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## Does She Want You to Open the Door? New Realities for Traditional Gendered Sexuality

Angela Towne

Widener University - Main Campus, [angiejtowne@yahoo.com](mailto:angiejtowne@yahoo.com)

Elliot Ruggles

Brown University, [Elliot\\_Ruggles@brown.edu](mailto:Elliot_Ruggles@brown.edu)

Betsy Crane

Widener University - Main Campus, [bcrane@widener.edu](mailto:bcrane@widener.edu)

Meghan Root

Widener University, [meghan.root@us.af.mil](mailto:meghan.root@us.af.mil)

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## Does She Want You to Open the Door? New Realities for Traditional Gendered Sexuality

### Abstract

In contemporary United States culture, young people may face contradictory gender-related pressures. Changing gender norms resulting from social movements in the latter half of the twentieth century (e.g., sexual revolution, feminism) collide with traditional expectations, such as female virginity until marriage. This study used cross-gender focus groups to examine young people's gendered experiences in the wake of social change. Data were collected with 35 millennials (ages 18-27) in Pennsylvania who self-identified as having traditional views about relationships and sexuality. Participants articulated current traditional expectations, which included educational and career responsibilities for women as well as behavioral expectations that participants associated with hyper-masculinity. Such expectations were often paradoxical and frequently contrasted with lived experiences. Participants coped with conflicting pressures by keeping secrets and leading double lives. These findings may help educators and clinicians recognize the complex social reality millennials face and assist them in balancing conflicting pressures.

### Keywords

Gender and Sexuality, Feminist Studies, Masculinity Studies, Sociology, Focus Group

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## Does She Want You to Open the Door? New Realities for Traditional Gendered Sexuality

Angela Towne

Widener University, Chester, Pennsylvania, USA

Elliot Ruggles

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA

Betsy Crane and Meghan Root

Widener University, Chester, Pennsylvania, USA

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Since the 1990s, popular culture narratives assert that North America has entered a postfeminist era (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003). These narratives profess that feminism is obsolete and its support has dwindled. Yet struggles around achieving gender equity persist, as demonstrated by the recent "Me Too" movement, conflicts about same sex marriage, and battles over abortion accessibility (Andaya & Mishtal, 2016; Lee, 2018; Shultz & Shultz, 2016). Further, the social movements associated with transformation around gender and sexuality (e.g., feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, sexual revolution, civil rights) have not been equivalent across genders (Gerson, 2009). Expectations have broadened for women; however, there has been less change around men's roles. Issues surrounding gender are far from resolved, existing within a mix of historical inequality and transition toward greater equity.

In this historical context, young people face confusing contextual norms. Should a man hold a door open for a woman? Is that chivalrous or patronizing? Is it appropriate on a date, but not at work? Should a woman express sexual freedom, or will sexual behavior negate marriage possibilities? These choices represent a conflict between a desire for the security afforded by enacting *traditional* gender norms versus a desire to embrace the greater gender freedom that recent social movements advocate (Rogers, 2008; Turner, 1990). Awareness of such conflicts motivated this exploratory qualitative study. We used the signifier *traditional*

for study recruitment asking participants to self-select based on the publicized criterion of being “fairly traditional in their ideas about relationships, sexuality, and marriage,” requiring only that volunteers were over age 18 and under age 30. *Traditional* is defined as “based on customs usually handed down from a previous generation” and synonymous with the terms established, prescriptive, and usual (Merriam-Webster, 2018), so we determined that those who identified as *traditional* would provide valuable perspectives on contemporary challenges they experience related to changing gender roles. Focus groups provided a means to observe processes of articulation of gender categories (Munday, 2014). This research thus generated data not only on content in response to our questions, but also the processes through which the content was produced. Because traditional roles are preset and passed down, or “traces’ of residual kinship” (Butler, 1988, pp. 524-525), we describe Crane and Crane-Seeber’s (2003) four boxes of gendered sexuality and Connell’s (1987, 1995) *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* to define pre-set and passed down ideological traditions.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity**

Connell (1995) defined hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity as social forces with the purpose of legitimizing “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). Hegemonic masculinity includes certain directives aimed at men: emotional restrictiveness; isolation; striving for achievement; violence when necessary; hiding weakness; and avoiding anything deemed feminine or homosexual (David & Brannon, 1976; Hanke, 1998; Levant & Richmond, 2007; O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986). Therefore, adhering to hegemonic directives is associated with negative relational, psychological, and social consequences while simultaneously providing privileges (hooks, 1992). The degree to which privileges may be attained in exchange for hegemonic behaviors can be explained via intersectionality; poor, racial minorities, queer, and/or disabled men are clearly less privileged than upper class, White, heterosexual, able-bodied men (Berkowitz, 2006; hooks, 2003; Hurtado & Sinha, 2008; Rembis, 2010). Owing to intersectional analysis, the terms *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* will include privileged social locations for the remainder of this article.

Hegemonic masculinity cannot function without its counterpart, *emphasized femininity* (Connell, 1987). The performativity of emphasized femininity is not a power orientation; it is an adaptive orientation that exists in relation to the power of hegemonic masculinity. Masculine displays generally indicate power and dominance, whereas feminine displays must indicate submission and vulnerability (Grindstaff & West, 2006). Though Connell (1987) saw women as continually under pressure to “do” emphasized femininity without direct and tangible rewards, others (Bell-Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Crane, Towne, & Crane-Seeber, 2013; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006; Williams, 2002; Wohlwend, 2009) suggest that this enactment holds social currency and promises access to a successful male provider. Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity work in symbiosis creating a system upholding a mainstream United States gender ideology. Individuals, whether attempting a privileged identity or consciously rebelling against it, must constantly interact with these preset binaries and make choices around accepting or rejecting attributes contained within each box (Butler, 1999; de Beauvoir, 2015 Trans.). Whereas Connell theorizes two socially supported gender categories, four boxes model expands theory to include hierarchical dynamics within gender categories as well as their origin.

### Four Boxes of Gendered Sexuality

In focus groups the four boxes model was used as an accessible heuristic device to engage participants in discussions about current gender ideology (see Figure 1). Crane and Crane-Seeber (2003) use the terms, *tough guy/sweet guy* and *good girl/bad girl* and describe sociohistorical causes for these gender categories. They detail how political and religious systems institutionalizing marital patrilineage organized feminine norms called the *good girl* (p. 289), while patriarchal relations based on domination and economic access led to the privileged *tough guy* construct (p. 289). They further explain a second binary split that organized each gender into privileged or marginalized categories. Whereas the good girl displays *emphasized femininity* (Connell, 1987; Crane & Crane-Seeber, 2003) becoming the supportive wife and mother; the *bad girl* embraces independence and sexual freedom. Whereas the tough guy enacts *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 1983; Crane & Crane-Seeber, 2003), the marginalized *sweet guy* exhibits traits typically aligned with femininity. Cultural expectations based on patriarchal legacy impact gender experiences, including feelings, behaviors, and attractions (Crane & Crane-Seeber, 2003), rather than “hard wired” biological forces (Buss, 1998). Crane and Crane-Seeber (2003) acknowledged that no one person fits in any of these boxes; instead they are an example of “ideal types” (Sakaluk & Milhausen, 2012, p. 90).

<b>Tough Guy</b>	<b>Sweet Guy</b>
<b>Good Girl</b>	<b>Bad Girl</b>

Figure 1. Four Boxes of Gendered Sexuality

### Gender Role Change

Social movements instigated in the twentieth century aimed at eliminating oppression compelled systemic *role change* (Rogers, 2008). Turner (1990, p. 87) defined *role change* as change in the shared conception and execution of typical role performance and boundaries. Collectively, men inhabiting privileged social locations changed in response to social movements rather as a result of their own instigation (Lamb, 1979). For example, nation-wide decreased homophobia resulting from LGBTQ activism increased acceptance of a wider range of masculinity behaviors among some men (Anderson, 2016). However, historically based privilege and oppression is embedded in many social identities and institutions. “Imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is resilient and role change may work to maintain power dynamics (hooks, 2013, p. 4). Demetriou (2001) theorized that when hegemonic masculinity is threatened, allowing some marginalized masculinities to assimilate it works to maintain patriarchy. Temporarily increasing role variability within hegemony to include subordinate or marginalized men, such as gay or Black men, expands the option of sharing

hegemonic masculinity with more men without incorporating women. Adoption of “a new, more feminized and Blackened White masculinity” (Sarvan, 1998, p. 37) does not end men’s domination of women but may instead sustain it. In 2009, Gerson found men’s “right” and “responsibility” in assuming the provider role was “an integral and non-negotiable aspect” of men’s *neotraditional* (new traditional) identity (p. 745).

This preconceived and institutionalized power and identity structure obscures the complexity of lived experiences (Brod, 2003; Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005; Moller, 2007). Gender ideologies do not describe actual people; rather they set unachievable standards and channel efforts toward those standards (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Because sustaining the ideal is ultimately impossible, gender productions “swerve from their original purposes” (Butler, 1999, p. 39). This swerving creates a range of ways to “do” masculinity or femininity while being interpreted as a masculine or feminine subject. Further, subjects can consciously enact predetermined social expectations in exchange for the protection or security promised by following expected norms when desirable (Hegel, 1977; hooks, 1992) and distance themselves at other moments (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Even for those who strive for the social and material benefits a *traditional* identity provides, a “constant process of negotiation, translation, and reconfiguration occurs” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). These conciliations led us to explore how young people who perceive themselves as *traditional* navigate gendered expectations.

## Methods

The research team consisted of a Human Sexuality Studies professor, co-creator of the four boxes of gendered sexuality model, and three Human Sexuality Studies graduate students. The team included White transgender and cisgender researchers of diverse sexual orientations. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a purposive sample was recruited in southeastern Pennsylvania using flyers, word of mouth, a tabling event, and social media. Participants who volunteered self-selected based on the publicized criterion of being “fairly traditional in their ideas about relationships, sexuality, and marriage.” Because the team’s perspective on gender and sexuality norms has been informed by liberal and queer perspectives, we determined that recruiting “traditional” participants would offer an alternative perspective on current gender and sexuality norms. We scheduled mixed gender focus groups to explore the research question, “How does a small sample of young people, who identify as traditional, perceive traditional and changing ideas about gender, relationships, and sexuality?” We chose to use focus groups to capitalize on communication between participants, allowing ideas to surface through discussion format.

## Demographics

Because participants self-selected, demographics may be relevant when defining *traditional* identity among people born after the initiation of said social movements. Thirty-four people participated in four focus groups; 27 identified as women and eight as men. No one self-described as transgender; perhaps cisgender identity may be a key component in *traditional* identity. The majority identified as White (73%), 18% identified as Black, 9% Hispanic, and 3% Italian. Eighty-five percent described their orientation/identity as heterosexual, 12% identified as bisexual men and women, and 3% lesbian. Only 26% had not attended college. The majority of participants (65%) identified as middle class while 18% were working class and 18% upper middle class. All participants were raised in a prominent religion:

88% Christian (51% Catholic) and 12% Jewish. This demographic points to organized religion as an important influence in *traditional* identity.

### Data Collection

Two researchers, who were themselves young people, co-facilitated each focus group; the mentoring professor did not facilitate focus groups. Sessions were audio recorded. As Munday (2014) stated in her book on feminist focus groups, “Focus groups are particularly appropriate if you want to produce in-depth data about how the social world is constructed collectively” (p. 239). Though most volunteers were women, researchers scheduled mixed gender groups to encourage dynamic discussion, thus creating a milieu where women and men responded to each other’s perspectives. What is unique about these focus groups is that we did not seek consensus. Researchers instructed participants to generate diverging perspectives and opinions stating that when participants agreed with an articulated point, they did not have to repeat it. Participants tended to reach consensus when describing ideal types, whereas discussions about lived experience yielded paradox and contradiction surrounding current gendered sexuality norms. Although groups did realize collective experiences, our results show negotiations and articulations that generated greater nuances. hooks (1994) stated, “...binary opposition that is so much embedded in Western thought and language makes it nearly impossible to project a complex response” (p. 49). Instructing participants to share differing and contrary perspectives allowed participants to express complexity that likely communicates a more accurate lived experience of *traditional* millennials than would have come about if researchers had directed participants to reach consensus. Researchers asked questions such as:

1. What does traditional mean to you?
2. What does it mean to be a “good girl” or “bad girl?”
3. What about guys? Do they need to be the “tough guy” or can “sweet guys” still be attractive?
4. How do you fit into those categories? What about your friends or partners?
5. What about “friends with benefits” and hooking up?

### Data Analysis

After transcribing recordings, four researchers engaged in a collaborative data analysis process. Our team met to conduct data reduction (i.e., isolate sections of text from transcripts), create a coding structure based on observed overall patterns in the data, and code each data segment based on lengthy discussion in order to reach intersubjective consensus (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weber, 1949). Researchers started with open coding in a hermeneutic circle process, using a combination of deductive analysis based on four boxes of gendered sexuality theory and inductive coding based on themes emerging from the data. First level analysis resulted in 24 codes. Researchers realized that a four-by-four matrix reflecting overall patterns in the data could structure findings with four overall themes (traditional norms, gender norms, traditional relationships, and traditional sexuality) and four perspectives on each theme (definitions, why they exist, changes in each area, and how these changes are occurring). The results below reflect participant ideas about “traditional” gender, relationships, and sexuality norms, how *traditional* norms are maintained, and participant’s behavioral adaptations to cope with a changing social environment.

## Results

Three major themes emerged from data analysis, as well as five sub-themes. The first theme captures how participants defined the word *traditional* as relates to gender and sexuality. Titled, Defining Traditional Gendered Sexuality, it has a sub-theme of Going with the Flow. The second theme, Maintaining Traditional Norms, describes what participants shared about the behaviors they needed to display in order to be *traditional*. This theme has two sub-themes: men described norms of Hyper-masculinity, while women expressed challenges related to the Double Standard. The third theme, called Adaptation Strategies, is based on discussions about Leading Double Lives and Secret Keeping as well as Being a *Real Man* and a *Real Woman*. Results are presented below, organized by theme, with participants' self-described gender and race indicated.

### Defining *Traditional Gendered Sexuality*

When asked to define the word *traditional* in terms of relationships and sexuality most participants described a prototypical heterosexual married couple organized into a nuclear family living on their designated private property: "a man and a woman and your two kids, and your dog and your white picket fence."

However, those participants who discussed sexual identity described revisions to this prototypical relationship. "I view traditional as a person who wants to enter a relationship looking for a life partner or someone to build a life with, gay or straight" (White man). "I don't really think orientation matters at all, but the relationship ideal be [sic] monogamous with one-person long term - probably ending in some sort of union of marriage" (White woman). Likely resulting from the LGBTQ+ rights movement, for some participants, the *traditional* relationship no longer hinges on heterosexuality. The key element that made a relationship *traditional* was monogamy between two people with the aim of marriage.

Participants also acknowledged how *tradition* has changed at the intersection of sexuality and race. For example, one Black woman explained, "Traditional meant you stay in your own race. But now-a-days we see a lot of Black and White couples, or, you know, a lot of variation." A Hispanic man responded, "You see it more today, interracial couples, but I think it's more like hush, hush, like talking about, you know, behind their backs. They will still be together, but people are always going to have a problem with it." These findings demonstrate impacts of the racial civil rights movement, though the change is paradoxical. Participants expressed more freedom to have interracial relationships knowing that negative judgments would be less overt rather than absent.

When researchers asked participants to define *traditional* norms using the terms "tough guy" and "good girl," participants were able to describe these terms in explicit detail with no further prompting. Comments describing good girls reflected an embodiment of virginity, vulnerability, docility, and Whiteness with the aim of marriage and motherhood associated with respectability. The following comments portraying the good girl came from White women: "The girl is super tiny and blond;" "...virgin, sweet, blond, submissive;" "...a nice B cup;" "I'd say a full B, a small C cup maybe, she doesn't show her chest;" "She carries herself with dignity and respect;" "She wants monogamy with a man, and she wants children, be a stay at home mom." A Black woman described her observations:

I think about seeing young women our age psyched about being a wife, but it was more like the trinket of a ring...its talking about that ring, getting that right ring, "Where did you get it, What kind is it? When am I gonna get it?"



Good girl expectations simultaneously came with responsibilities with paradoxical economic connotations: “They’re going to school; they know what they want to do; they have a plan” (White woman). “Now a woman has to have the career and raise a family” (Black woman). “She has to take more responsibility for everything she was responsible for before. Cooking, cleaning whatever is assigned to the traditional feminine role; she has to do that on top of working. It can be seen as liberating, but in some ways it isn’t” (White woman).

Participants described the good girl as a de-sexualized, blond female who wants to be a wife and mother. However, one participant noted that the goal among her women friends was obtaining “the trinket,” a symbol that shows she is capable of being chosen to be a wife, as opposed to a focus on taking on the roles of wife and mother. When participants discussed the lived roles of wife and mother, they described overwhelming labor and a lack of liberation. The good girl also possesses a specific embodiment raced as White, as indicated by “blond.” This embodiment reflects stereotypes that may put women of color automatically into a marginalized gender category, which Crane and Crane-Seeber signify with the term “bad girl” (2003).

*Traditional* “tough guy” gender roles contained a different set of expectations. These expectations included restricting certain emotions: “You couldn’t cry when you fell down” (Hispanic man); acting as the bread-winner: “They’ll feel bad if they are not making money” (Italian woman); drinking certain beverages: “When it comes to your drinking choice, you have to drink beer (White man); maintaining a specific physique: “The guy is really rugged and built but not overly muscular” (White woman); and social expectations: “You couldn’t go in your room and sit alone; you had to be out with your friends. You couldn’t hang out with girls. You had to hang with men and do supposed manly things” (Hispanic man).

Maintaining a tough guy image also held negative connotations including allusions to alcoholism: “He shotguns beer” (White woman); anti-social characteristics: “Always trying to get into fights” (White woman); “The tough guy is the one that’s going to be thrown in jail” (Hispanic man); as well as sexual posturing: “[He] just wants to bang a woman” (White woman).

As conversations continued, participant descriptions became more specific about ethnic and racial differences in *traditional* masculinity. A Black woman stated, “I think masculinity does have a lot to do with race... each race group definitely has different definitions of what masculinity is.” A Hispanic man responded, “It’s definitely about culture because in my family we’re Hispanic, Puerto Rican, and the females and males both have to cook. They had to know how to cook. But in America I see that the female has to cook.” A White man stated, “I come from White culture and...to be a man, you have to have a labor job, drive a pick-up truck, play some kind of sport, or do some kind of sporting game like hunting or something like that.”

In response, another Hispanic man shared his experience:

I go back home, I’m supposed to be this little gangbanger. They got these roles, and I go back home, “Oh you in college?” I get looked at weird over there, like, “What? You trading on us? You supposed to live off welfare. You supposed to be on social security. You supposed to get a check every month. But, I think that’s where it comes from, the friends you make, the environment you at. And for me, it’s the people around you that enforce it. I guess that’s where the traditional roles come from: the environment where you at, your family, your culture, and all that.

When describing ideal types participants described behaviors associated with hegemony or dominance. However, race, class, and ethnicity interacted to produce complicated, group-specific experiences that contributed to complex perceptions of what it means to be a man in

contemporary United States society (Hurtado & Sinha, 2008). Because *traditional* hegemonic masculinity is dependent upon the subjugated form (de Beauvoir, 2015 Trans.), economically disadvantaged people as well as ethnic and racial minorities are often boxed into a subjugated form of masculinity and femininity. Though these participants identified as traditional, experiences of oppression led to complex landscapes for people to navigate when considering their own expression of gendered sexuality.

**Going with the flow.** Several participants used the phrase “going with the flow” verbatim to describe how they are able to reproduce a gender identity aligned with *tradition* as well as their reason for doing so. Going with the flow meant repeating parental ideals: “If you were brought up a certain way then maybe you’re going to teach your kids the same stuff” (White man). The discussion of going with the flow resulted in articulation of the motivation behind maintaining tradition: in-group security and the promise of an easier life. A White woman stated:

If you have relatively traditional beliefs, your society is set up to not give you so many roadblocks. So if you feel traditional in the way you feel and behave, and that’s welcome in your society, you can live that way and be that way and it’s very much condoned and easy for you to have that existence.

Women of diverse races described how upholding a *traditional* gender ideal also came with a potential cost of connection with others. A White woman described a friend:

The only thing she can think about is being a good girl and “God forbid I slip, then I’m going to hell, and my family’s gonna be disappointed and I’m gonna let myself down.” And so it’s really hindered her from having meaningful relationships with people.

Although “going with the flow” and repeating traditional behaviors offered participants the promise of a life with less opposition, it came with pressures to perform and costs to meaningful relationships with others.

### **Maintaining Traditional Norms**

Should participants fail to meet *traditional* gender expectations, they talked about risking losing the security provided by “going with the flow.” If they traversed the limitations of *tradition*, they entered into gender marginalization. One Hispanic woman noted:

The good girl is a person who you might bring home to mom and the mom will actually invite that girl in and sit down and talk to the girl. A bad girl is basically a girl you bring in the back door. She doesn’t have the standing to come through the front.

A Hispanic man stated, “The sweet guys didn’t get the girl. The sweet guys didn’t do anything. The sweet guys just sat back and watched...I think the sweet guy is the one girls talk to when she’s having problems with the tough guy.” “They [sweet guys] aren’t datable” (White woman). If participants were seen as bad girls or sweet guys, they crossed into gender marginalization. This marginalization came with a risk of losing respect and also relationships.

Participants clearly articulated the most relevant lines they cannot cross and still be considered *traditional*. The boundary for men was dominance—the hyper-masculinity men are

often pressured to perform—and the boundary for women was sexual activity, the sanctions associated with the double standard.

**Hyper-masculinity pressures.** Participants referred to the current performance of *traditional* masculinity as “hyper-masculinity.” Hyper-masculinity was the restriction of men’s roles in the face of women’s expanding roles: “Women can do everything a man can do, everything. But men cannot do everything a woman can do, so we end up...being in a box to be hyper-hyper-masculine” (Hispanic man).

As our participants observed, expectations for women have changed in recent decades, especially in taking on roles previously reserved for men. One White man observed, “It’s no longer the man’s the hero. Sometimes the woman can be the physical hero that lifts the truck and saves the day.” Some participants commented that this has led to progress for women: “Women are given more opportunities with different movements that have occurred in the past. Women are taking those opportunities and going to school and bettering themselves” (White woman). However, fewer changes have occurred in normative expectations for men. A White man stated:

I think men don’t really have that much of a choice. Women have a choice. If a woman chooses not to do the traditional thing, that would be okay. But for the man, if the man doesn’t do those things, then there’s something wrong.

While there has been a focus on women’s empowerment, empowering men to change has been neglected. A White man described growing up surrounded by examples of strong women, but felt he was not encouraged to flourish (as a man): “Where’s my encouragement?”

As discussions continued, participants uncovered paradoxes due to uneven gender role change. For example, some women expressed a desire to be seen as independent: “We don’t need a man to do anything for us” (White woman); but still wanted men to hold open doors for them and buy dinner on a date, reinforcing hyper-masculine norms: “I want my dinner paid for” (Black woman). Participants also spoke about the focus on women’s empowerment as a double-edged sword.

Girls are sort of encouraged more to be independent, but it’s at a price. If you are independent, you’re not going to get boys to like you, at all, ever. That’s really hard, because girls are encouraged to go out and be their own people and have confidence and do all this stuff, but then in the end, they can’t find guys that will like them when they’re being really independent. (White woman)

These experiences demonstrate the paradoxes of changing gender norms where change is encouraged on the one hand, but it comes with a price of potential relationships and marriage if change is fully embraced. Illustrating this gender paradox further, the following interaction occurred when the facilitator asked, “Does she want you to open the door?”

“Don’t hold that door for me; get outta here. [laughter]. Screw you. I can do it myself,” (White woman).

“As a woman, there’s certain things I do want. I want my door held, damn it!” (Black woman).

“Me too,” (White woman).

“But, if you’re in front and he’s behind you, do you wait for him to open the door?” (White woman).

“No, not always. It’s not like, ‘Oh my god, I have to stop.’ Oh, ‘What do I do? A bolted door!’ The door is not just open! [Laughter]” (Black woman).

“When a guy can go around and open a car door, I’m all like, ‘Chivalry’s not dead!’” (White woman).

A White man responded, “[I’m] conflicted. What do we do? Do you want me to open the door? You just gotta feel out the person really, but I’ve met a lot of people who are like, ‘Don’t open the door for me, I’ll get it myself.’ Some of them get annoyed like, ‘Get the hell out of my way so I can go through the door.’ They don’t like it, but people like him and her, they’re like, you gotta do it; that’s the greatest thing.”

“Are we defining people that don’t like that [men opening doors] as less traditional?” (White researcher).

(Several men and women speaking simultaneously) “No, I don’t think so.”

“No, I think it’s all part of what’s going on with this new type of era,” (Black woman).

“...Because it’s more of a choice. Before you had to swallow it if you didn’t like it,” (Black woman).

“You were just like, ‘All right, fine. I’m just going to get it over with.’ But, now you can be like, ‘No.’ You’re not that weird girl who yelled at some guy for getting her flowers and opening a door” (Black woman).

“Would you do that for men?” (White researcher).

“I hold open doors for men” (White woman).

“I have women open doors for me all the time,” (several men talking over each other in agreement).

This quote demonstrates how articulations and negotiations during focus group discussions generated nuanced findings. It shows the struggles young people may have as they attempt to negotiate changing gender roles as it illustrates a divergence of strongly held perceptions about this symbolic topic. Who opens the door is symbolic of contradictory and oppositional opinions about how men and women should relate to each other suggesting that there is no clear path to a *traditional* identity related to gendered sexuality. The intensity of the emotions around this discussion led to the authors’ decision to make this question this article’s title.

**The double standard.** A crucial issue defining *traditional* ideology for men and women was the sexual double standard. Focus group participants were familiar with double standard pressures. One White woman described this narrative, “If a tough guy had sex with someone...He might be stereotyped as a player, but it’s not necessarily the bad connotation...But the bad girl, the minute she steps out of line, she’s a bitch; she’s a whore.” A Hispanic man described his experience of double standard pressures becoming very animated, frequently hitting the table for emphasis:

I have older relatives and they’re like “You’re going out with this girl?” I’m like “Yeah, she’s nice.” “So who else are you going out with?” I’m like “Just one person.” “I don’t get it, so who else are you sleeping with? I know you must have somebody on the side.” No I don’t. And it’s like they look at you like what’s wrong with you?... And like that’s a lot of pressure and there comes a point when you just sit there and listen to the conversations because they don’t want to hear anything from you, because you’re not like them.

This finding illustrates how the double standard can put unwanted sexual pressure on men. Experiences of sexual pressure and being social ostracized may be a form of sexual coercion that men perpetrate on other men.

Illustrating the complexity of this issue, participants articulated their lived experience of the double standard and differentiated between what is “realistic traditional and what is thought of as being traditional” (White woman). “I actually think of being traditional as having sex before marriage. In today’s society, for people to remain virgins is not traditional.” “Pre-marital sex is pretty much normal these days. Living with your partner before you get married is normal these days. It’s your preference as long as you’re in a serious relationship” (White man). Here, participants described greater freedom in sexuality norms, as long marriage is the expected outcome.

When researchers asked about casual sex, the double standard was mired in paradox. The following conversation occurred, demonstrating the value of the focus group discussion format:

“Why is a girl considered a ho if she had sex with someone? And a guy is like ‘oh yeah,’ slapping a high fives” (White woman).

Many participants responded, “Yeah.”

“A man goes to the club, and the female goes to the club. Out of ten girls a guy gets, he’ll probably be able to sleep with two of them, three of them, four of them if he’s a nice person... I feel as though if a girl has nine partners and a guy has nine partners, she’s considered a slut, because it’s easier for a girl to get it than it is for a guy” (Hispanic man).

“It doesn’t mean the girl is a slut. Like a guy’s going out that night to have sex, well some girl could be like, ‘I’m going out tonight to have sex’” (White woman).

“But that’s when it totals up, when you have so many nights that you go out. You’re like, ‘I wanna have sex.’ That’s when you become the slut” (Hispanic man).

“So is he considered a slut?” (White woman).

“He should be a slut” (White woman).

“He should be considered, but he’s not” (Hispanic man).

Many participants responded, “Exactly.”

“He’s considered ‘the man’” (White woman).

“But you all talk so bad about each other so much. Here’s what you all should do. All you girls, every time you have sex, next day, tell all your girls, be like high five” (White man).

“We do” (Several women).

“See” (White man).

“I feel like there’s so much pressure on women to do it [have casual sex]” (White woman).

“Yeah, there is a lot of pressure on women to do it early and fast” (White woman).

As participants continued the discussion, in-group relationships made a difference in the extent that participants used double standard marginalization: “It’s different within your friends

because they know who you are. But as soon as like an outsider, like, ‘Oh she’s such a slut’” (White woman).

Across focus groups, although participants were familiar with the double standard narrative, many denied personal endorsement. One White man stated, “It pisses me off when girls call each other sluts... Get to know her first; she’s probably the nicest girl in the world, like my girlfriend.”

Marks and Fraley (2005) described the sexual double standard as the view that men are socially rewarded and women socially derogated for sexual activity. However, double standard studies over the last two decades show conflicting results, thus revealing the complex nature of this seemingly straightforward idea (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Jonason & Marks, 2009; Marks & Fraley, 2005; Milhausen & Herold, 1999). These studies overall found less personal acceptance of the sexual double standard, but ongoing belief that the societal double standard narrative enacts power over individuals and impacts behavior. These findings illustrate that the double standard still has power regardless of a lack of personal endorsement.

### **Adaptation Strategies**

The third theme, Adaptation Strategies, captures the strategies focus group participants discussed using in order to be perceived as *traditional* in light of changing gender norms. Two sub-themes emerged; the need to keep secrets in order to live double lives and acting like a *real man* or a *real woman*.

**Secret keeping and double lives.** For women, leading double lives was a strategy for reconciling the pressure to present oneself as sexually chaste while simultaneously expressing sexuality. Women enacted both good girl and bad girl narratives, but compartmentalized them in their lives. One White woman described the tension she experiences living double lives:

I feel restricted and have to put myself in the good girl box. I go to the function and I’m sitting there all prim and proper in my conservative dress. Then after we leave, after I’ve had a couple of glasses of wine, I want to go put on my cute clothes and go out and dance and act like the bad girl or whatever the perceived thing is. So it definitely bounces back and I feel like I have alter egos.

Participants spoke of maintaining double lives by keeping secrets. One Black woman articulated:

Traditional really needs a lot of secrets and omitting the truth. Traditionally I may look for a mate and try to go for the marriage and the 2.5 kids. Traditionally I will not tell how many partners I have, because I want to be a traditional woman.

Women of all participating races expanded on this idea, generalizing secret keeping about sex. “Girls may be lying about the number of sexual partners they have or the situations in which they have sexual relationships” (Hispanic woman). “Things are changing dramatically, but I think that allows you to have more secrets” (Black woman). Some women in these focus groups discussed participating in sexual relationships and embracing the sexual freedom allowed by social movements, but, in order to be seen as *traditional*, they also had to keep their sexual lives secret.

Participants indicated a masculine version of the living double lives phenomenon. Men's compartmentalization occurred around context specific demonstrations of dominance and non-dominance. "I try, especially around males that I don't know, to put on, to do the tough guy thing" (White man). While some women described a side tough men only shared with them: "My guy's a sniper, so I guess that could be looked at as a tough guy, but he's probably the sweetest person I've ever met" (White woman). Participants repeatedly described how men presented themselves as dominant in some contexts and showed their sweet side to only select people.

Throughout focus groups the terms *real man* and *real woman* surfaced without researcher prompt. Participants introduced this terminology to differentiate the concept of double lives/secret keeping from the ability to occupy multiple boxes without subjugation.

**Being a *real man* and a *real woman*.** Participants used the terms *real man* and *real woman* to signify traditional young people able to successfully navigate the gender demands of differing contexts without losing the security that comes with traditional roles. "A real man can be tough and sweet at the same time" (Hispanic man). "A real man would know when to walk away from a situation, and a tough guy is just going to start a fight no matter what the outcome" (White woman). "I think a real man could really get in touch with themselves. Inside they cry, they laugh, they smile, they are sad, and they ain't ashamed of it" (Hispanic man).

Participants also described the *real man* as friendly to women in relationships: "Someone who's courteous and respectful" (Black woman). "You don't have to hit someone; you don't have to over power someone. You just gotta work together at what you want. That's how I feel about a real man" (White man). "A real man is a guy who opens the car door for you." (White woman). "I was thinking that too" (White woman).

Participants also discussed a similar concept they called the *real woman*. One White woman described the real woman identity:

A real woman can be a well-rounded individual and enjoy herself if that means going out and having a couple of drinks or having sexual relationships and also going to school and getting good grades and having these goals in mind.

However, the real woman could be seen as untrustworthy for this expression. A Black woman shared:

You have those undercover bad girls that will dress nice, talk well, and do all the things that appear to be a good girl, but they're all deceptive. The ones that come out at night and go dancing, or do whatever they want basically.

Thus, participants created narratives for both the *real man* and *real woman*; those people who have achieved a level of mastery in perceiving contexts where the lines between the boxes can be crossed and where they may occupy both boxes at once. These findings help illustrate the impact of the social movements over the last half-century and how strongly these trends have effected young people who identify as traditional. As young people face more choices around expressing gendered sexuality, choices afforded to them through feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, sexual revolution, and civil rights movements, *traditional* young people grapple with paradoxical pressures to maintain the security afforded from the status quo while attempting to express more authentic relationships and identity structures.

## Discussion

Using the language of the ideal types signified in the four boxes model, *tough guy/sweet guy* and *good girl/bad girl* (Crane, Towne, & Crane-Seeber, 2013; Sakaluk & Milhausen, 2012), participants described the continuation of hierarchical, dichotomous, gender relationships and explained how lines between dichotomies have moved since the social movements of the later twentieth century (e.g., feminism, sexual revolution, LGBTQ+ rights, civil rights). They described women's role expansion, a moving outward of the gender binary line. Although women must still follow the dictates of possessing a certain body type, acting submissively, and presenting a restricted sexuality, the role has expanded to include pursuing higher education and having a plan for the future. At the same time, women also expressed simultaneous pressures to be sexual "early and fast," and fears that men would reject them if they were perceived as independent. Gerson (2009) too found that almost three-quarters of interviewed women wanted financial self-reliance in marriage. This self-reliance offered protection against economic dependence, the social devaluing of stay-at-home wives, and the fragility of the marital bond.

Based on the concept of binary gender defined against each other (Dalley-Trim, 2007), in the face of women's expanding roles, masculinity has become further restricted. Male participants reported a pressure to more strictly reinforce *traditional* gender by enacting a "hyper-hyper-masculinity." They witnessed the women in their lives being encouraged to explore new opportunities. At the same time, both men and women reified masculine expectations of paying for dinner, taking responsibility as the provider, acting tough, and pursuing sex. One man even discussed the pressure to have multiple sex partners at once. For men the lines moved inward, restricting masculine characteristics. Though Gerson (2009) did not present data on sexual behavior, these discussions reified Gerson's finding that *neotraditional* (new traditional) men felt that "breadwinning remains an integral, nonnegotiable aspect of their own identity" (p. 745). Whereas women were seen as having a "choice" whether or not to be financial providers, men were seen as having a "responsibility" (p. 745).

Focus groups illustrated a process by which male participants negotiated with each other to express experiences of the intersection of masculinity and race/ethnicity, heavily influenced by class, whereas this type of negotiation did not occur when describing *traditional* femininity. Participants discussed raced masculinity differences in expectations in the realms of employment, education, hobbies, and home life. Though no participants explicitly discussed racial or ethnic differences in women's gender expectations, some White women described the good girl as "blond," indicating Whiteness. This finding, along with the racial make-up of the self-selected sample, suggests that the good girl ideology aligns with White ideology. This suggests that associations between sexual purity, marriageability, and Whiteness have yet to be dismantled (Collins, 1991; Dowl Hall, 1983).

When asked to delineate ideal types, participants described prototypical images representing social pressures, not a living person (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Crane & Crane-Seeber, 2003; Sakaluk & Milhausen, 2012). Since ideological gender expression does not represent an actual person, but rather a way that people position themselves within social discourse (Connell & Messerschmit, 2005), participants must ostensibly *pass* in order to maintain hegemonic traditional identity. Social identity theory explains the underlying motivation; individuals align with social group expectations for their own benefit (Abrams & Brown, 2000). The benefit of maintaining a social identity aligned with tradition was the promise of an easier life with fewer "road blocks." Enacting such narratives brought security in predictable and affirmative reactions in social situations as well as the promise of a stereotyped image of home and family complete with a white picket fence indicating a class



capable of owning private property. If participants “go with the flow,” they received comfort from having norms in their favor.

Four boxes model shows a vertical axis representing binary gender split into privileged and subjugated categories (Crane & Crane-Seeber, 2003). Though participants self-identified with a traditional gender ideology, their lived experiences appeared to flow between privileged and subjugated binaries where dichotomy often dissolved into paradox. This paradox resulted from a tension caused by a false choice between security and freedom. Participants expressed desire for independent expression and desire for relief from environmental pressures to uphold traditional gender and sexuality norms. Lived experiences of violating traditional norms brought pleasure as well as intimacy and closeness in relationships. Yet, participants felt insecure in those decisions and felt they would lose opportunities to find long-term relationships. This conflict between security and freedom led participants to compartmentalize marginalized self-expressions as a means to maintain a traditional identity. Compartmentalization is a coping strategy where simultaneous experiences are placed in separate psychological spaces (Bowins, 2012). Compartmentalization manifested as secret keeping and living double lives. Therefore, the means by which a person can *pass* and stay in privilege (or cross the line into subjugation) were context-dependent.

Our participants identified two lines they could not overtly cross in certain audiences (e.g., family members, older adults, out-group peers) and still pass as *traditional*. Men showed only a select few intimates emotions and behaviors that would cast them out of the tough guy box (Crane & Crane-Seeber, 2003). Women kept secrets about sexual behavior to avoid crossing the line into the bad girl box, while simultaneously experiencing an opposing social pressure to be sexual “early and fast.” This paradox suggests reasons for women’s collusion reflected in the comment; “A bad girl is basically a girl you bring in the back door,” perhaps a good girl violating sexual restriction norms does not want to be seen. Through this compartmentalization process (Bowins, 2012), individuals were able to ostensibly maintain traditional ideology while sharing alternative self-expressions with a select few, thus preserving deniability. Traditional young people were crossing these lines with an ostensive nod to traditional values by being quiet about their transgressions in certain social settings. Thus acting as a traditional person is an expression not only of choice under social pressure, but also of ability or capacity (Rembis, 2010); it is an ability to signify a normed set of approved characteristics performed for certain audiences and the capacity to recognize safe contexts where simultaneous multiplicities in gender and sexuality expression would not lead to subjugation.

Participants experienced tension in recognizing these contexts. The discussion around the appropriate gendered interaction for a man and a woman in front of a door demonstrates how current ideology is conflicted and paradoxical even for those who identify as traditional. The contradiction, confusion, and high emotional states participants illustrated when asked, “Does she want you to open the door?” resulted from a legacy overlaying a binary system on human experiences that do not neatly fit into binaries (Connell, 1987). Recent social movements troubled dichotomous and hierarchical human relationships (Butler, 1999), otherwise there would be no debate over the door.

Some participants referred to those individuals who are experts at navigating contextual paradox as a *real man* or *real woman*. The term *real man* is often used as a synonym for hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1983). However, our participants used this term differently. A *real man* knows when to be tough and when to be vulnerable. A *real woman* successfully integrates good girl and bad girl characteristics, though some participants described this integration as “untrustworthy” and “deceptive.” This difference in perception can be attributed to the patriarchal standards set for women as a subjugated class (de Beauvoir, 2015 Trans.). However, overall, this linguistic shift may reflect a subtle change in traditional gender identity,

an attempt toward a more “real” human expression in some contexts. A compartmentalized person may, consciously or not, censor values, aspirations, behaviors, and emotions that are deemed inappropriate in certain contexts, thereby disengaging their full self (Rozuel, 2011). Psychologist John Snyder (2005) contended that integration is a move toward mental health, “One of the crucial goals of therapy... is to move away from this dichotomizing and splitting toward an integration of seemingly irreconcilable opposites...this alienation and estrangement of one half of oneself from the other” (p. 69). Participants used the terms *real man* and *real woman*, without researcher prompt, to define people who were able to successfully uphold traditional norms while also finding safe contexts where alternative gender expressions would not lead to subjugation.

### **Strengths and Limitations of Study**

Our research methods and models contained benefits and limitations. This research illustrated the versatility of four boxes theory as a useful model to interrogate relational gendered sexuality expectations. The use of focus groups enhanced findings in that men and women dialogued about ideas increasing the depth of group discussion. Participants self-selected in this study and generally occupied privileged social locations with the exception of gender. Though this self-selection is relevant in establishing who identifies as traditional, findings largely reflected gendered sexuality in terms of a White (74%), middle class (65%), college educated (74%), heterosexual (85%), cisgender (100%), and Christian (88%) ideology and experience. Findings must be interpreted as reflecting these identities. The sample would have benefited from greater diversity further articulating conceptions of traditional gender. Though racial and ethnic differences in masculinity surfaced, intersectional data defining traditional gender may have been lost where it did not align or contrast with group-induced schemas of the four boxes. As a qualitative study, our findings are not generalizable to all traditional young people, however readers may find results transferable.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This topic is highly relevant to people living amidst evolving gender norms. Further research is recommended to examine the compartmentalization of subjugated and idealized gendered experiences and the impact this practice has on daily living. Judith Lorber (2005) called for *degendering* the human condition; can we do this without first examining how gender differentiation constrains individual expression? Inclusion of people who embrace change, rather than identifying as traditional, as well as diverse social locations would further enrich discourses around these social forces. As same-sex marriage creates options for more mainstream lifestyles, researchers could look at how such individuals negotiate the four boxes. The experiences of those who identify between and outside of binary gender categories would also provide a view of these forces at work within the course of individual life spans. Finally, the input of non-Western experiences would provide a more holistic understanding of how (and if) these social forces are translated cross-culturally.

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### Author Note

Dr. Angela Towne holds a M.Ed. and Ph.D. in Human Sexuality Studies from Widener University. She has worked in the gender and sexuality field in an educator, counselor, and program leader for the past 17 years. Her professional experiences span social service, public health, academic, and media settings. She has taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies department at Kansas State University, and previously at Pacific University in the Gender and Sexuality Studies department. Currently, Dr. Towne is working with a team to explore the effects of hormonal and surgical transition on sexuality with trans masculine co-researchers. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [angiejtowne@yahoo.com](mailto:angiejtowne@yahoo.com).

Dr. Elliot Ruggles is currently serving as a Sexual Harassment and Assault Resources and Education Advocate (SHARE) at Brown University and holds a PhD in Human Sexuality Studies and a Master's in Social Work from Widener University. He has been organizing, teaching, running therapeutic groups, and conducting research in the fields of social work and sexuality for over ten years. Most recently he served as the Director of the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center at SUNY Oneonta. His research uses critical and queer theory to examine the genealogy of the interrelated, yet distinct (Western) concepts of gender and sexuality, and life-history interviews to examine how people develop sexual and gender identities that deviate from Western social norms. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [Elliot\\_Ruggles@brown.edu](mailto:Elliot_Ruggles@brown.edu).

Dr. Betsy Crane, Professor, Center for Human Sexuality Studies, Widener University, near Philadelphia, PA, earned a Ph.D. from Cornell University. Previously she worked for 17 years as a sexuality educator, as a public health family planning outreach worker, then as Education Director and later Executive Director for Planned Parenthood in Ithaca, NY. Co-editor of *Sexual Lives: A Reader on the Theories and Realities of Human Sexualities* (Hesley & Crane, 2003), her research interests include the history of gendered sexuality and shifting gender and sexual identities of young people. Dr. Crane is past president of the Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and was named a Distinguished University Professor by Widener University for 2014-2017. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [bcrane@widener.edu](mailto:bcrane@widener.edu).

Meghan Root, MA. M.Ed. earned her MA in counseling psychology from Lesley University in Cambridge MA. She also has an MEd in Human Sexuality Studies from Widener University in Chester PA. She has training in crisis response, trauma, sexual addiction, and sexual violence prevention and response. She is currently working at Fort Meade MD as the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator for the U.S. Air Force. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [meghan.root@us.af.mil](mailto:meghan.root@us.af.mil).

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