a story focusing on the plot. The second voice is the “self” voice and the researcher listens to how the participant imagines herself to be present in the story (Gilligan et al., 1990). Since my use of the method involved multiple readings of a transcript rather than multiple listenings of an audiotape I will henceforth refer to this method as the Reading Guide. When I began the study I had not decided on the nature of the final two voices. Some ideas I had were listening for things such as conflict, acknowledged social influence, or participants’ understanding of the men’s perspective. This method has been chosen for a number of reasons. First, it does not posit an essentialized self. None of the voices are assumed to be representative of any “true self” of the participant. Gilligan et al. (1990) write, “Placed in time and in relationship, personality or character becomes indeterminate, open to change or reversal. And meaning similarly becomes indeterminate, subject always to revision, to the possibility of seeing anew” (p. 88).

In a similar vein, the “Reading Guide” can be used following the “crisis of representation” (e.g., Denzin, 1997). According to Denzin, “qualitative researchers can
no longer directly capture lived experience. Such experience, it is argued, is created in the social text written by the researcher” (1997, p. 3). The Reading Guide, as alluded to above, acknowledges the relational nature of experience and does not make claims of representation. Though my focus is primarily informed by feminist theory and thus will carry a political message that I will not attempt to hide, postmodern sensibilities regarding “authority” and “representation” will be taken into account.

This study was designed to take place in two distinct phases. The first phase asked university women questions about the common patterns/stereotypes present in hetero-relationships at Miami University. These questions were not intentionally personal, but instead invited women to comment on the “Miami lifestyle.” Information from this portion of the study was used in order to generate questions about topics that are appropriate for campus life at Miami U. (Appendix A) and to engage women in a dialogue that used language and terms they were familiar with. I furthermore used information gained in these first interviews to determine which women would be appropriate for the second phase of the interview.

Given Wiersma’s research (1988), it is taken as an assumption here that women will tell certain cultural stories (“press releases”) about life at Miami University and will refrain from a more personalized account unless they are comfortable with the researcher. From the original sample of women, I attempted to identify those who indicate that they are willing to expand beyond the “press releases.” These women were articulate, insightful, and unafraid to examine themselves deeply. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were also given a blank journal and invited to record anything they felt would be useful for my purposes. I also presented their stories back to the women prior to completion of the manuscript in order to obtain their opinions.

Process

In order to create a more complex and rich story, I find it important to explain how I went about collecting and analyzing stories, and how this process deviated from the proposed idea. I believe that it is important for the reader to understand the experiences I had while working on this project. My experience affected my participants’ experiences as well as the analysis and write-up of the project. Thus, it is important for me to be open about my experience with this project from the beginning.
The idea for this project came about as I wrote a proposal for a separate project that I intended to complete for my Master’s Thesis. This hypothesized project involved listening to stories from women who had been sexually abused and treated in the mental health system. After showing this proposal to my advisor, Roger Knudson, he intuitively inferred that this was not where my passion lied. However, what Roger did see from this proposal was that I was angry about something. Roger encouraged me to engage in a number of writing assignments. As I began to focus my work, one of these assignments resulted in the following.

My story

The first time I remember questioning gender expectations was, ironically (or perhaps not), while my cousin and I were playing with Barbies. Barbie and Ken were getting married, and Ken unfortunately had a last name that rhymed with whatever new “potty” word I had learned that week. The happy couple (I know they were happy because Barbie always smiled) decided that it was in everyone’s best interest if they just both took Barbie’s last name (which was Gold – as in the color of her hair). This solution made perfect sense to me. Although I considered myself an advocate for equality among the sexes beginning at a rather young age, my original idea of “empowerment” involved acting like a man. Even though I knew that it was not fair that Barbie should have to change her name to Ken’s name, I couldn’t imagine any other solution than to have Ken change his own name while taking marriage vows. Granted, I was only six or seven, but it took a great number of years to question the sexist heterosexual scripts my cousin and I played out with Barbie and Ken on an almost daily basis, the dolls would just occasionally switch roles.

Implicit in the assumption that women and men should be treated equally without any change to the dominant social structure is the idea that women must emulate the behavior of men in order to be equal. This belief at hand, I managed to find myself in groups of men and believed that I needed to play by “their rules.” By “their rules” I mean not only the rules that men explicitly voice, but also the societal “rules” they themselves are not aware of. One of these “rules” is always “don’t complain, don’t talk about it if it upsets you.” This “self” that I was attempting to mold myself into by following these “rules” is, according to Jordan (1997) the “ideal Western self.” She
writes, “Increased self-control, a sense of self as origin of action and intention, an increasing capacity to use abstract logic, and a movement towards self-sufficiency characterize that maturation of the “ideal Western self” (Jordan, 1997, p. 9). Following these rules, the ideal person (read: man) does not complain, does not talk about feelings, does not automatically think about the ramifications of her/his actions for others and certainly does not ask for help.

Furthermore, “I would also like to suggest that boys are actively socialized toward a power-dominance experience of selfhood, while girls are socialized towards a love-empathy mode of being in the world (Jordan, 1987)” (Jordan, 1997, p. 18). Whether it is rigorous socialization or an innate drive, women generally behave in a more relationally focused fashion that includes relational growth, growing through compromises with others. “Energy put into relational growth, rather than into pleasure narrowly defined as for the self, is judged often as masochistic or self sacrificing” (Jordan, p. 59, 1997). Women who are concerned about others are weak and weak beings are not desired in a male social system. One thing a relational woman can do in this situation in order to gain status, or privilege is to attach herself to a dominant male. Often, this involves a woman integrating herself within the male culture in order to meet appropriate males.

Jordan (1997) further notes that:

A system that defines the self as separate and hierarchically measurable is usually marked in Western cultures by power-based dominance patterns. In such systems, the self-boundary serves as protection from the impinging surround and the need for connection with, relatedness to, and contact with others is subjugated to the need to protect the separate self. (p. 16-17)

Connection, which is weakness in this system, is a subordinate position to hold. Given their orientation, women hold the subordinate position. This explains my early belief and some feminist beliefs (such as Roiphie’s), that in order for women to gain power we must act like the “ideal Western self.” I was not equipped to be a successful self-sufficient person in the male world. This led to silence. Often my male friends viewed me as snobby or “better than them” or bored because I did not speak. What they did not know is that I simply had nothing to say that would not make me look like a bitch, a bimbo, or a
weirdo. What’s a woman to say to a group of men (her friends) who are discussing the merits of push-up bras? And even if she is to speak, will anyone hear her?

Jordan (1997) notes “The metaphor of ‘voice’ so often used to characterize the experience of self, is apt, for one’s voice is vividly shaped by the quality of listening provided, whether with a real audience or an imagined one” (1997). My voice, a confused mass of what I should say and what I wanted to say, remained silent, unable to ever find a balance between the two. Sometimes I squeaked out some sarcasm, as this maintained that I did not agree with the men, but never quite clarified my position.

I’d like to interject here with a story from my undergraduate years. I believe it represented a turning point in my understanding of myself in male situations. It was after this situation that I began to “really” question (as in not just with my “external” voice, but also with my “internal” one) my idealization of this group of friends. Fortunately, this incident was quite benign, but I came to believe that there very well may have been a different ending to this story. I realized following this instance that I didn’t need to yell louder, I needed to yell elsewhere.

It’s four am and I’m on the floor. I’ve fallen off the bed, but at least I haven’t thrown up on myself. My roommate breaks into raucous laugher, and her boyfriend chivalrously places me back on top of my bed. “I may be drunk,” I slur, “But at least I’m home!” The boyfriend raises an eyebrow. He doesn’t understand the world of insecure college women. My roommate suppresses her laughter and nods. She does.

Hours earlier I am visiting a friend. He is having some sort of social gathering and I am honored to have been invited. We sit in a circle and drink cheap alcohol. I am in the circle. I don’t speak much, but I nod and giggle when I think I am supposed to. Suddenly, as I stand up, my bladder demanding a visit to the bathroom, I have the startling realization that I am much more drunk than I should be. I’ve been counting the glasses – all good women know to do that. I wobble to the bathroom, and when I return I catch my friend’s roommate refilling my glass. He’s been paying more attention to what I’ve been drinking than I have. He’s a strange guy to begin with, and he is currently as inebriated as I am. He wraps his arms around my waist and pleads with me to climb onto his top bunk with him and “hook up.” I’m a little nervous when I realize that I cannot pry his fingers off from around me, but I’m surrounded by friends. I half fall, half
jump, onto the shoulder of a friend sitting besides me. Surely he will help me. “Get off of me!” he yells, “Just go hook up with him and leave me alone.” I have forgotten where his loyalties are. So I get off of him and look around the room. I cannot remember how to count, but I approximate that there are fifty empty beer cans, one giant half-empty jug of wine, eight men and me. I hear a female voice in the hall, but she must be at least two miles away. Sixteen eyes are looking at me and this somehow gives me the strength to pull away and take off down the hall. I stumble home.

It is very likely that these men never would have sexually assaulted me or any other woman. However, if they did, others (and myself) would wonder: “What the hell was she thinking, being alone with a bunch of men and drinking?” And didn’t I think one of them was cute? Perhaps I did want something... Following this, I chided myself for weeks about my stupidity, but somehow this did not seem to be a lack of knowledge. I was well aware that a woman should never ever be alone with a group of men that she sorta knows, and worse, drink enough alcohol that she can’t really remember walking home. So what the hell was I doing? The best answer I have now is that I believed that somehow my sense of self worth was contingent on my acceptance by these males. My belief in a bounded self, compiled with low self-esteem, led me to believe that whatever I was thinking, whatever I was feeling, must be wrong (weak). I did not use my voice because I couldn’t hear it.

After writing this I realized that what I really wanted to study was my own confusion. Why had I done these things? I am an intelligent woman and have always been aware of the dangers of men, particularly drunk college-aged men. I thought that if I knew so much and I had done these things too there must be another part of the story that is missing. The final crystallization of this project came when I read Lynn Phillips (2000) book, *Flirting with danger: Young women’s reflections on sexuality and domination*. It is from here that my project began.

After my thesis committee accepted my proposal I began recruiting participants. After consulting with Roger I decided that I did not wish to offer financial compensation to my participants. The reasoning for this being that I only wanted participants who were generally interested in the project and not in making a few extra dollars. Previously I had assisted another professor in an all-female longitudinal study she had been running. At
the end of this study she allowed me to obtain the e-mail addresses of all participants who wished to be contacted should further research opportunities arise. I e-mailed approximately 300 women and invited them to join my study. Of these women, five responded and agreed to participate voluntarily. These woman, and all women interviewed were given two consent forms (Appendices B & C). All women received an information sheet after they completed participation (Appendix D) After meeting with these women for initial interviews, one woman reported that she would participate in the second phase of the study, but said that she did not feel that she had much to offer. I decided to not include her in the second phase of the study. At this point I had a complete set of interviews from four women. These interviews were then transcribed. I found the transcribing to be tedious and tiring. Once transcription was complete, I felt that at least one story was missing, the story of a woman who believed she had been sexually assaulted by a peer at the university. My first step was to e-mail my participants and see if they knew anyone who would like to participate. One woman responded and I interviewed her friend. However, based on the initial interview I determined that she did not have a story that I was looking for and did not ask her to return for any more interviews.

Once I realized that it would be difficult to find another woman to volunteer I approached a number of psychology instructors who were offering extra credit in their classes for participation in experimental research. These instructors invited me to talk about my project briefly in front of their classes. It is here that I gained the participation of Brianna. She was enrolled in a psychology of women course. I explained to the class that I was interested in hearing stories from women who had been sexually assaulted, but if women had additional stories that they felt were “informative” I would be happy to hear them as well. When I first interviewed Brianna it was clear that she did not have a story to tell about sexual assault. However Brianna is African-American. I felt that she offered a perspective that my other participants did not have, and thus had a new story. As Rosenwald (1988) states, “the unusually placed observer in a multiple-case study may glimpse features of the object unsuspected by anyone else…” (p. 247).

My next strategy was to place fliers advertising monetary compensation in the women’s bathrooms at the psychology building (See Appendix E). These fliers remained
up for a number of weeks until I received a response from Katie. She told me that she had been sexually assaulted and would like to talk about it. After interviewing Katie I determined that I did not wish to obtain any more stories. (Unfortunately I remained mostly stagnant during the following academic year due to unrelated issues. Interviewing these two additional women was the extent of my work on this project.) During this year I felt “fed-up,” defeated and somewhat guilty. I felt that I had “borrowed” something from these women—their stories—with the promise of using them for something useful and insightful, and had yet to deliver. Finally summer approached and I felt ready to resume work on this project.

The next stumbling block I approached was a voice of my own, the voice that most frequently says “this isn’t good enough.” This voice interrupted my use of The Reading Guide. I became over concerned that I was simply “making stuff up,” that my project was worthless and that I was an academic failure. I consulted with Roger and two additional graduate students. We agreed to meet and practice using the Reading Guide on a portion of the transcript for one participant. We initially focused on one participant, Megan, in order to determine the last two voices I would read for. Megan’s transcripts were chosen since she was the first participant that I interviewed. From our meetings I felt validated in my struggles since both graduate students found the method cumbersome and time-consuming.

Prior to this I determined that I needed a more structured model in order to base my work on. My search led me to a book chapter by Gilligan et al. (2003) and I used this as a model for my use of the Reading Guide. According to the authors, when using the Reading Guide one should first look for the plot and I voice and then read the transcripts for two contrapuntal voices. In other words, the third and fourth readings should be opposing voices. Upon reflecting on my goals and Megan’s text, I determined that I would search for a voice that was “sure” and a voice that was “unsure.” The third voice, the “sure” voice was the voice Megan spoke with that sounded confident, self-assured, and informed me about what she is in control of. The forth voice, the “unsure” voice was timid, said, “I don’t know” a lot, and often stumbled grammatically. I tentatively began to look for these contrapuntal voices in my remaining transcripts. In addition to this, the article recommends creating “I-poems” out of the I voice for each participant. Each I-
poem was created with each woman’s words, but I also used a minimal amount of poetic license, often in the form of removing the word “like” when not relevant. It is how I heard her speaking about herself in her story.

After struggling with the method and my “this isn’t good enough” voice for a number of weeks, I eventually discussed this with a member of my thesis committee, Ann Fuehrer. Out of our conversation I had an idea. I would create a separate file where I would record whatever this voice wanted to say about the project. I found this to be an effective method and did not even have to use the file very often. Just knowing it was there seemed to be enough for that voice to release it’s vice-grip on production. After this, and after making the realization that I needed to set deadlines for myself, work on this project went fairly smoothly. Through my meetings with Roger and Ann I determined that in order to maintain my sanity and complete the project, I would only analyze a portion of the text for the plot and two additional voices. The I voice, however, was located throughout the entire set of transcripts (except for the initial interviews). My criteria for determining which portions of the transcripts were relevant were: 1) the participant is telling a story with a plot and 2) the story involves being in a dangerous situation. I defined a dangerous situation as one in which a woman was at risk for being either physically or emotionally injured.

Once I had a set of stories about each woman that both Ann and I were happy with, I began to contact my participants to ask if they would be able to read over their own stories. At this point I experienced something that I had not quite expected. I felt an intense responsibility toward these women and was nervous about what they would think about what I had written about them. From this I gained a new understanding of qualitative research and its importance. I felt that I had told a story about these women and that this story would be important to them. I wondered if what I had written would meet their expectations and justify the amount of time they spent helping me. I hoped that they would find my stories about them interesting and helpful, if only to supply them with a different way to look at themselves.

I heard back from five of the six women, all except Katie, and either met with each woman or sent her copy by mail. I gave the women a deadline to respond, and when that deadline approached only one woman, Megan, responded. I e-mailed the remaining
four women and reminded them that I would like their comments. Sarah e-mailed me back soon after and told me that her comments were on the way. She sent me her comments a few days later. I did not hear back from Kira until nearly a month after giving her section to her, but she did respond with a thoughtful commentary. I could not contact Grace after she received her section, and Brianna informed me that she had lost her section. I was able to resend Brianna her section, but she responded only briefly. I did not hear from Katie at all. I wonder if it is simply a coincidence that I heard back immediately from the first woman I interviewed, the second participant responded shortly after, etc., and I was entirely unable to contact the last participant. I began to complete the write-up of this project with this information.

During the write-up I struggled with a balance between a text that fulfilled the requirements necessary for a master’s thesis and a text that was meaningful for both myself and my readers. I decided to compose the text in a quasi-traditional fashion, complete with different sections typically found in theses, but also to include parts that were somewhat more “alive” such as personal reflections and I-poems. As noted earlier, I adapted Gilligan et al. (2003) concept of I-poems. For my poems I attempted to both position each woman’s voice in the text and reflect her story. In some ways the process of writing this thesis mirrors the struggles women face everyday. This has been a struggle between the rational and emotional, between what “feels right” and what “must be done.” I have also added italicized passages throughout the text that represent my thoughts and feelings about each woman and her story. Largely, this has been a struggle within myself, as my thesis committee rarely commented on formatting or complained that the manuscript was not academic enough. Below is what resulted from a dialogue with my participants, my committee and myself.

The Stories

*Megan – “They move in little by little... it’s tricky”*

When I met Megan she was a vivacious 21-year-old junior. She is Caucasian and was raised Presbyterian. Megan stated that even though she maintains a belief in God she is no longer attached to an organized religion. Megan spoke rapidly during the interviews and had many stories to tell. Megan is an attractive young woman, but what
really stood out for me was Megan’s personality. She seemed to be full of life and always excited to talk.

**Background**

Megan grew up with her mother, father, and two siblings in what she called “the last patriarchal family.” Megan further explained that her father was and is the breadwinner and makes all the decisions in the household. She also said that her parents are still affectionate in their marriage. It seems that Megan shares some of their values. For example, Megan reported that she would stay at home if economically feasible and also believes that parents should stay married as long as they are raising young children. However, Megan told me that she feels her mother makes more compromises in the relationship than she would.

Megan explained that she was considered to be one of the “richest kids” in her school because “the middle class was rich” in her hometown. She described growing up in a blue-collar community that experienced an economic depression when a major factory closed. Megan explained that there was a rift between the “rich kids” and the other kids. She told me that there was a lot of bitterness directed towards her by other students. One student told her “you’re just going to college because your parents can afford it.” Megan did well in school and was salutatorian of her graduating class.

When I asked Megan about romantic relationships she told me that she did not really have any until college. She told me that on the playground in first grade her friend had a boy kiss her because Megan had told this friend she had a crush on him. Megan was so embarrassed that she did not reveal any romantic feelings to her friends throughout the rest of school. However, Megan did have both male and female friends throughout high school.

**I voice**

Physically, Megan described herself as somewhat similar to the stereotype of a woman on campus. She told that a lot of her clothes are similar to other women’s clothes on this campus, but she disagrees with other things that women do on campus such as tanning which she described as “gross.” However, Megan reported that she was very different from the typical woman on campus in terms of “the party scene.”
As alcohol use is prevalent on this campus, one of the things that stood out about Megan is that she does not drink alcohol. Megan’s decision not to drink is related to a number of factors and it seemed to me that one of these is her control over her own behavior. She notes, “If it goes too far with a guy I am dancing with I’m not drunk… I’m not drunk so I won’t do anything that would be against my values.” Megan also told me that “I have the ability to become drunk without actually having to consume alcohol… I can let go of that part of my brain and just act like that way [drunk] and have fun.”

Megan is able to both control her own behavior and also protect her friends if a dangerous situation were to occur. In some sense, Megan is able to control which parts of her self are going to lose control. She can have fun and lose her inhibitions but quickly snap back into control should it be necessary. However, when I specifically asked Megan if her decision not to drink is related to a fear of being assaulted she answered “I don’t think so” and added that she doesn’t drink just because she “doesn’t want to.” She did also add that if she were to decide to drink she would ask friends to “watch out” for her in order to maintain safety.

Megan also talked about her safety a number of times throughout the interview. She described being vigilant about danger around her. In one story, Megan was at a gas station and a “creepy” man stared at her, stood very close to her, and said a few things to her that Megan found disturbing. While leaving the gas station, Megan realized that this man would be going in the same direction that she was, and in order to lose him, Megan drove off in the wrong direction and then doubled back. She also told me about a time when a man on a train Megan was taking began to talk to her in a manner that was frightening to her. She said, “I was just kind of naïve in that I didn’t want to be impolite by not talking to him.” Fortunately, Megan was not assaulted in these situations, but she did feel frightened enough to respond to them. When she drives to visit her parents’ home Megan will wear only baggy shirts in order to not appear sexually attractive. From the train incident Megan learned not to put her hair in pigtails, since a friend told her that she may have attracted the “creepy” guy by wearing them. What Megan has learned here is a common lesson women learn: in order to avoid unwanted sexual attention, or even sexual assault, change your appearance. Again this seemed to relate to the theme of control.
When I asked Megan specifically about her ideas about control, she told me that she believes in some sort of destiny but also that people can make choices. She said “certain people are going to get cancer…but it just depends on how…they deal with it when they have cancer.” Megan seems to believe that people cannot control what is going to happen to them, but they can control their responses to events.

When Megan told me about her friends I had a sense that she enjoys the company of an eclectic group of people. She described friends that ranged from sorority women who enjoy drinking and partying to a group of men who would rather spend time in their dorm room in the dark and are considered “odd” by other friends. Currently, Megan has a boyfriend from her hometown who is still in high school. When I asked Megan if she ever found herself flirting with men she was not sexually interested in she responded “Oh yeah, I sit in their lap, I flirt with them. It’s all good because they all know I have a boyfriend.” However, Megan was referring to her male friends in the above passage and indicated that she does not flirt with men she does not know.

An important event in Megan’s life was when her friend Emma was sexually harassed by her boss at a summer job they both worked at during high school. They both stopped working during the school year but, “she was kind of trapped, she didn’t have to go back [to work the following summer], but we thought that we would get in trouble if we told someone because we didn’t tell someone right as soon as it happened so she went back… now it seems silly, but at the time it seemed like there was no other alternative.” Megan told me that “I thought I could protect her,” but during their second summer of work Emma was sexually assaulted by their boss. Megan and Emma are fairly close and Megan feels that she has lived through this incident with Emma, since Emma was deeply affected by it.

Plot voice

When I asked Megan if she had ever felt unsafe, she had a story to tell. By listening to Megan tell the story in different voices a complex picture emerges. First there is the voice that tells me about the plot:

A professor kissed me inappropriately… I was leaving school at like the last day of last semester… he gave me a hug goodbye… [he kissed my cheek and then my lips]… I just acted like it never had even happened I just got into my car and left. And I never told anyone about it for like a few months… I was just like thinking about that and whether
or not I was comfortable with that and then like he kissed again… we kept on talking about what I had been talking about before like finishing my sentence and then I just like left… when I came back to school and like its like the same everything is the same… my immediate response was just to act normal and get out of the situation.

By reading for the plot voice in this story, and also in places in which Megan expanded on the story, her story goes like this: The evening she had left campus on winter break, Megan needed to stop by her academic department. While there Megan ran into a male professor she knew. According to Megan this professor first hugged her, then kissed her on the cheek, and then kissed her on the lips. Megan then drove away without saying anything about the kiss to the professor. She forgot about the incident until a couple of friends were discussing this professor’s inappropriate advances toward other students the following semester. She then told her boyfriend and a few close friends. One of Megan’s friends, a rape counselor, encouraged her to report the incident. At the time of our last interview Megan was undecided, but was leaning towards reporting. These are the bare facts of the story, and numerous interpretations can be drawn from this reading. The parts that seem to stand out the most are Megan’s silences, what she did not say. She did not tell the professor to stop and she did not speak to anyone, did not even think about this, for more than a month after the incident.

Sure voice

While listening to Megan during the interviews, it became clear that she was generally not a timid woman. Megan described many situations in which she stood her ground, spoke her mind, and followed her morals. She also seemed proud of this fact and in the beginning of the first interview when I first told her that I would not be looking for personal stories she asked, “So I don’t get to tell how I told this guy off at a frat party?” In this sense, there is a voice in Megan that is very self-assured and confident. This voice knows what is going on.

When I read Megan’s story a second time for this voice I heard: A professor kissed me inappropriately… so I was just like loading up a whole bunch of stuff and it was dark in the parking lot and I mean I didn’t think anything about it being weird… I have a certain level of trust for all people that would that are in the department but like some professor which I don’t have any classes with… I talk to [him] because um he’s just like around a lot and his office is near my desk so, we would like make small talk a lot like he was leaving to go home so he came up to me and he gave me a hug goodbye and that wasn’t weird at all… its not like high school where you can’t absolutely
touch the people I mean I’ve hugged a lot of professors before… I just got into my car and left. And I never told anyone about it for like a few months… that’s normal though because I had a friend who was actually sexually abused um in high school and she didn’t tell anyone about it for years… I’m just like trying to deal with it in that my friends want me to report but it would be really uncomfortable for me to report right now but if I want to see if I can report it right before I graduate and… it wasn’t that huge of a thing, but since like it could lead to more but I don’t have to take classes or anything from this person so and usually I and I definitely would not want to be alone with him again… I’m just trying to learn from that situation to like, next time I get into that situation… I just wanted to act normal and get out of the situation so I just did… So I just want to like learn how to deal with that better the next… he’s not American, so its like custom in other countries… but I was like dealing with that… that was definitely weird, but I just ignored it… but that’s what I did, and… if it came out like now it would be really uncomfortable for many people next year because its not going to be big enough to get fired… even if I like made a huge deal out of it there would be no one around anyways because most like I was at like the loading dock but and then there was a dorm right there… if something really aggressive happened I’m sure I would have like made a huge like screaming fit like thrashing and stuff… my immediate response was just to act normal and get out of the situation.

In this reading it seems that Megan is sure of her thoughts and behaviors. In answer to the implied question above (why didn’t Megan say anything?), she seems to provide a clear answer for herself. She did not say anything because she did not think anything was “weird” about a professor hugging her, and then when he kissed her on the cheek she was not sure if that was weird since the professor is from a different culture. Also, Megan knows that forgetting is a normal response to a situation such as this one. Megan’s confidence was present in many other parts of the interview. At a latter portion of the interview, I asked Megan if any other guys had made advances toward her. She responded, “the guys at [a] party I can just kind of say ‘quit it’ but the professor, obviously that was a completely weird situation that I wasn’t prepared for…it just depends on the situation, like, with my boyfriend, like if I’m not in the mood… and I’m just like ‘eh’ and so he just wants to cuddle…”. Megan is explaining the places in which she can say no, she is prepared to tell a guy at a party, “quit it” and is also not afraid to tell her boyfriend when she is “not in the mood.”

Confused voice

However Megan also evidences a contrapuntal voice, one in which she is not sure about what is going on in a situation. When I listened to Megan speak with this voice, the story sounds like this:
Um... um... it was like, I was like, it was like... I... but um... I don't know why but I didn't... I just like pretended I just acted... I don't know. I guess... cause I... but I don't necessarily think I think... I don't know... because you don't know that your your um boundary has been crossed until after its been crossed... I don't know if I handled it right or wrong I don't... you just don't know what to think... I was just like thinking about that and whether or not I was comfortable with that and then like he kissed again and I was like I was just like... I don't know. That doesn't really make sense... I was just like I was like... so I don't know. I was just I don't know... I don't know why I did that... I didn't I don't know if that’s like a normal response or not... like maybe I was just trying to be like calm so I could leave but I mean... I don’t know at that point... I really don’t know why because that doesn’t make complete sense but that’s like how I [unintelligible] did.

This voice stands in contrast to Megan’s confident voice. Throughout this passage she questions both her reaction to the professors kiss at the time and after. At these points Megan’s speech loses its fluidity and she often seems unable to finish sentences. This voice seems connected to Megan’s silence after the incident. She says, “I just felt ashamed and really, really uncomfortable and and it was really hard to talk about because it was something that I just kinda kept in my self for a very long time and it was just a very uncomfortable situation, so then I think it becomes even more uncomfortable to talk about it because I was like ashamed that it happened. I know it’s not my fault but I was just ashamed that it happened and maybe I wasn’t completely [happy] with the way I handled it and things like that.” Megan talks about her discomfort with both the situation and her shame about her actions (or lack of).

*Megan’s I-poem*

I was leaving
I was like
I was just loading up a whole bunch of stuff
I mean

I didn’t think anything about it being weird because I trust,
I have a certain level of trust
I don’t have any classes with [him]
Um, I talk to
I mean
I’ve hugged, it’s not like high school
I mean
I’ve hugged
I still didn’t do anything
I don’t know why
But I didn’t didn’t
I just like pretended
I just acted like it never had even happened
I never told anyone
but I’m just…

I had a friend who was actually sexually abused
I don’t know
I guess
I’m just like trying to deal with it
I want to see if
I can report
right before I graduate
I mean it wasn’t that big of a thing
I don’t have to

I
I definitely would not want to be alone with him again
I don’t
I think
I’ll just…
I don’t know
I’m just trying to learn from that situation
Next time I get into that situation

I just wanted to act normal
So I just did
and I don’t know
If I handled it right or wrong
I don’t
I just…
So I just want…

My reactions

Megan’s sure voice helped me see a new aspect to sexual assault and about her own situation. When I had asked Megan earlier in the interview if there was a way a woman can avoid being sexually assaulted she answered “maybe not going on a date is the only way, cause they’re tricky. They move in, they just take an inch at a time before they get you, because I’ve had guys at frat parties try to make out with me…there are some things you can do with a guy…and still feel comfortable, but then its like they
move in little by little so...you’re not as much aware that your boundary of comfort has been breached.” Although she was speaking about potential date rapists at a fraternity party here, this relates to Megan’s situation with the professor.

While Megan was telling her story about the professor, I remembered the comment she had made about being “tricky” and remarked “earlier you were talking about how the boundaries...sometimes get crossed...the hugging was ok, and then the kiss on the cheek was a little.” She responded by finishing my sentence and moving on: “Weird, but you know he’s not American, so its like custom in other countries...I was just like thinking about that and whether or not I was comfortable with that and then like he kissed again...that was definitely weird.” By Megan’s definition, the professor’s behavior can be viewed as tricky. He did not just grab her and kiss her. He engaged in an act considered appropriate by both parties (hugging), then moved on to a questionable act that perhaps was considered appropriate by him (kissing on the cheek), and finally kissed her on the lips; an act presumably known by both people to be highly inappropriate.

Megan, an intelligent, well informed woman, was “tricked.” While she was busy trying to figure out what was going on, the professor moved in before she could act. Megan’s confusion and silence during the kiss seemed to not be related to a lack of knowledge or thinking, but rather to a superfluous amount of rational engagement. This situation was not one that Megan was prepared for, and she was busy trying to figure out what exactly was going on and what the appropriate response should be. Megan’s typical response, it seems to me, is to learn how to change her behavior in order to control the situation.

Megan may have learned this from her mother as a piece of the “last patriarchal family.” When Megan told her mother about the situation her mother focused on what Megan could control. According to Megan, “me and the other girls [the professor made advances toward] have curly hair and [mom] was like ‘maybe you should get your hair straightened now.’” Implicit in this situation is the message that Megan can control her professor’s behavior by changing something about her appearance. This seems consistent with patriarchal values where a woman is the “gatekeeper” of male sexuality, responsible for keeping lusty males away from her. In this dynamic, the male is not responsible for
being sexually aggressive since that is simply what a man is, but the burden is placed on
the female for controlling his behavior. (White and Niles as cited in Phillips, 2000).

Rationality, in the guise of control, is a large part of Megan’s shame. Instead of
understanding that we cannot control everything, we attempt to dogmatically increase our
control. Megan told me that she currently carries a pocket knife and is interested in
buying mace. Megan is exerting some sense of control over strangers attacking her, but
Megan is less familiar with the chaos that can happen in friendly relationships. I am not
suggesting here that Megan should stop flirting with her male friends, never hug another
professor, or that she should have been able to stop this professor from kissing her, but
perhaps gaining an understanding that the world is unsafe on many levels will help
Megan be comfortable with her own responses to the situation.

Megan’s belief that she could have controlled the situation if she had been more
prepared is an important part of her shame. In a “predict and control” society it is hard
for us to recognize that chaos exists, that there are some things that we cannot control. If
Megan were to embrace this chaos, some of her shame over her reactions could be
alleviated. She simply cannot be prepared for everything, and being unprepared she was
unable to respond in a way that she feels was appropriate. Out of this chaos comes
“trickyness.”

Megan’s response

After reading the above transcript, Megan told me the end of her story. She
informed me that she did, in fact, report this professor to the appropriate academic office.
Unfortunately Megan did not receive the response she hoped for. She reported that she
was told by the office to confront this professor. She responded by writing him an e-mail
expressing her concern, to which he replied that she had been “baiting him” all semester
and that he had “acted accordingly.” Megan maintained a distanced and strained
relationship with him until he critiqued her harshly on an assignment he was assigned to
grade. Megan reported, “He destroyed my project utterly, to the point that the other
professors invited to the critique were defending my project rather than offering
constructive criticism. Livid by his academic discrimination, I began to build a stronger
case against him.” Megan recruited the help of another woman who felt she had been
harassed by this professor and they confronted him. After both women returned to the
academic office responsible for these types of complaints and received no further support, Megan appears to have become very frustrated.

At the end of her resources, Megan responded in a different manner: “So I did what I could do: tell every last student in the department what he had done, essentially destroying his reputation as an educator, and confront him face to face.” Needless to say, this professor did not appreciate Megan’s actions and accused her of a number of things including being a flirt, conspiring against him, and trying to ruin his career. Megan agreed that she was flirt and somewhat agreed that she was trying to ruin his career. When I read this, I remembered Megan’s concern about reporting the incident during our meetings, and her desire to not destroy the man’s life.

In her concluding response to the transcripts, Megan showed maturity and an advanced meaning making process that she had been working toward since our last meeting. She wrote:

In the end, what can I do but forgive and move on? I can't fix everything, and I can't save everyone. I have tried though, and I will continue to try. I am just thankful I relearned how to trust, something I couldn't do when we originally spoke… In the past year my perception of these events has changed greatly; one of the most striking things I noticed about my transcript was that I was searching for a formula to evade harm… No such formula exists. All I can do is carefully choose who I trust based on instinct and judgment, and understand how vulnerable I really am. I have been taught to fear the frat boys and the creepy men hiding in the bushes by wagging fingers and high school health teachers, but I have been taught to fear my teachers, employers, and friends from experience. I choose to trust regardless because life otherwise is frightening and dull.

Although she continues to struggle, Megan has come to accept that she cannot always protect herself. Ironically, Megan shows control by acknowledging that she does not have total control. She is aware that trusting people puts her in danger of being hurt again, but she has decided that this is better than living a life that is “frightening and dull.” Megan also informed me that she now drinks alcohol socially, albeit carefully. This seems connected to her decision, as I view her original abstinence as a means to control her situations more. Furthermore, Megan has continued and deepened her relationship with her boyfriend and also has developed a close relationship with another one of her professors. She summarizes her transformation the best when she writes “Last
year, I would change my appearance to avoid attention. Now I turn a cold shoulder, however dressed.”

Conclusions
Megan did everything right and it was absolutely useless. She was so prepared. She was a good girl. A smart girl who knew about the strangers lurking in the bushes and the dangers of alcohol and frat boys. Tell me this—what more was she supposed to be afraid of? I am tired of women being told that we should live our lives in fear. How much more can we be afraid of? Megan found out that you cannot live a life in fear. It isn’t living.

Perhaps she wondered just how much more she would have to change in order to be safe. Perhaps she wondered exactly what weapon it was that kept away men she trusted. Sometimes bad things just happen. This is how it is. We can’t prevent it, certainly not alone. This is why we have institutional structures in place—to help us cope and act afterwards. These structures failed Megan miserably. What message was sent to her through that? At best—“no big deal”—at worst—“it’s not our problem, it’s yours.”

What good is all this if it cannot help one strong outspoken woman? Who does this help? Megan didn’t need much help, what about those who need a lot of help?

Dogmatic rational thought, in the guise of control, is a large part of Megan’s shame. Megan’s mother, most likely out of love and concern for her daughter, reinforced this idea when she tells Megan to straighten to hair. The idea that there is a logical sequence of events and that a woman can control enough of these events in order to keep herself safe produces a sense of shame and stupidity. By telling Megan that she could control these events in the future, Megan’s mother is unwittingly telling her that she could have controlled the assault in the past. Megan is then left with a bevy of unhelpful questions such as “what if I’d only…” or “why didn’t I think to….”

Megan’s sure voice does a wonderful job of rationalizing the events that happen and provides Megan with a cognitive peace about the assault and her response to it. She told me rationally why she did what she did, why she felt what she felt, and what she should do about it. Her unsure voice, however, pointed out that cognitive understanding, rational understanding, is not enough. It is with this voice that Megan accesses her shame, her feelings of doubt, and questions about what to do. Further rationalization, by
her mom for example, only pushes this voice further underground where it can do more harm.

Megan’s current comfort with the incident is most likely due to a number of events. First, Megan’s struggle with “going through the proper channels” and taking the necessary steps in order to address this professor resulted in nothing from Megan’s perspective. From this she learned that even doing things the right way, the rational way, the following-the-rules way, she was unable to control the situation. Second, Megan found places for these other voices to speak. One was in the interview room with me. While Megan told me her story I did not tell her that she “wasn’t making sense” or give her any advice as to what to do. I believe Megan may have also found allies, such as the other student who had been harassed by this professor and her friend who had been assaulted when she was much younger.

Through these interactions, and probably other events and relationships in her life Megan was able to hear a different voice; one that said, in her own words, “I was searching for a formula to evade harm… No such formula exists.” This voice is not looking for formulas or logical points of entry, but rather recognizes that there are some sometime things that are out of control. By accepting that logic fails, that there is more to life than rational control, and that life is, in fact, “tricky,” Megan was able to make meaning out of the assault and move forward in her life. She is no longer remaining at a stagnant position of continually trying to achieve more control.

Sarah – “They were just like ‘Sarah, what are you doing?’”

Sarah is a small blonde Caucasian woman whom I recognized as a student in a large abnormal psychology class I had been a teaching assistant for in the previous semester. From the class, I remembered her as quiet but always with a smile on her face. This proved true throughout the interview. Sarah was friendly and very willing to help, but she often seemed to be unable to find the words she needed in order to answer my questions. Her answers were often brief and lacked detail, and I found myself talking more than I did in other interviews. Sarah allowed me to copy parts of her personal journal at the conclusion of our meetings and she proved articulate and thoughtful throughout her writings. When I interviewed Sarah she was a 20-year-old college sophomore majoring in psychology and a foreign language.
Background

Sarah grew up in a small suburban town with her parents and a younger brother. She described what seemed to be a lack of communication in her household. Sarah said of her emotions while growing up, “most things were just kind of kept inside.” When she described her parents’ relationship she did not report any overt hostility, but wondered aloud “I’m not really sure why they are still together…something just doesn’t seem right.” When I asked what she felt she had learned about relationships from her parents she perhaps answered her own question, “you get married and you stay with that person, no matter what and that divorce is just not an option.” Although Sarah did not seem close to her parents, she told me that she was close to teachers and a friend of the family who provided her with “a place where I felt comfortable to be.”

When asked about elementary school, Sarah explained that she had some hurtful friendships. She explained that she was friends with the “popular kids” who “just randomly decided that they didn’t want me to hang out with them anymore.” However, Sarah described her high school in a more positive light. She explained that her high school was very diverse, and also had the reputation as “the bad school” although she herself did not find it threatening. Sarah was part of a high school sports team. She explained that she had both male and female friends in high school and that it was common to see mixed sex groups of friends.

I voice

When I read for Sarah’s I voice I found her to be much of a “work in progress.” She seemed to be unhappy with herself in many ways and actively working to change parts of herself. When I asked Sarah about her reluctance to talk with her parents about her feelings in the past she responded, “I had to… protect them from… who I was maybe.” Sarah reported that she was “exploring options” when I inquired about her religion. When I asked Sarah for her beliefs about the amount of control people have over their lives, she responded that she was also trying to figure that out, tentatively replying that people have some control; and that she plans on taking a philosophy class in the future. At one point in the interview, Sarah reported that she occasionally cut herself and is trying to stop that behavior. In her journal she alluded to a possible eating disorder.
When I asked her how similar she was to the typical woman at this university, Sarah reported that she was somewhat similar but did not feel like she fit in. She expressed being more liberal than most of the students here and also more willing to debate her views. She also reported being less interested in the social scene than other women at Miami. Sarah explained that she liked staying in her dorm room and watching movies, often with friends. Like Megan, Sarah does not drink. When I asked her about that she answered “it’s a lot of things… I don’t think that I really have a lot of self-control sometimes, so I’m afraid that once I started I won’t be able to stop.” Because she does not drink Sarah often feels that she has to “baby-sit” her friends while they are drinking.

Sarah also seemed to be in a transition with her friends. She described recently joining a sorority and wanting to be a “really dependable friend for people.” Currently, she described having a group of friends who identify strongly with Christianity and Christian values such as not drinking and a separate group of friends with whom she would attend parties. Sarah explained that she does not feel as emotionally close with the second group of friends. She also told me that she has some male friends who were not the stereotypical Miami guys. She described feeling safe with these men and also reported that they are protective of her. For example, she told me that one will pretend he is her boyfriend if she is receiving unwanted attention from a man at a party or bar.

When I asked Sarah if she felt like she had to act differently when with different friends, she answered “yeah I pretty much kind of put on a front and a face and just do that with most people.” She further explained, “I’m working on getting it to be one face so that I’m not affected so much by other people.” She added that she feels like she can be more “goofy” and less self-conscious with her guy friends. When I asked about her strongly Christian group of friends she answered “I get depressed a lot and I don’t like talking about it with them ’cause I don’t want them to always think of me as being depressed and read into everything I do because of that.”

It seems like a lot of the mistrust Sarah has in herself is based on her perceptions of past experiences. She said, Relationships that I’ve had in the past have not worked out for me and they just all kind of reinforced that I need to be more cautious and I should, I don’t know, at the same time it’s like I’m kind of shutting myself off because of them and then trying to open back up
and find a middle ground there so I’m not getting into situations where I don’t want to be, but so that I am actually meeting people and giving them a chance.

Sarah seems to be in a quandary; she knows that intimate connections are an important part of life, but she also knows that those connections can often be painful and violating. In an effort to reach out and make friends, Sarah believes she needs to learn to respond to people differently, and part of that learning is to ignore her knee-jerk reaction to avoid people. As such, Sarah currently distrusts her own reactions.

Sarah seems proud and certain of her morals. When I asked her if she thought she would be a good role model for a younger girl, she responded jokingly, “go ahead and be like me, not like them” in reference to most of her friends. She is also clear that she wants a relationship that is based on communication, not sex. When I asked her about her ideal mate she responded that she would like a man that is understanding, caring and funny, but also serious.

In summary, Sarah’s I voice, her view of herself, is that of a person who is not yet finished growing. She seems to be confused about who she is and where she is going, but rather than getting lost in that quagmire, Sarah is actively working toward finding herself. She is engaged in therapy, seems to be using her studies to help her find herself, and also keeps a reflective journal. A poem Sarah wrote in her journal describes the process of disliking her present state and acting out against it:

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a trembling fist strikes the face with unswaying determination
shattering the image
and sending jagged pieces tinkling into the sink and cascading to the tile floor below
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*Plot voice*

The “plot” of Sarah’s story came together on two separate occasions during the same interview. When I asked Sarah “do you ever feel that you consented to do something sexual that you had not really wanted to, but not abjectly refused just to kind of go along [and] not anger your male friends or female friends?” She responded:

A friend of mine who I ended up dating for a little while… I went along with it because he wanted to so much… it was Parents’ weekend so all of our other friends were off with their parents and just we were kind of hanging out that night… we went out to a hockey game and we were back watching a movie in his room. We were just sitting there and he just kept like leaning closer and then he just was like right next to me and then he asked if he could kiss me and I just kind of looked at him for a second and I think I nodded… we
just ended up like making out… he was more interested in a physical relationship and I just wanted to get to know him first… I tried to tell him where I was coming from and he said that he understood.

A short time later I asked Sarah “Have you ever been in a situation where you’ve gotten… a gut feelings or a feminine intuition… and ignored it and stayed in a situation?” Sarah returned to this relationship and she expanded on her story:

I knew something was going to happen that night and I still went to his room with him… they [my friends] knew actually they were the ones who kind of convinced me to… break up with him… I’d come back from and like tell them little stories they just were like ‘Sarah what are you doing?’… there were a few times where I came back from being with him and I would just like burst into tears in front of them… I believed him when he said that he understood that I wanted to slow down and that kind of thing and then he just didn’t do that at all… I didn’t really like say anything at the time, but then I tried to talk to him about it afterward.

From reading Sarah’s plot voice, I understand that she became romantically involved with a male friend, not because she wanted to, but for other reasons that are unclear. She was unhappy in the relationship, particularly in response to his sexual advances, and this was apparent to her friends. Sarah was not comfortable telling her boyfriend to slow down during intimate moments, but would talk with him about them later. Sarah’s situation is dangerous for at least two reasons. One is that even though she tried to tell her boyfriend about her boundaries and her thoughts about the physical nature of their relationship he seemed to forget or ignore these talks while they were actually being intimate. Second, it is clear that Sarah was emotionally distressed during and after this relationship. She adds later when asked how this relationship affected her “I think it just makes me more hesitant to trust… again and makes me feel more uncomfortable.”

Sure voice

When I read the text of the interview again for Sarah’s sure voice I saw:

I just, kind of went along with it because he wanted to so much and I was just like ‘well, I don’t really want to’, but, you know, I don’t want to not go along with him and make him angry with me or anything… I valued our friendship and I didn’t want to lose that… I want people to like me and I didn’t want him to get angry with me and tell our other friends that you know I was really mean… I just wanted to get to know him first… we kinda did things backwards from my perspective… I tried to tell him where I was coming from… I knew something was going to happen that night… I get afraid in relationships like just to trust anyone and like that causes me not to have a lot of relationships with people so I’m trying to just kind of push that aside a little bit and like give people the
benefit of the doubt and learn to trust them… I was just saying ‘well, this is irrational’ you know ‘he’s a friend, I can trust [him]’… It was just wanting to have a relationship… all along I kind of knew that it wasn’t gonna work out… No, not at all, I actually liked someone else better… I wasn’t comfortable, but I wanted it to work out just because none of my other relationships have worked out [unintelligible] and I wanted this one to be different… I was hurt too, because like I trusted him… I believed him when he said that he understood that I wanted to slow down… I didn’t really like say anything at the time, but then I tried to talk to him about it afterwards.

In this reading, Sarah is sure about her values. She knows what level of intimacy she is comfortable with and can tell her boyfriend this when they are not in the process of having sexual contact. She also displays a lot of insight into her own thoughts and behavior; she knows that she wants people to like her and recognizes that this may have played a part in the relationship. Sarah is also able to recognize her “gut feelings” even if she did not follow them in this instance.

Confused voice

Sarah’s confused voice reads like this throughout the interview:

I don’t know… I don’t know, I just, kind of… I don’t know… I don’t know... I don’t know… I think I nodded or something like that, I don’t know… I don’t know, I just… I don’t know… I don’t, I don’t really know… like, I don’t know… so I don’t know… Um… I don’t… I don’t know… I don’t know… it just, he just kind of, like… um… I don’t know… Um… Um… Um… I’m not… Um… Um… I think… Um… Um, I mean… I don’t know… um, then I don’t… and just I don’t know… um, I don’t know… um, I don’t know… I don’t know, just… Um, I don’t know, I just, I don’t really know… [unintelligible]”

Frequently throughout Sarah would begin her sentences with “Um” or “I don’t know” and end them with “I don’t know,” even when it seemed that she did, in fact, know what she was talking about. It is likely that Sarah doubts her perception of events, or perhaps she is truly unsure about what she is saying. Sarah’s doubt in herself may lead her to be more vulnerable to aggressive males.

Sarah’s I-poem

Um, I think
A lot of times I get afraid
I’m trying
I think
I was just saying “I can trust him”
I didn’t really feel like I could
I think
I would have
I’m not sure

I think
I think
I more convinced myself that
I wanted to than I really did
I don’t really think that
I was ready

I think
that’s what I wanted to happened
I kind of knew it wasn’t gonna work out

I mean
I don’t know
I don’t know
After awhile I’d come back
And just, I don’t know

I actually liked someone else better

I don’t know
I came back from being with him
I would just like burst into tears

I don’t know
I think it was just
I wasn’t comfortable
I wanted it to work out
I wanted this to be different
I was hurt
I trusted him
I said
I believed him
I wanted to slow down
I think
so I think
I was hurt too

*My Reactions*

After hearing Sarah talk about her relationship with her parents, I felt that I had a new understanding as to why Sarah had difficulty telling her boyfriend no during
intimate moments. She said of her parents’ household “if you were angry you just kept it inside… if I knew something was going to make [mom] mad I wouldn’t say anything I would just kind of try and tiptoe around and not do anything to make her mad.” Sarah has learned to “tiptoe” and not to make people mad. Fortunately, she still expresses her needs but does it in a way that is less likely to make her boyfriend angry. Unfortunately this did not prove effective in this situation.

Shortly after our conversation I found that Sarah had left a note for me. It began: “why did i counter my instinct and go along? b/c saying no and him not stopping would make it real, & i didn’t want to risk that. at least if i went along w/ it i could pretend that i wanted it too ~ & maybe i did…[ellipses in original] i just don’t know anymore” She later wrote “he always held on to me a minute too long, how the one time i did get him to stop he got upset with me. i may be able to doubt myself and my feelings, but I know what he did and i can’t deny that.” And later: “like it’s a big deal. it’s not really. i just overreact.” In her note Sarah displayed a mix of clarity and confusion. On one hand she gave me an assured response to the question “why did I go along,” but later questioned both her own desires and the validity of her feelings. Sarah’s conclusion, “I know what he did” is invalidated by her following statement that it’s not a “big deal.” I wonder if Sarah does not think it is a big deal because she was not physically hurt. Perhaps society’s insistence on physical proof leads Sarah to doubt the emotional proof she has that it is a big deal.

Sarah introduced a new idea to me in this note, and that is the idea of “making it real.” This seems to express the idea that a woman who never says no can never be raped or assaulted. By believing that her protests are only “inside” and the hurt is solely emotional she has no “external” physical proof that it is real. Denzin (1997) notes that since the advent of cinema we are perpetually aware of the voyeur and in some ways define what is real based on the voyeur’s perspective. If no one can see it, if it cannot be filmed, it did not happen. Perhaps this is Sarah’s way of staying safe and working toward trusting people more. If Sarah generally views people as hostile and threatening, and she is trying to transform herself, it makes sense that she would actively be working toward trusting people and viewing them as benign and helpful.
Although Sarah’s process of self-transformation seems positive, it may put her more at risk since she is less likely to listen to her “gut feelings.” She notes that she has difficulty trusting people and that this may hinder what might be a positive relationship. When I asked Sarah about her friends in a previous interview, she responded, “I didn’t really have that many close friends, but then this year I’m trying to expand my social group and try to get more involved in the campus.” Sarah is actively trying to increase her social network and she understands that part of doing this is allowing herself to trust more.

At this point in her life, Sarah has little trust in herself and her decision making ability. During one of our meetings Sarah told me about a time when she seemed to become overwhelmed with the urge to cut herself. In order to avoid this, Sarah gave her scissors to a friend in the dorm. Sarah does not seem to trust herself to make healthy decisions for herself. In order to remain healthy, Sarah keeps herself away from dangerous things such as scissors, alcohol, and perhaps the most dangerous of all—other people. Sarah’s final decision to break up with this boyfriend is influenced by her friends’ opinions that the relationship is upsetting to her. It is only after her friends witness her crying and ask “Sarah, what are you doing?” that she is able to put an end to the relationship. The voice Sarah has the most difficulty hearing is that of her ego, of a coherent sense of self. Although Sarah is currently working on this, during this relationship she was able to hear the opinions of her friends much more clearly than her own. I hope that Sarah is able to one day hear a solid voice out of the multiplicity of doubts and other voices in order to make decisions.

Sarah’s Response

After reading her own portion of the text, Sarah responded that it was “interesting” and “helpful.” She wrote:

Reading this really gave me a chance to clearly see some things I think I'd known all along but never really admitted to knowing…[while reading] I found myself feeling bad for ‘Sarah’ and wanting to tell her to just trust herself. I can't even trust myself enough to say a semi-important sentence without starting or ending it (or both) with ‘I don't know’…It's kind of sad when I think I haven't really made much progress, so for that it was hard to read, but good for me at the same time – maybe it'll give me the motivation I need to keep working on it.
Sarah found the story I told about her to be consistent with her experience, even if she does not like to admit this to herself.

What is more important to me, however, is Sarah’s feeling that participating in this study was helpful for her. After reading my story she told me about a male friend who had left a message for her to call him while she was visiting her parent. She told me, “I really don't want to see him because, well, he's not really interested in talking, and with the two of us alone, I didn't know what would happen, but I was pretty sure I didn't want it to. This time it was me asking myself, ‘Sarah, what are you doing?’ And I never called.” Sarah has made a first step toward trusting herself.

Sarah also had some perspective on my project in general. She wrote, “I think it's so much easier for people to say they wouldn't make dangerous decisions because they don't want to admit to the reality that they probably would ~ because then they'd have to feel something for the victim, and if we could identify with a fraction of the victims out there, I think it'd be too much to handle. We'd rather stay in our blissful denial, pretending we have nothing in common with these people who have bad things happen to them ~ we prefer to feel immune.” In her response Sarah has given me two more ideas that I had not explicitly connected to the project. One is the concept of “too much.” From my understanding, Sarah is saying that we cannot possibly feel empathy for all the victims in the world; it would consume us. One way to get around this problem is to deny that they are victims, so that we do not need to feel “bad” about it. This also serves the purpose of distancing ourselves. Sarah’s second point is about wanting to feel immune. If we, people who have never been in one of these situations, imagine that any negative consequence was surely avoidable, then we can imagine that we can avoid it. It can never happen to us. Unfortunately, a consequence of this is then believing that the victim should have done something to avoid being a victim.

Conclusion

I heard this a million times “I don’t know” “I don’t know.” Sarah does not know. I’m not entirely sure what it is that Sarah does not know. She doesn’t know what she feels? She doesn’t know how to feel? She doesn’t know how to tell me what she feels? She knows she just wants people to love her. Sarah’s parents were unable to give her the love she needed. When Sarah cried, when she felt, her parents told her not to trust her
feelings, that it is not ok to feel and that we should not talk about that. Sarah can’t talk to her friends, especially her “nice Christian” ones because she believes that if she opened up, let out a little, it would consume their entire image of her. Feelings are too big. She writes about them, but she smiles while she talks. What would happen if she felt them all at once in the company of someone who cared about her? I think they might eat her alive, and her friend too. No one taught Sarah what to do with her feelings. Mom and Dad made her afraid of her own feelings. She’s so frail. I feel like if I had said the wrong thing to her she would have crumbled, but only inside—I never would have known. Sarah is waiting for someone to save her. She cannot save herself, she doesn’t know how to commune with the Savior, so she looks for the Savior embodied in someone else. She does not have a stable sense of self—forget about a stable sense of multiple selves. I know one feeling that Sarah has. Sarah is mad. She shows so much anger in her poetry, but it’s all at herself. Is she mad at the world? Does she know that it’s not all her fault? Sarah does not want to “make it real,” but it is so real to her. Sarah knows she has a problem, and she knows part of that problem is that she can’t let people in. She does not know how to judge people. She can only do this on a purely rational level. Friend=safe, boy=friend, boy=safe. She can’t hear that voice inside her that says “this isn’t safe, back up, move out.” She can’t hear this voice because it constantly screamed at her and she had to shut it up. Feelings are gigantic and they hurt. Sarah does not know how to listen for what they are telling her, she only knows that they are terrible.

There are clear points in Sarah’s story that support my theory that a sole reliance on rationality is unhelpful to women in these situations. For example, when Sarah says “I was just saying ‘well, this is irrational’ you know ‘he’s a friend, I can trust [him],’” she is also saying only rational thoughts can be trusted. Sarah’s feelings that this man could not be trusted were “irrational” simply on the basis that they did not make logical sense. Logically, a friend is someone whom you trust, so if a particular person is a friend you should trust him. The voice that tells Sarah when not to trust comes from her gut, or her heart, or wherever it is that feelings are imagined to come from. Sarah does not have trust in these other voices, in part because of her parents’ insistence that she not use them. It is with these voices that Sarah writes clearly and poetically in her journal.
**Kira – “I’ll put that one in my ‘what was I thinking’ file”**

When I met Kira I also recognized her from one of the abnormal psychology classes that I had assisted. My meetings with Kira were enjoyable as she has a fun “spunky” attitude and is a good storyteller. I met with Kira for four interviews, and I have the longest set of transcripts from my time with her. Although Kira told me many stories that must have been frightening at the time she was experiencing them, she always spoke with a smile and joked throughout. She is a Caucasian woman with short hair and appeared to have a vintage chic-wardrobe. Kira also seemed “older” than the other women I had met with; she was a 19-year-old sophomore at the time. She was raised Catholic, attending both Catholic grade and high school. According to Kira, “[I] still hold the crux of the Roman Catholic beliefs with some of my own deletions and variations.”

**Background**

Kira grew up with her mother, father, older sister, and younger brother. She described her father as “laid-back” and reported her mother “wear[s] the pants in the family.” According to Kira, her parents generally get along well with each other and have a positive relationship, although they occasionally fight. However, Kira did describe a time when her family was in an uproar. Kira explained that when she was in eighth grade her parents discovered that her sister worked as a dancer in a strip club. Her father responded to this by forcing Kira’s sister to move out of the house. She added that her mother cried a lot and her father once told Kira that he “hated” her mother. Her parents did not interact much during that time. Since then, family relationships have calmed down. Kira also added that her family does not readily display emotions. Kira reported that she spent a lot of time with her extended family growing up. She described her grandmother as an important figure in her life and also as “the voice of reason.”

When I asked Kira about her family’s openness to matters such as sex, Kira reported that they do not talk about sex. In fact, it seems like sex was a shameful topic in Kira’s household. She told me that she would receive “new creation” homework while in grade school intended to help parents talk to their kids about sex. Kira said that her parents would often sign a form indicating that they had worked with Kira on her homework but did not actually spend time on it. Kira’s parents, especially her mother,
have conservative values about sex. She indicated that her mother became angry with her sister for living with her fiancé before marriage.

Kira attended a co-ed Catholic grade school and all-girls Catholic high school. She explained that grade school “started out ok” but “other girls at my school were just… whored out before we hit 6th or 7th grade.” Kira described this as wearing make-up and rolling up their uniform skirts. Kira expressed a discomfort with this early sexuality while explaining that at a birthday party where music with the “dirtiest lyrics” was being played “[I] almost cri[ed] because I was like ‘I need my mom, this is horrible.’” She added that during high school it was “trendy” to have a “questionable sexual preference.” Kira described her high school friends as being generally “eccentric,” and said she had male friends from a local all-boy Catholic high school. She also felt that there were teachers in high school that she could rely on if she felt that she needed support.

I voice

Kira’s I voice was from a woman who has learned from her mistakes. She is someone who loves attention, has suffered adverse consequences in her quest for others’ attention, and is trying to move on in her life. Kira was not ashamed to admit to me that she thought she had made some fairly significant mistakes in her life. When I asked why she wanted to participate in this study one of her answers was, “I feel like there were some things last year and the beginning of this year that, gee if I could have had a chance to do that again I don’t think I would have.” While telling me stories Kira would sometimes refer to incidents as belonging to the “what was I thinking category.” Kira also told me that she is the kind of person who needs to experience things in order to learn what not to do.

As alluded to above, Kira mentioned desiring attention a number of times throughout the interviews. When I asked if she ever flirted even if she did not want to pursue a sexual interaction with a guy she answered “I think I’m a lot flirtier than I think I am in order to have attention.” When someone new is introduced to Kira she reports that “I want to make an impression on the person and it’s not so much that I even want the person to like me.” Kira added that she will flirt with both men and women for “attention and admiration.”
Sometimes Kira’s desire for attention will become more overtly sexual. She told me about a time when a male friend became obviously interested in Kira sexually. Even though Kira was not interested in him, she eventually ended up kissing him because she was “appreciating the attention.” Kira also conveyed a somewhat jaded attitude towards sex. She told me this story: “[my friend] stopped the car and he was like ‘let’s just look at the stars’… I’m not a fish and I don’t want to be fed a line thank you but he started kissing me and it was ok… and I had oral sex, I gave and did not receive and… I wasn’t really interested in him but it was like ‘he’s my friend, I’m here and I know he wants it so ok.’” Kira told me this story nonchalantly, but she did add that this was “stupid.” For Kira, giving a man oral sex is “no big deal.” She wrote in her journal, “I think I would feel ‘dirtier,’ if you will, receiving oral sex from someone I’d just met than I would giving it. That’s why I seldom ever receive but am inclined to give. I don’t know why I think that; maybe it’s because ‘giving’ in the word itself denotes something you’re bestowing upon someone else & no longer have to carry yourself.” This sentence struck me and I wonder what it is Kira is carrying with her that she needs to get rid of.

This need for attention can become even more sexually dangerous. She told me that once, against a friend’s advice, she went into a room, by herself, with a guy she had just met because he was paying attention to her. Kira is aware of the danger in this and when I asked her if there is a type of woman more likely to be raped she answered “[my friends and I] go out with the intent to keep the buddy system and then I’m like ‘screw the buddy, I’m getting attention from this total stranger’ and so I think that having an attitude like that is worse than what you wear or if you’re flirtatious.” From Kira’s perspective, her need for attention is dangerous.

Regarding her place on campus, Kira also seemed to view herself as somewhat non-traditional; and, I agree that she did not fit the stereotype of a Miami woman. Indeed, she noted that she and her group of friends do not look like stereotypical undergraduates at the university. Kira appeared to have more of an “urban edge” than many of the other students here. Kira reported that while it seems like most people choose their friends based on appearances she searches for people who are her “intellectual equal.” Kira herself has short hair, which is not typical on campus, and reported that she is occasionally asked if she is a lesbian because of it. She also noted
that males who fit the campus stereotype do not usually approach her. When I asked her what she looked for in a future partner one thing she said was “I don’t wanna say I don’t like people who look like everybody else but I prefer when I feel like someone is, even if they seem to fit some type of stereotype, if they’re doing it because that’s who they really are.”

Kira also indicated that she gets along better with men than with women. She reported that “I seem to get along better with guys and I think it’s because when I was growing up, I have a younger brother… once [he] got old enough to be able to do stuff I spent more time with him… [and] I was my dad’s favorite so I just had more of a male influence growing up.” Referring to Miami in particular she added that “guys you meet on this campus open up more social opportunities for you…you can get your foot in more doors if you are friends with more guys.” Given the large Greek presence on campus, unless you are in a sorority, the best way to make friends on campus is to get to know fraternity men, according to Kira. She also told me that she keeps in contact with a male professor she had taken a class with who seems concerned for her welfare by telling her to be careful and avoid certain situations.

Throughout Kira’s stories it became clear that her social life is very important to her. She indicated that she went out to parties at least once, and possibly three times a week, for her first year and a half on campus. Like Sarah, Kira indicated a desire to view people as generally good. When telling me why she had given her phone number to a man she had just met she said, “I don’t wanna say have faith in humanity but [I] wanted to believe that the intentions were noble.” An important part of being social for Kira was drinking alcohol and sometimes taking illicit drugs. She explains “it would be like well, just drink and drink and I can just keep drinking and drinking and drinking because I’m still standing.” Kira described to me how attention seeking and excessive drinking can lead to dangerous situations: “you had too much to drink, you like the attention you’re getting, someone asks you if you wanna go like be alone go somewhere else, you go with them and then things wind up maybe having more than you want but it’s never establishes that you put up a fight to resist.”

Throughout the interview it became apparent that Kira’s religion is important to her, but she has molded Catholicism to fit her individual life style. When Kira and I were
discussing an incident with a man (to be discussed below) and I asked if they had sex she answered, “this goes back to my Roman Catholic variations… what your definition of sex is.” When I asked Kira about her take on the amount of control people have in their lives she answered, “I believe in God… so it’s kinda like He has a general plan of how— where He expects you to wind up, what [He] expects you to do, but how we get there is our decisions.”

An important event in Kira’s life that shaped her was when she became pregnant and had an abortion. Kira became pregnant during a relationship she had with a boyfriend. Kira describes the decision to abort the baby as a difficult one, and she relied on her older sister for support. She said “I love children… I’m just not ready for my own… if I went through the whole pregnancy no way I could give away the child; I can’t just give it to somebody else you know like ‘have fun with it’; it’s not a pair of shoes.” Kira also indicated that a friend from high school died right when she became pregnant. This influenced her decision because she felt like someone would be watching over her child. Kira reported that since the pregnancy she has been much more conscious about the rate at which her relationships escalate sexually and more likely to tell a man that she wants to slow down. She also told me that she refused birth control at the abortion clinic because she believes that this would “give [her] an excuse” to have sex again.

Perhaps Kira has less faith in her judgment following the abortion. It seems that this incident largely colored the way Kira told her stories. When she told me about her behavior she more often than not spoke of it as something behind her. I wonder if the abortion has given her new eyes to look back on her old behavior. Kira told me, “how’s this gonna make me feel… this is just a question that I seriously find myself asking now before I do anything… I’m trying not to have those not finer moments.”

*Plot voice – Part I*

Kira had many stories to tell and I will focus on two here. The first story came about when I asked if she ever went along with things to “keep the peace.” A portion of the plot of this story is as follows:

I went to that date party and I knew one guy… I was this guy’s date and I know him from [?] so I was like ‘it’s ok, you know’ kinda hanging out whatever thing and then they had this like swimming pool in the basement and he wanted to like throw me into this disgusting rank beer water… I was like soaking wet so we go back to his room and he
like gives me like a t-shirt and some shorts and stuff to put on and um things got I think more physical than I would have preferred… we had been drinking… I definitely did more than I wanted to do… I didn’t like put my foot down, even though I wasn’t necessarily like enjoying myself… he asked me if wanted him to get a condom and I was like ‘I’m not having sex with you’… penetration wise, yes that did happen… it didn’t like go on for very long, you know, it was just one of those things where like we stopped… I have stayed here before… in his room so I had just like kinda banked on doing that again because he had like a bed and a couch and like before like I had slept on his couch

Kira then continued the story, telling me about a second meeting about a week later:

I went back to see him when I had a group meeting at King library and he asked me to stop by, so I stopped by and he wanted to know like the what are we kind of thing and I was like ‘well I don’t know’ like ‘we’re friends I don’t really want anything else’ kind of thing and he wound up like locking his door… locked the door and like stood in front of it and like wasn’t gonna let me leave until like I don’t know, he said like all he wanted me to do was kiss him, but I was like, ‘no I don’t believe it’ and I was uncomfortable and um so at that point I was like ‘no, like let me leave’, and he was like ‘I’m not gonna let you leave’… I was like ‘no, I’ll scream until they come’… He finally did let me leave and I didn’t have to do anything to get out… I really got assertive with somebody and not so much in the like ‘well these are my opinions’ it was like ‘you do this, for me, or else like, no compromises, like let me out of here, like’ but at the same time I was also afraid to get too close to him because he’s bigger than I am.

Kira went to a date party with Josh, a man she had known previously. She was intoxicated and was thrown into a pool. When she went upstairs to change her clothes she and Josh became sexually involved. Kira was not sexually attracted to him, but continued to be intimate with him; however, she would not have “sex”—in Kira’s definition—with him. Her friends picked her up the following morning. He called her sometime later after she had been at an evening meeting. She went to his house and he locked her in his room in order to ask her if they were dating. He also told her that he would not let her leave until she at least kissed him. Kira then told Josh that if he did not let her leave she would scream, calling for two men living in that house that she knew. Josh eventually let her out of the room without forcing her to “do anything.”

Sure voice – Part I

During our meetings Kira appeared very self-confident. She spoke self-assuredly, at a moderate volume, and although she occasionally paused before answering my
questions, she very rarely seemed to be searching for words or self-monitoring. Her sure voice throughout this piece of text read like this:

It’s not like I definitely didn’t want… things got I think more physical than I would have preferred… more physical than I would have liked for the reason that or because of the fact that we had been drinking and that he was really the only person that I knew and so I was like, you know if he’s not gonna like pay attention to me, what am I supposed to do here and I’m too drunk to go home.. I was stuck there… part of it was like, you know ‘this is the only person that I know here’ like ‘I have to sleep here because I can’t sleep anywhere else’ like I’m not gonna go with some random person that would be even worse like ‘hey, can I sleep in your room?’… I knew I wasn’t really attracted to him, but I didn’t like put my foot down, even though I wasn’t necessarily like enjoying myself… I did say no to one thing, I remember because he asked me if wanted him to get a condom and I was like ‘I’m not having sex with you tonight’ so I remember saying no to that… Definitely never became an issue… it never came into play in the situation… I’m not even attracted to him at all, no… I’ve kind of like changed my perspective a little bit… I definitely hadn’t planned on it… at that point I was like ‘no, like let me leave’… ‘I’ll scream until’… ‘no, I’ll scream until they come’… He finally did let me leave and I didn’t have to do anything to get out… I really got assertive with somebody and not so much in the like ‘well these are my opinions’ it was like ‘you do this, for me, or else like, no compromises, like let me out of here, like’… ‘you know, I’ll scream and cause as much of a scene as I can until like Alex or Joey like comes to get me out of here’… the fact that he had like offered to do something like that before somehow like was a little bit more like reassuring that if I needed help he would come.

As stated above, Kira generally gave off an aura of confidence. She often used words like “definitely” and “no” which seemed to indicate that she had strong decisive opinions on a number of matters. She also sounded very confident when she described the situation in which Josh locked her in his room. As she says herself “you do this, for me, or else…” Kira presents with the confidence of a woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. Kira’s openness with me also indicates a sense of assuredness. She freely told me about many events in her life that could potentially be judged as “shameful” or “wrong” by others.

Confused voice – Part I

However, Kira did speak in a confused voice as well:

Um… whatever and um… um… um, part of it could be… um… I think it was one of those like, it wasn’t, it wasn’t that it seemed like a good idea it wasn’t that it seemed like a bad idea I was kind of like, I don’t know indifferent sort of, I don’t know how to describe it, it was like part of it was like, you… um… I guess like I I… Um… [mumbling]… Um… um… It just, it just kind of like I guess like [pause] I don’t know… I don’t know… it was just like, I don’t know it just like kind of… it was just kind of
like, I don’t know. I guess sort of like… what’s up. I don’t know… Um… um… Um… I
don’t know… um… I don’t know… so I don’t know… Um… um I don’t know… felt
like maybe like what I had learned about like …like like there’s like I don’t know… so
like I don’t know… Um… to try to like I don’t know… Um… I don’t know like… like I
don’t know… um so like I don’t know… I don’t know… I don’t know. I don’t know, maybe

There were certain points during this portion of text where Kira used her confused
voice more. The first was when I asked about her “decision” to become sexually
involved with this man the first time. Her response began with “I think it was one of
those like, it wasn’t, it wasn’t that it seemed like a good idea it wasn’t that it seemed like
a bad idea I was kind of like, I don’t know indifferent sort of, I don’t know how to
describe it, it was like part of it was like, you know.” There are many fillers in this
response and it is difficult to understand what point she is making. Kira seems unsure as
to why she did this. Another time when she seemed more confused was after she
responded to my remark “it seems like it was best thing to do in the situation” while we
were discussing the same topic.

Plot voice – Part II

The plot for Kira’s second story reads like this:

We all went out together one night and Carrie was, she was really, really like drunk like
to the point where she was like ill and like so she went into the basement… went to lay
down and my other two roommates went to go get her… I don’t remember a whole lot of
detail but um, cause we all had quite a bit to drink that night… so I was like ‘oh you
know, I’ll be fine’ they’re like ‘you stay here, like don’t go anywhere, stay here’ kind of
thing and I was like ‘ok ok!’ and you know and like they went downstairs to get her… at
some point he like, we went into the bathroom and like we started kissing and he started
to like undo his belt buckle… not doing too well standing at this point and um, somebody
knocked on the bathroom ‘hey you know, people gotta go’ and so he was like ‘ok, come
on’ and like grabbed my hand… like dragged me outside to the parking lot and um, did
one of these like spin moves you know so they I was like facing him because he was like
dragging me [unintelligible] get to his car… I like hit his car kind of like slid down and
like now I’m sitting on the ground… I did one of these kinds of things [Kira imitates her
head falling forward]… next thing I know like this guy’s like pants are open in this
parking lot like there’s genitalia in my face… I don’t know if I ever did anything or not…
but I remember telling me like the next day, they’re like ‘what did you do while we were
gone?’ and I was like ‘there was a guy and I don’t really know’ because they’re like ‘all
you kept saying is like, like ‘penis in my face outside’’ they’re like ‘did you do
anything?’ and I was just like ‘I don’t have any idea and I don’t know who it was’… I’d
forgotten about it… I explained the situation and they’re like ‘did you do anything?’ and
I’m ‘I don’t know.’
In this story Kira was left alone by her friends during a party while another friend was feeling sick. Her friends instructed Kira to remain where she was, but instead she went into a bathroom with a guy she had been dancing with. They made out until someone knocked on the door and he then grabbed her hand and led her outside. He threw her against a car which she slid down and landed on her butt. Kira then remembers the man taking his penis out of his pants, but cannot remember any more after that until she was back at the party inside the house. She mumbled something about a penis to her friends who asked her about it the next morning. Kira was unable to tell them what had happened then and could not remember if she had given the man oral sex.

Sure voice – Part II

At some points in the story Kira seemed sure. The sure reading of the text looks like this:

‘Oh you know, I’ll be fine’… I remember being afraid that the car alarm was going to go off… slid down and like now I’m sitting on the ground…I remember my jeans were all dirty…I did one of these kinds of things… I had been drinking so much… this guy’s like pants are open in this parking lot like there’s genitalia in my face…‘but I’m getting attention right now’… you don’t want to lose it cause you’re already like started getting it…I can’t like know that I had a situation like that with somebody and then like try to have a like relationship with him…I remember being upset about it about not being able to remember… I know I would have told them… I wouldn’t feel like violated as strongly as if I had been like ‘no, no, no means no, no, no’ and had like been dragged out there against my will or anything like that.

More of the story is shown through this reading. Kira added while telling the story to me that she had forgotten about the entire night until looking through a photo album belonging to a man, Todd, she was casually dating throughout our interviews. Kira recognized his outfit from the party and became worried that he was, in fact, the man who led her into the parking lot. Although Kira was not clear about her explanation, she was sure that if Todd was this unknown man, she did not want to continue a relationship with him. She also thought about the implications of this event for a man and woman trying to start a relationship, and also about the woman’s reputation. She said:

I don’t want it, I don’t want it to be him, you know what I mean, because I mean after what happened like who could I don’t I don’t wanna say like respect a guy who did that because then you can say ‘well how can you respect the girl who went with him?’ if
you’re gonna do the counter argument you know but it was just like I can’t like know that I had a situation like that with somebody and then like try to have a like relationship with him, it’s just ridiculous

Kira is faced with a dilemma here. She does not feel that she can respect a man who has engaged in this behavior, but believes that losing respect for a man would mean losing respect for herself. She seems to settle here on the idea that engaging in this behavior is, at least, no way to start a relationship.

Later when I asked her again about this idea she also said

You mean if you’d wanna have a like a debate about it with the guy I mean you could say like ‘how could a guy be like that’ and I mean I’m sure a guy could come right back and be like ‘you know how could a girl like be so drunk that she couldn’t tell you’ you know, I mean cause that’s like like ‘couldn’t tell what she wanted or what she didn’t want to do’ or cause I mean I do know guys who had that that viewpoint and to be like honest, I don’t know whether or not I made it clear that that was something that I didn’t wanna do.

At this point Kira’s speech breaks down. Although typically articulate, Kira is difficult to follow and her speech contains many fillers such as “like” and “I mean.” Again, this is clearly a topic that Kira is struggling with and her struggles are more apparent when I examined her unsure voice.

*Confused voice – Part II*

Unlike the last story, throughout this story there were many times when Kira was unsure, largely due to her memory lapses throughout the evening. The confused text reads:

But um… so I’ll just like, um… I don’t really know… I don’t remember a whole lot of detail but um, cause we all had quite a bit to drink that night, but um… I don’t really remember the time, the time frame so I don’t remember how long I was actually like… I don’t know how long we were in their either… but I don’t know… so, um, so… I like I don’t know if I have like, like… that I don’t know… I don’t remember how I got back inside… ‘I don’t have any idea and I don’t know who it was’… Um, [unintelligible] um, I’m sure like I can’t I can’t say like I said again, I can’t say things [intelligible] and I can’t say… but I mean, like, um, just I’m sure it was something like, you know… so, um… um, you know like… um… I don’t know, I guess. You mean if you’d wanna have a like a debate about it with the guy I mean, you know you know you could say like ‘how could a guy be like that’ and I mean I’m sure a guy could come right back and be like ‘you know how could a girl like be so drunk that she couldn’t tell you’ you know, I mean cause that’s like like ‘couldn’t tell what she wanted or what she didn’t want to do’ or cause I mean… I don’t know whether or not I made it clear that that was something that I didn’t wanna do
Kira cannot remember some details that are important to her and this seems to bother her greatly. She does not know if she was assaulted because she does not know if “anything happened” nor does she know if she told him “no.” She stated, “I remember being upset about it about not being able to remember what I’d what I had done and the fact that I can’t remember I think upsets me kind of because the fact that I don’t remember anything makes me more to believe that I had done something that I didn’t want to do and I’m trying not to think about it or like I didn’t want to like admit to myself that I’d actually done it cause like I knew that it was wrong.” To Kira, having “done something” in this situation is clearly wrong. This judgment may be largely due to her Roman Catholic roots and also her family. She states, “basically at my house it was like sex is bad don’t do it.” When Kira told her mother that her roommate had a collection of condoms her mother’s response was “‘she’s so bad, she’s so dirty, sex is bad, don’t do it.’”

An interesting point about this story is that she told it after I asked her for more examples of when she felt unsafe. Kira responded “it wasn’t necessarily a safety thing and I’m thinking maybe if I tell it I ca-if I get it out of my head…” Kira is not sure that this situation was about her personal safety, but it was important enough to tell that she felt a need to talk about before we could continue with our interview. This is a story that wanted to be told. I believe this is about her safety, particularly since she is unsure about what actually happened.

Kira’s I poem

I went to that date party
I knew one guy
I was this guy’s date
I know him
I was like “it’s ok, you know”

I don’t want to think about
I was borrowing clothes
I was soaking wet

Things got I think more physical than
I would
One of those things I’d classify as
“What was I thinking?”
I think things got
More physical than
I would have liked

The only person I knew
I was like
What am I supposed to do here?
I’m too drunk
I’m like, so I was stuck
How I felt I guess
I defiantly did
more than I wanted to do

...

I went back to see him
When I had
I stopped by

I was like “well”
I don’t know
I don’t really want anything else
I don’t know
I was like
“No, I don’t believe it”
I was uncomfortable

I was like “no, like let me leave!”
I’ll scream until
At this point I had
I was like “no”
“I’ll scream until they come”

I don’t know
I don’t know
I guess that’s why
Why I made
When I think of him
I think of someone
I’m no longer comfortable with

I didn’t have to do anything
What I had done
I was like
I was scared to be there
My Reactions

As I mentioned in the beginning, Kira seemed to be a fun person to spend time with. When Kira told her stories I often had to remind myself of the fear she must have felt. Although Kira’s voice lowered and she seemed more “serious” while discussing her abortion, throughout her other stories she added an air of levity. I had a sense that Kira did not want me to pity her or to worry about her. Perhaps it was important for Kira to let me know that she had everything under control.

Kira’s story is partly a story about learning. One of the reasons she stated that she wanted to participate was because “I’ve made choices that I’ve made at Miami I feel like there were some things last year and the beginning of this year that, gee if I could have had a chance to do that again I don’t think I would have…” Kira’s faith is also a salient theme for her. Kira’s confusion over her own motivation may have been an important impetus for the change in her behavior. It is important to note here that although Kira believes she has made bad decision in her past, she is a bright and engaged woman. I occasionally see Kira around the psychology department participating in academic events and know that she is actively engaged in her schoolwork. Kira is a woman capable of making positive decisions in her life and frequently does so. She is not self-destructive or “masochistic.”

I find it interesting that Kira’s sexual development occurred later than that of her peers. Part of this seems to be due to her parents’ shame about sex. Although many of the girls in her school rebelled against a strict Catholic upbringing while in grade school, Kira saved her sexually tinged rebellion for college. I wonder what Kira was like in high school. Kira identifies her need for attention as a primary motivator for doing things that belong on her “what was I thinking list.” Thinking about what this might be about; I wonder how much of her parent’s attention Kira received in school while her sister was working at a strip club, sneaking out of the house, and moving in with boyfriends.

Kira seems to be settling back into an equilibrium of sorts. Kira’s first few semesters in college stand in stark contrast to a conservative Catholic upbringing. I wonder if the repressed voice of her “wild child” came into full force when she left her parents’ home. The repressive atmosphere at home and at school affected both Kira and her sister, and perhaps the other school girls at well. Kira presently seems able to both
acknowledge her urge to have fun and be sexual, but also is learning how to think about responsibility and consequences.

I learned quite a few things from Kira. One of these is about “the cycle.” Kira described a cycle beginning with going on a date and ending with having sex in one form or another. In this cycle sex loses meaning. When Kira talks about giving oral sex to her friend in the car it seems to be more mechanical, and I wonder where her passion is. This cycle, which ensures that the man will receive physical pleasure at the end of the evening, robs sexual content of meaning. Kira felt the pull of this cycle and the need to complete it. Josh also understood this cycle and was angered when Kira refused to continue it when he locked her in his room. When I asked Kira if she thought she was a victim she answered, “I guess yes and no. Sometimes I feel like maybe I didn’t necessarily want to do something at the same time I didn’t really vocalize the fact that I don’t want to do it so it’s kind of the blurry zone in between yes and no.” Like Sarah, Kira did not “make it real” by saying no. However, now that she is rethinking her needs and wants, perhaps she is rethinking exactly what consent is.

A second thing I learned from Kira is that sometimes there are other needs that need to be satisfied before physical safety. For Kira, this need is attention. In some ways, it may be more damaging for Kira to be ignored than to be sexually imposed on. Kira had also learned that in order to increase her social options, she needed to become friendly with more men than women. Before these situations became dangerous to Kira, perhaps she was simply getting what she wanted out of the equation. I did not hear Kira once talk about her sexual pleasure. I wonder if she didn’t tell me about this, or if she doesn’t experience much. At the least, it is not an important part of the story for Kira. For Kira, it seems that sex is most used as a tool to gain attention and esteem in a male-centric culture.

*Kira’s Response*

Kira responded positively to her portion of the text. She reported that she was at times skeptical of the things I said about her, but still valued my opinion. Kira reported that she is unsure if I have gotten all the details of her stories correct, but said that it may be her memory that is failing. She noted that she had forgotten about some of the events she had told me about until reading about them. The exact details of her past, or even my
particular take on them seemed less important to Kira than other aspects of the project. She wrote, “Reading your thoughts also provoked some other feelings in me as well. First and foremost, it provided me with a sense of pride within myself. There was something about the way in which everything was worded and feelings and thoughts conveyed that made me feel glad to be me, despite the fact that I was reading information about mistakes and low points in my life.” Although reading about “mistakes and low points” Kira was able to see the positive aspects of herself through the telling of the story. This is a good story then. It does not attempt to hide horrors and bad experiences, but also does not get lost there.

Kira also wrote about the experience of telling her story. She too was unsure what she was trying to “get rid of” or “bestow” in her journal entry regarding her preference for giving rather than receiving oral sex. She responded “What I feel now when I reflect on those events of the past is that whatever I was trying to ‘let out’ of my soul during those events seems to have been released through our meetings…it feels like telling someone my stories, those stories that ate at my core, stories that made me ashamed of who I was—like I was no longer my mother’s daughter—that releasing those words from my own mouth on to ears that had no personal investment in my life really…and to hear no criticism, no opinions, no real input of condemnation or condolence from my captive audience…that in itself was pure liberation.” [last two ellipses in original]. The very act of telling, not in search of a response or an answer, but simply telling in service of the soul, in service of the stories themselves, gave Kira some sense of peace.

Conclusions
“Sex is bad, don’t do it.” Words of wisdom from Kira’s mother. Kira’s father would have just blushed, unable to even get those words out. Don’t talk. Don’t. Perhaps if no one acknowledges it, it will all just go away. Kira’s sister was a stripper. Kira was pregnant. Kira engages in sexual activity simply because. Kira says “what was I thinking?” What was she thinking? Was she thinking? Was she tired of thinking? Tired of strict Catholic morals and polite society silence. Thinking is not the problem. Kira knows how to think. What Kira has trouble with is attention. Who does she want attention from? Perhaps it makes more sense asked this way: who needs the attention?
“Mom, it’s not so bad.” It’s not so bad to be less than pure. Kira is a billion miles away from boring sweet Ohio girl. She can’t play the game of sweet little rich farm girl. She’s bored; she only hangs out with “intellectual equals;” she’s not getting the experiences she wants. She likes to talk; she wants to confess (she is Catholic after all). She confesses to the god of prudence and ankle length skirts and mothers that are ashamed of their daughters. Kira’s not a ruffled pink girly-girl; she’s always liked hanging out with the boys. She gives blow-jobs to be friendly. It’s meaningless to her. Then her baby came with a message. The baby told her “it’s not all fun and games mom, what do you want if it’s not me?” Kira is a mom, she’s learning to be a mom for herself, a mom that says “sex isn’t so bad, but for God’s sake be mindful about it!” Kira confesses like a torn artery. Once she began she kept going until my head felt full, wondering what to do with all the spilled blood. Kira speaks about her sexual exploits, justifying them: “it seems like it was the best thing to do in the situation.” Kira can’t tell me what she was “thinking” at the time because she was thinking with Alcohol, the great silencer of “hey-maybe this isn’t such a smart idea.” Alcohol, the god of intelligent Catholic women who realize that it’s not so simple as “just don’t do it.” I want to talk to Kira when she is trashed. I want to talk to Alcohol. I’ll ask it what Kira wants, tell it to put her in a corner for awhile stuffed with her “shoulds” and “don’ts.” It’ll then tell me what it is that it’s helping her out with. Alcohol helped her “let it out of [her] soul.”

What I think Kira was “letting out of her soul” was a strict adherence to rationality. As with Megan, I did not ask Kira to make sense, to defend her decisions or carefully explain her logic. When Kira was able to tell her story and not have to worry if it logically flowed; when she allowed it to come out in fragments of feelings, thoughts, and reflections she was able to experience her past more fully. This is in contrast to the strict Catholic way of being her family and school espoused. Kira was able to talk in a voice that was not concerned with doing things the right way or the logical way. She was able to talk in a voice that wanted to have fun, to live life regardless of the consequences, regardless of rational choices. Without any outlet for this voice, without having any contact with the more tempered, rational voices, it was able to “take over” at times.

Although I am happy that Kira benefited from the study and feel that she has moved forward in life, I wonder about one thing. Kira wrote, “There are days when I
surely feel disconnected from that wild girl, and thinking of those experiences feels like trying to recall episodes of a television drama—you remember some of the details but forget names, faces, times, and all the intricacies that at one time made the story so alive.” Although I want Kira to be safe, I don’t want her to lose sight of that “wild girl.” I think she is a lot of fun. However, I am not putting this all on Kira. There are dangerous consequences for the free-spirited, fun loving woman in this culture, and Kira has experienced them. Kira needs a safe space to allow her “wild child” to roam free, and not having found this, she has instead chosen to deal with the consequences of a male-centric social scene that has little use for wild women. I hope she can listen to the “wild child” and find safe and exciting ways to both be with and challenge men.

Grace – “I’ll do it just so you stop annoying me”

Grace was a 20-year-old psychology major when I interviewed her. She described her ethnicity/race as Asian-American explaining that she is half Korean. Grace had long straight black hair and Asian features. I found Grace to be friendly and easy to talk to, although she seemed more wary about what she revealed than the other women. Grace did not want to name specific fraternities or sororities and often seemed shy about some of her own experiences. When I mentioned that she did not like using any fraternal names she reported “I don’t wanna offend anyone that’s listening to this.” She is a member of a sorority, so may have had allegiances to honor the Greek system. Despite this, Grace seemed interested in the study and seemed to enjoy telling stories.

Background

Grace grew up in an urban environment with her mother and father. Grace’s mother is Caucasian and her father is Korean. She has a half-brother who is sixteen years older than she. This is her mother’s second marriage; her brother’s father died while her brother was still young and he was raised by Grace’s father. She feels that she and her brother are fairly close, despite the fact that he moved out of the house when Grace was only two. Grace’s mother tells her that she has “two only children.” Grace explained that she does not feel like her parents are in love, and she sometimes feared that they would get a divorce when she was young. She told me that once “my mom got really mad and she just left and I was bawling… I thought she was gonna leave and never come back, but she just went driving and finally came back later that night.” When Grace
asked her mother if she had “settled” by marrying her father, her mother responded that she had “a realization.” She also explained that there is tension in the household because her father holds traditional Korean values about gender roles in a marriage. She said “[Dad] expects a woman to serve him…he always thinks he’s right and my mom knows he’s not half the time.” When I asked Grace what she’s learned about marriage from her parents she first responded laughingly, “I don’t wanna be like them.”

Other salient adults in Grace’s life are her father’s extended family who often come to visit. When Grace told her aunt and cousins that she would be coming to college they told her that she was “too naïve” and would never make it. Grace described these visits as “like hell on earth.” She also explained that she has had close relationships with teachers and a guidance counselor, particularly when she was going through a period of depression (to be expanded on below).

Grace’s school was a largely upper-middle class and Caucasian private school. Grace reported that her family was in a lower class than her peers economically and although her parents tried to give her everything she wanted, she often felt that people judged her because of this. Grace explained that her group of friends was also of the working or middle class and they cared less about their grades than most of the other students at her school.

I voice

As noted above, Grace seemed to be the most reserved woman I spoke with in terms of what she wanted to reveal to me. Grace seemed embarrassed about some of the things she spoke about and vigilant about not using proper names. This is not to say that Grace was not helpful or did not seem interested in the study, on the contrary I believe that Grace was very interested in participating. At the end of our last interview, when I asked Grace if there was anything else she wanted to add, she commented “Now whenever I [see] girls on campus I always think about this thing [the study], I’m like, hmm I should write that down.” When I spoke with Grace she frequently laughed during her answers, and exhibited a lot of facial affect. The laughter seemed mostly to be nervous laughter, and she often laughed when she asked me if she was making sense. Unlike Kira, when Grace told me stories about times when she was upset, her facial expressions seemed to match the content of these stories.
When I asked Grace how similar she felt she was to the stereotype of a woman on this campus she pointed out that although she was not Caucasian, she is somewhat physically similar to that stereotype. Grace told me that she is sometimes concerned about her “image” and keeps up with trends, but does not feel that she always has to dress fashionably, pointing out that she was wearing an old sweatshirt and jeans to our meeting. Grace also told me that she while she sometimes acts “bitchy” she is not “bitchy at heart” like other women on campus. She explained “my roommate and I are kind of huge bitches when we’re together at parties. We’ll make fun of people… I feel really bad… and then there are other times when I’m like ‘don’t make fun of them…’ but I don’t know; I have two different views on that.” It seemed to me here that although Grace will engage in what she considers to be bitchy behaviors such as making fun of other people, she also believes that these behaviors are not always appropriate.

Once I began to ask more about other women being “bitchy at heart” Grace seemed uncomfortable and her speech seemed to break down slightly. She said “I feel like I’m really mean just by saying that they’re bitchy at heart because I don’t think [they are] really that mean at heart, it’s just like it seems like some of them when they are really mean they don’t, it seems like they don’t care, but they might, I don’t know what they’re thinking I mean like there are things that I would like I know that I do wrong, but I don’t change it, like I don’t know how to like, I don’t know I just like there are things about myself that I would change and I just can’t and like I feel like um that girls like they might know they’re doing something and they just they don’t know how not to do it you know like, I don’t know.” And then Grace laughed after this statement.

Due to Grace’s speech pattern here, I believe that Grace is uncomfortable about two things. First, she seems ill at ease judging other women on their behavior alone, particularly since she knows that she may appear outwardly similar to them. Second, she is uncomfortable with the fact that she knows she is doing something she considers wrong, but does not know how to change this behavior. When I asked her about the latter she answered “I feel it’s my environment that makes me like that… I think I could change myself if I was in a different environment… I don’t think it’s like a personality flaw.”
Grace is attuned to what other people think about her. When I asked her to describe her friends she noted that she has one “politically correct friend” with whom she feels she has to monitor what she says. She also told me about her roommate, Jen, who was a key figure in many of Grace’s stories. Grace told me that although she likes talking with Jen about important issues, “[Jen] makes you feel like she’s right, even if she’s not, and the things she laughs at… it’s like everyone else should be laughing too.” In her journal, Grace wrote “One of the worst insults I’ve ever heard was something [Jen] said to me last weekend. It was ‘you’re always frowning, like that’s your face,’ as if to say my mouth is just in the shape of a frown. I told my mom she said that and just started crying… I can’t change the shape of my mouth!” Grace clearly feels judged by her roommate and is sensitive to her roommate’s criticism. However, Grace did mention that she has one friend with whom she feels completely comfortable. Her friend Lindsay is a Quaker, and according to Grace, is therefore able to find the good in everyone. Lindsay is subsequently not critical. Grace reports that Lindsay simply laughs when Grace is “bitchy,” but not in a way that feels hurtful or rejecting to Grace. It seems to me that Grace can tolerate differences in other people, but cannot tolerate being judged by others because of those differences.

When I asked Grace about flirting she told me that she often acts flirty around men, even those in whom she is not sexually interested. She said “I don’t really want them to have a crush on me, but in some way I would because it would be flattering… it makes me feel more fun and loveable.” Like Kira, Grace desires attention, however it seems to be a different kind of attention. While Kira described wanting to be admired, Grace seems to want to be loved and wanted. Grace told me this story about a party “I was in a bad mood… I went to talk to this guy because he would make me feel better… and then she [another girl at the party] came in and took all the attention. I went home and cried my eyes out.” Perhaps Grace went home because she felt unwanted and unloved at the party.

Grace told me that she is “more paranoid” than a lot of people she knows. Many of the friendships she had in the past, especially with men, ended when Grace began to believe they were talking about her behind her back, even though they acted friendly toward her. In one story she told me she had “hooked up” with a fraternity brother and
then did not want to return to that fraternity. When I asked if she was afraid that they would call her slut she answered, “yeah, or just like saying anything about me like ‘oh my god, I can’t believe she’s here’ or ‘she’s such a bitch.’” Grace told me that during the prior year she would “hook up” with a guy about every other week. However during our interviews she would hook-up with men less frequently and these men were generally her friends. Grace told me that she does not like waking up in the morning after a man has slept over her house with her. She informed me that she feels like she needs her own space.

When I asked her about choices and free will Grace told me that she believes everything happens for a reason. According to Grace, people do make choices, but their choices are largely part of a greater plan. She also told me a Korean tale from her father in which a hungry tiger is stalking a school bus. The teacher sends one child outside to distract (get eaten by) the tiger so the rest of the children can escape. The tiger, however, is not interested in eating the sacrificial child and all the other children die in a bus accident. This story illustrated how everything happens for a reason even if it seems like the situation is hopeless. Although Grace does not believe in God, spirituality is very important to her. She stated “I think it’s what keeps me going…when I have something really bad happen to me I’m like… ‘it happened for a reason, you don’t know now, but just keep plugging and whatever something will happen it’s supposed to.’” Although Grace’s strategy “keeps her going” she believes that it is somewhat of a “cop-out.”

Grace’s spirituality has helped her out through difficult times in high school. She would often feel depressed and even suicidal in school. Grace did not tell me much more about her feelings in high school, but she did tell that she still gets depressed sometimes, although she is no longer suicidal. Consistent with her spiritual views, Grace found a somewhat positive spin on her depression. She told me “I’m more depressed this year too and it’s making me more independent.” I wish I knew more about Grace’s depression, but she did not go into much detail and I did not ask many follow-up questions about it.

*Plot Voice*

When I asked Grace about a time she felt uncomfortable with a man she told me two stories weaved together. Here is what I read looking for her plot voice:
He wanted me to do something and finally I was just like ‘fine, I’ll do it just so you stop annoying me’… my ex-boyfriend from here who I dated like the very beginning of last year, he would always like pressure me to like have sex with him but I wouldn’t… my ex-boyfriend though, last year would always pressure me to like have sex with him and I was like ‘no’ like he would want me to like go down on him and I was like ‘ew, no’… I was not sober and I had thought he was hot for a long time and so we were hooking up and he like wanted me to do something and I was like ‘no’ and then eventually I was like… then I found out later that oh he had a girlfriend and he had lied to me about breaking up with her… he kept asking me and I was like ‘no’ and he kept like doing things so that I would be more in that position since like, and then finally I was like ‘fine whatever’… that was in high school… my ex-boyfriend was pressing me to have sex and I’m a virgin and so like that’s more something I’ve never done and don’t want to lose it to just anyone the other thing was not sex it was just like I was more concerned about keeping my… we mutually broke up but in a weird way

The portion of the text analyzed is much more convoluted than most of Grace’s interviews. She seemed visibly embarrassed talking about her sexual experiences; she would blush and often look down. Grace also laughed nervously at points. She gave very little detail about the events. One of these stories is about a college ex-boyfriend who would continually ask her to have sex, both oral and vaginal. At the time of the interviews Grace reported that she was a virgin and was interested in staying that way. The second story is about a drunken hook-up in which Grace participated in an act of which she is ashamed. Grace did not tell me what this act was. According to her, she became intimate with a guy she thought was attractive and he began to ask her to participate in a sexual act that Grace did not feel comfortable with. Eventually Grace agreed. She later found out that this man had a girlfriend who was then angry at Grace.

Sure voice

One thing Grace seemed sure about was her value position. This came through by reading for her sure voice:

He wanted me to do something and finally I was just like ‘fine, I’ll do it just so you stop annoying me’… he would always like pressure me to like have sex with him but I wouldn’t… I was strong enough to say no like there are times when I am strong enough to say no, but then there are times when I’m just like ‘huh! You are just like pissing me off so much’… my ex-boyfriend though last year would always pressure me to like have sex with him and I was like ‘no’ like he would want me to like go down on him and I was like ‘ew, no’… I was not sober and I had thought he was hot for a long time and so we were hooking up and he like wanted me to do something and I was like ‘no’ and then eventually I was like ‘fine’… it’s just not something I’m proud of… he kept asking me and I was like ‘no’ and he kept like doing things so that I would be more in that position
since like, and then finally I was like ‘fine whatever’… I just wanted him to stop like annoying me about it… I don’t really care if a guy thinks I’m a tease but like I don’t want him to like think badly of me… I’m not normally like ‘oh I really care what he thinks’ but like in that case I was… my ex-boyfriend was pressing me to have sex and I’m a virgin and so like that’s more something I’ve never done and don’t want to lose it to just anyone the other thing was not sex it was just like I was more concerned about keeping my virginity

Confused Voice

The text read through an unsure lens looks more like this:

Um… um… um or like I don’t know, I guess I feel like I’m like guilted into it sometimes but like that was like once um… I was like ‘no’ like he would want me to like go down on him and I was… I don’t know… I don’t I don’t know… Um, I guess I tried to… and like I don’t want him to think I’m like a tease like I mean, I don’t really care if a guy thinks I’m a tease but like I don’t want him to like think badly of me I don’t, I’m not normally like that though… that was like I don’t know… I guess… no I think he broke up with me because, well we I don’t really know how we broke up, it was the weirdest like relationship ever and I don’t wanna like go into like how we broke up but like it was kind of we mutually broke up but in a weird way I don’t know, um… I mean

More often than at other points, Grace’s speech breaks down and she adds fillers such as “like.” At one point Grace discussed her motivation for engaging in a sexual act that she did not feel comfortable with. She was unsure about her motivations, particularly around the idea of being “a tease.” Grace is torn between the idea of not wanting people to perceive her as “a tease” and not wanting to care about how people perceive her.

Grace’s I-poem

I don’t really wanna
I was just like “fine”
“I’ll do it so you stop annoying me”
I dated
But I wouldn’t
But I was strong enough
I was strong
I am strong enough
There are times when I’m just like
I don’t know
I guess
I feel
I’m guilted into it

I was like “no”
I was like “ew, no stop”
I don’t know
I was not sober
I had thought he was hot
I was like “no”
I was like “fine”
I don’t
I don’t know
It’s just not something I’m proud of

*My Reactions*

Grace tells two stories about being pressured to engage in sexual activity. In one she is able to stand by her values and say no. In the other she acquiesces. After reviewing the interviews, I wondered how comfortable Grace is with her own sexuality. There is only one point where Grace discusses her own sexual wants and this is when I ask her about taking guys she has met at parties home. Grace tells that she’s not sure why she does it, but uncomfortably admits that she desires sexual activity. I believe that Grace is unsure about her sexual needs, but knows that she values remaining a virgin until marriage. By Grace’s own philosophy, she does not need to know the reasons for her behavior or perhaps her own needs because it is not up to her to decide what path she is headed down.

Grace is also worried about how other people perceive her. She has had hurtful relationships in the past, and works hard to avoid becoming involved in any more. She speaks about appearing “bitchy” multiple times. I wonder if Grace’s experiences at high school have left her hyper-conscious of her own image. She talks about not wanting to be viewed as a tease, but also being uncomfortable with being concerned about how people perceive her. Sarah also talked about wanting to be perceived in a certain way, but did not feel concerned that she felt this way. This tension reminds me about the Western notion of privileging the individual over the collective, and I wonder if, given her parents’ different cultural backgrounds, there is some tension between the Eastern collective and Western individualistic view in her household. I also wonder how Korean culture has affected her views on sexual relationships.

In this sense, perhaps it is not that Grace cannot hear many voices; perhaps she is just unsure what to do about them. For example, Grace has been raised in an
individualistic and collectivist way and she values her virginity, but desires to have some sexual contact. With too many competing scripts, Grace may be somewhat confused as to what she wants and needs. Perhaps by being able to speak about these things Grace can better hear the disorganization.

One thing I learned from Grace is the difficulty of being sexually active and also remaining a virgin (not engaging in vaginal intercourse). Grace is obviously seeking affection from males, but does not want things to go “too far.” I imagine that a lot of young men generally assume that young women are ready to have sex before marriage. By not sharing this assumption, but still wanting to be physically intimate, Grace runs the risk of being seen as a tease. Eventually, it is this fear, or, more appropriately, this expectation that a young woman will engage in sexual intercourse, that helps convince Grace to engage in an act she finds objectionable. Grace’s desire to be loved is also important here. Having sexual relations with a man is one way that Grace can be loved. This is different than Kira’s desire to be admired, because Kira’s definition of admirable qualities seem to include an inner strength and part of that strength is standing one’s own ground. Grace believes that in order to be loved she must acquiesce and this belief depresses her.

Grace’s response

I was able to contact Grace in order to send her a copy of her portion of the text. However, I did not hear from Grace after I sent out her copy. It is possible that either Grace was uncomfortable with what I had written and did not wish to communicate with me any further, or simply became busy in school and did not have time to participate in the study any longer.

Conclusions

More than any other woman in my story, Grace is Miami. I know Grace; she reminds me of women in my life, constantly hurting but hiding behind normal. She’s extra sensitive and very very angry. Grace is so tired of people telling her how to be, her friends in particular. Grace is fatigued with being Nice; her face shows it when she speaks, her body cringes, it’s so hard to be so Nice all the time. Grace has to be Nice when men ask her for sex. She can only say “no” so many times before she looks Bitchy. This is the dichotomy, and Grace did not make it up. Nice/Bitchy lives in the world of rational
discourse and duality. Which are you? What end do you occupy? How is one not a Bitch? She has heard, but does not want to listen to, her mother’s cryptic warning that she won’t “settle for a man” but will eventually come to “a realization.” There is no happy ending to the story, no fairy tale. How can you be so unhappy with your friends and your life and still be so Nice? Grace finds independence when she is depressed. She doesn’t have to be so perky when she’s depressed. Unlike Sarah who wanted to talk but couldn’t, Grace wasn’t sure if she wanted to talk to me at all. She wanted something, she came to talk to me to get something, but I don’t think she knew exactly what it was. Perhaps Grace just wanted to understand why she is so sad, she knows that in some ways this Miami box is part of that sadness. You can exist from here to here and anything else is odd and unhealthy. Part of it is that she doesn’t like to hear about it; she doesn’t want to imagine herself as part of a system, as someone who cares about what other people think about her. Grace cares, of course she does, but she’s not allowed to. Women who care about what others thing of them are weak and stupid. Grace does not want to be weak or stupid, so she can’t let all of her speak. I could not hear all of Grace. She was reining someone in, not letting someone speak. Perhaps she did not want me to know that she is afraid.

Grace is strong in her values and beliefs, and attempts to stick by them. However, Grace is emotionally susceptible to the judgments of her friends and family. I wonder if Grace felt that I was judging her when she read what I wrote about her. Although we did not discuss it too much in the interview, I believe that Grace hears many competing cultural scripts about how she should be and act. In most ways Grace is very American in appearance and thought, but she has a good deal of spiritual beliefs and morals that seem to come from her father. Perhaps because of this Grace is very distressed when someone is implying that she is wrong in her actions. Part of the tension Grace feels is due to the fact that she logically knows that she should not be overly concerned about other people’s opinions of her. However, she is concerned about this. In her story where Grace eventually “gave in” it was largely because she did not want to be viewed as “a tease.” I wonder if right before she “gave in” Grace struggled between wanting to be loved and wanting to not want to be loved. Wanting to be loved by people that she really
has no interest in is not a rational notion, and the rational voices tell her that this is not ok.

Grace’s unsure voice in this section largely deals with deciding if she should be worried about being viewed as a tease or not. Compounded with this is the unfortunate fact that Grace lives in a culture where it is likely that she will be viewed as a tease if she becomes sexually involved with a man but does not conclude the act with intercourse. According to Kira, this is a cycle that is well known by men and women. Throughout our interviews I did not feel like I was able to get to hear most of Grace’s voices that are opposed to the rational voice. I hypothesize that Grace’s carefulness with her words, and possible fear that I was judging her, did not provide the adequate space for her to speak with all voices. I can only guess as to what these voices are and what they mean to her.

_Brianna – “How am I supposed to be friends with this guy?”_

At the time of the interviews Brianna was a 19 year old junior majoring in psychology. She is African-American and was raised Methodist, although she now reports that “I don’t believe that there’s one right kind of religion I… also incorporate Buddhist ways of thinking.” When I interviewed Brianna she had many stories to tell me and spoke in a detached manner. Although she shared many emotional tales with me, she spoke primarily in a monotone voice and would occasionally yawn. In general, Brianna seemed very friendly and willing to help, even though she was very busy.

I recruited Brianna from a psychology of women class. The instructor offered students extra credit for participating in any study run by the psychology department, and I came to her class to briefly describe my study. At this point in my research I was primarily looking for a woman who believed she had been sexually assaulted or raped, however I also indicated that I was interested in hearing from women who believed they had interesting stories to tell. When Brianna and I met for the first time it was clear to me that there was something that she wanted to talk about. She indicated that although she had not been assaulted, she felt like she had been in the middle of a relationship that was very relevant to my study. I also welcomed Brianna’s participation to hear from an African-American woman’s perspective. During our initial interview we spoke in length about her experiences on campus and also about experiences that she felt were endemic to most African-American women on this campus.
Background

Brianna grew up in a fairly urban environment with her mother and father. Brianna reported that her early childhood was very happy. However, by the end of sixth grade Brianna became aware that her father had serious drug problems; and her parents divorced when she was in seventh grade due to the financial debt he was incurring. For the next few years, throughout high school, Brianna’s dad would move in and out of her life, often living in dangerous areas when he was not in her mother’s house. She told me “I know some streets… where he used to live that I cannot drive down without feeling sick to my stomach.” When we spoke about her family Brianna spent most of the time talking about her relationship with her father, or her relationship with her mother as it relates to her father.

Brianna has a lot to say about the friendships she has had with her peers throughout school and about her friends’ struggles with their romantic partners. Brianna explained that she was “quiet” throughout school, but described having relationships with outgoing people. Although she had friends of both sexes throughout school, Brianna did not have many romantic relationships before entering college.

Voice

When asked how similar she is to the typical female undergraduate on this campus Brianna answered “I’m pretty different than the typical Miami girl, I think I’m less social in certain ways I’m very… shy.” However, she also noted that she probably shares a lot of concerns with the typical woman on this campus such as physical problems, problems with men and problems with friends. Brianna told me that recently she spoke with a few women who seemed more like the stereotypical woman here and was surprised to find that they had a lot of the same concerns. She said “these girls were really pretty and they were well put together… I assume girls [like that] would be a little catty and jealous… but I never thought they’d be going through the same kind of little trials and tribulations like me.” Brianna seems wary of women that appear to fit the campus stereotype and is surprised when she has positive interactions with one.

A clear component of Brianna’s sense of self is her father’s drug problems. Through all the struggles she and her mom had because of her dad, Brianna expressed an unwavering love for her father, and a desire for him to be well. Brianna also told me that
she believes she inherited some of her father’s addictive traits, so she tries to stay away from addictive substances, although she has experimented in the past. She believes that her father’s behavior has had an impact on her life that she has yet to understand. Brianna explained “I’m sure it had some sort of deep dark impact on my life that I’m probably not totally aware, but I kind of think it’s the way I look at men very apprehensive[ly] and war[ily].”

During the time that her father’s problems were at their worst, Brianna’s mother asked her if she would like to see a psychologist; Brianna answered “I don’t wanna talk about it with these people; I’ll just keep it to myself.” Brianna did seem to “keep it to herself,” as she only recently told her best friend about his drug problems. Perhaps this is related to shame, or perhaps one lesson Brianna learned from her father is to not trust other people. She stated, “when I was in high school no one could know because I didn’t think anyone else could understand… could ever fathom what it was like having a father that was so good go from being the perfect dad [to] the cause of all my misery.” To keep such a secret as this one, Brianna must have sacrificed a good deal of emotional connection in her high school friendships.

Even now, Brianna told me that she does not feel like she can completely trust her friends. She said “I can trust certain friends with certain pieces of information but sometimes I don’t feel totally comfortable with telling everything to just anybody, just for fear of being rejected, of them saying ‘that’s stupid.’” Brianna told me that one of the reasons she wanted to be in this study was to have the “opportunity to tell somebody just everything I was feeling and thinking… [you’re] not gonna sit there and judge me cause… that’s [your] job, to listen.” Brianna wants to be heard; she does not want to be judged. Brianna also told me that due to the small size of the African-American community of campus gossip travels fast, so she knows that if she tells one person something, everyone will hear it.

When I asked Brianna what she had learned about dating and marriage from her parents, she told me that although her mother still loves her father, she would not consider remarrying him, even if he would be able to stay off drugs. Brianna also discusses the tension between taking care of herself and taking care of other people particularly men. She indicated that “this has kinda made me want to help any guy I
know that’s doing something [unhealthy]… I want to help them be a better person.” But she also notes, “My mom could have stayed married to my dad… but then it would have cost her lots and lots of money and it just would have been horrible and… made our lives worse.” She has also leaned not to trust others, even a partner, with money.

**Plot voice**

The story Brianna had to tell me was very long and often confusing. Most of what she told me seemed to be pure plot. It is related here in the plot voice:

I got here and this guy… my friend told me that he liked me and I just totally didn’t… believe it… he kept calling me and stuff and I just kind of like blew him off… after a while he stopped calling me and I… started missing him… I called him and then we started like getting on more like talking on a regular basis and stuff and we got to know each other more and like then but then I found out that like while he was talking to me he was talking to another girl… he kind of like told me like, ‘well, you’re not my girlfriend, and she’s not my girlfriend either, and you kind of blew me off so I just moved on kinda’ ‘ok, well whatever’… we continued to like talk, nothing really physical was happening and then over Spring break, he tells me he wants to like kind of progress our relationship so that we’re like, you know, boyfriend and girlfriend, and I’m like ‘ok, well you have to stop seeing this other girl’… she tells me she wants to talk to me… we straightened it all out… I got really mad at him for something… I told him I don’t wanna see him anymore and just ‘forget it, forget everything, I don’t wanna be in a relationship with you’ and so he was like mad and sad and I am too and he calls the next day and was like ‘I really wanna work things out with you… he was going to Chicago for a conference or something and he comes then he comes back I hear like that he brought her this t-shirt that says like ‘my heart belongs to like a [fraternity] man’… I was like ‘forget it’… I’d still try to call him and like work things out and like and then like end of the year we just kind of said like ‘ok, we’re just gonna [be] friends’… I wouldn’t really call him… I wasn’t busy but I just told him I was… he starts calling me and calling me and calling me and then he wants to see me… I’m like ‘no, leave me alone you have a girlfriend, no leave me alone you have a girlfriend’ and he keeps being persistent so finally I said ‘ok, we can, we can be friends, but as friends I want us to actually like do stuff, you know, hang out, cause we were friends last year and we didn’t do anything we just you were just a friend and I just think like if you wanna really be my friend and you really are serious about this, we should like get to know each other better and you know sit and talk and’… it was like that for a couple of weeks, so I’m like ‘you know what, why don’t we just give it one more try’… our relationship gets more physical… I’m like ‘get rid of all that stuff, cause I don’t want her coming over your room, cause that’s just leading for trouble… I’m like ‘does she stay here?’ and he’s like ‘yeah’… I just kind of like let it go and then like after that though he told me that she stayed over there, I told him that I didn’t want anything to do with him but he told me they never had sex and I believed him… she told me that they were back together… I already kinda decided I didn’t wanna be like, you know, in a relationship with him but I think that was the time when you, where you came in to give me the flyer that was like kind of like all, my emotions were really scattered about… ‘you know what, I can’t deal with this I’m not talking to him anymore’ so then I
stopped talking to him, and I haven’t talked to him in like two weeks I haven’t like returned his phone calls or anything like that and he started he called me and was like ‘well what why haven’t returned my phone calls what’s what’s your problem’… right now I’m trying to come to terms with that like how am I supposed to be friends with this guy

This story seems to be about a relationship that is confusing for Brianna and is therefore confusing to me. On the first page of the journal I gave Brianna to write in she wrote:

no barriers
no fronts
answer my ?s
why me?
why her?
what do you want?
- from me & out of our relationship
what o

This relationship is so emotionally draining Brianna cannot even finish her thoughts. From what I can gather, Brianna has had an on-again/off-again relationship with a prominent African-American man on campus named Connor, and this line of questioning seems to be directed toward him. He is also involved with another woman, and Brianna and this woman have gotten in a few arguments. At the time of the interview Brianna decided that she cannot have a romantic relationship with this man, but cannot decide if and how she wants to remain friends with him. However, throughout Brianna’s journal written after our last interview, she seems to be becoming romantically involved with him again. This relationship is dangerous in the sense that it is emotionally hurtful for Brianna. Brianna is confused and is dating a man whom she believes is treating her poorly.

Sure Voice

Reading over Brianna’s text, it was difficult to locate the sure voice. Where I heard it the most was in Brianna’s account of things she had said to Connor.

I found out that like while he was talking to me he was talking to another girl and it really like made me… ‘ok, well you have to stop seeing this other girl’… I told him I don’t wanna see him anymore and just ‘forget it, forget everything, I don’t wanna be in a relationship with you’ and so he was like mad and sad and I am too… I went into this next year feeling like ‘I’m not gonna talk to him, he’s he’s too much trouble’… I’m like ‘sorry, I’ve been really busy’… ‘no, leave me alone you have a girlfriend, no leave me alone you have a girlfriend’… I’m like ‘get rid of all that stuff, cause I don’t want her
coming over your room, cause that’s just leading for trouble, you know she’s gonna you guys are going to get back to together and then I’ll be feeling like you know like what was the purpose of us even talking? So then like after awhile like you know and then like another week goes by and the the stuff’s still there so I’m just like I’m like ‘does she come over here a lot?’… I told him that I didn’t want anything to do with him but he told me they never had sex and I believed him… ‘you know what, I can’t deal with this I’m not talking to him anymore’ so then I stopped talking to him, and I haven’t talked to him in like two weeks I haven’t like returned his phone calls or anything

Brianna is very clear about her wants and needs, and seems to have made this clear to Connor from her story. From this reading I have a sense that although Brianna may express a lot of ambivalence in her relationship, it is important for her to appear in control and decisive. This is not to say that Brianna is not decisive in some respects; she is clear that she does not want to be in a relationship with a man who is also in a relationship with someone else. She also seems clear about her values in a relationship both in the interviews and in her journal when she talks about her friend’s relationships with men. Referring to a friend’s boyfriend Brianna wrote, “She should just leave him alone. He is so disrespectful of her just like every guy on this fucking campus.”

Confused Voice

Much of Brianna’s text seemed confusing to me. For the fourth reading I focused on parts where she seemed especially confused.

Something happened, oh yeah, then the girl I guess she found out that like I was she said something… I got really mad at him for something I don’t really remember why… I don’t remember the exact details… I’m like ‘ok, and like’ and like usually… I don’t know it’s just, it’s weird… I don’t know how why what’s going on, like why I am feeling so much dissonance with like the way, you know like, I don’t know I don’t know what to do about him anymore, like I just don’t know if I should like you know forget it just ‘I don’t wanna be your friend anymore, like you’re just too much trouble for what you’re worth and I don’t feel like’ sometimes that’s I don’t know he’s he’s just weird, I don’t know what to do so that’s like where I am right now, but it’s like very I don’t know it’s very like.

There were points in our interview when Brianna could not remember chunks of her story and I understood this to be due to the convoluted nature of her relationship with Connor. Brianna also seemed confused at the very end of her story when she is assessing her own behavior. She seems confused as to the direction she could take her relationship with Connor. Although she does not say so directly, I imagine that Brianna is also confused about her participation in the relationship. For someone who has clear ideas
about what is ok in a relationship and appears to have no problem saying so, she is in
what can be considered an unhealthy relationship, or at least a relationship that does not
fit her standards.

Brianna’s I-poem

I was like
I’m never calling him again
I
I didn’t call him
I wouldn’t return his phone calls
I didn’t call
I
I was
I went into this next year
I’m not gonna talk to him
I don’t want anything to do with him
I see him
I don’t talk to him
I see him
I’m looking for my friend
I walked over
I tried to cut [out]
I could talk to him
I’m like “huh”
I was looking
I’m like “hi”
I tried to cut [out]
I’m like “sorry”
“I’ve been really busy”
I wasn’t busy
I just told him I was
I was
I was like
“I don’t wanna talk to you”
I walk off
I guess
I’m like “no, leave me alone”
Finally I said “ok”
I want us to actually do stuff
I just think
So I then “ok”
I’m like “you know what, why don’t we give it one more try?”
My Reactions

The fact that Brianna is African-American adds a new dimension to her story as well. She reported “the Black community’s so small that girls throw themselves at guys… [to have] a boyfriend you have to attach and deal with all their crap. They have the upper hand.” By Brianna’s account, a woman who wants to date an African-American male is already at a disadvantage due to “supply and demand.” A woman dating an African-American man will have to “put up with more crap” since he knows that he is in demand.

The power dynamics in this situation most likely interact with what Brianna has learned about relationships from her parents. Although Brianna’s mother seems to be at peace with her decision to separate from her husband, Brianna seems unclear about how to relate to her father. She knows that she loves him, but she also knows that he has made life more difficult for Brianna and her mother. And like Connor, Brianna’s father moved in and out of her life. Brianna has also connected the process of looking for “pity cases” with her father. I wonder if her desire to “straighten up” a man engaged in unhealthy behaviors is a wish to symbolically exert control over her relationship with her father. As a young child Brianna could do nothing about her father’s decisions to take drugs, but as an adult woman she is perhaps trying to learn how to exert control over men engaged in objectionable behaviors. By doing this, in theory, she will be able to avoid marrying and loving a man like her father because she will learn how to change him.

Furthermore, it seems that Brianna has not had a lot of experience with close intimate relationships. She had this to say:

Some of [my friends] had really… dysfunction relationships… I was like ‘I don’t want anything like that’… Connor [was] the first guy that I could probably say was like a boyfriend in some sort of sick perverted way and so I never really realized what kind of feelings were involved and how could they do such stupid stuff, but then you realized that when you have strong feelings for someone, what kind of stupid stuff you can do.

Intellectually, Brianna can pull herself back from the situation and examine her own behavior rationally. However, once Brianna’s heart is involved, once she is actually in love, she is unable to do what she logically believes is the correct thing to do—break up with Connor.
I learned quite a few things from my meetings with Brianna. The first is how “supply and demand” can drastically affect a relationship. Although I can only speak with information gleaned from Brianna’s perspective, because African-American men are rare on this campus, they are able to exert a large amount of power over the women who wish to date them. Brianna, at least, experiences this power as real. A second thing I learned from Brianna is that knowing what you want in a relationship and being able to recognize that you are not getting it is not enough to end an unhealthy partnership. A woman can state her needs to herself, her friends, and her partner; but if they still are not met, it is not easy to say good-bye while in love’s grasp. The love she feels for Connor is overwhelming and I wonder if she can learn, like her mother, to not only listen to and acknowledge that love; but to also make decisions that take her own values into account.

While working with Brianna’s stories I thought of what I knew about the relationships African-American women have with African-American men. In their article about little sisters Stombler and Padavic (1997) note, “As Collins (1991:42) discovered when asking young Black women about lessons they learned from their mothers, most answers stressed self-reliance, e.g., ‘want more for yourself than just a man’” (pg. 271). They also infer from literature on Black women that “These women’s notions of ‘strong, black womanhood’ and life success do not include future economic dependence on men” (Stombler & Padavic, 1997, pg. 271-272). The authors cite this literature as reasons why Black little sisters are able to “resist” Black fraternity men more successfully than White little sisters.

I imagine what these mothers had in mind—what Brianna’s mother had in mind. Although this is positive in many ways for African-American women, I wonder if Brianna’s confusion about love is related to a reliance on this voice. The idea of not depending on a man and being able to take care of oneself, although positive, does not address the notion of loving a man. What is a Black woman to do when she falls in love with a louse? She knows rationally that she should leave him, but does she know why she can simultaneously not want to leave him?

_Brianna’s response_

Brianna was contacted and sent her portion of the story. When I did not hear from her after a month I contacted her again. She informed me that she was still
interested in replying to her portion but needed another copy of the text. After resending her the text, Brianna gave me a brief reply. She wrote, “I thought it [the text] was very insightful and I am very glad that I participated and that I could help you.” She also indicated that she would like to be contacted if I became aware of future research opportunities similar to my study. I asked Brianna for further elaboration on her comments, but did not receive a reply. It is most likely that Brianna is either too busy at school or simply cannot organize her thoughts enough to reply.

Conclusions

Brianna is in a bad spot. She is in love with a bad man. She knows this; she feels this everyday. She knows what she’s supposed to do. She is a Strong Black Woman. All Strong Black Women know about these guys, and know to watch out for them. No one, however, tells these women what to do once they fall in love. Brianna talks in circle, in octagons. I can’t follow—she can’t possibly follow herself. Just leave him. She hears this every day. From her friends, her mother, herself. If it was so easy she would be gone by now. You can’t Just Leave someone you love, that doesn’t mean you have to stay, but you can’t just go. How did her mother do it? Does Brianna know? Was it all willpower? Did she shut off her heart? Perhaps she did, and perhaps she can do this. She’s old she has her children, she has loved. Brianna has not. Did Brianna’s mom teach her how to love her father even though he’s no good? She is searching for a rational way out of an irrational problem. Brianna does not have a rational problem, being in love is not a rational problem, Just Leave is a rational answer—not gonna cut it here. She is a fixer, still trying to fix her father. She finds her father in a confused, messed up young man—she can’t fix him. She’s going to “keep it to herself,” she’s going to “take care of it.” Brianna has to because she is pitted against her African-American sisters here. They are competing for a small dating pool, and to Brianna that dating pool is useless anyway. She’s all on her own. There’s so much drama in her relationship. She’s so cynical about men. Brianna sounds so tough. When she tells me about what she says to Connor I imagine that she looks like a woman not to be messed with. This is all for show, this is a game. Brianna wants to be this tough woman who doesn’t care, but she doesn’t know how to stop caring. Not only that, but she knows somewhere that tough women who don’t care are cold and empty. But Brianna does not know what else to do.
What does a woman in love do? She can’t let this woman, the one in love, speak out loud because it goes against everything the culture tells her about being a Strong Black woman.

Brianna is a strong, intelligent African-American woman. She has listened to her mother’s and the culture’s advice about men and understands it very well cognitively. Unfortunately that advice, on how to respond rationally to a man who is taking advantage of you, has nothing to say about that love she feels. That advice tells her to ignore it. Brianna, someone who has little experience in intimate relationships, hears this voice of irrational love and is not sure what to do about it. She has learned that she cannot simply reason herself out of loving Connor.

I wonder if this happens to many women who are in unhealthy or abusive relationships. It is easy to cognitively and rationally know that one should leave, it seems harder to actually do that. Is there a space for women, and people in general, to love something that is utterly wrong for us? I wonder that if Brianna could listen to that love, if the culture would let her listen to that love even though it makes no sense, she could find a way to both love Connor and protect herself. It seems as though her mother has learned to do this, and I wonder if she has any further advice for Brianna. The problem isn’t that she’s in love; the problem is that she is trying to kill that love.

Katie’s story – “This was a nice guy”

When I met Katie she was a 19-year-old psychology major. Katie had been raised Presbyterian, but had converted to Catholicism when she was in high school. She was petite and pretty. Katie had responded to flyers I had placed in the women’s bathrooms in the psychology building. I had offered payment on the flyers and explicitly asked for a woman who believed she had been sexually assaulted and/or raped. Katie responded after the fliers had been up in the bathroom a couple of weeks and when I asked her about her participation she answered, “I do research work with… a professor here and I know it’s kinda hard to find people to participate,” also adding that it might be a good idea for her to be able to talk. She was friendly and, in my opinion, very brave. She was able to talk about a sexual assault early in our first interview. While Katie told me about the assault her voice wavered and she often appeared like she was about to cry. She paused often, seeming to collect her thoughts and perhaps her emotions as well. After she
initially told me the details of the story her answers to my questions were brief, but poignant.

*Background*

Katie’s description of her background was briefer than those of the other women in the study. Katie reported that she had a happy childhood growing up with her mother, father and three siblings. Her father worked and her mother stayed at home. She described her mother as caring but “obsessive-compulsive” and her father as busy but always in a good mood. Katie’s parents are a decade apart in age and eloped after dating for only six months. Katie explained that she had a good group of friends in elementary school, and also in high school. She told me that she and some of her friends were cheerleaders and were also studious. Katie and one of her friends were co-valedictorian of their graduating class. She had her first boyfriend in eighth grade, and her first serious relationship was during her sophomore year of high school.

*I voice*

I had a difficult time locating Katie’s I voice throughout the transcripts. Part of it may have been Katie’s generally brief answers to my questions and part of it may have been that my skills as an interviewer may have been worn as this was the last interview I conducted for this study. However, one thing that seemed important to me about Katie was her insistence that the assault did not negatively affect her in any significant way. She explained that since then she has been more cautious about her behaviors such as drinking, but in general feels like she has not been greatly affected. Although this may largely be true, given the amount of affect Katie had while discussing the story, I wonder if perhaps there was more to the story.

Katie described having positive relationships with people in general. Katie was able to talk with a number of her friends about the assault. However, there are a few people that Katie has not told about the assault. She did not tell her parents because she does not want to worry her mother. She said “I just didn’t think it was necessary it’s not something we would talk about in a conversation.” She has not told her boyfriend because she feels that it does not affect their relationship. According to Katie, the sexual assault did not affect her relationship with men. Katie seemed hopeful about love and finding a future partner, and much of this hope stems from her parents’ relationship.
Unlike the other women I interviewed, Katie did not have any stories to tell about family arguments or difficulties with friends. The assault, it seems, was an anomaly in her life. I wonder if Katie’s general positive disposition on life, if her hope, serves as some sort of shield against the assault. If her life has been generally as pleasant as she described, perhaps she has no template to understand what happened to her. The only other “dangerous” story Katie told me was one in which an intoxicated boyfriend punched a hole in the wall after Katie refused to have sex with him. According to Katie she was able to resolve this situation effectively by sleeping in another room.

Katie is doing well in school, working as a research assistant for a professor, and has ambitious career aspirations. Although she told me that as a child she imagined being a stay at home mom, she now dreams of entering law school when she is finished with college. An important thing for her in a relationship is that she and her partner have similar goals.

*Plot voice*

Katie tells a story about being sexually assaulted.

It’s last year… that night I went out with a group of girlfriends and we went to one party and were drinking and then we went to a bar that we usually go to and at the bar there’s this bartender that we know… we met him like earlier in the year… he’s older… he like would give us drinks and stuff since we were just freshmen… we’ve been to his house like a couple of times… after the one party before we went uptown I was very intoxicated I was like stumbling drunk and then we went to the bar and that was like 1 o’clock or so so we were there until close for another hour and we were gonna go over to his house afterwards and so the other girls were gonna wait and um go with his friends so I rode home with him and I get there and he just takes me upstairs so I can go lay down. So I lay down in his bed for a while… I wake up and he is in the bed with me… he had um unbuttoned my pants and had his hand inside of me and I that’s when I woke up… I pushed him off and me and I told him I’m going home so I grabbed my purse and my jacket and I like ran home… I just like walked out walked all the way home… I remember him taking me upstairs like when we first got there and just telling me to lay down and like he’s like ‘I’ll send [your friends] up here when they come’… we were laying like spooning… he had his arm like reached around and like I shoved, I elbowed him… he was like ‘I’ll take you home’ and offered to drive me home and I said ‘no, I don’t want’ I just grabbed my stuff I like couldn’t find it I was like rushing around the room and I finally grabbed it and just go he was just like just kept asking me if I wanted ‘are you sure, to walk home?’… He didn’t even touch me or anything he just ‘oh you just woke up’… apparently he told them that they he wasn’t he was gonna sleep on the couch… I talked to them and I told them what happened… he just convinced that would be ok… I’ve seen him like a few times um like the first time we saw him afterwards we were at another bar and he came to that bar and he came up and talked to my other two
friends and I walked away and my one friend like confronted him and told him to never ever talk to us again… he denied it he like ‘I don’t know what she’s talking about’ like ‘she was really drunk what are you talking about. She just got up and left for some… I told another good friend of mine from back home and no I didn’t tell my parents.

According to Katie, she and two friends were drinking at a party and then went uptown. While uptown they met up with a bartender, Sean, whom they had been friendly with. He offered to drive them home and offered to let Katie to rest on his bed. Katie does not seem quite sure what happened next, but she believes that Sean convinced her friends that they could leave her at his home. Katie, who had been intoxicated, passed out. When she awoke she found Sean’s hand in her pants. She pushed him off of her and began to get dressed to leave. Sean asked her if she wanted a ride home, not saying anything about the incident, and she declined. She told her friends and they eventually confronted him, but he denied that anything had happened.

Sure voice

Katie’s sure voice was most present when she described waking up with Sean’s hand in her pants, when discussing the reasons why she went home with him, and explaining why her friends left her there.

Actually I thought he really liked one of my friends… I pushed him off and me and I told him I’m going home so I grabbed my purse and my jacket and I like ran home… he was like ‘I’ll take you home’ and offered to drive me home and I said ‘no, I don’t want’ I just grabbed my stuff… He didn’t even touch me or anything he just ‘oh you just woke up’ you know and that’s and like when I was buckling my pants I’m like ‘no, I do not you to go home!’ he didn’t even say anything… I was just upstairs in like his bedroom area and he he just convinced that would be ok…I would have done the same thing too to my friend… I trusted him enough… that didn’t even cross my mind I’m sure it didn’t cross their mind…I told another good friend of mine from back home and no I didn’t tell my parents that would just make them worry more… that fact that I let that happen like part of it is like that whole situation now that I look from like back up I mean like I shouldn’t of drank that much… it’s kind of embarrassing that I wasn’t smart enough to like think ahead like what could happen it’s kinda silly that I trusted a guy like that like why didn’t I see it… that’s why I was surprised at him… we were like ‘this guy’s so awesome he’s so nice he’s invites us over he get us drinks’ you know drives me home if I’m intoxicated stuff like this so I had a trust with him … I totally blocked out the fact that he’s so much older than us and that um probably too forward like inviting us over and stuff now that I look back on it but I didn’t even think about that then.
Confused voice

Katie also seems very confused about a number of things that happened that evening.

Like I hate just like just bringing it up like I don’t know how to like start talking about it I don’t, I really don’t… he um… and ah… I guess my friends came up… I guess I passed… I just woke up I first like I forgot where I was like I was still like looking around it was really dark and then I like just noticed like I couldn’t even tell when I first woke up until like I finally I felt it and I w-turn-turned around there he was like he was like behind me… all I wanted I wanted I didn’t know where my friends were… I yeah I had no idea I was like I don’t I wasn’t I was so I was like as soon as I re- I pushed… I I was so like I didn’t know what to do… then I think I must… I just I was I was upset… but they they didn’t they didn’t well they didn’t leave me they they this guy was a nice guy I mean he was fun they didn’t they just didn’t let… like I wasn’t I was… you know I really I guess I didn’t know him that well…Well I just I didn’t I didn’t I I didn’t know they were gonna leave me or anything like I didn’t realize I guess I was that drunk… I don’t know I didn’t even think I was I was like I didn’t know what I did like I’m so still intoxicated I was just like like what did I what did I do I don’t know did I I knew I was just sleep I knew I must have just passed out like [unintelligible] I couldn’t I wasn’t angry at myself or anything I was just like I wasn’t even just mad I just let me like I let myself get drunk and then just mad at my friends and that was… I’m sure they I don’t they would I wouldn’t… I I guess like I didn’t… I mean it wasn’t I mean… like I guess I I but I’m yeah.

Katie is hazy on some of the details, and also seems unsure about her friends’ behavior. Although I noted above that Katie seems sure of her friends’ reasoning at points, she still seems unsure about it at others. It is possible that although Katie can logically understand why her friends left her there, she is still angry at them. Katie is confused about this anger because it does not make logical sense. Also, Katie is struck by the idea that she would have done the same thing had she been in the friends’ situation. She may be guilty at the very idea that she could not have protected her friends from this event.

Katie’s I-poem

I hate just bringing it up
I don’t know how to start talking about it
I don’t
I really don’t, ok

I went out
I thought he really liked one of my friends
I was very intoxicated
I was stumbling
I rode home with him
I get there
I can go lay down
I lay down
I guess
I remember
I don’t remember
I guess
I passed out

I don’t know
I wake up
I
I woke up
I had no idea what was going on
I didn’t know
I just woke up
I pushed him off
I told him “I’m going home”
I grabbed my purse
I ran home
That’s all I remember

My Reactions

The story I want to tell about Katie is about a young woman growing up confident and hopeful about her life. When she meets Sean she is simply excited to have met an older man interested in hanging out with her and her freshman friends. Katie does not even imagine that this man would want to hurt her. Even now she does not seem to view him as a predator and seems somewhat confused as to why he would assault her while he seemed to have been interested in her friend. Katie’s silences and occasional stumbling throughout the interview are about utter bafflement as to why someone should do this to her and a realization that she was utterly unaware that this situation might arise. Katie calls herself “stupid,” but this is far from the truth, once she had a few minutes to wake up she knew exactly what happened to her and exactly what to do; that is, she left, told her friends and discontinued contact with this man. She considered prosecution and decided against it based on the fact that there was not evidence to support her claim. She also has examined the situation and learned from it what she can.
I wonder if before she was assaulted Katie knew much of the less friendly parts of daily experience. One thing that struck me about Katie while interviewing her was the she was very nice and very optimistic. Katie’s assailant chose to attack her in a time of slumber, a time when the rational confident voices were unable to help her. The assault was an unfortunate introduction into the darker side of life. Katie is currently learning how to listen to that voice, a voice that alerts her to possible danger and reminds her that all people do not have good intentions.

One thing I learned from Katie is that a predator can located a woman’s blind spot. Although I have no way of knowing, I doubt that Sean would have attempted to assault Katie while she was awake. Given her reaction when she woke up, and her strong sense of self, Katie seems to be a difficult target for coercion. She is not meek and not afraid to say no, as evidenced by her refusal to have sex with her wall-punching boyfriend. Another thing I learned is that a sexual assault does not always equal a gigantic trauma. Although Katie was affected by the assault, she has moved on with her life. As a budding psychologist I worry about possible unrealized effects, but perhaps Katie has talked about the assault as much as she has needed to. She has been able to process it with her friends and also with me.

Katie’s response

I was unable to contact Katie, even to give her a copy of her section. I believe that this is mainly due to two reasons. First, Katie was recruited by flyer with a promise of payment, so it is possible that she had less intrinsic interest in participating. Her main reasons for participating were a desire to help out a fellow researcher and a feeling that perhaps she should talk about this. Second, it’s also possible that Katie does not want to have to think about the assault anymore. Even though she agreed to do the project she seemed reluctant to speak about how the assault affected her, and eager to tell me that she was doing fine. Katie’s way of dealing with the assault may be simply to not think about it.

Conclusions

I didn’t get much into Katie. She’s a bit of a mystery to me. I think Katie reluctantly participated. She knew she needed to talk about it but she didn’t know why. Katie is nice like Grace, but not angry like Grace. I want her to be angry but she can’t be. She can’t
even talk about it. Katie does not want to bring it up, she doesn’t know how. Katie has had a nice life. Something terrible happened and she does not want it to mess up her nice life. Katie cannot understand this event as part of her life because it does not make logical sense to her. Why someone as sweet as she would be assaulted does not fit with her understanding of the world.

Like Megan, Katie seems to have had a belief of an orderly logical universe. It simply does not make sense to her, and it doesn’t make sense that a man interested in one of her friends would assault her or even that the assault should have any affect on her future life. Katie’s reasoning about the assault’s effects is based purely in logic; it should not affect her relationships with men because she logically knows that this was one man, and not a representation of all men. Furthermore, she does not see the point in talking about the assault with future partners or her parents based on the fact that she appears to be unaffected by it. Unlike Megan, however, Katie does not seem to want to give up that voice.

I heard Katie’s unsure voice, the voice that is not concerned with being rational, during her emotional tale of the actual assault. However, Katie appeared disconnected from this voice, told me that she did not like bringing it up or becoming upset about it, and I furthermore did not hear this voice throughout the rest of this interview. I wonder if Katie does not want to be upset about the assault because logically she feels that she shouldn’t be upset. Logically it’s “no big deal.” She was not physically hurt and she is not currently being harassed by this man. Logic tells her that she should move on with her life as if this never even happened. Although I do believe that it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that Katie will experience no emotional trauma due to this assault throughout the course of her life, I wonder if this voice that is emotionally hurt, the voice that wavers and says “I don’t know” when she talks will ever have its say. And I wonder what it wants to say.

Conclusion

Throughout this manuscript I have attempted to describe a process that was multilayered, dynamic and extraordinarily complex. This project affected all people involved, including myself. While writing I drew more from the “layered” approach of Lather and Smithies (1997) rather than the “grounded theory” approach of Phillips,
(2000) who mysteriously disappears after the introductory chapters. In their study of HIV positive women, Lather and Smithies (1997) constantly remind their readers of their presence throughout the study by using a multi dimensional disjointed style in which multiple texts are created, often on the same page. The authors accomplish this by simultaneously presenting the women’s voices and the voices of the researchers, dividing each page accordingly. My project is less disjointed than Later and Smithes, but I hope that the multilayering is clear. I have at least four tales to tell: the story of why I wrote this, the stories of the women, the stories of my interactions with the women, and the tale of the write-up. These are interwoven throughout.

Each woman provides a very different story and each story demonstrates a distinct way in which a cultural reliance upon pure rationality is harmful. Megan, a woman aware of the dangers of simply being a woman, was assaulted in a way that she would have never expected and was not prepared for. Megan’s healing process began when she learned that life is not always logical, that she cannot and should not be expected to prepare for all possible assaults. Despite what she has been told by people close to her and by the culture at large, Megan cannot change her behavior or appearance in such a way to prevent sexual assault. Her confused voice spoke about the shame she experienced by not being able to control her response during the assault or her emotions after the assault.

Sarah is a woman in transition. When I spoke with her, Sarah did not trust her voices that were not entirely rational. Unlike many of the women interviewed, Sarah’s difficulty is not that she can’t hear other voices; it’s that she has learned not to trust them. Like Megan, Sarah found it helpful to read about herself in the text; to see that she had valid gut feelings that she was ignoring. Sarah has learned to keep her feelings inside of her, and has also learned that they are her enemies. Sarah’s feelings keep her isolated and depressed, so she did not trust them when they told her to not be alone with the man who later became her boyfriend; instead she listened to her rational voice, the one that told her everything should be ok.

Kira listened to a rational puritanical voice for most of her early life, and then ceased listening to it at all once she entered college. For Kira, the dichotomy that you can be either rational or irrational was hurtful. Kira is an intelligent woman and “knows
better” than to enter into many of the situations that she found herself in. By allowing all her voices to speak at once she was able to hear herself in a new way and find pride in what she was hearing. Kira is a multi-faceted woman, and is faced with a societal difficulty of being a woman with high morals and intelligence, but also with a drive for attention and fun.

Grace, like Kira, is struggling for a way to fit her sexuality into her value system. She is also caught between the Western rational world and an Eastern world that speaks to her in metaphors and faith. Grace is also self-conscious and is deeply offended by others who insist on telling her the right way to do things. Grace was also conscious of how I would write about her and how you would read about her. Her other voices want to speak, they brought her into the room and I heard them occasionally, but unlike most of the other women in the study, Grace did not seem comfortable even voicing her confusion. It was this silencing of Grace’s voices, the voices that tell her about her sexuality and comfort level are silenced by an aggressive male who is able to reason her into engaging in acts that she is not comfortable with. Like Megan, Grace is caught in a myth where women are responsible for controlling men’s sexuality with reason and temperance.

Brianna is an African-American woman at a mostly Caucasian university. She is very aware of the gender and power dynamics that come into play in this context. She is also a woman who had never experienced love prior to her relationship with Connor. Brianna knows what the rational response is, what her mother would want her to do, but no one ever told her what to do about love. Love speaks to Brianna in a loud voice that does not know how to hear or how to reconcile it with the rational part of her that knows that a strong Black woman should not be treated poorly by a man. The culture’s focus on what she should do, the logical thing to do, ignores her love for Connor.

Like Grace, Katie seems disconnected from her voices that are not entirely rational. Her confused voice speaks to me in the beginning of our second meeting, when I question about her feelings and her fears, but is silent throughout most of the rest of the interviews. Similar to Megan, she has been taught that the world is orderly and controllable, and is baffled when she is attacked in a way that she cannot understand.
Katie responds to the situation rationally and does not want to hear what her feelings are telling her.

Each woman responds to her many nonrational voices in a different way. In every story, however, each woman responds to her situation on many levels. Although each woman could clearly tell me what she “should” do or feel and most women were able to tell me what they wanted to do, it was never quite that simple. In no case would it have been helpful for an outside source, an expert, to tell these women what to do. They are surrounded by experts: their friends, parents, the media, and a whole host of advisors that know what is best for young women. In no case was a woman helped by the addition of yet another rational voice.

Oh if it was as easy as “well, I just won’t do that anymore.” If it was “I just need Dr. Phil to tell me to ‘cut that out.’” Thanks man, 6 foot+ pale god of rationality. If it was so easy, you could just tell us silly women what to change, what not to do. Please help us with our maladaptive thought processes. Help us understand the safest way from A to B, even if we have to change X, Y and Z. You don’t know what it’s like. You don’t know us beyond out behavior because that is all you look at. Stop trying to turn us into robots. To take out all the beauty in the life, all the messyness, all that things that are neither X nor Y and both at the same time. Your version of life is 00111000010111110. You want to empty out our insides and fill us with switches and data ports and decision trees. There is so much more to life that you refuse to see. It makes life terrible, but it makes it wonderful. I want my confusion, I want my emotions, I want to want what my 19 years of education says I don’t need. I want to make decisions that don’t make sense to anyone but me and to not be told that I’m stupid. Things don’t always make rational sense. Such is life. Your way is cold computer death.

Reconnection to the literature

Much of the literature cited in the introduction focuses on how specific male-centric contexts such as fraternities are dangerous for young women. However, as Stombler and Padavic (1997) found, this is not a simply passive process. The young women in my study were not passive victims in any sense. They all have taken action in order to protect themselves, however sometimes those actions are not considered productive by traditional culture. Like Lebowitz and Roth (1994) found, young women
are likely to use the cultural discourses available to them. In this case, the dominant cultural discourse is about rational behavior, agency and logic.

In the conclusion of her book Phillips (2000) notes, “As young women use the cultural tools available to them to participate in and make sense of their own hetero-relations, they also unwittingly participate in their own entrapment” (pg. 193). Throughout my study I have shown that traditional scripts are harmful for women. These women cannot make meaning out of their lives and experiences based on the tools they have been given by the culture. The tool this cultures gives young women that I find particularly insidious is the privileging of the rational voice over all others.

In her study of women suffering from eating disorders, Burns (2004) writes, “One of the ways in which meanings are privileged in discourse is via their hierarchical and oppositional relation with other texts. Language contains implicit binaries in which one side of the opposition is positioned as the key concept against which the other is defined negatively” (pg. 270). Burns explains how Cartesian dualisms and privileged discourses are harmful for women with eating disorders and I have shown how they can be harmful for women in relation to their social experiences at college. As long as rationality and emotionality (or whatever you want to call nonrational experiences) are placed in opposition to each other, we will always miss important parts of experiences. It is clear that rational texts (or voices) are placed on the top of hierarchy in clear opposition to any other texts such as those we generate from our bodies and emotions. We lack the language to make sense of our experiences that cannot be explained in a rationalist discourse, and a large component of this lack is our refusal to listen to it. We can neither speak with nor hear a voice that connects us with our bodies, our senses, and the rest of the world.

As predicted by Rosenwald (1988) this multiple-case study was (and is) a fluid process in which the participants, the product and the researcher were changed by and through each other. Sarah and Megan were able to gain a new understanding of themselves; Kira found a sense of peace after speaking; and I, returning to my original story, found some answers. As I look back on my own story I find so many voices that I would have liked to talk to. I would ask to speak with the voice that so desperately wanted the attention of those men and find out what it needed. I would also want to tell
my college self, the one that felt shameful and stupid for not doing anything that I did “do something” to protect myself; I got up and walked out.

Catalytic validity

For each woman I presented a story about how she was harmed by society’s insistence on unitary rational voices. The theory and the stories belong to myself, the women involved, and the reader. Lather (1991) discusses catalytic validity. She writes, “Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (pg. 68). Some of the evidence for catalytic validity cannot be assessed until this study is completed and distributed; but I have evidence that the study is, in some sense, valid.

Megan discovered something about her self that made sense, that is, her past preoccupation with safety. After reading my study Sarah decided to not call a man whom she assumed would want to engage in sexual relations with her. Kira found the very act of telling so rewarding that she feels like this study will be memorable for her always. Brianna found her participation rewarding enough that she expressed a desire to participate in further research. The effect of the study on Grace and Katie is less defined. As I intend to provide each woman access to this document once it is complete, they may find sense in the completed project; this is my hope at least.

Recommendations

Part of all these stories is each woman’s relationship with multiple voices. I have provided examples of women who have been unable to hear these internal/external conversations. My goal here is not to state that if each woman could just get herself under control, or just learn to listen to herself better she would not have been assaulted. My goal here is to tell a story in which these voices are an important part of a woman’s experience both when she is in a dangerous situation and in her daily life. Furthermore, these important parts are ignored by society. Ignoring these voices is as problematic as ignoring incidents of violence toward women. It is important to listen to these voices while dismantling the culture of violence against women.

The women in my study benefited from having a space in which to talk about their confusion, shame, and mistakes. By allowing these women to speak about their stories without judgment, the voices that are typically silenced were given a chance to
Phillips (2000) writes, “I am persuaded that keeping young women’s hetero-relational complexities and contradictions out of the public discourse may bring… long-term costs” (pg. 209). I agree. I too was only able to complete my study once I allowed all of my voices to speak. Women, and I believe men as well, need these spaces in order to live richer lives; in order to live for their souls. I propose that, as psychologists, we provide these spaces for women in our research, in our classes and in our therapy rooms.

Furthermore, I write this in order to inform the current patriarchal system of the harm it inflicts on young women. A system of domineering rationality is unhealthy for women. I ask this culture, largely one of white men, to listen to women for once. Yes, your advice has a place, your rational answers should be heard, but I am tired of one-way conversation. These women in my study are not crazy, stupid, or weak. All together, we, the participants and I, tell a story that is real and solid in its foundation. You cannot silence us by talking over us. The current hegemony is shaky at best, and will be proven untenable.
References


Appendix A
Questions

*note* Only questions in **bold** were asked in the original round of interviews (phase 1).

**What is the typical “Miami woman” like?** How are you similar to “her”? How are you different? **Are women at other campuses like “Miami women”?** Similar? **Different?**

**What is the typical “Miami male” like?** Are males at other campuses similar to the “Miami male”?

**How do the typical “Miami female” and “Miami male” interact?** Why does the “Miami male” spend time with the “Miami female”? Why does the “Miami female” spend time with the “Miami male”? **Do “Miami males” listen to “Miami females”?**

**Do you feel like Miami is a safe campus?** Would you feel safe going to a party by yourself? Would you feel safe being the only woman at a fraternity?

**What are you female friends like?** Male friends?

Do you feel like you need to act differently than you’d like to in order to keep your friends? Do you often need to lie about how you are feeling or what you are thinking? With which group of friends do you feel “more yourself”, male friends or female friends?

**What is the “bar scene” like at Miami?** **How about the “fraternity scene”?**

**Describe the typical woman who attends fraternity parties.** How are you similar to her? **Different?**

**What kind of women are outcasts at Miami?** **How are they treated by “Miami males”?** **By other “Miami women”?**

**Are there any other common stereotypes at Miami?**

Tell me about a time in which you “went along” with something that made you uncomfortable in order to “keep the peace” with your male friends? (For example, watching a pornographic movie or consuming drugs.)

Have you ever found yourself flirting with men on campus that you do not intend on having a sexual relationship with? Why do you suppose it is that you do this?

Have you ever had a sexual encounter that you agreed to, but didn’t really want, just so your male friend or female friends would not be angry with you?
Describe to me situations in which women are unsafe. Have you ever been in situations in which you felt unsafe? Have you ever left a situation because you felt unsafe? Have you ever experienced what might be called a “feminine intuition” that a situation was unsafe and ignored it?

Have you ever been in situations that you would not want a female friend/family member to be in?

Have your friends/family ever warned you to avoid certain situations such as being alone with a male you do not know?

Is there a type of woman who is more likely to be raped? What is she like? Why is she more likely to be raped?

Do you have any friends that have had unwanted sexual encounters? Tell me exactly what happened. Was there anything they could have done to stop it?

Have you ever had an unwanted sexual encounter while at Miami University in which you were either unable to give consent because of drugs or alcohol, or force/threat was used against you? Tell me about the events that occurred.

How did you feel about yourself after the incident? About the male(s) involved? Were any of your friendships, either male or female affected? Were you aware of any services available to you such as the crisis hotline or the women’s center? Did you use any of these services?

Are you a “victim”? What is a “victim”?

Is it ever ok for a man to have sex with a woman without her consent? How about if they are dating? Engaged? Married?

What was your home life like? Tell me about your mother. Your father. Were there any other important adults in your childhood? Tell me about them. How did your mother and father interact?(if applicable) What did you learn about dating and marriage from your parents?(if applicable)

What were the girls like at your grammar school? The boys? Did you have many male friends? How did they interact?

Where did you learn about heterosexual relationships? What did you learn about them?

Did you ever fantasize about your future partner when you were younger? What was he like? What is your “ideal” male like now? Do you know any men who resemble “him”?
Appendix B
Informed Consent for Participants

STUDY TITLE: Women in “dangerous” situations.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Koelsch

The purpose of this study is to examine gender relations at Miami University. It is hoped that through this research better understanding can be gained of male/female relationships, and perhaps suggestions may be given as to how to improve male/female interactions. In particular, this study focuses on situations in which women are not entirely safe, such as when they are alone with male acquaintances.

Participants will be asked to engage in a primary individual interview in which they will describe the male/female social scene at Miami University. This interview may last anywhere between one hour and two hours. Following this, some participants will be asked to return for a second interview in which they will be asked to discuss personal experiences they have had while at Miami. These participants may be asked to return for up to two more interviews and to keep a journal.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and participants may decline to participate in any interview at any time during the study. There will be no penalty for terminating participation. There are no direct risks associated with participation in this study, although talking about certain experiences may be upsetting to some participants. Participants are encouraged to contact either the Miami University Psychology Clinic (529-2423), the Women’s Center (529-1510) or Miami University Student Counseling Services (529-4634) if they experience distress. There is no deception in this study.

The confidentiality of participants will be protected. Only the primary investigator will have access to the names of the participants. All participant generated material will be identified with a code number. The only other people who may have access to the coded material will be either Clinical Psychology faculty members or other graduate students who are involved in this project.

If there are any questions regarding this study, please contact Lori Koelsch at koelscle@muohio.edu. If there are any questions regarding the rights of research participants, contact the Miami University Office for Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching at 513-529-3734.

I have read the preceding statements and agree to participate in this study.

Signature of participant                                                                                  Date
Appendix C

Consent for Recording and Quoting Interviews

STUDY TITLE: Women in “dangerous” situations.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Koelsch

I understand that the interviews I participate in will be recorded on audiotape. I further give my permission for the researcher to quote from the interviews in any reports of this research (including papers presented at professional conferences, articles in professional journals or book chapters). I am free to withdraw this consent at any time for any particular interview or for the entire set of interviews. There is no penalty associated with withdrawing this consent.

I consent to my interviews being recorded and quoted as described above.

__________________________________________  _____________
Signature of Participant                        Date
Appendix D

Information for Participants

STUDY TITLE: Women in "dangerous" situations.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lori Koelsch

There has been much research documenting the contexts in which sexual assaults occur and other dangerous situations at university campuses. However, little research has shown why women continually enter dangerous situations, even though they are aware of these dangers. This study will help to understand how women, from their own perspectives, view male-dominated situations and explain why they do not avoid them.

For more information about young women and their experiences with men, participants are encouraged to read:


Appendix E
Recruitment Flier

Have you been sexually assaulted on campus or in Oxford? Would you like to talk about it?

Telling your story is an important part of the healing process.

As part of a research study, I am looking to interview Miami University women who have (or believe they may have been) sexually assaulted or raped. You must be 18 years or older and an undergraduate at the Oxford campus in order to participate.

Please contact Lori Koelsch at koelscle@muohio.edu for additional information.

Confidentiality is assured and compensation for your time will be provided.