ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING A WORLD IN FLUX: SEXUAL SCRIPTS IN INDIA

by Sandhya Achamma Thomas

This qualitative study sought a comprehensive understanding of the manner in which young adults in India experience and reconcile changing norms regarding sexuality by interviewing 10 Indian young adults aged 18-30. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used to describe extant sexual scripts. Four themes emerged that include the pervasiveness of tradition in India, the consequences of changing norms regarding sexuality, the extant sexual double standard and the lack of discourse regarding sexuality. Participants discussed the struggle experienced when individual needs are in conflict with the expectations of the collective along with personal methods of coping. The impact of cultural norms on attitudes and emotions associated with sexuality and the need for comprehensive sexuality education programs are described.
NAVIGATING A WORLD IN FLUX: SEXUAL SCRIPTS IN INDIA

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Navigating a world in flux: Sexual scripts in India

“Sexuality for human beings never just is: it has no reality sui generis, and a concern with it always brings wider social and psychic issues in their wake. Human sexualities have to be socially produced…, socially organized, socially maintained and socially transformed. And, as cultures change, so do sexualities” (Simon, 1996, p. ix). The perception and experience of young adults in India of changing norms regarding sexuality is sought in this study. Dating and choice marriages are becoming more common among young adults in India, yet society continues to believe that the dissemination of information regarding sexual activity will only encourage experimentation and increase premarital sexual activity among younger generations. It is important to gain a comprehensive picture of how young adults perceive and experience these changing norms regarding sexuality, how they are affected by and how they reconcile differing family and peer influences; how they believe sexuality is approached and discussed in India and their opinion as to how education regarding sexuality can be made more effective.

Characteristics of Traditional Indian Culture

India has traditionally been viewed as a collectivistic culture. Collectivistic societies are those that value duties and obligations, collective identity, group cohesiveness and emotional dependence (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi & Yoon, 1994). Self-construal in collectivistic societies is considered to be interdependent in nature (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In such societies, people become members of extremely cohesive in-groups from the time of birth. It is the appropriate social relationship that completes and gives meaning to the interdependent self. In the same manner, the Indian sense of identity and belonging is derived to a large extent from cohesive in-groups. Nath and Nayar (2004) state that family and community are important aspects of patriarchal Indian culture and the collaborative relationship between the two serves to preserve values, customs and language. The fulfillment of roles and duties leads to the maintenance of social order (Kim, 1994). Institutions in collectivistic cultures are seen as extensions of the family and rigid gender roles and lay the foundation for the division of labor. However, this is slowly changing with increased education for Indian women and greater movement of women into the workforce. However, Desai (1996) asserts that the primary focus of career women in India is still the family and household. Nath and Nayar (2004) maintain that even with such broader social changes, women in contemporary India are still confronted with a
Madonna-whore dichotomy in regard to the expression of sexuality in a complex, conservative and patriarchal society.

Collectivistic cultures are contrasted with individualistic cultures such as the United States of America. Individualistic cultures are those, which value autonomy, emotional independence, pleasure seeking, the right to privacy and universalism (Kim et al, 1994). One’s ties to others in such a society are not tightly bound and one is only expected to take care of oneself and the immediate family. The self is construed as autonomous and therefore unchanging across time and situations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). For the independent or individual self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001) one’s own thoughts, feelings, attitudes and inner qualities determine and give meaning to one’s behaviors.

Collectivism alongside individualism. Sinha and Tripathi (1994) dispute the conceptualization of India as solely collectivistic since the social reality within which the Indian psyche is embedded is extremely complex and replete with paradoxes. The authors maintain that over centuries, numerous dissimilar people in India have learned to coexist with each other in a manner, which cannot be described as a ‘melting pot’ or a ‘social blending machine’ (p. 124). This coexistence mode of collectivism allows for contrasting elements to exist within the same culture and the same individual. It speaks to the coexistence of a public self and a private self. The coexistence of contrasts is also highlighted in the pursuit of duty and salvation alongside the pursuit of wealth and sexual satisfaction as fundamental qualities (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994).

Similar to the interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), the boundaries for the Indian self are constantly changing and one’s response depends on the context within which an incident is occurring. Collectivistic and individualistic aspects of Indian society are like a figure/ground configuration such that the figure and ground change depending on the situation. While Sinha and Tripathi (1994) maintain that Indians have a high tolerance for dissonance, they also cite research that highlight the psychological struggles, which result from contradictions in everyday existence, as the root cause of anxiety. This may relate to Suh’s (2007) finding that there are disadvantages to being excessively context-sensitive since thoughts, emotions, motivations and behaviors that are necessary for and augment social harmony may have negative consequences for the individual’s happiness.

The coexistence mode of collectivism implies that the Indian self can be conceptualized at multiple levels: the individual self, the relational self (Chen, Boucher & Tapias, 2006;
Sedikides & Brewer, 2001), the public self and the collective self (Triandis, 1989). The public self focuses on others’ thoughts about oneself while the relational self involves the conceptualization and evaluation of oneself in relation to significant others along with corresponding emotional, behavioral and motivational reactions (Chen et al, 2006). It is motivated to maintain relationships and take care of and nurture the significant other (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). According to Triandis (1989) and Sedikides and Brewer (2001), the collective self refers to the large social group identity that the individual holds. Here, aspects that distinguish one as a member of the in-group and differentiate one from relevant out-groups are important. One’s collective identity is often derived from symbolic rather than personal bonds with other in-group members. With such a framework, it is possible to conceive the complex and intricate impact that the violation of cultural norms or the navigation of those that are changing can have on the Indian psyche.

Traditional gender roles in India. Traditional gender roles and expectations in India are similar to traditional roles of the West. Eagly, Wood and Diekman (2000) define roles as aspects of culture that are developed and maintained through socialization processes. Categorization along gender lines is so basic in interpersonal interactions that gender roles are omnipresent, pervasive and automatically activated. Roles take the form of systemic beliefs that are internalized and used in the appraisal of behavior of other members and the self (Eagly et al, 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2002, 2004).

Gender roles encompass differing beliefs about traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics that portray men as being more agentic and women as being more communal (Helgeson, 1994). In reality, men and women need to endorse both agentic characteristics, like self-protection and self-assertion along with communal characteristics, like co-operation and attachment, for healthy adjustment. It is unmitigated agency or communion and too little agency or communion that are related to problems such as relationship difficulties and subjugation (Helgeson, 1994; Helgeson & Fritz, 2000; Korabik & McCrea, 2000). In their work on social role theory, Eagly et al (2000), establish that the division of labor in society along the lines of providers and homemakers has played an integral role in the maintenance of beliefs regarding the stereotypic characteristics of men and women. This is clearly seen in India as well where men are the breadwinners and women are the caregivers. Epstein (1996) asserts that traditionally the ideal Indian wife is one who exists solely to serve her husband.
Roles influence the structure of society by bringing about restraints on behavior (Eagly et al, 2000). As seen in Prentice and Carranza (2002), promiscuity is a socially undesirable (gender proscriptive) trait for both men and women in the West. However, while it is socially undesirable for both sexes in India as well, for women especially, it is a gender-intensified proscription and the loss of virginity before marriage is disgraceful. Traditionally the elders of the family arrange a majority of marriages in India. In such arrangements, love and romance are of little importance (Nath & Nayar, 2004) and are secondary to issues like religion, caste and socioeconomic status of the family of the prospective match. Love may develop as the marital relationship develops but it is not viewed as a deciding criterion for an arranged marriage. Being in an intimate interpersonal relationship before marriage places one’s own reputation and that of the family at risk (Abraham & Kumar, 1999).

Negative reactions for deviating from traditional gender roles (Eagly et al 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2004) range from subtle (disapproving glances shot in the direction of deviators) to blatant (deviators are rejected, devalued and marginalized). Since virginity is greatly valued in India, young women especially run the risk of being labeled as immoral thus endangering their future as eligible marital partners. The scope for stigmatization by society is broad as the honor of her entire family is also at risk of being sullied. Nath and Nayar (2004) explain that as a partner in religious worship and a mother, a woman in India is revered. As a sexual being, a woman is denied the right to experience sexual fulfillment and is labeled a slut. Therefore, successfully performing or avoiding sexual behavior, plays a significant role in the appraisal of an individual’s value (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), especially in the culture of an arranged marriage in India.

Trends in Contemporary India

Changing gender roles, sexual behavior and attitudes in India. India is in a state of economic and social transition. Earlier, the system of arranged marriages and the joint-family system (extended family including grandparents, paternal uncles, aunts and cousins all living under one roof) quelled the expression of sexual desires. Now with the influx of Western cultural influences and changing values, urban middle class youth in India feel compelled to defy traditional societal rules (Nath & Nayar, 2004). In particular, the Indian values, which place a premium on female chastity until marriage and prescribed roles for men and women, are passing through a period of evolution (Nath & Nayar, 2004). Singh (2003) emphasizes that greater
numbers of people are pursuing higher education and seeking financial independence in terms of establishing careers. Along with the resulting migration and urbanization, the age of marriage is increasing. These trends have led to a loosening of conventional restraints (such as familial control over the individual), changing gender roles (due to the financial independence of educated, working women) and increased opportunities for intimate interpersonal relationships and premarital sex (Nath & Nayar, 2004; Ray, 2005; Singh, 2003).

However, changes in the occupational roles for women have not had a corresponding effect on people’s attitudes and behaviors towards equality of status for females (Desai, 1996; Nath & Nayar, 2004). Abraham and Kumar (1999) reiterate this by stating that while urbanization has given rise to a combination of traditional and new roles, active double standards and contradictions do exist in India and dictate what is considered acceptable sexual behavior for both genders. In prior research, many male participants have elaborated that it was all right for men to have premarital sex but not women. In the India Today-AC Nielsen ORG MARG Sex Survey, 63 % of men stated that they expect the woman they marry will be a virgin (Visvanathan, 2006).

Also, youth in India are experiencing a growing disparity between the age when they attain puberty and are physically ready to have sex and the age at which it is culturally permissible (Nath & Nayar, 2004). When this scenario interacts with changing values and a lack of knowledge and protection, young people, in urban India especially, are left vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Current trends: A sexual revolution. Pachauri and Santhya (2002) report that 20-30% of males and up to 10% of females in India are sexually active before marriage. However, the India Today-AC Nielsen ORG-MARG Sex Survey 2006 reports different numbers, revealing that 46% of single men aged 16-25 years have had sex (Visvanathan, 2006). 24% of single women, between the ages of 18 and 30, who participated in the India Today-AC Nielsen ORG MARG Sex Survey in 2005, stated that they have had sex (Bamzai, 2005). 41% of men experienced sexual debut between the ages of 16-18 years. For 11% it was at less than 15 years of age (Visvanathan, 2006). 48% of men had their first sexual relationship with a girlfriend (Bobb, 2005). 42% of single women had their sexual debut between the ages of 19-21 years and 29% first had sex between the ages of 15-18 years (Bamzai, 2005). 63% of women had their first sexual relationship with their boyfriends (Bamzai, 2005). The defiance of conservative societal
attitudes that disapprove of intimate interpersonal relationships among young people, before marriage, is risky. However, as revealed by the India Today-AC Nielsen ORG-MARG Sex Surveys (2005 & 2006), younger generations are willing to take that risk and are displaying more permissive attitudes towards sexual behavior.

The India Today AC Nielsen ORG MARG Sex Surveys that were published between 2003 and 2006 allude to a “sexual revolution” that is slowly but surely taking place. The government has, in recent years, made serious efforts to introduce sex education from the secondary school level onwards. However, the teacher plays an immense role in the effectiveness of such courses (Nath & Nayar, 2004) and many Indian teachers are against sexuality education in schools (Tikoo, 1996). Simon and Gagnon (1986) state that when the culture loses its dictatorial power, one of the possible outcomes is that the individual becomes capable of providing instruction, a function that was previously the responsibility of the culture. If such is the case, then a young adult in India should be able to express his or her sexuality as a responsible choice made with the understanding of potential consequences (like pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases). While research does indicate that young adults in India are experiencing sexuality in a very different context as compared to earlier generations and that traditional customs and the family are losing their influence on sexual behavior (Abraham & Kumar, 1999; Pachauri & Santhya, 2002), there seems to be a lack of clarity about what the actual state of affairs is.

There is limited prior work available on the sexual behavior and attitudes of young adults in India (Mane & Maitra, 1992; Tikoo, 1996). However, the impact of changing cultural norms on the prevalent sexual behaviors and attitudes in the West has been well documented. This literature on sexual behaviors, attitudes and scripts will lay the foundation for the discussion of prevalent sexual scripts in India.

Sexual Scripts

What are sexual scripts? Simon and Gagnon were the first to use the term sexual script (Long Laws & Schwartz, 1977) and explain the perspective of human sexualities as drama. The established script or drama makes life and sexuality simpler to navigate, while allowing for creativity and ad-libbing. Humans expect particular scripts, follow them and fit their experience to them. “Sexual scripts are mutually shared conventions that guide actors to enact a sexual situation interdependently” (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 150). Many scripts are familiar and
identifiable, like “the happy marriage” or “the first date”. Sexual scripts refer to constructs about sexuality that a majority of members of a certain culture will recognize. They provide direction for appropriate sexual behavior and goals and people depend on them, consciously or otherwise. Sometimes we may have a vague idea of what is supposed to happen in a given situation but the entire script may not be known. Finally, scripts vary across time, across cultures, within cultures and across individuals (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Greene & Faulkner, 2005). In India, the sexual script theme of the “arranged marriage” is predominant with religious, regional and community or caste based variations.

Scripts operate and interact on three different levels (Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Rose & Frieze, 1989). First, at the cultural level, a script helps to generate and sustain social norms and directions for sexual behavior. These norms govern sexual behavior at the societal level and decide on the details of the sexual communication, like who, what when, where, why and how (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005). Cultural scripts influence both the manner in which couples discuss sexual intimacies and the changes in each individual’s view of gender roles and sexuality (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). They include socialization within the family, peer group influences, sex education and/or mass media messages.

The interpersonal script is shaped by and communicates people’s understanding of social rules, their personal experiences and socialization (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005). This includes the configuration of sexual behaviors and attitudes that one acquires and retains during interactions and “shared expectations about the standard sequences of behavior over a period of time” (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003, p. 295).

Lastly, at the intrapsychic level, scripts include fantasies or feelings about a particular activity, which are used when one contemplates previous behavior or requires guidance for present or future behavior. It is at this level that the impact of interpersonal relations and cultural norms is seen on the attitudes and values of the individual. Therefore, the script at the cultural level influences both the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

The traditional sexual script in the West. The heterosexual sexual script in the West has evolved over time, however the traditional script dictates that women remain abstinent until marriage while men are permitted, even encouraged, to be sexually active before marriage (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Ganong, Coleman, Thompson and Goodwin-Watkins (1996) add that
women expect the man to be older, more educated, earning a higher income with a greater desire for success. Men are the initiators of sexual activity. They are expected to be knowledgeable, assertive and “enhanced by each sexual conquest” (Greene & Faulkner, 2005, p. 240). Women, on the other hand, are expected to be the gatekeepers of sexual activity. They should limit contact but still maintain interest in the man’s needs and be responsive but compliant (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Rose & Frieze, 1989). Traditionally, both men and women in India were expected to be abstinent before marriage. However, this script has evolved and transformed over time along with broader societal changes.

Impact of the traditional sexual script. The use of the traditional sexual script maintains traditional gender roles (Rose & Frieze, 1989), which dictate that women be submissive and bear the responsibility of satisfying the uncontrollable needs of their male partner. The traditional heterosexual sexual script in the West is also accompanied by the sexual double standard that sanctions different sexual behavior for men and women (Greene & Faulkner, 2005), whereby women are condemned for being sexually active before marriage while men are not (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Abraham and Kumar (1999) allude to the presence of a similar sexual double standard in India. This double standard, along with the relational orientation of women implies that it is less likely that women will initiate sexual activity. Whether or not this is the reality is unclear. While dominant public discourse does promote prescribed gender roles, it may be that Indian women are able to express sexual interest and desire with long-term male partners. In the West, the relational orientation of women and the sexual double standard make it more likely that women will be compliant and take their partners’ wishes and desires into account in order to maintain the relationship (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Also, as explained by Seal and Ehrhardt (2003), the masculinity or sexual orientation of men who do not pursue sexual opportunities is questioned. Men were and still are expected to be perennially ready to perform and satisfy their partner sexually.

Tschann and Adler (1997) believe that due to the double standard that condemns women who are sexually experienced, young women may be less accepting of and uncomfortable with their own sexuality. This is likely to be experienced by Indian women as well since Nath and Nayar (2004) assert that in Indian culture, a woman’s body is viewed mostly as an impure object. Tschann and Adler (1997) state that women who experience a lack of sexual self-acceptance are less likely to discuss sexuality related topics with their partners. This is because negative
emotions, such as guilt, regarding sexuality hinder candid communication with one’s sexual partner.

The violation of the traditional sexual script also brings about self-presentational concerns for young women in the West. Lam and Barnhardt (2006) emphasize that sexual negotiation for abstinence or condom use, in order to avoid negative outcomes like pregnancy or STDs, place women in a sexually assertive role that is directly in conflict with traditional gender role expectations that dictate that men should initiate and guide sexual activity. It also involves the violation of cultural standards for female submissiveness, passivity and sexual inexperience. It is likely that women in India face such self-presentational concerns as well with the split cultural perception of women as the ‘good mother’ or the ‘whore’ (Nath & Nayar, 2004) and ancient folk wisdom that dictates that women are sexually immoral and lack intelligence. The young women in the Cleary, Barhman, MacCormack and Herold (2002) study were anxious about the more immediate and negative implications of health protective sexual communication, such as, fear of the male partner’s perception of the participant becoming negative and possibly ending the relationship. The extent to which individuals believe in the traditional sexual script and adhere to its expectations will influence sexual communication between partners (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). Morokoff, Quina, Harlow, Whitmire, Grimley, Gibson et al (1997) found that couples who subscribed to less traditional scripts in their relationships, reported greater sexual self-disclosure and communication.

To summarize, adherence to traditional sexual scripts increases the likelihood that traditional gender roles will be maintained, that women will be sexually compliant in long-term relationships, that the sexual double standard will be perpetuated and that sexual communication will be ineffective. However, when men and women do not follow the traditional scripts, new and untested scripts are created. With the evolution of norms regarding sexuality, young adults in India are faced with new and evolving scripts at the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels and the corresponding impact of these new scripts.

Study Aims

The objective of this study is to understand the perception of sexuality and sexual choices among young adults in Indian society where values and norms regarding premarital sexual experience are changing. This study attempts to explore the complex nature and impact of these changes using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2003). This study
will illustrate sexual scripts that exist in a southern metropolitan city in India as described by urban middle class youth. Although differences do exist along the length and breadth of India, this study will provide insight into the scripts that are in existence at the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels.

At the cultural level, common themes like arranged marriage, and “the chaste virgin until marriage” are present. To what extent does the traditional sexual script dominate? With a changing social environment and behaviors, is there resistance to the traditional script? If so, is resistance endorsed by both men and women? Does the traditional sexual script constitute the only script in existence or do alternative contemporary scripts exist? If so, what are these scripts? How do these different scripts impact young adults’ perceptions of courtship in India?

In conducting this research, we additionally anticipate discussion of the influences of the family, peer group and media on these scripts and whether these influences are in conflict with each other and/or whether they are shifting. Information on how to make the discussion of sexuality more effective will also be addressed. Also, Indian society has different expectations of men and women. How do young adults reconcile that which is deemed unacceptable for their gender by society, with that which their peers deem to be acceptable and the possible long-term consequences of specific sexual behavior? What, if any, is the disjuncture between the current and ideal script for men and women? What sort of scenario is envisioned for future generations who will potentially experience more stable norms regarding sexuality?

The aim is also to understand the intrapsychic and interpersonal experience of young adults while navigating these changing norms regarding sexuality. How have changes at the cultural level of the script impacted interpersonal exchanges and individual beliefs and values? What is happening at the behavioral level in terms of courtship and romance with changing marital customs? What are the qualitative characteristics of discourse at the interpersonal level for parent-children, romantic partner, future spouse, and peer and sibling dyads? The impacts and outcomes of non-traditional behavior on one’s cognitions, emotions, goals and consequent behavior will also be explored. Would the performance of an egalitarian script result in conflicting emotions and attitudes, both interpersonally and intrapsychically?
Method

Participant Characteristics

Ten participants (five men and five women) were interviewed for this study. All participants met the inclusion criteria of twelve years of education and the ability to speak English. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 30 years (mean age of male participants = 26.2 years; mean age of female participants = 21.4 years). Except for one, all participants were unmarried. Three of the male participants had Masters degrees, and two had completed Bachelors degrees. Two female participants were in the process of completing Bachelors degrees and three were yet to complete Masters degree requirements. The participants were majoring or had majored in a variety of subjects like engineering, business and history. The religious backgrounds of participants were diverse - five were Hindus, four were Christian and one was Muslim. Six participants were employed while the remaining were completing degrees. The demographic characteristics of participants are summarized in Table 1.

Participants were residents of the Southern coastal city of Chennai (formerly known as Madras) in India. Chennai is the capital city of the state of Tamil Nadu and is one of four metropolitan cities in India. It is the center of the automobile industry in India and the second largest hub for Information Technology (IT) in the country (www.chennai.org.uk/facts). Chennai is also a cultural hub for the performing arts and the base for the Tamil film industry.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants were recruited through methods such as brief presentations and snowballing procedures whereby a participant identifies and informs another potentially interested individual. The primary researcher made a brief presentation to graduate students at an all women’s college. Interested individuals then telephoned the researcher to volunteer. The primary researcher was also put in contact with other potentially interested individuals through a human resource contact at a Business Process Outsourcing unit. When the human resource contact had identified a potential participant, the researcher would go to the business premises and give the potential participant a brief presentation regarding the study. Two participants were recruited using the former method; four participants were recruited using the latter method. Two participants were recruited using snowballing procedures and two participants were recruited through mutual acquaintances. All participants were unknown to the primary researcher. Participants volunteered to participate and there was no compensation of any kind.
Given the sensitive nature of the topic under study, before beginning the interview, the participants were given a clear description of the study, were assured that all information would be kept completely confidential and were asked to express any doubts, concerns or questions. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any point in time and could decline to answer any questions that they felt were too personal. They were given an informed consent form and a demographic and sexuality education questionnaire. The latter provided the primary researcher with demographic information along with information on formal and informal sexuality education experiences of participants. On conclusion of the interview, participants were given a debriefing form, which provided them with contact information of mental health professionals in India and the primary researcher’s advisor who is a licensed clinical psychologist.

*Interviews*

Depending on the level of detail provided, the interviews took 38 to 95 minutes to complete. The average time for an interview was 63 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured as the primary researcher used a prepared schedule of questions to initiate and guide the interview. A list of interview questions is included in the Appendix. In keeping with the methodology of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999), the researcher remained alert for new information and enabled the development of new themes by following the lead of the participant and asking additional questions. The interviews were digitally recorded in audio format to enable further analyses. Due to the vastness and complexity of this topic, the lack of prior research in this area, and time constraints, this project was considered exploratory and an attempt at saturation was beyond the scope of the project. On the completion of ten interviews, the primary researcher returned to the United States to begin the data analysis.

*Data Analysis*

*Approach to data analysis: Why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)?* The method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze data. IPA “provides an in depth understanding of both the idiosyncratic and culturally construed aspects of a person’s being-in-the-world” (Shaw, 2001, p. 49). The focus of IPA is to gain an understanding of the phenomena as an individual experiences it, as opposed to gaining an understanding solely from theory. It is a tool for exploratory research and is data-driven. Smith and Osborn (2003)
explain that contextual and cultural factors that influence the individual are considered to be extremely important. The aim of IPA analysis is to explore a particular area in a flexible and detailed manner. As a result, the research questions are framed in a broad manner without the intention of testing formulated hypotheses. The advantage of IPA is its ability to reveal unanticipated phenomena or previously uncovered constructs (Shaw, 2001). For these reasons, this methodology was considered to be well suited for this study.

Smith and Osborn (2003) also emphasize that this is a very dynamic method of exploring research and the researcher plays a very active role. The researcher’s perspective is required in order to interpret the participant’s experience and this must be done with caution. Along with the personal significance of topics chosen for qualitative research, there is a certain amount of subjectivity that is inherent in the hermeneutic nature of the IPA process. Therefore, establishing alternative criteria for assessing reliability and validity are important.

Reliability in qualitative research is often referred to as enhancing permeability (Stiles, 2003), implying that the researcher’s understanding is open to change as a result of new observations. In this project, permeability was enhanced by constant iterative interaction between the data and interpretations and grounding, whereby verbatim quotes of participants are used to illustrate meanings and interpretations. A practice that helps readers to assess permeability is the disclosure of forestructure and internal processes during the research experience. Forestructure reveals the investigator’s preconceptions, values, personal experiences and expectations regarding the topic. From the researcher’s personal experience, it was expected that participants would have experienced much psychological confusion regarding the navigation of changing sexuality norms in India. While participants did reveal psychological confusion, they also brought forth some unexpected information about the impact of these changes, such as the difference in male perceptions of a girlfriend and a wife. Indian culture is conservative and as a result, the researcher did not expect participants to voluntarily reveal that they were sexually active. However, some female participants did acknowledge dating while male participants spoke of personal experiences with dating and sexual activity. A discovery with positive connotations was that of the ‘in between’ marriage. Here, participants revealed that they would like to marry a person of their own choosing with the approval of their parents.

The interviews revealed strong biases in Indian culture, such as strict adherence to gender roles and double standards, that are not as prevalent in the researcher’s family or peer group and
this was eye opening for the researcher. The researcher greatly empathized with participants who struggled to strike a balance between traditional, collective-focused norms and contemporary, individual-focused norms, especially the conflict between revealing one’s sexual history or preferring to live with the guilt of keeping it a secret from one’s partner.

The researcher attempted to establish validity of the study through consensus (Stiles, 2003). Consensus regarding themes and their interpretation was established with the help of an undergraduate researcher and an auditor who were familiar with the data. This is but one aspect of reliability that can be established using the investigators of the study. Other aspects of validity, like coherence and testimonial validity can only be established using readers and participants’ judgments respectively.

Analytic procedure. The primary researcher and an undergraduate researcher completed the verbatim transcription of the interviews. The primary researcher’s advisor served as the auditor in the analytical process. The researchers first read each interview while simultaneously listening to the audio recording of the interview. Next, the researchers highlighted important words or phrases in each interview. The researchers then reread each interview in order to create relevant themes to encompass the highlighted words/phrases. Emerging, corresponding themes were documented in the right hand side margin of the same page as the highlighted words/phrases. Themes that were similar or related were grouped together under super ordinate themes. The researchers then checked back with the transcript to ensure that the super ordinate categories and connections were accurate.

The researcher and undergraduate researcher met twice a week to discuss their overall impressions of a new interview, potential themes and to identify super ordinate categories that had emerged from each person’s perspectives. Once a week, the researchers also met with the auditor who helped the researchers merge their separate lists of themes into a master list/table of themes. This ensured that different perspectives were taken into consideration in creating a final list of themes for each interview. Also, this provided the opportunity to discuss different perspectives and issues that arose during coding, provide background information on the interviewee and explain Indian traditions and customs. Though a certain amount of subjectivity is inherent in the IPA approach, this helped to ensure that one researcher’s bias did not affect the selection of themes. Themes that did not fit into any super ordinate category were placed in a ‘Miscellaneous’ category instead of being dropped completely. Each interview was analyzed as a
separate entity without using the master list of the previous interview as an outline. Each master list was compared with the transcript to ensure accuracy of representation.

In the next step, the primary researcher created lists of the content for each participant concerning a particular theme. Finally the primary researcher combined the content for all participants, regarding a particular theme on a separate document. These documents were then reviewed and discussed with the auditor and relevant changes were made.

Results

Four salient themes regarding changing sexuality norms arose from the interviews that took place with young adults in India. Participants addressed similar and different aspects of traditional gender and sexuality norms and the manner in which these are changing along with the consequences of such changes at the collective and individual levels. Participants also discussed the sexual double standard that exists in India and its impact on younger generations. Finally, participants tackled the state of discourse regarding sexuality in India and made numerous suggestions in regard to improving the quality and frequency of dialogue.

Traditional Gender and Sexuality Norms in India

Traditional norms regarding gender and sexuality in India have immense historical influence. Most participants spoke of the unfairness of a patriarchal society (see Table 2). Some expressed helplessness and resigned acceptance in the face of thousands of years of entrenched tradition while others expressed hope for future generations.

Historically influential, extant traditional sexual script in India. A central aspect of the traditional sexual script in India includes the chaste virgin wife. A few participants elaborate that virginity is so highly prized in India, that women are strongly socialized to remain virgins until marriage. Some participants explain that men in India are socialized with high expectations of marrying only ‘pure women’.

Its very, you know, it’s a part of upbringing that you be selfish. We expect our women to be 100% pure (Basant).

Some participants address the initiator role of men and the gatekeeper role of women. Mekhala believes that men are socialized to “chase the prey” and to expect women to give in only after a considerable courting period. A few participants assert that Indian men generally believe that women have no sexual desires, thoughts or feelings. Other participants also express
their opinion that women who violate the gatekeeper role and initiate sexual activity threaten
Indian men.

Because they have this image of being the first to initiate activity, especially sexual
activity. They should do it, they should be the ones to initiate it. Women should just be
there, and just like that. So if something happens and if that image reverses then they feel
like their self-image is being threatened (Tahira).

Women who initiate sexual activity or give in too easily to a man’s persuasions are labeled as
easy, gossiped about and men encourage each other to try their luck with them.

The majority of participants spoke about traditional arranged marriages in India. As the
only married participant, Aditi spoke about the influential factors in her decision to marry.

…my parents forced me to get married to this person, because this time this alliance
came, they were asking so many times and they said, okay it’s a good one, he is a central
government employee and he’s also our relative. He’s going to be in Chennai, because all
of my relatives are in HP [Himachal Pradesh], its good for you; you can meet us often.
They forced me and I said okay. I didn’t want my parents to be yeah, upset because of
this so I accepted it and I didn’t even see him before marriage (Aditi).

While a few other participants do anticipate a certain amount of choice in their decision to marry,
Aditi’s experience does highlight influential factors like family background, financial stability
and proximity to family of origin.

Traditional gender script and gender roles in India. Most participants assert that both
men and women in India are expected to marry and have children as both are an integral part of
the Indian identity.

I need uh, somebody to take care of my parents more than my choice because it’s, it’s
very traditional that I get married and give birth to a boy. Its culture, tradition continues
and all that (Basant).

Some participants contend that while marriage and children are expected of both sexes, a
woman, especially, is considered to be incomplete without a husband and children.

And all the, I think, society as it is, when you announce it, you’re ready to get married
and all that, they say, “Oh, she’s so lucky, she’s getting married. And you know, good for
her, she can have children.” And the whole thing about motherhood being the, you know,
ultimate thing for a woman. It’s the pinnacle of a woman’s life (laughs) and all that. I
think its that.. Its that that makes a woman…. (Mekhala).

While both men and women are expected to get married and have children, their accompanying
roles differ. Men are expected to marry, have children and be the primary breadwinners in the
family. Women are expected to marry, have children and be the primary caregivers while running the household. Mandira voices her opinion that in most families women are socialized from a young age to be financially dependent on their husbands.

Choosing a wife in India is a collective decision that involves the family and is based on different aspects of traditional values.

But when the wife concept comes up, it’s something to do about the family. The bahu [daughter in law] she has to be a good uh, daughter in law to my mother. All that concept comes up. So that, when that happens you will naturally think about your family and traditional values. See, your father and mother would want a very uh, you know, a virgin, a fresh type of girl who is very adaptable to a family values and all that…. (Basant).

Participants agree greatly on the qualities that are expected of a good Indian wife. A woman who is traditional in dress, a good caregiver for her husband, children and in-laws, an efficient hostess and someone who is willing to do domestic chores is valued. Tahira provides a detailed description of trait and role expectations:

She’s like uh, a good girl is seen in terms of one who stays at home, does the housework, takes care of the people and is able to balance between her studies and at home and is very quiet, very submissive kind of girl. So if she, they find some girl who goes out and like that then they will be like so, she is not the good girl, so she doesn’t have the characters of this good girl (Tahira).

While participants were able to elaborate upon the characteristics of a good Indian wife, there was a mix of endorsement and resistance among both men and women towards such role expectations.

Cultural and familial endorsement of the traditional script and gender roles.

Socialization practices, cultural values and attitudes strongly endorse traditional norms regarding sexuality in India.

…I think even though we may say that women are independent and India has changed, we are all like, empowered, women can do everything, but I think the attitudes are still the same. They haven’t changed in attitude (Tahira).

Basant agrees and states that women in India are objectified by men and restricted in their roles due to the cultural endorsement of traditional norms.

They are just seen as objects of sex or objects of machine who do, who does all the household work. There is no respect as such in India for women. It comes from the male ego (Basant).
A few participants also allude to a ‘pervasive narrow-mindedness’ in Indian society that perpetuates guilt about sexual activity (that is frequently religion-based) and a lack of tolerance towards homosexuality. Chaitan states that majority of Indians believe that dating is taboo and Mekhala highlights that Indian society greatly disapproves of Public Displays of Affection (PDA).

… I think most people think that sexuality and intimacy should be something that is personal to you and it should not be displayed. You know you can display your love to somebody but, you know, not hug them or hold hands. I don’t think that’s very appropriate in, in public. People stare at couples holding hands or you know, sitting too close together. I think that’s how people see it (Mekhala).

Participants also voice the concern that the ineffective socialization of boys and girls in dealing with the opposite sex is magnified by their segregation into all-boys and all-girls schools. This lack of interaction with the opposite sex is also seen in some orthodox families, such as Aditi’s. Chaitan is vociferous in his condemnation of such practices. He believes that such socialization does not prepare children for the real male-dominated world.

You don’t know how to survive because you’ve seen, you’ve been around women all your life. It’s different dealing with women, its different dealing with men; be it on a professional level, on an educational level and on a sexual level…. You suddenly start meeting guys. Guys have, and they’re so sweet to you and it’s entirely different from the affection you get from a woman. You think, this is what I’ve been missing… so let me pile it up (Chaitan).

Some participants state that the negative impact of poor socialization is that the lack of development and expression of female opinion and judgment about the opposite sex and the objectification of women because boys are not taught to respect women.

Changing Norms Regarding Sexuality in India: Influences and Consequences

Themes regarding the influences on and consequences of changing norms regarding sexuality in India, as well as, the methods of coping with these changes were salient across interviews (See Table 3). These are multifaceted themes and participants touched upon various dimensions of the impact of these changing norms. It is not just young adults in India that are affected by these changes; rather the impact can be felt across generations.

Norms regarding sexuality are changing in India. All participants agreed that norms regarding sexuality are changing in India. This can be seen in the increase in dating, choice marriages, premarital sexual activity and extramarital affairs. However, there is much variation
in the acceptance of these non-traditional behaviors across Indian society. While Gaurav is vehement about the difficulty of generalization due to the complex factors that comprise society in India, other participants address the varied levels of acceptance in conjunction with different factors. In particular, some participants examined geographical variation. This is either an urban-rural dichotomy or a comparison between conservative and broadminded areas, with greater acceptance in urban areas and cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru. Participants also speculated about different levels of acceptance across and within religions and socioeconomic strata.

There are variations in acceptance among the families of participants. Tahira, is from a strict Muslim family and knows she will not be allowed to date. Being from an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, Basant knows he has to marry someone of his parents’ choice. Chaitan, on the other hand, has not experienced any pressure to agree to an arranged marriage as dating and choice marriages have been accepted in the Anglo-Indian community for numerous years.

But then again, I come from a different society where it’s okay to have a dating relationship you know, and you know in our, at least from the society that I have come from and move with, you know it’s like all of our parents had relationships with each other for 7 years, 8 years, 4 years, whatever be the case; you know they had a proper relationship and build up to their marriage (Chaitan).

Mandira’s parents are open to her dating, however, the pressure to marry a person of her parent’s choice does exist but it stems from the small size and relative anonymity surrounding the Badaga community in India.

Many people think leaving the community is a disgrace, you’re just abandoning it. They don’t get that when you fall in love, you don’t think about all that (Mandira).

Members of Ekta and Shravan’s families have had intercaste and inter religious marriages. Aditi’s family, however, has disowned her brother for marrying outside of their religion and most participants acknowledge the importance of religion and community for their parents and/or themselves when deciding on a future spouse.

It should be noted that even when parents of participants were open to dating, there remained a generation gap in how dating was conceptualized. Participants assert that dating is viewed by the older generation as a distraction from one’s focus on education and career aspirations. Some participants suggested that while they believed that some sexual activity was a part of dating, their parents would rather be in denial of anything sexual occurring on a date.
They explained that the older generation would restrict dating activity to going to the beach or a movie and nothing beyond.

Male participants were open to the benefits of dating and sexual activity before marriage. Most of the female participants were open to the idea of dating with the condition of limiting sexual contact. Some spoke of the benefits of dating like romance and getting to know someone well before taking a huge step like marriage.

……… but I know when they get married, its like, its so new to them that they, they, its like so new to them that they can’t really adjust to it. Its like oh, this is how it is. Maybe we should have known this a little earlier, probably we wouldn’t get, we wouldn’t have gotten married so early types. So I think people should get a taste of it. In the right amount, in the right way, with the right person (Ekta).

Some participants assert that among their peers, sexual activity is only accepted within committed relationships that have a long-term goal of marriage. Casual relationships are not viewed favorably.

Reasons for changing norms regarding sexuality. A few participants attribute the change in Indian culture to the influx of Western influences and norms.

Uh… Probably more of Westernization. Uh, kids like to ape the West, if I may put it that way, so, and a lot of kids go abroad, bring the cul, when they come back bringing the culture with them so its and intermixing of cultures. Especially you know, with this globalization taking place and foreigners coming in so uh, you mix with people and you learn a little of theirs, of their culture as well and they learn a little of yours so that dilutes tradition (Gaurav).

A few participants believe that the change in sexuality norms can also be attributed to the growth of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies in India. With night shifts and a young employee population, BPOs represent an unconventional work environment in India. The mainly young graduate population that works at BPOs often moves into that environment fresh out of all girls or all boys colleges or co-educational institutions that have strict rules on intermingling across gender lines. However, while peer pressure is inherently strong in BPO culture it must be noted that there are mixed opinions as not everyone is accepting of dating and choice marriages.

Because they feel, they feel like,… this is the culture. Every week we are supposed to go to the discotheque and we supposed to have dating otherwise we will not be treated good within our company or within our colleagues. If you look at this, so many people are going, if you don’t do that they may treat you badly or they may ignore you for the other
things so they feel that okay, I should also get involved with this. But very few people say, okay whatever they think it’s not my problem (Aditi).

Aditi proposes that disagreement with and rebellion against parents along with some parental neglect is leading to the greater influence of peers. Young males are reinforced and given prestige within the group for being sexually active before marriage. Male participants discuss the camaraderie, prestige and reinforcement that is associated with a man who is single, sexually active and perceived as the ‘alpha male’. Also, with the behavior of younger generations changing, the chain reaction in the imitation of peers leaves most parents with no choice but to accept Western norms.

People see more of youngsters doing it so when you have your child and your neighbor’s child and someone else’s child all on the same plain, you slowly start accepting things for what they are (Gaurav).

A few participants suggest that a disadvantage of peer pressure is that men are able to dupe women into sexually active relationships before marriage.

**Consequences of changing norms regarding sexuality.** Participants contend that the impact of changing norms regarding sexuality can be felt at many different levels, ranging from the cultural to the individual level. A few participants discussed the spoiling of Indian culture due to the influx of Western norms. While Aditi is distinctly unhappy by the changes in Indian culture, participants like Gaurav were ambivalent about their role in diluting Indian culture. Gaurav explains that he is on the fence because there are positive and negative aspects to this change. The positive aspect is that one can freely express one’s desires while the negative aspect is that one is adding to the problem of diluting Indian culture.

In his contemplation of the Westernization of India, Yash comments heavily upon the struggle between the emergence of Western norms and the pervasiveness of tradition in India. He explains that Indians are adopting Western norms but are unable to adapt to them.

…. Its very negative in a way, because Indians by and large are very uh… family oriented and very close and stuff like that so we’ve taken stuff from the West but we can’t adapt to how the West has adapted to it. That’s where the clash comes in (Yash).

Yash also believes that traditional Indian norms like arranged marriage defeat the purpose of certain behaviors like dating. He is unable to understand why his friends date if they are ultimately going to marry their parents’ choice. Chaitan proposes that dating against a background of tradition requires farsightedness and compromise.
Another consequence of the troubled coexistence of traditional and Western norms is the need to balance one’s individual needs with that of the collective in order to navigate changing norms regarding sexuality in a successful manner. Immense mental strength and agency is required in order to navigate the conflict successfully.

They cannot handle the entire...thing of where they want to be and eventually they just give up and give in to their parents, give in to their demands. You’ve got to be very strong mentally, I mean you’ve got to make a decision and say okay, even if my parents say no I will still do it my way because its my life. But uh, umm I don’t see a lot of people doing that (Yash).

As a Muslim, Tahira also explains that the family honor is endangered when a woman or a man behaves in a non-traditional manner.

I think they view it in the same way as society because I think uh, keeping up the name in the, keeping up the family’s name is more important than a person, just being, you know, just letting the person do whatever he or she wants (Tahira).

Participants suggest that young adults in India find it difficult to cope with their own ways of thinking and the need to adhere to their elders’ way of thinking and keep older generations happy. Basant’s personal struggle between a lack of belief in marriage and the need to fulfill his duty to his parents highlights the potentially detrimental consequences that can result from this conflict.

…because of my parents choice I will marry finally. But uh, I wouldn’t be very happy because I can’t imagine myself living with one particular person for the rest of my life. I need to have my own choices. So I will continue to do my uh... philanderings. Yeah it will continue throughout my life because I can’t just say because I got married, I can’t leave my girlfriends saying that because I married, uh because we got married so let’s part company (Basant).

A few participants discussed different ways of coping with these changing norms. Chaitan expressed determination to express his individual choice while Mekhala showed conformity due to her discomfort with societal disapproval. Coping methods also included lying and keeping secrets, leaving the country, sitting on the fence and living a double life with peers and parents. There are negative psychological consequences that result from these methods of coping.

I feel guilty about it somewhere. But uh, again, when it comes to my personal thing I would be selfish about it. So I might be hypocritical and do one thing and say the other (Gaurav).
So you don’t know how to behave. You’ve got to behave one way with this group of friends, then you go home and you’ve got to behave in completely different ways so that your parents don’t get upset. And it’s a huge struggle so definitely yeah, there’s a lot of psychological damage that’s happening there (Yash).

Some participants contend that another consequence of changing norms regarding sexuality in India is the persistent attempt to secure compliance to traditional norms through social control. They explain that moral policing is performed both by the police themselves and other members of society. This takes the form of physical and verbal intimidation, threats of harm and violence.

Moral policing is uh, these are people who think that they want to uh, maintain the society’s rules and standards as how it has been and not to have any Western influences in the society. So these are people who, who are not very open to Valentine’s Day. They would try to tear all the cards and they are so against it. Burn theaters which have uh, they burn movie theaters which show movies that endorse homosexuality. And uh, people who are seen in parks or, you just see two people who are youngsters going out then they would catch these people, beat them up, put them in police stations, humiliate them in front of a lot of people so… other people would see that and be scared to go out on a dating relationship (Tahira).

Basant talks of public censure for school and office romances that are uncovered.

If we, if we’re doing something wrong at the college and the office, I understand it is not to be done there. It should have been handled in a more sensitive way by calling us alone and saying you can do this outside somewhere, not in the office premises. But the way they handle people in India, its different. They call us and give some warning letters and make it a very public issue (Basant).

The attempts at social control arise from fear of the breakdown of family in India and control over younger generations. Tahira is of the opinion that social control does not fulfill its goal of eliminating dating behavior; it just makes it more secretive and less public. Aditi points out that strong social control continues after marriage as well with high societal expectations and pressure on the young couple to produce a child.

With the increasing prevalence of choice marriage, participants weighed the pros and cons of choice and arranged marriages. Most participants agree that, depending on your perspective, both arranged and choice marriages are equally good or equally risky; the person chosen is extremely crucial.

The advantages of an arranged marriage is greater security since parents will do research before approaching the families of prospective spouses, as well as lower expectations and
therefore a lower chance of disappointment. The disadvantage is marrying a person who is not well known to you or the emphasis on the alliance between families.

You have absolutely nothing in common and you’ve got to spend the rest of your life with this person, it’s just weird. Yeah, probably your parents are very happy because she’s got loads of money or you’ve got loads of money and, or her business works well with your business. That’s not the basis of what your marriage should be based on (Yash). The advantages of a choice marriage are that parents are not burdened with searching for a match and one knows the person whom one is marrying after having dated that person. However, the disadvantages are that one does not know enough of the person’s family, has higher expectations and greater chances of disappointment and that love is an impractical foundation for a marriage and fades.

Some participants reveal the development of an ‘in between’ type of marriage whereby they would like to date and marry a person of their own choice and have the approval of parents which they deem essential. They explain that they cannot and will not marry a person their parents did not approve of.

I told you I don’t really believe in running away, eloping or going against the family, throwing tantrums and all that. I would prefer to get okay with their consent. I have a lot of family values so I do not want to throw away my family for anybody who, I mean I would not want to do that. I would not want to hurt my parents and grandparents (Mandira).

The Sexual Double Standard in India: Changes and Consequences

Participants attest that the sexual double standard is thriving in patriarchal Indian society. Traditionally, both men and women were expected to remain abstinent until marriage. In recent times non-traditional behaviors like dating and sexual activity before marriage have been deemed acceptable for men and not for women (See Table 4).

The extant sexual double standard. Both male and female participants are vehement that dating and sexual activity before marriage are sanctioned and seen as natural for men but not for women. A woman who is in an intimate relationship before marriage is at risk of ruining her reputation and being ‘black marked’ by her community.

Indian society is very biased. The man can do no wrong.. If the girl’s in a relationship, it’s because she’s loose, and if the guy’s in the relationship, it’s because she’s loose. If the girl gets pregnant, it’s because she’s easygoing (Chaitan).

However, most participants agree that single, sexually active men do not perturb society.
They just don’t care. I mean it’s like an accepted norm. He will. It’s natural. He will do it. It’s fine. Nobody cares (Yash).

Mekhala and Mandira go further when asserting that a woman who has premarital sex is considered to be immoral and impure while a man proves his manhood.

I guess that it means that she has ummm, you know, different values, not wrong values I guess. Immoral or whatever or you know, she’s just desperate they would say. I think they believe that. I’m sure some of them think that you know, she’s probably having a problem psychologically (Mekhala).

A few participants describe the inability of adults to accept women who have been sexually active as future brides and daughters in law. Gaurav believes that mothers especially are unwilling to accept non-traditional women as brides for their sons. However, parents are willing to give prospective grooms the benefit of the doubt and exceptions are made.

I would give myself some more time to judge him and if he [is] still an okay person then I wouldn’t mind. But I probably would make sure that my daughter knows about it or, or at least he has some qualities that can make up for his having been in a relationship. So if I’m a mother who uh, is looking for a bride for my son and I come to know that she has been in an intimate relationship, though deep down in my heart I know that uh, she may be a nice person and she has qualities that can make up for her having been in a relationship, I would be afraid of what my family or society would think and my first reaction to her marrying my son would be no (Gaurav).

Some female participants explain that women in India experience pressure to get married before a certain age. Mekhala and Mandira contend that single men can remain so until even the age of 40 because a woman will always be available for them to marry. However, single women past a certain age (around 30 years) are highly stigmatized by society. Some participants also conclude that women themselves perpetuate the double standard by giving into familial/societal pressure to get married.

Mekhala believes that the sexual double standard persists due to the older generation. Shravan asserts that among younger generations, the sexual double standard is slowly changing. There is greater expectation that men may have sexual intercourse before marriage and greater acknowledgement of women having some amount of sexual contact before marriage.

I think these days… umm, you know, frankly speaking if, uh, you know, I’ve had this experience, you know, wherein people ummm, “you’re a virgin, my god, you’re such a loser in life!”(laughs). That is you know, what people perceive it to be. So I think you know, that is a drastic shift from what you know, we were in, say, in about 5 years [before] now (Shravan).
Consequences of the sexual double standard. A few participants attest that one’s character is of no consequence if one is sexually active before marriage. One’s qualities do not compensate for the loss of virginity, especially for women.

…. she’s a very good girl, she helps everyone….but also there is a problem with her because she had relationships with a person (Aditi).

All participants agreed that women especially face harsh personal consequences for being sexually active before marriage; ranging from direct consequences like pregnancy to indirect ones like being negatively labeled by society.

Everybody is very bothered. Everybody cares. Everybody has an opinion and everybody has a definition or a label that they can put on you. Uh, friends who like you will also have a label, it will be a kinder label and of course people who don’t like you will have a worse label. And your parents will have a very subdued label and your neighbors will have a very very huge banner that’s going to be placed outside, which puts lots of pressure on the girl as well, which is really sad (Yash).

All participants agree that non-traditional women are labeled as sluts and face a very uncertain future, both professionally and personally. Elders and society openly and tacitly judge them. Sadly enough, many participants point out that women themselves are harsh judges of each other’s character. Basant also says that a woman maybe successful at her career but she still pays a heavy personal price by giving up on being a wife and mother.

The men on the one hand drop them saying that uh, family is not accepting, I’m looking for a more pious wife or something. The other part, the women also don’t accept them, so they lose their life, they lose their identity. Certain women can carry on being alone, winning in life but other women, they don’t shine, they are not able to live their life. Because without a man’s company, its not very easy for a woman to stay. Not because of them saying scared or something. A man needs a woman and likewise a woman needs a man. So they have to compromise on certain things or lead a bad type of life (Basant).

All participants agree that non-traditional women also face consequences like emotional and psychological breakdown, guilt, shame and suicide. Participants discuss the perception of a single sexually active woman as a betrayer of her parents, her future husband and in-laws.

Whereas a woman, even if she doesn’t get pregnant, I guess that its just that she’s not a virgin any longer and that some guys, I don’t know, some guys might think they’ve been cheated… yeah… they probably want a virginal thing to get married to (Mekhala).
Basant alludes to the presence of a girlfriend-wife dichotomy in India and other participants confirm this. This results from the sexual double standard and the conflict between one’s own wants and that of the collective.

….for them its like (laughs) they want, when they are dating, they want people who are all hep and happening and you know, dressed in short skirts and tight tops and all that and they like to show off their girlfriends but when it comes to you know, serious relationships, you know, when it comes to commitment and when you know you’re going to get married to this particular person you always go back on this paavum [not modern] girl who (laughs) is always properly dressed, who has been paavum throughout her life. Smart but paavum types (Ekta).

Some participants are of the opinion that men experience no ramifications for non-traditional behavior, while others believe that men do face certain consequences since dating is not wholly accepted by society. However, these are lighter consequences since, as in the previously mentioned example of arranged marriage, men are given the benefit of the doubt by society. Mandira cautions that single, sexually active men need to be socially responsible and get checked for STDs because they run the risk of infecting their future virgin wives.

The sexual double standard in India has certain emotional and behavioral consequences for the participants themselves. Most male participants show some ambivalence and confusion in their view of sexually active women. Some both endorse and condemn non-traditional women. A few male participants are willing to be selfish and hypocritical in order to benefit from the sexual double standard.

In India, men are very selfish (laughs). That’s the truth. Even I’ll be very selfish. I will be allowed to adventure and do whatever I want but I’ll expect my wife to be a virgin (Basant).

Shravan and Gaurav acknowledge that they are being ‘hypocritical’ and ‘Male Chauvinist Pigs’ (MCPs) as well. Among the female participants, Aditi was very clear that she holds no personal double standard – single, sexually active men and women are ‘100%’ immoral. Other female participants were divided in their opinion of other single, sexually active men and women. Some female participants have dated, most discuss the need to set boundaries and limit sexual contact. They are quite aware of the negative consequences of non-traditional behavior.

Varying Levels of Discourse Regarding Sexuality in India

This category addresses the opinions of participants regarding the degree and manner in which sexuality is discussed in India. Participants described varying levels of restriction and
openness across multiple dimensions of society and self providing a rich understanding of their experiences of discourse regarding sexuality as members of Indian society and the educational system (See Table 5).

Limited discussion at the cultural level. Majority of participants agree that there is a general resistance and reluctance to discuss sexuality that exists across Indian society. Yash specifically asserts that many people are sexually active before marriage but nobody talks about it. Chaitan expresses his dissatisfaction with the lack of discourse saying that it might have worked in the more conservative past but it does not in contemporary India. However, some participants also assert that this resistance to discussion varies with social strata, gender, occupation and military families.

The need to increase discourse is emphasized when placed in conjunction with the personal shock that Shravan experienced when he emerged from the sheltered and disciplined life of a military child to a college and workplace in which the normalcy and ordinariness of sex in everyday conversation among his colleagues and other peers was a striking contrast.

Parental discomfort with discussing sexuality. From Shravan’s experience it can be seen that this overarching reluctance to discuss sexuality in society affects educational institutions and family units. Most families are reluctant to discuss sexuality with the younger generation and most participants’ families did not discuss sexuality at all while they were growing up. The participants agree that parental discomfort with the discussion of sexuality played an important role in this lack of discourse. Gaurav is of the opinion that a discussion about sexuality rarely takes place between parents and children and children in India. Ekta states that it is an immense taboo to discuss sex especially with older generations or within the family. Other participants concur:

Any aspects or sexual aspects that come up or things like that is shunned out and nobody is willing to talk about it. They, always, I’ve got the message that its wrong, its bad and you shouldn’t talk about it at home or anywhere else (Tahira).

Chaitan expresses his dissatisfaction with both parental discomfort and the deliberate miscommunication that parents engage in with their children, when dealing with the topic of sexuality. He also says that it’s not that children are growing up faster, they are being misinformed too early and have no guidance.
… parents throw a big hue and cry saying, ‘Why do my children need to know this?’.
The reality of it today, trust me, is that your children know more than you knew… ever (Chaitan).

Ekta points out that sex is discussed on a need to know basis in India. Marriage is seen as a license to discuss sex. In her family:

It’s usually, most commonly when one of, somebody is getting married (laughs). Usually if one of the girl’s are getting married and we’re all sitting and talking about it and she asks doubts on how do I, and first night and all of us sitting and listening to it. And then we have somebody elder talking to her about it and we’re all sitting around (laughs) (Ekta).

There were some exceptions to this lack of discussion and a few participants like Mekhala, Yash and Ekta enjoyed an open channel of communication with their parents, especially mothers, regarding aspects of sexuality in both the personal and sociopolitical context. Yash explains that sex education with his parents was an embarrassing experience for both parties, but a necessary and informative experience.

Poor quality discourse within the educational system. Not all participants had the benefit of informal sex education with their parents but most had experienced some semblance of formal sex education at different points in life, some in school and some at college. However, no matter the stage of life, all agree that sex education programs in India leave a lot to be desired. For most participants the programs fell short due to their focus on technical and biological aspects of sexuality or their indirect approach to instructing students about sex through the description of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Additionally, participants describe the lack of comprehensive information and guidance that resulted from the discomfort of teachers in dealing with such material or the emphasis on testing knowledge.

In school when I was in my 9th standard or 10th standard, when, I don’t remember well, but we had a chapter on sex education, but my teacher refused to take that chapter and she sort of brushed it apart and moved on to the next thing saying that it is not important (Tahira).

Participants had a variety of suggestions for improving the state of sex education in India. Some felt there was a need to use a graduated, age-appropriate curriculum that addressed not just safe sex but also relational aspects, social skills, judgment making, dealing with peer pressure, sexually transmitted diseases, establishing boundaries and the consequences of premarital sex. Participants were divided on when to start sex education and whether classes should be split
according to gender. Most agreed that parents, teachers and health professionals need to be active in this process and that continuous, interactive education is required.

Educate them. Talk to them. If you, if you are not willing to do it, don’t do it, don’t do it because your headmistress says that it is a part of your curriculum. Get a health professional to do it they will do it. Children will giggle when they are at age 12; they will laugh when they are at age 13. If you change the thoughts of at least 30% of the children at that age, to start with, you have succeeded (Chaitan).

*Inaccurate, flippant discourse among peers.* The poor quality and limitedness of formal sex education was mirrored in the description, of some participants, of informal sex education experiences with peers. According to Gaurav, most discussion about sexuality in India happens with peers. While his first experience of discourse with his peers was positive and enlightening, he also feels that peers can be misinforming.

Because uh, a little knowledge can always be dangerous. So, uh, you expect your peers to fill in the gaps for you but it might not always happen (Gaurav).

Yash contends that even as adults his peers are quite “clueless”. Ekta had only experienced flippant discussions about sexuality with peers that involved much humor and laughter. Both she and Tahira agree that personal disclosure with peers about sexuality and interpersonal relationships would be a selective act due to the potentially judgmental reaction.

And even, I know a lot of people who I’m sure who’ve gone beyond a particular point but you’re not willing to tell your friends about it because you know they won’t be as open about it as guys know their guy friends will be. So I think as girls we’re much more you know, closed in, in, when it comes to discussing a topic like sex and if, ya, women look at other women who’ve, you know, gone beyond a particular point, you know, have probably had sex before as, I don’t know, they’re not very comfortable with them (Ekta).

Finally, Shravan explains that there still are differing comfort levels towards this openness among peer groups.

*Unrealistic media portrayal of sexuality.* With the exception of Mandira and Ekta who believe that news channels and documentaries are educational and informative, most participants who addressed the role of the media in the discourse regarding sexuality focused on its negative influence. Chaitan reflects on the promotion of casual sex in the international media and its influence on changing the regional media. He also highlights the increasing role of regional media in sexual fantasy and exposing people to non-traditional sexual relationships. He believes that the regional media instills a lack of accountability along with a sense of invulnerability and
entitlement, amongst Indian youth, due to the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and real
life. Yash concurs in his view of the unrealistic portrayal of sexuality by the regional media.

Everybody is probably emulating their favorite movie star and what they see on screen
and it’s really sad because regional movies are completely warped. They’re not the right
picture of what’s happening in the real world…. I mean they’ve got this guy who’s larger
than life and who can pick up women wherever he wants and he looks at a girl and she
swoons. That doesn’t really happen in real life and when, and that’s basically what most
of the youth is left with because they learn from there. And when it doesn’t happen in real
life, they’re very disappointed and they begin to feel that maybe there’s something wrong
with me (Yash).

Basant, too, explains that although the Indian media presents aspects like traditional and
family values that are good, it also titillates and “pollutes” the mind by being mysterious about
sex and leaving much to the imagination. International movies, especially Hollywood movies are
much better, in his opinion, because they are explicit. However, the explicitness of sexuality on
the international screen is strongly counteracted by the implicit or even non-existent nature of
sexual communication among Indian couples in real life.

Desired but infrequent dyadic sexual communication. In regard to dyadic sexual
communication, participants focused mainly on honesty, open communication, importance of
consent for sexual activity, barriers and facilitators to communication and the likelihood of
disclosure, albeit conditional, of sexual history to one’s partner. Many participants expressed the
desire for open sexual communication but also acknowledged that it rarely takes place.

Participants discussed barriers to communication like female discomfort with discussion,
acceptance of the traditional female role, insecurity, peer pressure and a lack of socialization
with men. They also put forth acceptance of female emotions and sexual desires, trust and being
at a similar wavelength regarding sexual activity as facilitators of communication.

Participants were divided on whether or not to disclose one’s sexual history to one’s
partner/ future husband or wife. While personal honesty and the expectation of honesty from
their partner was salient for some participants, others felt that their disclosure of sexual history
would be conditioned on the partner’s potential understanding and acceptance. They would
rather live with the guilt of keeping a secret rather than jeopardize the relationship. Gaurav can
see both sides. He hopes that his partner will be honest because this will compensate for the loss
of her virginity with another man, but he foretells otherwise.
I think, these days, women are much smarter than men and they’ve always been. And uh, so if the average woman would uh, lets say, if she has been serious about her relationship and expected it to go to, to lead to marriage but that hasn’t happened, uh, she uh, uh, what I perceive to be her natural reaction to that, would be to be quiet about the situation and still go for the arranged marriage (Gaurav).

In her interview, Mandira focuses on the possible negative consequence of disclosure and the practicalities of secrecy.

So I think I will live with the guilt of covering it up for some time. Until I’m 100% sure he won’t mind. But then there is always, this will always be in his mind, always you know, that she’s slept with somebody else. It will always be in his mind (Mandira).

Most participants agreed that disclosure, by a woman especially, after marriage, would lead to divorce. However, Basant explains that, even as a man, fear of losing his wife and her parents along with fear of having to face his parents and condemnation by society would prevent him from disclosing his sexual history to his future wife.

**Sexual understanding comes with maturity.** In the discussions of their experiences with sex education, Yash, Mekhala and Chaitan allude to the existence of a developmental trajectory in terms of the content of discourse. Initially, young children are warned about abuse and protective behavior, teenagers are embarrassed to discuss anything related to sexuality with their parents, while adults are comfortable with discussing aspects of sexuality in the sociopolitical context. Chaitan focused more on personal growth of one’s attitudes, emotions and values regarding sexuality along with sexual understanding that comes with maturity. He sees himself as different from other men his age, in his desire for and valuing of commitment. Both he and Yash express comfort with their own opinions and judgments as adults as opposed to being strongly influenced by messages of peers and the media when they were younger.

*Reasons for and consequences of the lack of discourse*

A few participants pondered the reasons underlying the lack of discourse about sexuality in India. They contend that the parental fear of conveying tacit approval of premarital sex, fear of persecution resulting from openly discussing sex in a conservative society along with embarrassment and shyness due to lack of knowledge limit the discussion of sexuality.

Sadly enough, as much as fear of negative consequences restricts the discourse about sexuality in Indian society, some participants assert this lack of discourse itself has detrimental consequences such as misinformed and misguided children.
… it should be discussed because you ought to know about it because a lot of mistakes happen because you don’t know enough about the whole concept (Ekta).

A few participants also mentioned the prevalence of and belief in myths, false beliefs about sexuality-related topics that are not explained in a comprehensive and informational manner due to the limited discourse regarding sexuality in India. Chaitan alleges restrictions on communication enable parents and society to avoid discomfort and be in denial of the occurrence of intimate dating relationships before marriage. However, there is a price to be paid on restricted communication and denial of reality.

That becomes too explicit for them, but little do you know that by your act of not giving your children that approval, the things they do behind you (Chaitan).

All participants expressed dissatisfaction with the state of sexuality related discourse at multiple levels in India. They unanimously agreed that the need for open dialogue is greater than ever before during this time of transition and evolution of sexuality norms.

Discussion

In accordance with the limited empirical evidence on changing premarital sexual behavior among young adults in India (Abraham & Kumar, 1999; Bamzai, 2005; Pachauri & Santhya, 2002; Visvanathan, 2006), participants in this study report that they are experiencing sexuality in a very different social context as compared to previous generations. Practices of courtship and sexuality have been changing against a background of tradition. Often contrasting and sometimes merging with external influences, these changing cultural norms have had a profound effect on the cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels of the sexual script.

The cultural level of the sexual script

Representing the depth and complexity of attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality in India, participants discussed the co-existence of traditional and contemporary norms regarding sexuality, the manner in which sexuality norms are evolving, the varying levels of acceptance of these norms across social strata, the maintenance of gender roles and expectations, the sexual double standard as well as the state of discourse regarding sexuality in India. Simon and Gagnon (1986) describe the cultural level of the script as the institutionalized instructions and roles that exist at the collective layer of society. They also assert that at this level intrapsychic exchanges are insignificant and responsible for very little variation in the enactment of scripts (p. 99). This
level of the script corresponds to the collective and public selves (Triandis, 1989) of the Indian psyche.

The pervasiveness of traditional gender roles and expectations in India. Participants assert that conservative social norms for sexual behavior are stringently upheld by a majority of Indians, older generations especially. Sinha and Tripathi (1994) highlight the existence of paradox within Indian culture and the Indian sense of self and in this context the paradox of India’s provision of lessons in sensuality to the rest of the world through the Kamasutra and the purported pervasiveness of patriarchal and conservative attitudes in Indian society is striking.

Participants describe how, as in the West (Rose & Frieze, 1989) the traditional sexual script has enabled the maintenance of traditional gender roles in India. Most participants assert that women in India are objectified and restricted in their gender roles. While Nath and Nayar (2004) stated that the immense importance of female chastity until marriage and prescribed gender roles are passing through a period of transformation, participants attest that the traditional sexual script continues to exert an extremely potent influence in contemporary India.

Even though gender role expectations differ for both genders, from participants’ descriptions it appears that the majority are aware of role expectations for both one’s own gender and the opposite sex. Participants describe marriage and children as integral parts of the Indian identity for both males and females. However, they also explain that the traditional role expectations in marriage are very different for both sexes and, as a result, an exploitative interdependent relationship exists (Prentice & Carranza, 2004). Men are seen as the breadwinners and women are viewed as the caregivers, upholders of family values and tradition; obedient and passive. Stringent roles may be maintained and reinforced by the socialization of Indian women around believing in an unequal marital relationship (Chanana, 1996). While women are viewed as having more positive communal traits, the negative impact of traditional gender roles is that it enforces the patriarchal structure of society (Eagly et al, 2000; Prentice and Carranza, 2002, 2004) and this is seen in India as well.

Participants highlight that gender roles are in the process of transformation in India as more women are entering the workforce and becoming financially independent. However, as highlighted by Desai (1996) and Nath and Nayar (2004), changes in occupational roles for women in India have not been followed up by corresponding attitudinal and behavioral changes. Participants also attest that it is strongly advocated that marriage and children are aspects of life
that complete an Indian woman. Participants explain that similar to the findings of Prentice and Carranza’s (2002) study, women in India are still held to extremely high social standards with lower expectation for achievement whereby positive communal traits and traditional roles are given more importance, no matter how successful a woman may be at her career. As in the West, participants contend that even when women in India take on non-traditional roles, they do so in ways that maintain their compliance with role expectations like domesticity. Extreme deviation from prescribed, specific roles as a mother and wife does result in social disapproval. A few female participants spoke of the pressure that they experience to marry and to have children after marriage. As a result, the prominence of the public self (Triandis, 1989) and the relational self (Chen et al, 2006) in determining the behavior of many Indian women is seen as many women are likely to marry and have children as a result of social and familial pressure even if they do not feel mentally prepared. Additionally, corresponding with Eagly et al’s (2000) discussion on the consequences of deviation from gender roles, participants agree that a woman who stays single past a certain age and is successful at her career still experiences pity and stigma from society.

The extant sexual double standard in India. Female participants in the current study discussed socialization in India that focuses on the importance of remaining a virgin until marriage and male participants spoke of socialization that emphasizes high expectations of marrying pure women. All participants agree that the extant sexual double standard in India parallels the traditional sexual double standard of the West that dictates that single women are faced with a Madonna-whore dichotomy in regard to being sexually active while men are expected to ‘sow their wild oats’ before marriage (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Similar to the participants in Abraham and Kumar’s (1999) study who stated that it was permissible for Indian men and not women to be sexually active before marriage, most male participants voiced the difficulty they would experience in accepting a sexually active woman as a wife. This also corresponds to findings in the India Today-AC Nielsen ORG MARG Sex Survey that revealed that 63 % of men expect their wives to be virgins (Visvanathan, 2006). Participants also believe that single, sexually active men will have no trouble getting married and are most likely to expect their wives to be virgins.

Participants explain that Indian women experience consequences that negatively impact their relational interdependence while men’s collective interdependence (Gardner & Gabriel,
2004) is positively impacted by the sexual double standard. Similar to Western attitudes (Crawford and Popp, 2003), participants report that single, sexually active men in India are viewed as ‘alpha males’ by their male friends and are given much reinforcement and status due to their sexual exploits. So not only does sexual activity enrich Indian males’ sense of collective interdependence it also serves to ‘enhance their image’ which Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) found to be a salient factor for men in regard to wanting or not wanting sexual activity. According to participants, the costs of non-traditional sexual behavior outweigh the benefits as Indian women experience direct, negative and highly stigmatizing consequences due to the sexual double standard. They state that non-traditional women in India are ‘black marked’ and are unlikely to get married unless they keep past relationships a secret. They are labeled as sluts, gossiped about, seen as betrayers of family honor, considered to be at risk for psychological and emotional breakdown, getting pregnant and/or contracting an STD. Non-traditional women are also viewed as cheating or betraying their future husband and in-laws. Hence, in accordance with Eagly et al’s (2000) discussion on the weighing of costs and benefits of non-traditional behavior, the lack of beneficial consequences would likely stem an Indian woman’s desire to behave in a non-traditional manner.

Interestingly, the sexual double standard in India seems to be evolving. Some participants spoke of increasing acknowledgement of women in intimate but committed relationships before marriage and greater expectation of sexually experienced single men such that male virgins may experience stigmatization within the male collective.

The majority of participants demonstrated accommodation to gender role socialization. While most female participants expressed the desire to date before marriage only some are able to do so, with a strong emphasis on limiting sexual contact; a participant like Tahira is absolutely unable to do so due to her family’s orthodox Muslim beliefs. Most male participants admitted to being hypocritical in their admiration of sexually active men and their acceptance of being sexually active themselves while refusing to marry non-virgin females. However, male participants like Chaitan and Yash are more egalitarian in their outlook and open to having non-virgin wives.

Social control and the inhibition of sexual expression in India. Participants also believe that Indian society is narrow-minded and condemns sexual behavior that deviates from the norms it has set, through verbal, non-verbal and physical intimidation. As Abraham and Kumar (1999)
state, being in an intimate relationship before marriage places the reputation of both the individual and the family at risk. Some participants state that in Indian society, sexual activity before marriage is strongly condemned while after marriage couples experience immense pressure to reproduce. Participants spoke of strong social control and moral policing in Indian society. Simon and Gagnon’s (1986) assertion that successfully avoiding or performing sexual behavior plays a crucial role in the assessment of an individual’s worth is especially appropriate in India. Social control and moral policing can have adverse impacts on the collective, public and relational levels of the self. Eagly et al (2000) state that the consequences for deviation from normative behavior range from the subtle to the more blatant. A similar range of punitive reactions are seen in India with the subtle expression of disapproval from observers, verbal and physical intimidation by the police and rejection by family. Kim (1994) states that in the coexistence mode of collectivism shame plays a crucial role in the maintenance of control and this seems prominent in India. So while the India Today-AC Nielsen ORG MARG Sex Surveys (2005 & 2006) may reveal that younger generations are willing to take the risk of defying conservative social attitudes that disapprove of intimate interpersonal relationships before marriage, most participants assert that the taking of such a risk is shrouded in secrecy due to fear of negative, degrading reprisals and loss of face in society, family and the peer group.

*Lack of discourse regarding sexuality in Indian society.* All participants were of the opinion that, with few exceptions, there exists a reluctance to discuss sexuality across Indian society. In keeping with Bott and Jejeebhoy (2003) and Nath and Nayar (2004), participants spoke of the discomfort of parents and teachers in discussing sexuality. Few participants have families within which the discussion of sexuality took place outside of the sociopolitical context, if ever. While some participants, regardless of their gender or religion, did have an open channel of communication with their parents, it seems that they represent the exception rather than the norm. Ekta stated that in India impending marriage is one of the only periods of time during which the discussion of sexuality with the younger generation is sanctioned within the family.

In keeping with Nath and Nayar (2004) all participants agreed that formal sex education in India is of poor quality. They emphasized that sex education in India takes an indirect route and is limited to biological aspects of sexual intercourse and STDs. As highlighted by Tikoo (1996) and Bott and Jejeebhoy (2003) most participants spoke of the discomfort and reluctance of teachers to teach sex education effectively. Participants suggest that all-rounded sexuality
education programs need to be implemented. Such programs would require a graduated, age-appropriate curriculum that focuses on social skills and judgment making, and not simply biology, in order to enable youngsters to establish boundaries and deal with peer pressure effectively. Such a curriculum should be designed with the active participation of parents, teachers and students. Some participants also reiterated the need for parents and teachers to be available, accessible and supportive of children’s queries and struggles.

Majority of participants agreed with Bobb (2005) and Nath & Nayar (2004) that sexuality information is gained mainly from the media, which consists of Hollywood and regional Indian films, sitcoms from the West and regional shows. Participants agreed that the reluctance to discuss aspects of sexuality is compounded by the unrealistic portrayal of sexuality by the regional media in India (Nath & Nayar, 2004). Some participants stated that the regional media promotes the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality by provoking the imagination with stimulating yet incomplete images of sexuality alongside images of stereotyped good and traditional Indian values. Regional shows, very often, present a very black and white picture (the good traditional Indian girl vs. independent, sexually active and morally questionable Westernized woman) that is far removed from the gray of reality. International movies and television shows present a conflicting view of empowered and independent young people who are sexually active before marriage and do not conform to pressures from the family and/or society. Participants agree that young people are uncomfortably slotted between media that is fixated on sexual images and absolute silence from other potential informants like parents and teachers (Nath & Nayar, 2004).

Importantly, participants explain that this lack of discourse has consequences for both older and younger generations. The older generation remains in denial of the occurrence of intimate dating relationships and younger generations are misinformed, misguided and continue to date in secret.

_The changing landscape of sexuality in India._ All participants agreed with previous research (Abraham & Kumar, 1999; Nath & Nayar, 2004; Pachauri & Santhya, 2002) that indicates that non-traditional behaviors like dating, choice marriage, premarital sex and extramarital affairs are increasing in India.

Participants made attributions to the Westernization of Indian culture and the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) boom as influences upon changing norms regarding sexuality. Peer
pressure and the chain reaction of peer imitation are also commented upon in this context. This peer pressure plays out in the relational context for women and the collective context for men and can be linked with Gardner and Gabriel’s (2004) finding of the importance of relational interdependence for women and collective interdependence for men. Participants spoke of the pressure to be sexually active that women face from their male partners and the status and prestige that men earn from their male friends when discussing their sexual exploits.

The previously mentioned example and the following example highlight the influence of the relational self (Chen et al, 2006) on one’s emotions, motivations and behavior. Along with elaborating upon the coexistence of individualism and collectivism within the Indian psyche, Sinha and Tripathi (1994) also state that during this transitory period Indian youth are uncertain in their responses to questions about social-moral transgression. Participants discussed the troubled coexistence of Western and traditional norms in India and a salient theme in interviews was the conflict between one’s own needs and the obligation to the collective. This plays out most often as conflict between parents and their offspring with the latter being unable to risk going their own way. Pomerantz, Ng and Wang (2004) elaborate upon the role of childrens’ ability, sensitivity and motivation as factors that influence the effectiveness of parents’ gender socialization and this is applicable to the Indian context. Relationships with significant others (like parents) are, to a great extent, self-defining in India’s predominantly collectivistic culture. Hence, children are not only motivated to obey parents’ requests; they also have the ability to comply due to the control that parents exert on their children. They experience guilt very easily because they are insightful to socialization practices from a very young age. Walking this tightrope between the quest for autonomy and obligation to the collective along with the extant sexual double standard has led to the ‘wife-girlfriend’ dichotomy that parallels the Madonna-whore dichotomy in the West. Here, Indian males date young women, who are modern in dress and are willing to be sexually active, but marry traditional young women chosen by their parents. For some men, this is the sacrifice of individual desires for the satisfaction of collectivist demands (Kim, 1994). Paying heed to just individual desire without regard to the collective, i.e., marrying one’s girlfriend against family wishes, can lead to being ostracized. One participant states that this ‘parental double standard’ (Crawford & Popp, 2003) is enforced due to the parents’ desire to be cool and modern and yet remain traditional and in control.
However, this study also reveals that young adults in India maybe negotiating successful methods of navigating this tightrope such as finding middle ground between arranged and choice marriages. Participants spoke of the desire to find their own future spouse but also the need for the approval of their parents for marriage. This is a subtle violation of the stereotypic expectation of arranged marriage. As explained by Prentice and Carranza (2004), such violations may be disregarded or even seen as positive as children are not violating the prescription of marriage or their duty of seeking parental approval.

The multiple identities of participants implies that their membership in different communities, religions, regions and socioeconomic strata sanctions and persecutes different behaviors. In terms of geography, along with an urban-rural dichotomy, most participants stated that there is variation within urban areas as well. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru are open to youngsters dating before marriage while Chennai and cities in Kerala are conservative and condemn dating behavior thereby encouraging surreptitious dating and sexual behavior.

Religious affiliation plays an immense role in the acceptance of changing sexual norms. While Tahira wishes to be allowed to date, she knows that it is not possible due to her orthodox Muslim family. On the other hand, as a member of the mainly Christian Anglo-Indian community, Chaitan knows that dating before marriage is sanctioned and expected in his community. The tension that exists within the Indian psyche between individual needs and collective obligation (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994) is seen in Basant, who is a Tamil Brahmin. Basant believes strongly that men and women are not meant to be in long term committed relationships like marriage but knows that he is expected to get married and fulfill his duty to his parents and community. He states that he will do so but will not be faithful to his spouse.

In terms of socioeconomic strata, Yash believes that upper class members of Indian society are sexually active before marriage and that this is given tacit approval. He explains that people of lower socioeconomic means are also sexually active before but are not educated about the potential consequences such as contracting STDs. Yash maintains that it is the middle class that is judgmental and conservative about violating traditional expectations regarding abstinence from any type of sexual activity before marriage.

*The interpersonal level of the sexual script*

The cultural script affects the interpersonal level of the sexual script in a profound manner. At this level of the script, the social actor becomes involved and is instrumental in
converting cultural scenarios into context sensitive scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sinha and Tripathi’s (1994) conceptualization of the Indian self as context sensitive and changing is relevant at this level along with Chen et al’s (2006) relational self. Socialization experiences and formal and informal sex education experiences interact with traditional norms to influence the participants’ dyadic communication and expectations of sexual behavior that takes place both before and after marriage. Simon and Gagnon (1986) also state that when the interpersonal script represents insignificant variations of the dominant cultural script then it is capable of adapting sufficiently to correspond to intrapsychic dialogue (p. 107). However, it is important to keep in mind that the demands placed on the interpersonal script during times of ambiguity and conflict, such as evolving sexuality norms in India, maybe more than the adaptive capability of this level of the script (p.99).

**Dyadic communication.** Participants elaborated upon communication within various dyadic relationships such as parent-child, romantic and peer dyads. A few participants have experienced open communication with their parents regarding sexual activity while others have only experienced discussion of sexual norms in the sociopolitical context or not at all. Participants like Yash stated that discussions on sexuality between a parent and a child are embarrassing but necessary. Most participants emphasized the need for parents to play an active role in sex education. These findings are similar to those of Tikoo (1996) who found that both Indian boys and girls desire open communication with their parents in regard to sexuality-related topics. 59% of women who dated also admitted to being unable to discuss this with their parents (Vasudev, 2003). Mane and McCauley (2003) explain that for girls in India, just asking about sex can cause sanctions (such as negative labeling) and this social norm prevents girls from getting adequate knowledge and from protecting themselves. The relatively safer environment that can potentially be provided by parents can explain why girls are keener on discussing sexuality with their parents. Similar to Nath and Nayar’s (2004) conclusions and Bott and Jejeebhoy’s (2003) findings, some participants asserted that parental discomfort with open dialogue stems from the worry of conveying tacit approval of sexual activity before marriage and fear of embarrassment due a lack of technical knowledge. Unfortunately, this adds to the lack of control that young people in India experience in the nature and circumstances surrounding sexual activity. On a positive note, majority of participants spoke of communicating openly and
honestly with their own children in the future hoping that they will benefit from such open and supportive parent-child dialogue.

As stated in Bobb (2005) and Nath and Nayar (2004), many participants had their first discussion regarding sexuality with peers (friends, siblings, cousins). Participants had varied opinions on the usefulness of these interactions. One participant stated that it was a positive and enlightening experience and then went on to concur with a majority of the participants that such information from peers is usually unreliable and inaccurate. Some female participants also touched upon presentational concerns that prevented disclosure and help-seeking behavior due to harsh judgment from other female peers. These female participants stated that women in India are likely to gossip and reject others who violate gender role expectations regarding sexuality. In accordance with Diekman and Eagly’s (2008) discussion on the role congruity of relational aggression, women in India may find it safer to aggress by using aspects of relational interdependence since this does not violate gender role expectations.

Most participants expressed the desire for open and honest communication with their romantic partners but also acknowledged that its occurrence in India is extremely rare. One participant mentioned that after the safe sex discussion, couples don’t discuss sexual behaviors, emotions or attitudes. While it is encouraging to know that this group of Indian participants did emphasize safe sex practices, there is also the potentially disturbing similarity to Cleary et al’s (2002) findings that individuals fail to realize that practicing safe sex and discussing sexual health are complementary behaviors that should not be substituted for each other.

Poor quality formal and informal sex education experiences, ineffective socialization experiences with the opposite sex and self-presentational concerns could be reasons for the lack of dyadic communication concerning sexual health. Cleary et al (2002) found that, due to poor formal and informal sexuality education experiences, subjects were not comfortable, confident or desiring to initiate conversations concerning sexual health. A lack of sexual self-acceptance, which is the evaluation of one’s own emotions, thoughts and actions regarding sexuality, can also play a role. Tschann and Adler (1997) found that women, who had greater sexual self-acceptance, when first evaluated, communicated with their partners about sex and contraception to a greater extent. While single, sexually active women in India have to deal with costs like pregnancy and being ostracized by society and family, like the women in the Cleary et al (2002) study, they also may be more concerned with more immediate self-presentational aspects of the
relationship such as fear of ruining the relationship, embarrassment and the partner’s potentially negative perception of oneself. This seems especially salient since 77% of the men surveyed in the India Today AC Nielsen ORG MARG Sex Survey said they would not marry a woman who admitted to having premarital sex (Vasudev, 2004).

While most male participants spoke of the desire to marry virgins, they also, paradoxically, expressed the desire for their future marital partners to be honest about their sexual history. In the West, awareness of predominantly traditional gender attitudes among men keeps women from communicating effectively with their partners about sexuality related issues (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). Impett, Schooler and Tolman (2006) also address the silencing of one’s own desires and needs as a strategy used by women to reduce conflicts in relationships. They state that such “inauthenticity in relationships” is used when women suppress cognitions or emotions that are deemed unfeminine. Similarly in India, women silence the thoughts and emotions that are related to behavior that is clearly deemed non-feminine by society. While female participants spoke of the desire to communicate openly with their romantic partners, they conclude that they would rather lie and live with the guilt than tell their future spouse about their past. Later disclosure would be based on whether they perceived their spouse to be potentially understanding of their history. This also fits with Seal and Ehrhardt’s (2003) research which states that in ambiguous or transitory situations even when men and women privately believe in egalitarian relationships, they may endorse traditional roles and expectations in order to fit with their view of their partner’s script endorsement.

Participants also discussed facilitators of communication in romantic dyads. These seem to represent situations in which the traditional interpersonal script cannot single-handedly adapt to the variation of the cultural script (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and some intrapsychic changes are required. Facilitators include the acceptance of female sexual desires and emotions for which a non-traditional view of Indian women is required. Some participants also spoke of the importance of being on the same wavelength with regard to acceptable levels of sexual activity, and the need to check for a partner’s consent and respecting the partner’s boundaries. The salience of Chen et al’s (2006) relational self in such exchanges cannot be underestimated. Also, it is thought that that the aforementioned factors will have an effect on a woman’s sense of sexual self-acceptance. Aditi spoke of the understanding, space and time that her husband (whom she had not met until marriage) gave her after their wedding. His inclusion of her thoughts in
formulating their life plans also encouraged her to think positively about the marital situation into which she had been forced.

Geographical variation in the acceptance of non-traditional behavior has an influence on the interpersonal exchanges that take place when young adults socialize in India. In less conservative cities, communication regarding dating is direct and not taken personally. However, there is much ambiguity and confusion regarding the script in conservative areas. In conservative areas direct conversations about dating may also be seen as offensive to a woman’s virtue, which could lead to conflict.

*The intrapsychic level of the sexual script*

Simon and Gagnon (1986) state that the intrapsychic level of the script “becomes a significant part of the self-process in proportion to the extensivity and intensity of the internal dialogue” (p. 99). It involves connecting one’s personal wants and desires with socially constructed meaning (p. 100). Therefore, it would seem that this level of the sexual script corresponds with Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) independent self. When taken in conjunction with Sinha and Tripathi’s (1994) statements regarding the figure ground variability of individualism and collectivism within the Indian psyche, it is possible that the significance of the intrapsychic level of the script is highly context sensitive in India. Participants do confirm that the sexual thoughts, attitudes, emotions and fantasies of young adults in India are strongly influenced by the cultural context within which they live. The discrepancy between acceptable behaviors and personal desire leads to many negative emotions like shame along with much ambivalence.

*Emotions, behavior and identity.* Predominantly negative emotions are associated with sexuality in India. Participants explain that fear, shame and embarrassment restrict discourse regarding sexuality in India; fear of being judged and rejected along with embarrassment due to a lack of knowledge. Most male and female participants believe that single, sexually active women experience mostly negative emotions like guilt and shame. Eagly et al (2000) assert that individuals internalize gender stereotypes as standards for their own behavior. When they deviate from these standards, individuals tend to assess themselves negatively. Single, sexually active women, especially, are not only concerned about society’s evaluation of their behavior, but they are also aware of having violated internalized female role expectations. This is salient considering that women in India feel that it is difficult to differentiate between “promiscuity and
sexual freedom, decency and obscenity” (Vasudev, 2003). Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) found that the guilt and fear of harm to image in regard to wanting or not wanting sexual activity was salient to women. A lack of sexual self-acceptance or the evaluation of one’s own sex guilt and/or erotophobia (Tschann & Adler, 1997) could lead to intense negative emotional reactions to an evaluation of the self.

Most male participants revealed much confusion and, to a certain extent, shame at the advantage and power that they experienced. They fully acknowledged the hypocrisy and selfishness by which they are allowed to date and be sexually active and yet insist upon marrying virgins. The presence of such tension and emotions during the evolution of sexuality norms against of background of tradition that both Nath and Nayar (2004) and Simon and Gagnon (1986) describe as threatened and fearful of female sexual desire and interest, seems inevitable. These findings are also similar to Seal and Ehrhardt’s (2003) conclusions of the tension between men’s paradoxical desires for emotional and sexual intimacy. The men in that study spoke of enthusiasm in pursuing sexual opportunities in courtship, however women who were sexually active early in the courtship period were not viewed as potential emotionally intimate and long-term partners. These men also expressed respect for a woman who was prepared to assert herself and remain virtuous by not having sex early in the relationship.

However, the expressed desire for female initiation of sexual activity by male participants is also an aspect of the intrapsychic script. Dworkin and O’Sullivan (2005) report that in the West even though the initiation of sexual activity is a predominantly male activity, men very clearly desired egalitarian patterns of initiation whereby women would perform their share of sexual labor. Interestingly, many male participants in the study expressed the desire for female initiation of sexual activity. However, most female participants were unable to visualize such an incident and/or were able to envision only the stigmatizing and negative consequences of such behavior. This is unsurprising since according to Impett et al (2006) the silencing of the female sense of self is quite likely in a cultural environment (such as India’s) that conceptualizes sex as predominantly male sexual desire, objectifies women and “denies” women’s sexual emotions, desires and agency (p.132). Dworkin and O’Sullivan (2005) also state that the male desire for female initiation reveals the fantasy of being an object of female sexual desire. This initial shift towards female-dominated patterns of initiation shows an inclination towards a more egalitarian or flexible script. However, this shift is occurring in India during a time of ambiguity and Seal
and Ehrhardt (2003) state that men and women may prefer to adhere to the traditional script during such confusing times. Women in India have been experiencing changes in their occupational roles but as mentioned earlier these changes have not been followed by widespread attitudinal changes. In such an ambiguous context it makes sense that women would rather adhere to traditional roles of being the gatekeepers as opposed to risking their relationships and reputations by taking on an initiator role. Interestingly, Wells and Twenge (2005) found that for men in the US attitude change took place before behavior change. They posit that this is because men did not get the chance to change their behavior in accordance with attitude changes since traditional sexual scripts dictated that women are gatekeepers in sexual circumstances. In the context of female initiation of sexual activity it would seem that this finding is applicable for Indian men as well.

**Coping with the consequences of evolving sexual scripts.** Participants elaborated upon their methods of coping with the consequences of behaving in non-traditional ways or strategies for balancing their individual needs with that of the collective in India. Markus and Kitayama (1991) contend that a crucial aspect of the independent self is the ability to distinguish his or herself from the collective. Participants however, spoke of being divided, torn between two worlds, leading double lives with peers and family and the desire to engage in escapist strategies like leaving the state or even the country. While Sinha and Tripathi (1994) emphasized the ability of the Indian psyche to deal with dissonance and paradox, young adults in India seem to be struggling with the psychological impacts of such dissonance. This fits with Suh’s (2007) finding that being excessively context-sensitive can be disadvantageous to the individual when the thoughts, emotions, motivations and behaviors, which are essential for collective harmony, are detrimental to the individual’s sense of well-being and happiness. Some participants discussed the experience of emotions like confusion about proper behavior in ambiguous situations, guilt about keeping secrets regarding dating behavior along with a sense of ambivalence towards one’s role in the dilution of Indian culture.

**Personal growth and hope for the future.** Simon and Gagnon (1986) elaborate upon the life cycle and sexual scripts whereby certain behaviors are sanctioned at certain periods in the life cycle. Nath and Nayar (2004) also highlight the discrepancy that exists in India between the times when younger generations attain puberty and are ready to be sexually active and when society deems it appropriate for them to engage in such behavior. In the same manner,
Participants also alluded to a personal growth in one’s attitudes, emotions, beliefs and behavior in terms of sexuality. Some participants spoke of being strongly influenced by socialization practices along with messages in the dominant media when younger. They expressed the opinion that the power of such influences decreases as one grows into adulthood and begins to rely on one’s own judgment and opinion. This demonstrates that in India it is possible for sexual understanding of the self and others to increase with maturity.

Participants also elaborated upon the need to nurture a mature understanding of sexuality in their children. One method of doing so would be to conduct dialogue around sexuality in a different manner with their children. Chaitan and Shravan spoke of being more open, available, accessible and supportive of their children and their queries around sexuality. Tahira hopes that her children will have greater freedom of choice to date and marry people of their own choice.

**Conclusion and Limitations of Study**

This in-depth exploration of the impact of changing norms regarding sexuality on young adults in India reveals the influence of the prevalent cultural sexual script on the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels in times of ambiguity. Traditional norms persevere alongside the influx and adoption of Western customs and values, however there is varied acceptance of non-traditional behavior based on religion, community, SES and gender. This study has shed much light on the actual experience of young adults in India and the psychological impact of contradictions and uncertainty. There is a gap between desires and expressed wants in terms of marriage, sexual activity and sexuality education. This gap has led to and continues to perpetuate misinformation and a lack of guidance. However, all is not lost as young adults do express the ability to assert individual needs in the face of collective tradition in a proactive manner along with hope for greater openness of discourse for future generations.

Since this was a qualitative study, there was no effort to obtain a representative sample of participants from various Indian cities and rural areas, and this represents a limitation of the present study. The study had a small sample size from a single city in India and all participants had completed at least 12 years of education. As a result generalizations cannot be made to the wider Indian population, which is much more diverse. Also, due to their willingness to participate in such a study involving contemporary sexual experiences, the participants’ narratives cannot be considered as representative of sexuality-related experiences in a mainly conservative society like India. As much as the attempt was made to avoid this, it is quite likely
that questions in the interview invoked a social desirability bias. Participants described the conservative nature of Indian society and the negative consequences of deviating from prescribed roles, which may have raised self-presentational concerns by serving as a reminder of potential ramifications of participating in such an interview. It is also a possibility that since the primary researcher was a female, the candidness of responses from either the male or female participants in the study may have been influenced by self-presentational concerns in ways that cannot be determined. The participants did provide, however, a wide range of responses and different opinions, indicating that they did feel comfortable in expressing a diversity of opinions. There was considerable diversity as well in the religious backgrounds and dating experiences of the participants, although overall, the participants were well-educated.

There are numerous possible future directions that stem from this research. Most importantly, what is the experience of young adults across the length and breadth of India who would not participate in a face-to-face interview on sexuality? How are they navigating changing norms regarding sexuality while taking into account multiple aspects of their identity? What are the constructive steps that can be taken to alleviate the intrapsychic dissonance that results from cultural and interpersonal sanctioning of individual desires? Future research that utilizes both a qualitative and quantitative approach to the study of changing sexuality norms and their impact on young adults in India would enable the description of experiences of a wider population. Providing anonymity of response through the use of questionnaires or online surveys may be an effective means to sample a wider diversity of participants and opinions. Large scale studies need to be undertaken to explore questions regarding the extant sexual double standard, the manner in which it is changing and its psychological impact on men and women. In the light of India’s struggle with AIDS (www.nacoonline.org), the need to provide comprehensive education and enable supportive dialogue about sexuality is urgent in India. The results of this study can be used to design and implement comprehensive sexuality education courses that offer a graduated, age-appropriate curriculum and focus on interpersonal and judgment-making skills as well.
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ideology and adolescent girls’ sexual health. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 35*(2), 131-144.


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Appendices

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Caste</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aditi</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basant</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Brahmin Iyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaitan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ekta</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaurav</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Badaga</td>
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<tr>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shravan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Reddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yash</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Caste pertains to Hinduism. NA = not applicable.
Table 2

Traditional gender and sexuality norms in India

I. Traditional sexual script and gender roles in India

A. Historically influential, extant traditional sexual script in India
   1. Importance of premarital female chastity
   2. Indian men are socialized with high expectations of ‘pure women’
   3. Men initiate and women restrict sexual activity
   4. Influencing factors for arranged marriages

B. Traditional gender script and gender roles in India
   1. Marriage and children are an integral part of Indian identity
   2. Marriage and children are the ultimate achievements for women
   3. Characteristics of a good Indian wife

C. Cultural and familial endorsement of the traditional script and gender roles
   1. Indian society is conservative and narrow-minded
   2. Women are objectified and restricted in their roles by men
   3. Poor, ineffective socialization of children in dealing with the opposite sex
Table 3

*Norms regarding sexuality in India are in a period of transition*

II. Changing norms regarding sexuality: Influences and consequences

A. Norms regarding sexuality are changing
   1. Increasing prevalence of non-traditional behavior; varied acceptance
   2. Extra marital affairs are increasing

B. Reasons for changing norms regarding sexuality
   1. The Westernization of Indian culture
   2. The BPO industry boom
   3. Increasing peer influence

C. Consequences of changing norms regarding sexuality
   1. Indian culture is getting diluted; pros and cons
   2. Troubled coexistence of Western and traditional norms
   3. Conflict between one’s own needs and obligation to the collective
   4. Enforcement of compliance through social control
   5. Arranged versus choice marriage and the in-between
Table 4

*The sexual double standard in India*

III. The sexual double standard in India: Changes and consequences

A. The extant sexual double standard
   1. Non-traditional women are ‘black marked’ but boys will be boys
   2. Absolutely no acceptance of non-traditional brides
   3. Single women past a certain age are stigmatized
   4. The sexual double standard is changing

B. Consequences of the sexual double standard
   1. Despite good character one is judged if sexually active
   2. Negative and direct consequences for women
   3. Lighter, even positive, consequences for men
   4. Personal consequences for participants
Table 5

*Discourse regarding sexuality in India*

IV. Varying levels of discourse regarding sexuality in India

A. Resistance, lack of discussion and awareness across society; with exceptions
B. Parental discomfort with discussing sexuality
C. Poor quality discourse within the educational system
   1. Limited and poor sex education in India
   2. Numerous suggestions to improve sex education
D. Inaccurate, flippant discourse with peers
   1. Discussions can be enlightening but sometimes misinforming
   2. Varied comfort levels with the open discussion of sex
E. Unrealistic media portrayal of sexuality
   1. Media has a pervasive negative and misleading influence
   2. Regional media is changing due to Western media influence
F. Desired but infrequent dyadic communication
   1. Open communication is desired but rare
   2. Conditional and unlikely disclosure of sexual history
G. Sexual understanding comes with maturity

V. Reasons for the lack of discourse

A. Fear, embarrassment and shyness restrict discourse

VI. Consequences of the lack of discourse

A. Misinformed, misguided children
B. Denial of the occurrence of intimate dating relationships
Demographics and Sexuality Education Questionnaire

1. Chosen pseudonym:

2. Age:

3. Level of education:

4. Father’s level of education:

5. Father’s occupation:

6. Mother’s level of education:

7. Mother’s occupation:

8. Religion:

9. Caste:

10. Did you receive any sexuality education in an educational setting?

11. If so, at which educational level did this occur?
   a. Elementary
   b. Junior school
   c. Senior school
   d. College

12. Please describe the experience.
13. Would you change any aspect(s) of this experience to make it better and/or more effective? If so, what would you change, why and how?

14. Please provide information on any informal sexuality education that you have experienced from the following people:

   a. Parents:

   b. Peers:
c. Health professionals:

d. Media:

15. Would you change any aspect(s) of these experiences to make them better and more effective? If so, what would you change, why and how?
Possible interview questions

1. What were the first messages you were given about sexuality?
2. Where and with whom did you first discuss sexuality and related topics?
3. What are the messages that you receive as an adult?
4. What is the perception of sexuality and intimacy in India?
5. How is sexuality discussed in India?
6. How does society view romantic/dating relationships before marriage?
7. How do your parents/elders in your family view romantic/dating relationships before marriage?
8. Was sexuality ever discussed in your family? What have your parents or elders in your family told you about sex or being sexually active?
9. How does society/parents/elders view young men who are in romantic/dating relationships before marriage?
10. How does society/parents/elders view young women who are in romantic/dating relationships before marriage?
11. How would your parents or elders in your family feel about or react to you marrying someone who was not of their choice and of a different religion and/or caste?
12. Would you be able to marry this person with out their approval?
13. How do you think young men view other women/men who are sexually active before marriage?
14. How do you think young women view other women/men who are sexually active before marriage?
15. What do you think of dating relationships before marriage?
16. What do your peers think of romantic/dating relationships before marriage?
17. How do you view your peers who are sexually active?
18. What are the consequences of being a single and sexually active man in India?
19. What are the consequences of being a single and sexually active woman in India?
20. How do you think you would feel if you were sexually active?
21. Have you been in a romantic/dating relationship?
22. How would you feel if your female partner initiated sexual activity? What would you think of her?
23. As a woman in a romantic relationship, how would you feel about initiating sexual activity? How do you think your partner would react?
24. What was your experience of being in an intimate interpersonal relationship? Were you open about your relationship or would you have to keep this a secret? With whom did you discuss relationship issues?
25. Would you be able tell your parents about being in an intimate relationship or do you feel that this is something that cannot be discussed? Why would you be able or not be able to do so?
26. Were you able to discuss sexual activities and establish boundaries with your partner? What were these discussions like? How did you feel and think about yourself and your partner?
27. In your opinion, what facilitates the open discussion of intimacy and sexual activity in a dating (or marital) relationship?
28. What are the barriers to an open and honest discussion between partners in a dating (or marital) relationship?
29. If you were sexually active before marriage, would you be able to disclose this information to your future husband or wife? If not, why?
30. What is your opinion of the manner in which sexual information is discussed and disseminated in India?
31. How do you think such information should be disseminated to adolescents and young adults?
Informed Consent Form

Thank you for your participation in this study. Before starting, please be aware of the following information. It will explain more about this study.

This study is interested in the following: the changing perception of sexual norms in India. Norms regarding sexuality are in transition in India and traditional customs and families are slowly losing their influence on the behaviors and attitudes of young adults. We are interested in understanding how participants perceive these changes and what they attribute these changes to. A deeper understanding of how younger generations make sense of this scenario where boundaries are blurred and influences like the family and the peer group are in direct conflict with each other, is sought. Information is required on how youngsters learn about and/or discuss sexuality in India and whether safe channels of communication about sexuality exist in Indian society. Dating is fast becoming a common activity for young adults in India but many dating relationships remain a secret indicating that there is a perceived discrepancy between what society deems acceptable and what is deemed acceptable by younger generations. If the need of the hour is more open discussion and communication about sexuality, we need to explore how youngsters themselves perceive the situation and how they think it can be improved before any proactive steps can be taken. We hope that information gained from these interviews will contribute to a constructive understanding of the sexual behavior and attitudes of young adults in India and the implications for HIV interventions with this group.

The study is for individuals who are 18 years or older. You will first be asked to complete a questionnaire that will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. This questionnaire will ask for demographic information and about the formal and informal instances of sexuality education you may have experienced and how you think they could be made more effective. The second portion of the procedure will include an interview. This will last for approximately 1 – 1½ hours. I will ask you several questions that relate to socialization about sexuality and the growing acceptance of intimate interpersonal relationships among younger generations in the Indian context. Remember that your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any of the questions and if you feel uncomfortable and wish to stop the questionnaire or interview process, you may do so.

I also ask for your permission to audiotape the interview. This will help me to go back to your interview and better understand the information you share with me. The audiotapes will also allow me to transcribe our interview verbatim. Please indicate your consent for the following procedures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To have the interview audio taped:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To keep the audiotapes for an indefinite time, not to exceed 7 years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**We ask your permission on #2 because we may need the time for any further data analysis. After the data analysis is complete, or in 7 years after the interviews, the audiotapes will be destroyed.**
The questionnaires and audiotapes will be stored in a locked office. There will be no information that would identify your name with any of these materials. The only people who will have access to the questionnaires and audiotapes will be my supervisor, any research assistant, and myself.

If you would like to participate in this study, please sign the informed consent agreement. You can then start with the questionnaire. If you have any questions during the questionnaire portion, please let me know.

Thank you for your interest in this study. We appreciate your participation!

Please contact me, or my supervisor, if you have any questions about the study:

Sandhya Thomas                        Margaret O’Dougherty Wright, PhD
Clinical Psychology Graduate Student   Clinical Psychology Professor
thomass9@muohio.edu                    wrightmo@muohio.edu

You may also reach Dr. Margaret O’Dougherty Wright by phone: 001-513-529-2406
Debriefing Form

Thank you so much for your participation in this research!

The questionnaire and interview were designed to learn about your perception of the changing sexual behaviors and attitudes in Indian society. This study will seek to describe sexual scripts that exist in India. Scripts take the perspective of life as a drama. Sexual scripts refer to constructs about sexuality that a majority of members of a certain culture will recognize. They operate and interact on three different levels: the cultural, interpersonal and the intrapsychic. The script at the cultural level influences the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels. Scripts vary across time and culture. The objective is to understand the perception of sexuality in a society whose norms and values are in transition.

What we have found is very limited prior work on the sexual behavior and attitudes of young adults in India. Social norms are in transition in India and young adults are experiencing sexuality in a very different context as compared to previous generations. Young adults are caught between traditional norms that disapprove of intimate relationships before marriage and the context of changing peer and media as well as biological influences. The reality is that that majority of reported AIDS cases in India are found among young people (www.nacoonline.com). In the larger environmental context of HIV/AIDS, blurred social boundaries, increasingly permissive attitudes towards premarital sex and decreasing age at first sexual intercourse, it is important to understand the experience of young adults who are navigating the changing norms of society regarding sexuality. We felt that it was important to learn about how young adults perceive these changing norms, how young adults reconcile differing influences, how they believe sexuality is approached and discussed in India and their opinion as to how education regarding sexuality can be made more effective. It is hoped that the data generated by this research will enable more focused and constructive interventions for youth in a country where communication about sexuality is minimal. Your willingness to participate in this study will hopefully result in a deeper understanding of the reality of the situation, leading to the empowerment of youth through focused dissemination and discussion of information on sexuality and informed decision-making.

If you are interested, we would also like to invite you to participate in a follow-up portion of the study at a later date. This follow-up would allow us to obtain a more holistic and collective verification of the data analysis. The follow-up would take approximately one hour.

Regardless of whether you wish to participate in the follow-up, you can contact me to ask about the results of the study at thomass9@muohio.edu. The following resources also provide excellent background for our study:


If you have any additional questions about this research, or have become distressed and would like to discuss your participation, please contact one of the researchers listed below. There are also a number or professional service contacts that will assist you if you have other concerns. Please let me know if you would like help in obtaining a referral for counseling. I will be very happy to help.

Sandhya Thomas
Clinical Psychology Graduate Student
28275080/ 98403 75676 (India)
001-513-330-4147 (USA)

Margaret O’Dougherty Wright, PhD
Clinical Psychology Professor
001-513-529-2406 (USA)

Other resources:
India:
Dr Lakshmi Ravikanth
Counseling Psychologist
92821 32251

Student Counseling Center
Women’s Christian College
28272956

Miami University:
Community Counseling and Crisis Center
110 S. College Ave.
513-523-4146

Student Counseling Service
195 Health Services Center
513-529-4634

Psychology Clinic
Psychology Building
529-2423