

# GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY AMONG CONTEMPORARY YOUTH

GENERATION SEX

**Edited by** Patricia Neff Claster  
and Sampson Lee Blair

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SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES  
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**VOLUME 23**

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AMONG CONTEMPORARY YOUTH:  
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# **GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY AMONG CONTEMPORARY YOUTH: GENERATION SEX**

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**Julie Liefeld**, RN, LMFT, PhD, graduated in 2006 from the University of CT with a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies; she earned her Master's from UCONN in 1999 in Marriage and Family Therapy. She is licensed and became an AAMFT approved supervisor in 2005. Her undergraduate degree is in nursing from Boston College. She is a registered nurse in CT and worked in pediatric oncology before pursuing her family and advanced degrees. She is a practicing family therapist, an associate professor, and director of the Southern Connecticut State University Marriage and Family Therapy Training Clinic. Before joining the core faculty at SCSU, she worked in Student Affairs as Counseling Center Directors at Mitchell College, where she became the Vice President of Student Affairs before she left to Direct the Counseling Center at SCSU. She developed a specialty on training faculty in issues of transition for millennial students and became a specialist in suicide prevention in postsecondary populations. She is also a registered yoga teacher and trainer of yoga teachers; she integrates the concepts of yoga and mindfulness in her clinical practice, research, and teaching. Clinically, she specializes in the impact of trauma, disability, and oppression on individual and couple life satisfaction. Julie feels passionate about applying her lifelong learning to create an integrative developmental approach to healing and change using mind body awareness, principles of human development, and a deep-seated belief that people can heal the past in the present through self-awareness and the practice of authenticity. Her research involves the investigation of the impact of mindfulness, creativity, and whole-brained activity on postsecondary students and applying nodal mapping to clinical assessment learning and teaching, and the impact of disability on transition and life satisfaction. She has presented nationally and internationally on these topics.

**Mollie T. McQuillan** is a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University in the Human Development and Social Policy Program. Her current research uses both qualitative and quantitative evidence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the academic environment for gender-expansive youth and how their social environment influences their health. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago and two master's degrees, one in Teaching from the University of Saint Thomas and another in Human Development and Social Policy from Northwestern University.

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**Timothy Stablein**, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Union College in Schenectady, NY. He received his PhD from the University of Connecticut and postdoctoral training at Dartmouth College. His areas of specialization include adolescence, deviance, health, and research methods. His research focuses on two overlapping areas. First, he is interested in how adolescent experiences shape deviant and delinquent behavior, identity, and health trajectories, particularly among homeless adolescents and others with homeless and street life experience. He also researches adolescent health-care experiences and the role technology plays in shaping views about health information privacy and health information exchanges. He was recently Principal Investigator for a study supported by the Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), which explored the role of electronic health records in pediatrician–adolescent patient interactions. His research has appeared in both applied and cross-disciplinary outlets such as the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Emerging Adulthood*, *Health Sociology Review*, *IEEE: Security & Privacy*, and the *Journal of Health Organization and Management*.

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**R. Stephen Warner** (PhD, University of California at Berkeley, 1972) is Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has been President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Chair of the Sections on Sociology of Religion and Sociological Theory of the American Sociological Association. He has held Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships, has been a visiting member of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton, NJ), and his research has been supported by the Lilly Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Among his publications are *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (University of California Press, 1988); “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States” (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1993); *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Temple University Press, 1998; with Judith Wittner); *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore* (Penn State University Press, 2001; with Ho-Youn Kwon and Kwang Chung Kim); *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (Rutgers University Press, 2005); “The Role of Families and Religious Institutions in Transmitting Religion among Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in the USA” (with Rhys H. Williams), pp. 159–165 in *Religion and Youth*, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion (Ashgate, 2010); and “Race and Religion beyond Protestant, Catholic and Jewish Whites,” in *The Oxford History of American Immigration and Ethnicity* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

**Rhys H. Williams** (PhD, University of Massachusetts, 1988) is Professor of Sociology at Loyola University Chicago, where he is also Director of the McNamara Center for the Social Study of Religion. With R. Stephen Warner and Courtney Ann Irby, he is working on a book from the research reported here, tentatively titled, *Slow Religion: Bringing Up American Youth as Protestant, Muslim, and Hindu*. His other research focuses on religion, culture, politics, and social movements in the United States. His books include *Cultural Wars in American Politics* (Aldine, 1997), *A Bridging of Faiths: Religion and Politics in a New England City* (Princeton, 1992; w/ N.J. Demerath III), *Religion & Progressive Activism* (New York University Press, 2017; w/ T. N.

Fuist and R. Braunstein), and *The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity in the City* (New York University Press, 2017; w/ J. Barron). His articles have appeared in journals such as the *American Sociological Review*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Theory*, *Theory & Society*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, *Sociology of Religion*, and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. His work has won “Distinguished Article” awards from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the American Sociological Association’s Section on Sociology of Religion. He has been President of the Association for the Sociology of Religion and of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, as well as Chair of the American Sociological Association’s Sections on Religion, Social Movements, and Political Sociology.

**Ciann L. Wilson**, PhD, is of Afro-, Indo- and Euro-Jamaican ancestry. She has over a decade of experience working within African, Caribbean, and Black communities across the Greater Toronto Area first as a youth programmer and now as a health researcher. She is Assistant Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University where her areas of interest build off her community-engaged work to include critical race theory, anti-/de-colonial theory, African diasporic and Indigenous community health, HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive well-being, and community-based research. Her body of work aims to utilize research as an avenue for (1) sharing the stories and realities of African diasporic and Indigenous peoples and (2) improving the health and well-being of these communities.

# INTRODUCTION

Today's youth may very well be the most sexually open-minded and tolerant generation. Issues of gender identity and sexual behavior are increasingly prominent in various spheres of popular culture and media consumption. As such, youth are inundated with a barrage of sexual images, content, and ideologies, making sex a topic that is more openly discussed and, therefore, a more significant aspect of young people's everyday lifeworlds compared to previous generations. While sexuality has always been an important part of adolescence, notions of sexuality have become more fluid and flexible. The sexual experiences of youth are considerably less bound by the limitations of conventional gender norms and heteronormative sexual scripts. With access to the Internet, young people around the globe can readily obtain virtually any and all information they seek concerning sex and sexuality. Gender and sexuality have thus become increasingly salient aspects of identity formation for contemporary youth. Many young people are more openly expressing their gender identity, testing boundaries, and challenging traditional societal norms and the didactic gender constructs of femininity and masculinity. This has led to considerable social debate about not only feminine and masculine identities, but also transgender identities among youth. Indeed, the loosening of gender boundaries and the sexual liberation of youth has not come without backlash. As the present volume of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* was coming together, issues of equality as they relate to sex, gender identity, and sexual behavior have been at the forefront of national political debate in the United States as well as other countries around the world. From discussions about limiting women's reproductive rights, to efforts to curtail the progress that has been made in terms of legal protections for those in the LGBTQI+ community, the rights of those who do not conform to traditional hegemonic standards of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality are being challenged, once again. Amplified effort to control the sexuality of youth is especially exemplified by a recent vote in the House of Representatives to pass legislation that would send teens who sext (or send naked pictures) to jail for a minimum sentence of 15 years. While all of the democrats voted in opposition, only two republicans voted against this harsh measure aimed at punishing teens for engaging in unconventional sexual behavior. In this book, we explore some of the evolving issues concerning sex, gender, and sexuality in the lives of children and adolescents.



Religious groups and leaders have long been concerned with how to best control and monitor the sexual behavior of young followers. In the chapter, “‘Dare to Be Different’: How Religious Groups Frame and Enact Appropriate Sexuality and Gender Norms among Young Adults,” Rhys H. Williams, Courtney Ann Irby and R. Stephen Warner investigate how adults in positions of religious authority attempt to shape the gender norms and sexual behavior of the youth they work with in the face of what they see as an increasingly hypersexualized culture. Through numerous observations and interviews with religious young adults and religious leaders from Muslim, Hindu, and Protestant Christian religious groups, the researchers identify three organizational styles used across the religious traditions to promote traditional understandings of gender, heterosexuality, and marriage.

While there has been growing social acceptance and advocacy for LGBT rights in recent years, many youth continue to experience negative reactions and rejection from family members. Timothy Stablein provides a comprehensive review of the literature concerning the experiences of homeless LGBT youth in the chapter, “Estimating the Status and Needs of Homeless LGBT Adolescents: Advocacy, Identity, and the Dialectics of Support.” After identifying the logistical problems with accurately estimating the extent of the problem, research concerning the experience of homelessness among LGBT youth and issues of advocacy and support are addressed. Stablein then concludes with some practice and policy recommendations intended to help improve the situation of this vulnerable and understudied group of young people.

Youth who have been identified as intersex at birth or as a child represent another group that researchers have neglected to study. As conveyed by the 16 youth interviewed by Georgiann Davis and Chris Wakefield in the chapter, “The Intersex Kids Are All Right? Diagnosis Disclosure and the Experiences of Intersex Youth,” growing up intersex is not as detrimental to gender identity development or sense of self as doctors and parents once feared. Rather than withholding this information as was often done with children diagnosed as intersex a generation ago, all of the youth in this study were made knowledgeable about their diagnosis at the time of diagnosis. As Davis and Wakefield discover, heightened activism and the greater ability to connect with others in the intersex community has had a remarkably positive impact on today’s intersex youth helping them to confront and embrace their intersex status.

Stigma surrounding gender-nonconformity has also lessened over the last decade or so as the topic has gained more public visibility, calling attention to how children can influence parents to develop and accept alternative notions and understandings of gender. In the chapter, “Examining the Family Transition: How Parents of Gender-Diverse Youth Develop Trans-Affirming Attitudes,” Krysti N. Ryan conducts interviews with parents of gender-diverse and transgender children. Mothers, in particular, expressed overwhelming feelings of being caught between the competing mandates of mothering a

well-adjusted or “proper” child by hegemonic standards of gender and demonstrating unconditional love, acceptance, and emotional support.

The taboo subject of transactional sexual relations among youth is explored by Ciann L. Wilson and Sarah Flicker in the chapter, “Let’s Talk about Sex for Money: An Exploration of Economically Motivated Relationships among Young, Black Women in Canada.” Relying on multiple sources of qualitative, empirical data, Wilson and Flicker demonstrate the existence of a transactional subculture among a group of Black youth in the Northwestern part of Toronto. Transactional or economically motivated sexual relationships take many forms and are increasingly facilitated by the widespread availability of the Internet, related websites, and social media. While these relations are not specific to any race or class, Wilson and Flicker argue that limited resources and access to job opportunities as well as other structural barriers, such as institutional racism, increase the likelihood of women engaging in economically driven relationships.

Using nationally representative longitudinal data (AddHealth), Mollie T. McQuillan extends upon previous research concerning advantages in educational attainment among nonheterosexual youth in the chapter, “Educational Attainment and Sexual Orientation in Adolescent and Young Adult Males.” Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, most sexual minority men are found to have higher educational attainment. Arguing for the parsing of sexual identification categories instead of lumping all sexual minorities into one group, McQuillan finds unique differences between young men who identify with varying levels of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Interestingly, those who inconsistently identified as heterosexual or homosexual reported lower levels of educational attainment compared to those with more stable reports of sexual identification. Early identification of sexual orientation and stability of sexual orientation over time appears to be positively associated with higher levels of educational achievement.

The intersection between queer sexual identity and disability among adolescents has rarely been explored. Youth are often perceived as asexual or sexually pure, especially youth with disabilities. Using data collected from a case study with a young gay man with cerebral palsy undergoing queer affirmative therapy, Rebecca Harvey, Paul Levatino, and Julie Liefeld illustrate some of the challenges of experiencing multiple intersecting marginalized identities in the chapter, “‘To Feel Him Love Me’: Emerging Intersections of Identity, Queerness, and Differing Ability.” The model of therapy presented offers experiential insight and direction for practitioners and clinicians working with queer youth who are differently abled.

As children and adolescents have traditionally been viewed as sexually innocent, there has always been debate about how much and when information about sexuality should be disclosed to young people. Since talking to teens about sex can be quite difficult for many adults, young people are often unprepared for their first sexual experiences and, as a result, more susceptible to

negative consequences. In the chapter, “Sexual Debut Education: Cultivating a Healthy Approach to Young People’s Sexual Experiences,” Yvonne Vissing promotes the “sexual debut” framework, a child rights-based approach to sexual education intended to empower young people and give them greater control in decision-making regarding the sexual activity they partake in by arming them with honest and accurate information. This comprehensive approach to sexual education can help to protect youth from victimization, promote greater communication before sex with partners, encourage more satisfying sexual relationships, and increase the overall health and emotional well-being of youth.

Dating violence is one of the deleterious consequences of being poorly educated about sexuality and healthy sexual relationships. In the chapter, “Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: Teen Dating Violence Victims’ Responses to Partner Suicidal Ideation,” Jessica M. Fitzpatrick presents key findings from interviews with 16 young women who had been involved in abusive relationships during their teenage years where their boyfriends threatened suicide when they feared the relationship was ending. The themes that emerge through the interviews demonstrate the need for prevention education to address the connection between dating violence and teen suicide.

Despite a growing body of literature concerning the influence of media on gender and sexual socialization, there is a relative dearth of research on the socializing effects of children’s literature. The manifest and latent content in children’s books can significantly shape how children come to see and understand normative gender and sexuality constructs. In our final chapter, “Two by Two: Heteronormativity and the Noah Story for Children,” Sarah M. Corse analyzes 47 different books about the story of Noah and the flood to demonstrate how traditional gender norms, as they relate to patriarchal hierarchy and a gendered division of labor, and heteronormativity are normalized and reinforced.

Overall, the 10 chapters that have been included in this volume of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* offer considerable insight into various issues concerning sex, gender, identity, and sexual behavior among contemporary youth. Many thanks are due to all of the authors for their contributions to this volume, the anonymous reviewers who offered thoughtful and detailed reviews, and the editorial staff at Emerald Publishing.

Patricia Neff Cluster  
Sampson Lee Blair  
*Editors*

# “DARE TO BE DIFFERENT”: HOW RELIGIOUS GROUPS FRAME AND ENACT APPROPRIATE SEXUALITY AND GENDER NORMS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Rhys H. Williams, Courtney Ann Irby and  
R. Stephen Warner

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose — The sexual lives of religious youth and young adults have been an increasing topic of interest since the rise of abstinence-only education and attendant programs in many religious institutions. But while we know a lot about individual-level rates of sexual behavior, far less is known about how religious organizations shape and mediate sexuality. We draw on data from observations with youth and young adult ministries and interviews with religious young adults and adult leaders from Muslim, Hindu, and Protestant Christian groups in order to examine how religious adults in positions of organizational authority work to manage the gender and sexual developments in the transition to adulthood among their youth. We find three distinct organizational styles across the various religious traditions: avoidance through gender segregation, self-restraint supplemented with peer surveillance, and a classed disengagement. In each of these organizational*

*responses, gender and sexuality represent something that must be explained and controlled in the process of cultivating the proper adult religious disposition. The paper examines how religious congregations and other religious organizations oriented toward youth, work to manage the gender and sexual developments in their youth's transitions to adulthood. The paper draws from a larger project that is studying the lived processes of religious transmission between generations.*

**Methodology/approach** — *Data were extracted from (a) ethnographic observations of youth programming at religious organizations; (b) ethnographic observations with families during their religious observances; (c) interviews with adult leaders of youth ministry programs. The sample includes Protestant Christian, Muslim, and Hindu organizations and families.*

**Findings** — *The paper presents three organizational approaches toward managing sex and instilling appropriate gender ideas: (a) prescribed avoidance, in which young men and women are segregated in many religious and educational settings and encouraged to moderate any cross-gender contact in public; (b) self-restraint supplemented with peer surveillance, in which young people are repeatedly encouraged not only to learn to control themselves through internal moral codes but also to enlist their peers to monitor each other's conduct and call them to account for violations of those codes; and (c) "classed" disengagement, in which organizations comprised of highly educated, middle-class families do little to address sex directly, but treat it as but one aspect of developing individual ethical principles that will assist their educational and class mobility.*

**Research limitations/implications** — *While the comparative sample in this paper is a strength, other religious traditions than the ones studied may have other practices. The ethnographic nature of the research provides in-depth understandings of the organizational practices, but cannot comment on how representative these practices are across regions, organizations, or faiths.*

**Originality/value** — *Most studies of religion and youth sex and sexuality either rely on individual-level data from surveys, or study the discourses and ideologies found in books, movies, and the like. They do not study the "mechanisms," in either religious organizations or families, through which messages are communicated and enacted. Our examination of organizational and familial practices shows sex and gender communication in action. Further, most existing research has focused on Christians, wherein we have a comparative sample of Protestant Christians, Muslims, and Hindus.*

**Keywords:** Religion; youth/young adults; congregations; sex; gender; Muslims; Hindus; Evangelical Protestants; ethnography

## INTRODUCTION

While religious groups have long had a vested interest in moralizing and structuring the sexual lives of their members, the debates on sex education during the 1990s, and the salience of what were called “culture wars” issues about gender, sexuality, and family brought the connection between religion and young adult sexuality to the foreground – in both religious communities and for scholars. Focusing predominately on abstinence messages and programs, a wealth of social science research has since studied the intersection of sexuality, religion, and young adults by examining the religious influence of “abstinence-only” messaging on the sexual lives of youth and young adults. For the most part, this body of work has approached these issues by either analyzing the individual sexual practices of religious young adults (Adamczyk, 2009; Barkan, 2006; Beck, Cole, & Hammond, 1991; Burdette & Hill, 2009; Hull, Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011; Jensen, Newell, & Holman, 1990; Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004; Rostosky, Regnerus, & Wright, 2003; Uecker, 2008; Woodruff, 1985) or evaluating the rhetoric on sex and religion among movements such as True Love Waits (Gardner, 2011; Hendershot, 2004; Jones, 2012).

An extensive body of quantitative research has sought to specify why religion appears to often decrease the rates of sexual activity among young adults and adolescents. While this research often finds that religion reduces the number of sexual partners of young adults (Burdette & Hill, 2009; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; Uecker, 2008; Woodruff, 1985) and affects when they start having intercourse (Beck et al., 1991; Hull et al., 2011), the strength, and even the presence, of the statistical relationship often depends on how religion is operationalized. For instance, with the exception of sectarian groups such as the Latter-Day Saints, religious tradition often has little impact (Beck et al., 1991; Holman & Harding, 1996; Uecker, 2008). Additionally, while religious attendance generally tends to be negatively associated with sexual activity, the findings are mixed. Perhaps not surprisingly, religious affiliation and attendance have little independent impact on behavior; rather, research tends to indicate that religious salience is most predictive.

A smaller stream of scholarship has sought to move away from analyzing the rates of sexual activity among young adults and, more broadly, challenges the binary categories of “abstinent” and “sexually active” (Gardner, 2011). One strand of this research has qualitatively examined how religious young adults strive to live chaste lifestyles by focusing on their daily experiences negotiating tensions of gender, sexuality, and faith (Diefendorf, 2015; Irby, 2013; Mir, 2009; O’Brien, 2017; Wilkins, 2008; Yip & Page, 2013). In doing so, these scholars have documented the multitude of ways that religious youth actively renegotiate their sexuality within secular contexts, which often produces greater variation than the more narrow moral mandates about sex and relationships. A second strand of this research has tried to complicate understandings of the context and

social categories of young adults' faith and sexuality by examining the surrounding rhetorical context. By studying abstinence groups, such as True Love Waits or The Silver Ring Thing, scholars have discovered that while religious groups promote abstinence they also use sex to sell young adults on living an abstinent lifestyle (Gardner, 2011; Hendershot, 2004).

Together this research reveals insights into the cultural logics about sexuality that young adults face and the actions that they take. The current literature, however, is limited due to little empirical examination into the *mechanisms* that mediate the rhetoric and how those mechanisms shape young adults' actions. More specifically, we show that research into the religious communities and organizations that young adults inhabit can provide insight into how young adults learn about sexual morality from religious authorities, and the religious context for their sexual actions. How do local religious communities mediate, contest, and reshape broader cultural messages about sexuality? Additionally, how do local religious communities shape young adults' sexual actions through processes such as social control, social support, and accountability? Moreover, how are the constructions of "proper" displays of masculinity and femininity articulated through messages about sexuality? To approach these questions, we examine three organizational styles that emerged in our study of youth ministry programs: *avoidance*; *self-restraint* and *peer surveillance*; and *disengagement*.

## DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from interviews, ethnographic observations with religious organizations, and ethnographic observations with families, all gathered within a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The research project's overall purpose was to explore how important, and in what ways, religious institutions help formulate youth and young adults' senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections; we are interested in the intersection of organization and identity, and the role of organizations in the lived reality of religious transmission. The present paper uses data gathered from organizations and families representing Muslim and Hindu groups, and White and Latinx Protestant Churches. Due to our interest in the dynamics of organizational involvement, we purposefully studied young people and some families who were involved with religious organizations and religious organizations that had vibrant youth involvement. Our goal was to examine some of the organizational and familial dynamics in which young people are involved, and how that affects the ways they develop the religious and public identities they come to claim.

Specifically, we focus here on two sources of data. First, we conducted institutional ethnographic work through multiple site visits with religious organizations. We attended worship services, classes, and youth activities at Hindu, Muslim, and Protestant Christian organizations that cater to or seemed to

attract youth. For the most part, this meant congregations and their youth programs, but it also included some organizations that reached across individual congregations to offer programming for youth and young adults in our larger metropolitan, or smaller regional, areas. We located these sites in two phases; first we canvassed with the help of graduate assistants and undergraduate interns for a wide variety of organizations that we or our student assistants had heard about.<sup>1</sup> After finding some institutions that particularly seemed to fit our needs in terms of their vibrant youth activities and membership, we chose a sample for extended study. As a result, we intensively researched eight particularly vibrant organizations/congregations by doing multiple visits and individual interviews with their youth ministry leadership. These sites included one African American Protestant church, two evangelical Protestant congregations that were multiethnic, one White moderate/mainline Protestant church, one Muslim *masjid*, one regional youth organization sponsored by a national Islamic group, one Hindu temple, and one Hindu group that held regional meetings that included youth and young adults.

Our second source of data for this paper comes from ethnographic observations of families regarding their religious involvements. We spent entire days, usually on the most religiously significant day of the week (e.g., Sundays for Christians) with families, not only participating with them in their religious involvements, but also sharing meals and informal relaxing time. Understanding how the key “religious” day is organized, at both the congregation and the home, was designed to help us get a clearer sense of how religious faith is transmitted to children, but it also complemented our ethnographic observations about the ways in which youth and young adults were incorporated into, and in turn used, the organization. We contacted the families through references from the religious leaders at their main place of worship. In total, there were 12 families from six different religious congregations — two African American Protestant families, two White Protestant families from a moderate nondenominational suburban church, four families from two different multiethnic (White, Black, and Latinx) Evangelical Protestant churches,<sup>2</sup> two Muslim families from a suburban *masjid*, and two Hindu families from a temple that sought specifically to educate families in Hindu traditions (beyond just functioning as a site for the performance of rituals). All the families had youth under-18 living at home. Our experiences with these families allowed us to examine the direct connection between family practices and religious organizations.

Taken altogether our data show the important role that religious institutions play in helping to formulate young adults’ senses of who they are, what they believe, and the languages they use to articulate those connections. These data may not allow us to make sweeping generalizations about religious institutions and their attempts at organizing young people’s sexuality; rather, we report on the patterns we observed that cross religious traditions as well as some similarities and differences existing within traditions. While we did not set out to research how congregations teach about sexuality, the topic inductively



emerged as we were in the field, examining how religious institutions work to organize ideas, cultural logics, and practices so that youth become religious adults. In paying attention to those processes about many different aspects of life, we noticed many of their efforts were about sex. We developed our typology here from watching these varied institutions in action and considering how teachings reflected the particular religious traditions, as well as the racial—ethnic and class positions of each organization. Rather than offer a set of ideal types that can be generalized to all youth ministry in each specific religious tradition, the following analysis draws on our observations to frame inductively when sex and attendant notions of appropriate gender behaviors emerged as salient within organizational practices. Toward this end, we employ an interpretation presentation approach (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 184) to showcase the three organizational styles because “this alternation makes the relationship between the data and analysis more evident and conveys ways in which they form a whole.”

## DATA ANALYSIS

While religion likely has always played a role in regulating sexuality (Ellingson, 2002), the topic of young adult sexuality has recently created significant anxieties for many religious groups (Page & Shipley, 2016). From the perspective of many religious communities, young adults have become increasingly sexualized or at the very least are exposed to a more sexualized culture (Regnerus, 2007). Furthermore, the recognition that young people marry and form families at a later age means that many religious organizations feel compelled to monitor their youth and young adults — to socialize and prepare them over this more protracted period of youth and adolescence. Nonetheless, explicit and direct encounters with sexuality and gender were not uniform among the eight religious institutions where we observed. In analyzing the talks, programming, and informal interactions between leaders and youth, we identified three organizational styles that emerged: *avoidance*, *self-reliance* and *peer surveillance*, and *disengagement*. Thus, this paper demonstrates how the process of becoming a religious young adult is infused with particular messages and institutional practices about sex and gender, as well as modeled by the adult religious leadership.

### *Prescribing Avoidance*

Faced with what they view as a slackening of sexual norms and values, conservative religious groups often promote avoidance as a strategy for their members. While many religious leaders instruct unmarried, young adults to avoid all sexual activity (i.e., abstinence), some extend this message to include

prohibitions against dating and to limit interactions with people of a different gender (Irby, 2013; Mir, 2009; O'Brien, 2017). The Muslim groups we observed most explicitly called for avoidance for their young adults and employed organizational strategies to enact this ideal. Within their religious organizations they sought to create gender-segregated classes and activities that would ideally also minimize cross-gender interaction among the unmarried adolescents. In an effort to extend this behavior outside the mosque, teachings also included directives for how young men and women should embody modesty. While both men and women were advised to dress modestly, men were further advised to approach women with downcast eyes and to avoid overly personal inquiries. In the following ethnographic vignettes, we explore how calls for avoidance were grounded in gendered constructions of the challenges and promises of sexuality for young adults.

One summer, a religious- and gender-mixed group from our research team conducted participant observation at the annual summer camp/conference of an organization that specifically organized and ran programming for high-school-age youth. This particular summer conference brought together youth from Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, many of them from small towns where they might be members of the only Muslim family, with youth from Chicago, Milwaukee, and other places with significant Muslim populations. The male authors and a male undergraduate intern attended a workshop for the young men (ages 14 to 18, some of them already bearded) focused on the conference theme, "Dare to Be Different." It stressed the particular responsibility of these young Muslim men to practice and stand up for the ideals of sexual modesty and complete abstinence from sexual activity. A theme in the young men's workshop, which varied in its explicitness, was the threat posed to men's honor by women's sexuality.

One speaker referred to the story told in the Qur'an (S. 12, Section 3) of the coming of age in Egypt of the Prophet Youssef (the Biblical Joseph), whose host's very attractive wife attempts to seduce him. Although sorely tempted, Youssef is mindful of Allah's invisible presence and refuses her advances. He thus passes the test that proves him suitable to become a leader of his people. The speaker admonished the gathered young men that he did not mean that men should studiously avoid women: "Don't just stare at the floor all the time at school so that you walk into a wall" – "We're Muslims, not airheads" – but that instead they should conscientiously tell themselves to look away when confronted by temptation. Sexual energy is not itself ungodly, but it should be saved for the time to be spent with one's wife, "that one relationship that you enter with someone who has saved herself for marriage just as we save ourselves for marriage." She is the person with whom we will eventually enter paradise.

While the men's workshop presupposed that the key issue was young women serving as a source of temptation, the young women's workshop (attended by a female research assistant and three undergraduate interns) focused more on the standards of non-Muslim society that might be a lure and a source of

temptation. For the women, it was not so much that they either resented or guiltily enjoyed boys touching them, but that they felt constrained to fit into the culture of their high school peer group. Without negating the idea that the approaches of boys could be problematic, leaders located the real problem in the standards of a society that condone touching and hugging across gender lines. But many young women articulated that their most difficult challenge was to wear *hijab* when they were one of the very few Muslim girls in their suburban or small town high schools. (For most of them, *hijab* meant a head scarf covering hair, neck, and ears.) In a context where the young women felt the need to fit in, the call to “dare to be different” centered less on the boys in school than on more generalized social pressures (see Williams & Vashi, 2007). In both cases, there was recognition that the advice for the young men and women had to be practical within a secular context and within settings where they are surrounded by non-Muslims.

After the gender-segregated session, the next workshop involved both young men and women, but they were evenly divided into separate seating sections. The theme directly addressed “Gender Relations,” although sexuality permeated the discussions. The main speaker, whom we call MD, was a recently graduated medical doctor doing his residency at a local hospital and who was at least a decade older than most of the young people in the audience. One of the teenage speakers from the first session, whom we call TS, assisted him. MD stipulated that sexual attraction per se is not un-Islamic. Indeed, in the right context (marriage) it can be seen as worship. But before marriage, men and women must regard each other as brothers and sisters who can interact civilly and professionally and who ought to care about one another’s well-being but ought not otherwise get too close. What is needed is to balance modesty with a “brotherly” love for each other. Sitting separately is good, but we should not be separate in our hearts. Rather, it is important to know how to interact with a sister at the mall, in the school, and in public.

Similar to recent evangelical efforts to use “sex” to sell abstinence (Gardner, 2011), Muslim leaders used a sex-positive rhetoric that constructed it as a reward for the faithful in marriage. As such, marriage tended to be presupposed as nearly inevitable and as a goal for “good” religious men and women in all the sessions (see also Irby, 2014; Yip & Page, 2013). Within this context, heterosexual marriage is not only assumed but often portrayed as the natural goal of becoming an adult and of a life well lived. In the attempt to move away from negative understandings of sex, the efficacy of sex and its ability to be good becomes dependent upon context (heterosexual marriage).

Continuing, MD explained that Muslims have values distinct from non-Muslims and “American society” on gender relations. Even otherwise nice people you know and like may have the wrong values in respect to gender – totally *haram* (forbidden). He acknowledged that some Muslims go to extremes in their treatment of women, but generally Islam has healthy practices in regard to gender relations: above all, modesty; lowering the gaze; having most friends