A God-Shaped Hole: Evangelical Women's Strategies for Maintaining Purity in the Face of Secular Dating Culture

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A GOD-SHAPED HOLE: EVANGELICAL WOMEN’S STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING PURITY IN THE FACE OF A SECULAR DATING CULTURE.

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Abstract

College women today are exposed to many cultural messages placing positive value on their physical appearance, or desirability. In this way they are commodified as sexual bodies competing for male attention. In turn, this commodification may lead to anxiety in the face of ambivalent social messages about dating, where some messages suggest that sexual activity is an acceptable part of dating experience. In my study of evangelical college women on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania I saw how evangelical women were able to circumvent much of the pressure of sexuality placed on college women. This paper argues that evangelical women employ a host of strategies to construct a non-sexual alternate model of romance based on an ideal relationship with Jesus Christ. In addition this paper seeks to explore the appeal of evangelicalism as a world-view to college women. Examining how evangelicals create their own model of appropriate dating within a larger and often diametrically opposed environment adds to the body of knowledge about how “culturally proximate” groups reinterpret our familiar environment to suit their needs.
Introduction

As a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania, a good friend of mine asked me to participate in a weekly Bible study with her. I was well aware that she was an evangelical Christian, a religious preference in which I had very little interest, and towards which I had a bit of animosity. Growing up in a conservative Christian community, I found evangelicals to be ignorant, closed-minded, and judgmental. Nonetheless, I agreed to join the Bible study to get my friend off my back, but planned to quit after a few weeks. However, after spending several three-hour Sunday sessions in the group, I became so engaged that I not only finished out the semester long study of the Book of Mark, but began to attend other events such as church meetings and large group worship.

I was captivated, not by the love of Jesus Christ, but by the sub-culture of evangelical Christians existing just below the radar of the conscious culture of the University of Pennsylvania. Here were students whose belief system was radically different from the dominant ideology at Penn. I had difficulty believing that the person sitting next to me in biology may completely disregard the theory of evolution, or that the girl sitting behind me in a diversity workshop might reject the idea of religious pluralism. I was shocked to learn that world-views that are so widely accepted in the Ivy League academic community such as relativism and secularism could be calmly and confidently rejected by members of this very same university. And the rejection of what I thought was Penn culture was certainly not confined to the classroom, but extended into the social interactions of Penn students. While weekends filled with sex drugs and alcohol have become a right of passage for many college students, the Christian sub-culture completely rejects these forms of entertainment, and strongly cautions against even seemingly innocuous forms of socializing such as dating. This rejection of general university
norms was most salient in the attitude of Christian women towards relationships and dating. While exploring the world-views of evangelicals at Penn, I have chosen to focus my paper on women’s attitudes towards dating.

**Intellectual Framework**

I want to look at Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship through a few theoretical lenses. The first idea that I would like to consider is the theory of secularization. Paul Bramadat quotes Bryan Wilson, a major secularization theorist, as describing the process of secularization as a “transfer of power, property and activities...from institutions with a supernaturalist frame of reference to (often-new) institutions operating according to empirical, rational, pragmatic criteria.” (Bramadat, 2000, 13). Wilson also suggests that secularization does not predict the disappearance of religion, because religion may transform itself and find a niche within the culture. But this transformed religion does not wield the same “social power” as the hegemonic religious institutions once did. Once religion has been separated from state and public education it will move to the margins of society and take on a more private form.

The very fact that evangelical groups are thriving in a secular society raises questions about how evangelicism functions in the modern world. Bramadat asks, “Should we understand burgeoning evangelical groups as institutional embodiments of the compromises that these groups have been compelled to make with the secular ethos in order to survive ...Or should we understand these organizations as resolute uprisings against the overwhelming disenchantment with contemporary culture (14)?” I would propose, as Paul Bramadat does, that evangelical students are both in protest of, and in compromise with, the dominant culture (Bramadat, 15). The compromises and can be further described as “cognitive bargaining” strategies that compare two opposing world-views to determine which one to accept, and the protests can be explained as
"cognitive retrenchment" strategies that build cognitive and behavioral walls between evangelicals and the dominant culture (Berger, 1992).

I also believe that sociologist Reginald Bibby’s theory of fragmentation offers a plausible framework from which to view my research. In his book, *Fragmented Gods* (1987), Bibby suggests that North Americans today have adopted a “selective consumption” approach to religion, picking out the aspects that are useful to them and largely ignoring the rest. Although, following Bibby, evangelicals are less likely to adopt fragments of religious worldviews; it is exactly this turn from religious fragmentation that may hold an appeal to evangelicals. In the face of a fragmented world evangelicalism advances a strict and structured worldview. Conversely, I would argue that evangelicals’ lack of religious fragmentation creates among them a need for “selective consumption” of the dominant culture.

The final theoretical model that I would like to apply to my research is that of cultural models and schemas. Claudia Strauss and Roy G. D’Andrade describe these theories in their book, *Human Motives and Cultural Models*. Claudia Strauss argues that motivation depends not on socio-cultural messages, but on how certain messages are made relevant to certain social actors. While some public messages may be salient to certain people, others may reject these very same messages. She further argues that we must discover the variables that make certain messages compelling to certain actors among the mass of conflicting social messages (Strauss, 2). This framework seems especially well suited to comparing the messages that different groups internalize. The evangelical students that I observed and interviewed reject a large number of cultural models that the rest of Penn students seem to accept, particularly those relating to dating. By looking at why these messages fail to have salience for evangelicals as well as what variables
influence the degree to which the cultural message is accepted, we can better understand the behavior of evangelical students.

D’Andrade concentrates on schemas which he defines as “a conceptual structure which makes possible the identification of objects and events (D’Adrăde, 28).” D’Andrade divides schemas into a three-tiered hierarchy. The top of the scale are schemas which function as a person’s master goals (i.e. love, or achievement). Next are mid-level goal-schemas, which may be dependent on a series of other goal-schemas to be accomplished. An example of a mid-level goal schema might be a high paying job, requiring other mid-level goal-schemas, such as a college degree, or living in a city. At the bottom of the schema totem pole are schemas for simple things like peanut butter sandwiches and shoelaces. These schemas do not instigate action unless related to a goal-schema (D’Andrade, 31). Schema theory can be applied in my research to explain why certain social-messages about dating are or are not compelling to evangelical women. Furthermore, we can see how both master goals and mid-level goals interact with evangelical schemas for eating to reinforce or renounce the salience of the more general cultural models of dating.

Paul Bramadat did the work that precedes my study in the field of evangelical fellowships at McMaster University in Canada. He research was wide in breadth and discusses how evangelical students created “bridges” to participate in the secular culture of the university, and “fortresses” to keep out the unwanted influences of secular college life. My study builds on his contribution to general ethnography of evangelical students to concentrate on the strategies that evangelical women use to negotiate between the dominant cultural messages about dating and the evangelical norms for romance.
Methodology

I chose to write this paper for two reasons. Foremost, I want to explore how evangelical Christians maintain their identity in a university whose value system and ideology are in opposition to their own. My main focus will be to examine the strategies that Christian women use to uphold their values and maintain their identity in relationship to sex and dating in the face of an incompatible Penn dating culture. To do this, I chose to study the Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, primarily because that is the association I was familiar with, and secondly because they were receptive and welcoming to the idea of me writing a paper about their group. To observe this fellowship I attended a “small group” every Monday from September through December of 2001. “Small groups” are weekly Bible studies of about 10-15 people that take place in the college dorms and are attended by Christian residents of those dorms. This experience gave me a strong overview of the evangelical culture here at Penn as expressed by this group. I then went on to conduct interviews with eight of the women from my small group. This gave me further insight into evangelical women’s values surrounding dating and sex, as well as strategies for maintaining those values in the face of a divergent culture.

My other purpose in writing this paper is to bring to light the beliefs and practices of a sub-culture at Penn that seems to fall under the radar of the average Penn student’s consciousness. It is not necessary for groups of people to live in grass huts trading yams and banana leaf skirts to merit ethnographic attention (Bramadat, 8). Because their appearance does not scream of otherness, North American groups and institutions may go completely unnoticed. However, “culturally proximate ethnographies” can demonstrate the strategies people use to manipulate the familiar culture to suit their own needs (Bramadat, 8). Hopefully, by examining
our own culture through a distinctly different lens we can reach understandings that may have previously been out of our frame of focus.

Results/ Discussion

The University of Pennsylvania is a secular university. The student population is known for being predominantly Jewish, and the majority of Christians self-identify as Catholic. If the evangelical subculture is under the radar of the Penn consciousness, it is perhaps because they do not conform to our collective idea of what an evangelical looks like. When speaking to other Penn students about my research, they all asked if I had interviewed Brother Steven, an aggressive evangelical man in his mid-thirties who is known for his loud speeches condemning Penn students to hellfire and damnation. When I explained that I was actually doing my project on evangelical Penn students I was met with looks of confusion. They had never seen Penn students widely condemning their classmates’ behavior, which seemed to be Penn students’ only schema for an evangelical.

Penn students were equally confused when I explained the foundations of evangelical faith. “Surely no Penn student really believes the Bible word for word!” said Alex, a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences. It would seem that the evangelical students at Penn also didn’t fit into the schema of what a Penn student is like.

Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship/USA, is an evangelical and interdenominational campus ministry. Inter Varsity was originally founded at the University of Cambridge in England in 1877 when a group of Christian students came together to pray, study the Bible and witness to other students. They formed the British Inter Varsity. Varsity is the British name for a college level school. Thus, Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship simply refers to a fellowship that extended across schools at Cambridge. Eventually they sent Howard Guinness, a medical
student, to Canada in 1928 for the purpose of organizing similar groups on Canadian campuses. Within ten years Inter Varsity had spread like wild-fire in Canada and in 1941 the movement was expanded to the United States. Currently, more than 34,000 students and faculty on more than 560 campuses participate in Inter Varsity in the U.S. alone. At this time more than 1,000 people are employed by Inter Varsity.

In order to quickly familiarize the reader with the ideology and purpose of Inter Varsity I have included both the mission statement and the doctrinal basis from the Inter Varsity web-site below (<www.ivcf.org>).

*Inter Varsity Mission Statement:*

*In response to God’s love, Grace and truth:*

*The Purpose of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship/USA is to establish and advance at colleges and universities witnessing communities of students and faculty who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord: growing in love for God, God’s Word, God’s people of every ethnicity and culture and God’s purposes in the world*

Inter Varsity’s mission statement is cast as a “response to God’s love, Grace, and truth.” In this way, the existence of Inter Varsity may be seen as a divine calling to establish this campus fellowship. The mission statement calls for students who follow Jesus Christ to form
"witnessing communities," or in other words groups of like-minded students who spread the message of Christ's love to non-believers. The emphasis on community, rather than individuals is important because it allows evangelical students to form an evangelical stronghold in the potentially hostile environment of the secular university. In this way, evangelical students cognitively retreat their beliefs by surrounding themselves with compatible world views. At the same time, the mission statement calls for these students to witness to (evangelize) students and faculty alike. Because of the difficult nature of witnessing to a campus population whose attitude towards evangelicalism can be described as ambivalent at best, the community of fellow evangelicals is an important support network. It should also be noted that the mission statement takes some of its message from the popular secular discourse of multiculturalism when it mentions "God's people of every ethnicity and culture." However, what is considered important in popular discourse (diversity and acceptance of all cultures) is only partially appropriated by Inter Varsity. While Inter Varsity is inclusive of all ethnicities, it is not inclusive of any cultural beliefs that do not acknowledge the evangelical doctrines, which I outline below. In this way, we can see the nod to multiculturalism as a cognitive bargain between secular discourse and evangelical doctrines.

Inter Varsity's Doctrinal Basis:

We believe in:

The only true God, the almighty Creator of all things,

existing eternally in three persons—

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—full of love and glory.
The unique divine inspiration,
entire trustworthiness
and authority of the Bible.
The value and dignity of all people:
created in God's image to live in love and holiness,
but alienated from God and each other because of our sin and guilt,
and justly subject to God's wrath.
Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine,
who lived as a perfect example,
who assumed the judgment due sinners by dying in our place,
and who was bodily raised from the dead and ascended as Savior and Lord.
Justification by God's grace to all who repent
and put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.
The indwelling presence and transforming power of the Holy Spirit,
who gives to all believers a new life and a new calling to obedient service.
The unity of all believers in Jesus Christ,
manifest in worshiping and witnessing churches
making disciples throughout the world.
The victorious reign and future personal return of Jesus Christ,
who will judge all people with justice and mercy,
giving over the unrepentant to eternal condemnation
but receiving the redeemed into eternal life.
To God be glory forever.
This doctrine is modeled on those set forth in the Bible by the Apostles such that it affirms the Holy Trinity. It is important to note that Inter Varsity members use the names Jesus God, and the Holy Spirit interchangeably and are referring to the same being when they do so. The doctrine reveals its evangelical protestant leanings with the reference to the truth and authority of the Bible. Moreover, it insists on original sin through which we as humans were alienated from God, and deserving of his wrath. Evangelicals believe that all humans are sinners destined to face the judgement of God. Acknowledgement of sins through repenting and “faith in Jesus Christ alone” are offered as the only escape from to this judgement. Evangelicals do not believe that good works are enough to achieve salvation. Thus, a great importance is placed on spreading the message that Jesus died for our sins in order to “save” non-believers. Finally, evangelicals believe strongly in a second-coming of Christ. When Christ returns the faithful will be whisked off to heaven, while non-believers will be condemned to hell. As we enter the new millennium, there has been a resurgence of evangelical movements, perhaps in light of the slew of social problems that appear to foreshadow the destruction of the Second Coming. Belief in a final and supernatural solution to the world’s problems may be comforting because negates the need to find worldly solutions to current global problems. At the same time, the imminent return of Christ presents the challenge of reaching as many people as possible with message of the New Testament before time runs out. Thus, a large emphasis is put on global mission work and witnessing in peer environments such as secular universities.

Inter Varsity at Penn

It is important to note that not all Inter Varsitys are created equal. While retaining some degree of uniformity of communication through the national office in Madison Wisconsin, the culture of each campus plays a key role in shaping the culture of Inter Varsity. For instance,
there is much more ethnic diversity among Inter Varsity participants than among the general population at Penn. Most Penn evangelicals were raised in conservative evangelical families, but a good number have "found Christ" on their own, either in high school, or here at Penn. Inter Varsity members also come from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds than the general student population at the University of Pennsylvania. Further, a slightly greater number of University of Pennsylvania Inter Varsity members come from the West as compared to the general Penn population. However, there is one area in which Inter Varsity does not have relative equality, and that is the area of gender. While the University of Pennsylvania has a roughly equal number of male and female students, Inter Varsity is comprised of two-thirds females. Interestingly enough, this composition is not unique to Penn's branch of Inter Varsity. Inter Varsities across the country and evangelical populations in general consistently have a higher female membership (Bramadat, 90). Frannie*, a staff member for Inter Varsity at Penn, attributes the greater number of female participants to "the lack of male leadership within Inter Varsity." "Without males in positions of leadership it is hard to attract male members." While Frannie's argument may be part of the reason that male membership is lacking, I feel that there may be other forces at play. The fact that there are fewer male leaders may be an effect rather than a cause of less interest in evangelicalism among college men as compared to women. Furthermore, I suspect that evangelical ideology is more attractive to women than to men, especially within the context of a college culture.

There is one more point I would like to clarify about the tenets of evangelical belief before I move on to discuss the intricacies of Penn's chapter of Inter Varsity, and that is the stress placed on developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is this relationship which, to evangelicals, marks them as distinct from other Christian groups. It is important to note

* Names have been changed.
that when evangelicals use the word “Christian” they are referring only to people who have a personal relationship with Jesus, the “true Christians.” One of my interviews provides a perfect example of this thinking. When asked her views about non-Christians at Penn, Eloise*, a freshman from Texas, mused “I don’t think my Catholic friend knows he is not a Christian.” This personal relationship is a self-defining point of a Christian identity. Evangelicals see a relationship with Jesus as related to every aspect of their lives as well as the single most important relationship in their lives, above even those with family members or lovers. In this sense, this relationship is a master-goal, existing with an array of sub-goals that aim to ensure its realization. Later I will discuss how the relationship with Jesus becomes a template for all relationships and how these relationship schemas influence the dating practices of evangelical women.

**Small Group**

Small groups are small Bible studies held at different geographical points on campus for the purpose of forming community within certain college houses (dorms). It is important to note that at Penn there is no “Christian ghetto” as Ben* called it in our interview. In fact, Inter Varsity members make a conscious effort not to live together. “We spread ourselves out,” said Ben. “We are strategic about it, and it’s what we feel that God wants us to do. God uses us to share the faith. How we live is an example to non-Christians of God’s love. I always have my door open, and people have been receptive.” For this reason, very few Inter Varsity members live off campus, a popular option among the rest of the Penn community. Ben also sees small groups as the “heart beat of Inter Varsity. They are where you get to know people and grow in Christ together.”
I would agree with Ben, that small groups are the “heartbeat” of Inter Varsity. During my time observing small group I was able to witness the beliefs and practices of members of Penn’s evangelical community. Though the focus of this paper is on how evangelical women conceptualize dating and the strategies they employ to “cognitively bargain” with social-messages about dating, it is imperative to give the reader a broader basis for understanding the world-view of evangelicals at Penn. For this reason I include the following description from my experience observing small group.

Ben, a senior from Texas, and Miranda*, a sophomore from California, were the two leaders of the small group I attended every Monday from 7:30 to 9:10 at night. The small group was held in Miranda’s room in the Butcher section of the Quad, a dormitory ironically known for heavy drinking and wild partying among the predominantly freshman residents who live there. The rest of the group was made up of five men and ten women. The group was mostly freshman and sophomores, but had about five upperclassmen due to the Inter Varsity strategy of spreading themselves throughout the dorms. A typical meeting would start with some small talk and sharing about our weekends or getting to know each other through discussing childhood memories or holiday traditions. At this same time the group would discuss matters of business such as an upcoming retreat, or Inter Varsity events. At the first meeting we had to pick a name for our small group. With the majority of the small group being from the West or Southwest we settled on the acronym SALSA—Seeking A Lord So Awesome. At the first meeting we discussed the over-arching theme for the small group, which was “Intimacy with God.” The theme of intimacy is a telling indicator of the importance and depth of evangelicals’ relationships with God. The sexual associations around the word intimacy are no mistake. However, by
conceptualizing intimacy as spiritual connection, evangelicals create a alternative schema for intimacy.

After the matters of business were taken care of, Ben would signal that the group was getting down to business by asking two of the members to lead them in prayer. Prayer within Inter Varsity is always at least partially done aloud with a lot of what Paul Bramadat has referred to as Christianese. In order to humble themselves before God their prayers are often qualified by unrestrained use of the word “just” (68). For example, Ben once led the small group in prayer with these words, “God we just come before you tonight to ask that you’ll make your presence shown here, we just want to know you God and know your plan for us. We just want to read your words, God, because you love us so much God.” While some students pray aloud in this form it is common to see other students swaying back and forth, holding their heads in their hands, or squeezing their eyes shut tight and silently mouthing the words to their own private prayers. It was also common at this point in the meeting to pray for any concerns—the health of relatives, hopes that a friend would draw nearer to Christ, or an upcoming job interview.

Finally after the prayers we would come to the actual Bible study section of the meeting. Ben and Miranda would choose a section of the Bible to be studied by the group each week. Inter Varsity employs a literal interpretation of the Bible and members believe that studying the word of God (as the Bible is often called) is the best way to come to know Jesus (who is also referred to as the “word of God”). Inter Varsity also teaches what is known as the “inductive method” of Bible study. This method involves looking only at the section of text that is selected for that evening without bringing in outside information. The first step is to read the text and to make notes in the margins. Then participants are instructed to make simple observations about
the text. Next the group attempts to interpret the text, and finally the group discusses how to apply the text to their lives.

The "inductive method" of Bible study is a non-contextual approach to looking at the Bible. Participants must ignore the implications of the section within the context of the Bible, and simply examine "the word of God." In doing so, members of Inter Varsity come to see Jesus, not as the epic hero of the New Testament, but as someone they can relate to action by action, word by word. This method moves away from the big picture of Christ as savior (a message most members have already internalized), and allows members to "get to know Jesus" on a more intimate level. In this manner, inductive Bible study reinforces the intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

The ensuing discussions were always fascinating and revealing of the nature of Inter Varsity. For the sake of brevity I cannot discuss what happened at every small group however I do want to share some of general patterns that came up again and again.

Familiarity or Friendship with God

At my first meeting, Ben announced how excited he was that the group was sharing this time to "hang out with Jesus." This familiarity came as a surprise to me, as I was raised in a tradition where Jesus was more removed. Because of the evangelical belief that in order to be Christian one must have a personal relationship with Christ, Inter Varsity students tend to speak about Jesus as if he were one of their friends. Jesus is not only referred to as a friend in the discourse, but treated as a friend or counselor. Confused, whether or not to apply for an after school job, Eloise "asked Jesus, what he wanted me to do, and he told me to stick to my classes, and now I can see he was right because my classes are really hard this semester. If I had a job I
wouldn’t have time for anything else, including Inter Varsity!” This familiarity with Jesus, as well as the reciprocal nature of the relationship is a key to understanding the Inter Varsity persona. Inter Varsity members can call on Furthermore this relationship serves as a model for worldly relationships.

Wonder and Humility

Coupled with familiarity with Jesus is an almost childlike sense of awe and wonder at him. “We can’t know [exactly what this passage means] but God does, He is so far above us.” said Gwen*. Similarly Ben expressed his wonder with these words: “he made us so he knows us, he invested a lot in each of us. I was made for God alone, God’s thoughts are precious to me.” Another time when the group was discussing God coming to the defense of Moses (Numbers 21:1-9), Ben asked the group, “would God come to your defense, and would there be anything for him to defend?” The group hung their heads. I was shocked that people with so much devotion to God -- people who considered God, their counselor, father and friend-- evaluated themselves so harshly. “Do we deserve God’s mercy?” Ben asked the group. “Of course not!” was the general consensus. “It is only through His glory and goodness, we should be grateful.” Moreover, submission to God is integral to the evangelical identity. Evangelicals must be willing to submit to God’s will, even if it is contradictory to their own. In discussing her plans for the future Kat* said, “Sometimes I wish I could move back to California, but I know it is God’s will that I stay in Philadelphia. there is so much work to be done here in His name.”

Witnessing (Evangelizing)

Just because they are not shouting on street corners does not mean that Penn’s evangelicals are hiding their faith. On the contrary, an important part of being evangelical is witnessing. Witnessing is the act of sharing the salvific good news of Christ’s life, death, and
resurrection with non-Christians. When one witnesses one is claiming to have had an experience of the personal and divine reality of Christ (Bramadat, 120). This witnessing can be done by giving one’s personal testimony or simply talking to people about Jesus. Another important way in which evangelicals at Penn witness is through living among non-Christians as an example. The application of small group inductive Bible study often focused on “how to lift up Jesus in the dorms.” Making an analogy between Penn and faithless Israelites who were bitten by venomous snakes while wandering through the desert, Ben said, “People all round us are bitten. What can we do?” The group’s solution was to serve people. Presumably, serving others would generate curiosity among non-evangelicals about why someone would go out of his or her way for another person. This in turn would provide members of the small group an opportunity to share how God has lifted them up. When some members of the fellowship expressed doubt that non-evangelicals would be receptive to their stories, Ben offered this advice. “Inter Varsity doors are never closed. At first it may be comfortable to seek out others with the same beliefs, to encourage each other and be accountable to each other in Christ. Then, when you are ready to handle other opinions, you should go out and evangelize.”

These outlooks on evangelicals’ relation with Jesus and with the University provide an initial basis for understanding the way evangelical women deal with dating at Penn. The importance of relationship, as well as of submission resurfaces in evangelical women’s schemas for romance. In addition, the practice of witnessing is analogous to evangelical values surrounding dating in that just as evangelicals who are new in their faith are encouraged to take things slowly and focus on God, so those in dating relationships are encouraged to go slow. Evangelicals are only allowed to branch out into relationships that may threaten their relationship with God once they are completely secure in this relationship.
Dating at Penn

The dating culture of the University of Pennsylvania is very much like that of other large secular American universities. Ironically, the dating culture at Penn is defined mostly by its dearth of interactions that would typically be considered "a date". The "hook up," a cover term for all behaviors ranging from making out to having sex, depending who you talk to, is ubiquitous, and steady relationships are the exception rather than the rule. While a double standard exists to some degree, both men and women are expected to hook up. It is common to hear members of both sexes expressing desires for sexual contact. Ironically again, both sexes complain about the quality of the members of the opposite sex here at Penn. Boys find the girls too high-maintenance and trendy. They complain that the girls at Penn are all the same, and are all just looking to marry rich. Girls complain that all Penn guys only want a one-night stand.

Casual sex is common with the average Penn student. Data from the Alcohol, Other Drugs and Health Behavior Survey, Office of Health Education, Division of University Life (2001) report 50% being sexually active in the thirty days prior to the survey. Overall, the dominant attitude seems to be that everyone should try to get as much sex as possible. However, I have had numerous conversations with both men and women who have expressed disenchantment with this attitude at Penn. These conversations suggest that a significant number of Penn students are looking for something more lasting, more meaningful than a one-time hook up, but are often afraid to voice these concerns because they do not seem to fit with the dominant zeitgeist.

Christian Women and Dating
Kat described the difference between the beliefs of evangelical women, and the rest of the Penn community where she quoted Genesis 3:16:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy man, and he shall rule over thee.

"I see [the desire for men] so much here at Penn" she explained. "Women are so concerned with being desired by men that they do things that end up hurting themselves. But God thinks we are so desirable he sent his son to die for us. Our value doesn't come from what we do or how we look."

I believe this is the central tenet to the difference between evangelical women's behavior, and that of other college students. As a result of the advertising that fuels our consumer-driven culture, many women, especially college-aged women who are particularly targeted by such advertising, feel an obligation to be desirable to men. At the same time, college is a time and place where many students experiment with sexual intimacy for the first time, yet often without long-term attachment. These two factors (an advertising created need, and increased freedom for sexual experimentation) coupled together create a compelling need to be desired by men. The evangelical woman, while subjected to many of the same pressures, appears much less concerned about her sex appeal. I propose that the evangelical women compare and contrast the conflicting messages they receive about dating as a way to adapt to this pressure on college women. Romantic relationships are postponed by or modeled after the master-goal of a relationship with Christ.

To begin to investigate how evangelical women conceptualize their sexuality I reviewed some articles on the subject from the Inter Varsity web (<www.ivcf.org>). The fact that the Inter Varsity web page, which is mostly limited in scope to general information about the
organization, and links to local chapters, included three articles on evangelical standards with regard to sex, caught my attention. Clearly, InterVarsity realizes that sexual relationships are an integral part of college culture, even among evangelicals. The three articles were as follows: “Why Wait for Sex” by Alice Fryling; “The Accountability Factor” by Valerie Gladu; and “Thoughts on Dating” by Steve Hayner. I think it is beneficial to analyze the messages within these texts to better understand the social mores being set forth in the evangelical community.

“Why Wait for Sex” begins by asking readers to look at the lies college students face. Fryling begins by equating great historical tragedies—the Spanish Inquisition, the annihilation of Native Americans by white Settlers, and the Holocaust—with the lies of the new generation, lies surrounding premarital sex. From this assertion we can see that “sexual sin” is considered a very serious problem among college-aged evangelicals. Fryling goes on to say that our society is starving for intimacy.

Many of the lies we believe in our culture have to do with our hunger for relationship. We want acceptance, loving relationships, and deep intimacy, and yet we believe the lie that sex will satisfy our hunger…the truth is that sex outside of marriage is not all that it is cracked up to be.

Here Fryling is addressing the wide acceptance of cultural models for sexuality that may threaten the evangelical model of purity. Fryling uses arguments that support cognitive retrenchment of evangelical views to curtail any cognitive bargaining that InterVarsity members may have done with dominant attitudes about sex.

By constructing the dominant cultural messages about sex as lies, Fryling protests the secular model, while positively reinforcing the evangelical values. Through the article several patterns emerged—the importance of marriage, the moral decline of American culture,
evangelical values for faith and scripture, and appeals to the anxiety about sex appeal. These patterns represent evangelical goal-schemas, while at the same time providing counter-cultural models from which evangelicals construct these schemas.

Marriage is an important goal-schema for evangelicals. Fryling references this schema again and again in her article. She argues that premarital sex hinders intimacy and fosters bad marriages. In this way premarital sex may function as the opposite of a sub-goal schema. Rather than facilitate the realization of the marriage goal, it acts actively against it. We can see this attitude again in the statement, “sex is an art best learned within the confines of marriage.” This statement reiterates the value of marriage but the term “learned” also speaks to the misgivings that students may experience while experimenting with sex in college. If sex is something that must be learned, rather than experienced, a whole new set of expectations and anxieties is placed upon the act. Learning implies that there are rules and techniques to be mastereded before one can truly be sexual. This construction of sex places extra anxiety on those who adhere to it.

Fryling goes on to say that, “For a woman particularly, sex can reveal hidden fears and lack of trust.” From this statement we come back to fears and anxieties about being desired. Women who already feel these anxieties due perhaps to media or cultural influence (which is hard for evangelicals to avoid) find salience and meaning in anxiety and may incorporate Fryling’s advice as a rule for themselves to avoid this anxiety.

Perhaps the greatest appeal to women’s anxiety is Fryling’s statement, “Premarital sex may be bad for the emotional health of your future marriage. It lays the groundwork for comparisons, suspicions, and mistrust. ‘Am I as attractive (or as sexually stimulating) as his last partner?’ ‘If she didn’t wait for me before we were married, why do I think she will settle for only me now?’ ‘If someone better comes along, will I be left in the dust?’” Comparisons,
suspicions, and mistrust play directly into the anxieties about the desirability of college women. Specifically the question, "am I as attractive (or as sexually stimulating) as his last partner?" suggests that sexual experimentation only creates competition between partners. This reinforces the cultural model of commodification of women as competitive sex partners in a free market. Fryling offers abstinence as an alternative to this capitalist system where female bodies compete for male attention. By playing on the fears of women who have already internalized the cultural messages about desirability, Fryling is able to propose evangelical models of purity and abstinence. In this way she builds cognitive and behavioral walls between evangelicals and the dominant culture, through which evangelicals protect themselves from the anxieties that plague other college women. Fryling's warnings can be explained in terms of Mary Douglas' study of purity in the religion of "primitive cultures." Douglas argued that contamination is a symbol for social disorder, thus religion values purity in order to impose order (Douglas, 1966, 2). She also argues that pollution ideas may be instrumental in their attempt to influence behavior, and that rituals of purity create unity of experience (3). Fryling's advice can be seen as instrumental because it prescribes behavior to maintain purity while at the same time, those who adhere to it strengthen their collective identity as pure bodies. Following Douglas, this identity can function on an expressive level, symbolizing the religious ideal through bodily purity (4).

With an argument that many people might find offensive, Fryling states, "Sexual promiscuity is even bad for the health of our civilization. One study of more than eighty societies ranging in development from ancient to primitive to more modern revealed "an unvarying correlation between the degree of sexual restraint and the rate of social progress. Cultures that were more sexually permissive displayed less cultural energy, creativity, intellectual development and individualism, and a slower general cultural ascent." By equating sexually
permissive cultures with lack of creativity and intellectual development., Fryling makes sex an issue of not only moral, but also cultural superiority. Fryling wants to tap into the idea that pre-marital sex is bad for our “superior” culture. This goes along perfectly with the evangelical disenchantedment with the current morality of the United States. However, she comes at this complaint from a sly angle. Rather than attack the issue from the marginal evangelical perspective, she hides in (selectively consumed) hegemonic messages of progress and power. Clearly, there is no scientific evidence that sexual permissiveness and Christianity Today’s estimation of “cultural ascent” are in a causal relationship. But while Fryling is no social scientist and is certainly no anthropologist, her argument may be effective for her readers who have also internalized the American master-goals of power and progress.

Finally, Fryling resorts to two schemas very clear to the hearts of evangelicals, faith and the scripture. “Scripture is clear that sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage is sin. I do not believe that God gave these rules because he is a spoil sport. Quite the contrary. Because God created us and because he loves us more than we can ever know, he has told us how to have the best, most satisfying sexual experiences: in marriage. That’s where sex is fun!” Evangelicals believe that the Bible is true word for word and the best way to “know God”. By appealing to this schema Fryling has called on the ultimate authority to activate master goal schemas. To go against the scripture is to go against one’s own identity as an evangelical.

Similarly, faith is a master goal. The ability to trust in God no matter what is one of the ways that evangelicals construct their faith. When Fryling says, “obedience to God’s commands includes trusting him to know what’s best for us—even if we don’t fully grasp his reasons” she calls upon an evangelical schema for faith. Because faith in God/Jesus is the one way to achieve salvation, this appeal is extremely salient to evangelicals.
If Fryling seeks to motivate Inter Varsity members through appealing both to anxieties created by the dominant cultural messages, and master schemas of evangelical culture, Gladu suggests actual strategies for evading sexual sin. Gladu acknowledges that “God designed us to be sexual beings and our sexuality is not something we can or should merely turn off until marriage.” However she also asserts that, “too often in the arena of sex we ignore any discussion of God’s perspective on our sexuality...Relationships of accountability in the Christian community are very important if we are to maintain the standards of purity and integrity which Christ demands of us.” She suggests forming accountability partners, who would ideally be a member of the same sex with whom one would pray and whom one would be honest with. It is the accountability partner’s job to ask hard questions such as, “Have you broken any of the standards that you established?” “How are you encouraging each other in purity?” “Are you having sex?” “Are you lying to me?” I do not mean to give the impression through discussion of all these strict rules regarding sexuality that evangelicals never break these rules, or that they are shunned from the group if they do slip up. Gladu goes on to remind readers that it is also important to establish a community that cares and forgives.

Followers of Jesus must extend the same compassion and forgiveness which characterized Jesus’ ministry...People found the love of Jesus irresistible and sought out his forgiveness and healing. In the same way, as we are able to extend compassion and forgiveness, the people we are seeking to love will find it easier to admit their need for Jesus and for encouragement from fellow believers. Conversely, if students feel that they will be judged for their failures and frailties, they will choose not to reveal them to others, even if that means continued failure.
The element of forgiveness is crucial to evangelical beliefs and one of perhaps the most widely misunderstood tenets by non-evangelicals on Penn’s campus. Dinah* related an event where an active member of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) Association yelled at her for being a Christian because the LGBT member believed Christians to be very close-minded and judgmental. From my interviews and observations I have found most Penn evangelicals to be astonishingly forgiving of “sin,” primarily because they believe that we are all sinners and that God is the only being who can pass judgement.

Gladu also says that “relationships need to have room for other people. When there is no room for others to be included in a couples activities, the couple can become very self-absorbed, unavailable for opportunities to serve others. Worse yet, they drift away from accountability. Instead we want to encourage the development of a strong network of friends among leaders.” This statement is very much at the heart of the dating culture within Inter Varsity at the University of Pennsylvania. It is an extremely cautious culture characterized by discouragement of any romantic attachments during the first two years of college. Part of the reason for this attitude, several students have informed me, is that four years ago, when the current seniors in Inter Varsity were still in high school, there was a scandal involving “sexual sin” among several of the student leaders of Penn’s Inter Varsity. After that disaster, and bad example in leadership the idea of dating among Inter Varsity participants became a volatile one. Kat, a senior shared the advice a leader gave to her as a freshman. “ She told me, ‘college dating is like a traffic light. Freshman and sophomore year is red, do not go! Junior year is yellow, proceed with caution, and senior year is a green light for forming relationships and beginning to think about marriage.”

While this attitude may be more or less pronounced within Inter varsity of different campuses, Steve Hayner’s, “Thoughts on Dating” which comes from the Inter Varsity homepage
seems to mirror some of these same concerns. Some of his advice could be found in a secular advice column about dating, such as “seek friendship and wait on romance. Romance will grab you soon enough but friendship requires careful development.” And “Live in the reality of what and where a relationship is in its development, not in the fantasy of where you would like it to be.”

But other advice is clearly evangelical, “Many people pursue relationships as the solution to their problems, whether those problems be insecurity, loneliness, lust, lack of direction, bad self-image, etc. These are not necessarily solved by marriage. In fact often they are enhanced. God’s solution is to ‘seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.’ (Matthew 6: 33) It is easy for many to want marriage more than God and so be willing to compromise. Dating a non-[evangelical] is a problem if you haven’t clearly decided what you want to be in your relationship with Christ. How does this person enhance and encourage your growth in Christ?”

Again we see the strong emphasis on marriage as the goal of dating. Concurrently, we see the strong preference for a significant other who is also an evangelical Christian. The desire to marry an evangelical man was expressed by every InterVarsity student that I spoke to, save Ruth*, who told me that she has no desire to ever date or marry. All other members of InterVarsity said they would only consider dating other evangelicals. Part of the reason for this exclusivity is the aforementioned dating with the intention of marriage.

These three articles elucidate some of the evangelical messages that run counter to the dominant discourse on sex and dating. But evangelical women’s behavior in regard to dating is not merely a result of their internalizing evangelical rhetoric. Indeed, as Strauss argues, these messages are clearly so salient to these women that they adopt them as part of their worldview despite the fact that evangelical messages conflict with the more ubiquitous cultural messages. It
is possible that the women see being an evangelical as so fundamental to their identity that messages from evangelical sources have automatic salience. Or it could be that the acceptance of the hegemonic messages that construct women as sexual commodities gives salience to the evangelical messages that play upon sexual anxieties of women.

I interviewed eight evangelical women at the University of Pennsylvania in order to look at the ways in which they described dating and sex, and to understand how they construct their own motivations and behavior.

**Interviews**

While conducting my interviews with eight members of InterVarsity, I asked them how they felt about being an evangelical at a secular university. We discussed the somewhat limited role in leadership that women are allowed in the evangelical faith, and how that does and does not play out in InterVarsity. We also discussed dating culture, and values as they perceived them compared to the Penn community. I have included some aspects of the life histories of all of these women as to render them more real, and less two-dimensional.

In addition, in this section I would like to make reference to the work of Dorothy C. Holland (1992) who studied how college women’s schemas for romance become desire. Holland noted that “much of women’s time and energy ...had to do with romantic relationships (61)” and “going out with friends of the opposite sex ranked high on the list of valued activities(64).” Holland also argued that “involvement—the salience of and identification with the cultural system of romance—co-developed along with expertise.” In other words, women who were romantic novices or otherwise uncomfortable with romance experience less desire for romance (79). Similarly, while romance experts are able to navigate the complicated world of dating, novices will need to rely upon rules. Holland’s model is a good description of the Penn dating
culture. Women at Penn spend much of their time pursuing, discussing and thinking about romantic relationships. And the amount of time and energy spent on romance seems to have a positive correlation to women with more romantic experience. However, in the context of my interviews with evangelical women, dating as it is constructed by the Penn community clearly emerges as a cultural model with low salience for evangelical women. However, through rejecting this model a new set of evangelical rules are constructed to guide evangelical women through romance.

Olivia

Olivia* is a senior from Texas, she currently lives in the freshman dorms as a resident advisor. Olivia is Korean American and her parents come from a Buddhist background but were not particularly religious. Olivia said that her parents valued studying over religion and created a home environment that was very high pressure.

When I was in the 9th grade I was close to suicidal. But nobody knew because I just always walked around with a smile on my face. I felt like I always had to smile. Then I met this woman, Shawn Bryner, she was a leader of a local Christian fellowship, and she just saw right through me.

Olivia was very interested in the word of God and began to meet with this woman to study the Bible. When her parents found out they forbade her from seeing Shawn.

I began going to school early and meeting Shawn to study the Bible in her car. This was behind my parents’ backs. They were afraid it was a cult. They thought it was just a phase. Finally I convinced them to let me go to a Korean church because they thought I would learn Korean there.
But it wasn’t just a phase for Olivia. She continued with church, and her clandestine Bible studies with Shawn, and by her senior year she knew that some big changes had occurred within her. “I finally reconciled with my mom in my senior year. Previously we had had a very bad relationship. She set high standards that I couldn’t live up to. You might say she was verbally abusive. Its complex.” When Olivia got to college she “went wild” by becoming even more passionate about her faith. She has discovered that she has a “heart for missions” but again this creates problems with her parents who would prefer that she become a doctor.

I asked Olivia to describe her dreams for the future, compared to her perceptions of those for non-evangelical Penn women.

I just want to know how God wants to use me. I am being open to marriage and marriage and a family feels more important than a career, but serving God is above that. I think women at Penn are of two extremes. There are the girls who come here just looking to find a husband, and other girls who are completely career-focused. Most people at Penn are motivated by self-advancement. I think that Christian women are different, because we are not just thinking about our own advancement. We are not being run by our own desires.

Here Olivia builds a cognitive wall between evangelicals and the rest of Penn students by constructing Penn students as people who are run by their own desires, whereas evangelicals presumably pursue God’s will.

I then asked Olivia to describe the values surrounding dating in Inter Varsity.

Well, you have to be prayerful about it. It’s important that you tell your spiritual leaders before you initiate anything. I mean as a woman you don’t initiate [a relationship]. Biblically speaking women must submit and be chaste. But if a guy likes a girl he should
go to the spiritual leaders and they should pray about it. Then if the spiritual leaders think
it’s a good idea they will go to the girl and pray with her about it. If all goes well then the
couple will pray together. Ultimately you need to find out if it is God’s will that you get
together. Sometimes people don’t want to go through this process and begin dating in
secret, but that’s not good.

When I asked why that wasn’t good Olivia responded, “Christians place a lot of
importance on being pure, for both men and women.”

Olivia’s procedure and rules for dating greatly slow down the dominant process of the
spontaneous hook-up. It seems that it would be hard to begin to date anyone with so many
barriers to overcome in a rather complicated process. However, these barriers are very
purposeful in slowing down the tempo of dating, making sure a couple’s desire for each other is
lasting, patient, and foremost, the will of God. Olivia admits that this process is difficult, though
she accepts its purpose as right by identifying her value for purity. In this case purity seems to
function as a goal-schema that can be used to control other behaviors, such as dating, that might
threaten this goal.

When I asked about differences she perceived in the dating culture of the Penn
community, she responded that the biggest difference was that Christians only dated “marriage
material.” “Here at Penn there is a lot of lust and immorality. Girls hook up with people without
even knowing their names! I think alcohol plays into it and that relationships are not taken
seriously, I mean there is no real commitment.”

In explaining what is abhorrent about hooking-up, Olivia mentions that a couple may not
even know each other’s names. She demonstrates her value for relationship through her distaste
for dating and sexual practices that de-emphasize relationship, and emphasize the physical.
Through her renunciation of interactions that are brief and carefree, Olivia’s schema for romance emerges. A romantic relationship is not based in the physical act of sex, but instead in the strength of the connection between two people.

Then Olivia shared with me her personal worries about sex. “I don’t want to be physical with anyone until there is some promise of marriage. I think I am scared of physical contact because I have seen sex abused so much in the world. I guess I have kind of a warped view of sex.”

Clearly, Olivia is what Holland would call a “novice” in the world of romance. While she has some understanding of the sexually permissive dating culture of the university, it is not salient to her, nor is it consistent with her world-view. She rejects the dominant dating culture, which she cannot navigate with skill or “expertise” and in her status as a novice, employs a strict mental set of rules to use should she find herself entering the world of dating. Romantic relationships are postponed in favor of relationships with other Christians and her personal relationship with Jesus.

Changing the topic slightly, I asked Olivia what she thought accounts for the much higher percentage of women in Inter Varsity.

I don’t know. I guess it’s scarier for men to become passionate for God. There is more pressure for men to focus on money and family and success. I mean there are a lot of single women missionaries. They are more willing to go in unmarried than men are. Plus, I think it is harder for men to commit to the lifestyle, I mean being pure and committed to God. The physical aspect of sex is much stronger for men. Sociologically women are just more spiritual and more willing to obey God.
Finally I asked Olivia how she felt about waiting to date, “The kids on my hall have a running joke that I am married to Jesus.” She laughed. “A relationship with God controls desire, God fulfills and helps to wait.”

The idea of being married to Jesus, which might be construed by non-evangelicals as sacrilegious, doesn’t seem to bother Olivia. Instead she smiles, confirming that her relationship with Jesus is like a marriage, serious and committed—characteristics Olivia has come to value in all relationships.

Ruth

The next person I talked to was Ruth, a West Indian freshman from Queens. Unlike Olivia she was born into a strong Christian family, and religion has always been an important part of her life. Ruth even considered going to a Christian college because it would “foster a Christian community.” However, she was wary of what she called a “Christ act” where she feels like people are constantly trying to put on a show or act to demonstrate their grace. Ruth likes Penn because she feels that the Christian population here is small but “for real.”

Ruth doesn’t want to get married. She says that she used to consider herself a quasi-feminist and that she didn’t like sections of the Bible that talked about women submitting. “But now I see those passages differently. I mean I look at my mom and dad. My dad is the spiritual head of the family, but my mom has an important role too. She doesn’t submit. They are a team.”

Here we see one of the few areas where I have noticed evangelicals re-interpret the Bible which is normally followed word for word. While this is not exactly consistent with Bibby’s definition of “selective consumption,” it is certainly a selective interpretation of a text that is
usually honored in an unadulterated form among evangelicals. There is a common conception among the evangelical women at Penn that men and women are equal in God's eyes but work together in a relationship in slightly different roles. It is the man's job to really honor and serve the woman, and in response to this honor and service, the woman willingly submits to her husband. This relationship is supposed to mirror that of Christ and the church, with Christ serving the church and the church submitting to Christ. This sort of model for a romantic relationship implies a fairly serious commitment on both persons part, again giving the goal-schema of romantic relationships more weight for evangelicals than those who date for fun.

I asked Ruth how she felt about being an evangelical at a secular school. "I really love the InterVarsity people. They are so passionate and sincere. When I first got here I was afraid I would be alone because I am so conservative. Sometimes I get tired of witnessing, I don't have to explain myself to InterVarsity people." I asked Ruth if she had negative experiences with non-Christians. "I am the only Christian on my hall so sometimes they'll make jokes like, 'you're missing church? You're going to hell!' but mostly I have good relations with my hall." I asked if anything the kids on her hall do in their personal lives offends her. "Well, it's not really any of my business so I try to keep out of it for the most part but I have to question some things like when this guy down the hall from me has a girl over to spend the night. I mean the morality of the Bible is clear cut-- no fornication."

Again we see the authority of the Bible called in as a master schema for questions of morality. While the students down the hall seem like nice people, they are flagrantly flouting the Bible. Here Ruth must cognitively bargain between the secular ethos of her hall mates and what she has been taught about purity in evangelical circles. Unable to decide between conflicting
messages, Ruth uses a master schema, her belief about the authority of the Bible to decide that it is her hallmates who are in the wrong.

I asked again, "so why don't you want to get married?"

"I just feel that marriage isn't for me. I think it's funny that Christian women will often talk about their future husband as if they know him. They don't want to defile themselves before they meet him and they want him to be pure too. But there is forgiveness for sexual sin, the past is over."

This behavior, perhaps noticed by Ruth because (in the sense that she does not plan to marry) she is an outsider, is a concrete strategy employed to defer dating and sexual involvement. By conceptualizing a future husband as a specific person, evangelical women personalize an abstraction. In Imaginary Social Worlds (1984) John Caughey proposes that fantasies, such as the husband fantasies of evangelical women, reflect individual desires as they have been shaped by social and cultural forces. Caughey goes on to explain that fantasies can be linked to the culture of particular subgroups and are affected by sub-cultural categories rules and plans. Consequently we can look at patterns of fantasy to discover a sub-group's conception of the desirable (185). Moreover, Caughey argues that by providing purpose and meaning, fantasy has indirect but important effects on actual interactions (188).

Through fantasizing about their future husbands evangelical women may regulate their behavior to remain pure for this imaginary person. It is not likely that any of these women have met their future husbands, but by thinking about him as if he were someone whom they already know, his desires and feelings become meaningful. Furthermore, by verbalizing dreams about this person he becomes a real person not only to the individual evangelical woman, but to her peer group as well. Conversation between members of a cultural group makes human beliefs
public and part of the “universe of discourse”, or common images in discussion (Boulding, 1972, 49). As these imaginary husbands become part of the universe of discourse the evangelical woman is held accountable to her friends for actions that might not please her future husband who is now “known” by the peer group.

Ruth also mentioned that she has a good relation with Christ. “I can tell him anything and he will listen and answer. Husband and wife is not the only way.”

Here, Ruth is not “selectively consuming” from evangelical discourse along with the secular culture, instead she has taken the dogma of evangelicalism and excluded all other possibilities. A relationship with Jesus has taken such prominence in her life that she has decided she does not need any other romantic relationship (nor motherhood for that matter) to supplement her relationship with Christ.

When I asked Ruth why she thought there were more women in Inter Varsity she said, “It has to do with age. The ratio evens out as we get older. Men are very proactive. They want to do their own thing. They don’t want to be weak. It’s like Flanders on The Simpsons—he’s a good guy, dependable. But nobody wants that, they want Homer.”

Here Ruth ties to a common symbol of pop culture, The Simpsons to explain an evangelical phenomenon. Flanders may be one of the few mainstream representations of an evangelical man. Ironically, The Simpsons is often critical of evangelicals, using Flanders as the butt of its jokes. Yet the use of this particular analogy demonstrates that Ruth has picked up on the negative hegemonic models of the evangelical man. However, she also misunderstands the messages about the desirable male encoded in The Simpsons. Homer is not meant to be seen as a desirable male character, but rather a caricature of a working class man. Thus, her analogy betrays her lack of “expertise” regarding romantic ideal and relations. She has failed to
internalize dominant cultural models of romance, and perhaps this why romantic relationships have little salience for her.

"Basically it boils down to them being the prodigal sons on campus. Being Christian is perceived as being weak. I mean, 'I follow a king', who wants to admit that? But it's easier for girls. Women are the weaker sex. Plus being Christian provides women with a pact."

I asked Ruth to further explain her statement about a pact and she said that if guys know you are a Christian, then you have a reason to say no. You won't be pressured by slimy guys as much because you have standards of sexual purity."

This outlines yet another strategy for how evangelical women maintain their standards. By the very ability to rationalize abstinence with religious reasons evangelical women insulate themselves from the stigma of being prudish, or repressed.

Ruth also mirrored the comments of my other informants when she said "the dating culture in Christian circles is really conservative. First you have to pray, 'Is this the person for me?' It is a pretty direct path towards marriage, you see a lot more engagements within Christian circles."

Dinah

Dinah, a Euro-American senior in the school of engineering was also born into a Christian family in upstate New York. Dinah said she never considered going to a Christian school "because they are mostly too small and not well regarded academically. I didn't feel like it was the right place and my parents really discouraged me from going [to a Christian college]. They thought it would be a really conservative, single minded environment and growing up during the 60's, they really value self-discovery and different ideas." Dinah is also the only
person whom I interviewec who has a boyfriend. His name is Teddy* and he is also a member of
Inter Varsity.

Before arriving at Penn, Dinah thought there wouldn’t be any Christians here. “I didn’t
know what happened to Christians in college. All the college students you see in the media are
going out and drinking beer and having sex.” But when she arrived at Penn she got a flyer for
Inter Varsity and began to go to small group Bible studies. She didn’t like the large group
worships called “love shacks” where Inter Varsity members perform skits, play guitars and
bongo drums, and sing contemporary Christian music. “I hadn’t been exposed to anything so
contemporary, and I felt like the only person there because it was less personal. Once I tried to
take a friend, and he asked me if it was a cult.”

When I asked Dinah why she believes there are more women in Inter Varsity she replied,
“Well, the joke has always been that it’s just because the guys are so good looking.”

“Any other thoughts?” I pressed.

“Well I was talking about this with Teddy, my boyfriend, and he said that it goes against
the whole macho thing. I mean, submission isn’t manly, but it is the posture toward God that we
must take. Plus for a guy to have a Christian girlfriend he has to know that she loves God more
than him, that is hard for a guy’s macho ego, too.”

Here Dinah vocalizes the idea that a relationship with Jesus is the most important
relationship in an evangelical Christian’s life, and all other relationships—romantic, familial,
platonic friendships—are second to the relationship with Jesus. Even though Dinah is involved in
a romantic relationship, she doesn’t let it take first place in her life. She circumvents the curse of
desire that Kat described earlier. Her desire is not for her man, it is instead for God, and by that
she avoids the social pressures associated with pleasing men—emphasis on beauty and sexuality.
When Dinah was in high school she never thought about Christian dating. She had a two-year relationship with a non-Christian and it never bothered her. “But when I got to Penn,” she said, “my Bible leader really challenged me not to go out with guys at Penn, both Christians and non-Christians.” Dinah alluded to a scandal that had occurred the year before she was a freshman.

There were some bad things that happened between some of the leaders in Inter Varsity and after that there was this idea that a person of the opposite sex was the thing that could drive you furthest and fastest from God. When you are in love it’s a lot like worship. So you can go from an intimate relationship with God to an intimate relationship with a person, like you’ll be thinking about that person instead of praying. After I came to Penn I realized that my high school relationship was compromising my relationship with God and that it was bad, but I did it anyway. I really didn’t want us to break up. I think that sometimes people date because they crave attention, and that can be filled by God, but if something else is filling it, you can slip away from God.

We can also see that not only does a relationship with Jesus serve to replace a romantic relationship, but that conversely a romantic relationship threatens the relationship with Jesus. This would explain why romantic relationships are discouraged, especially among evangelicals who are “young in their faith.”

I asked Dinah what she saw as the major differences between dating within Inter Varsity and dating in the larger Penn community.

In Inter Varsity there is a strong value for not dating people who are not Christians. The major difference is that Christians date with intention. The two people pray together. It’s not just for having fun. It is very intentional towards seeing if it is God’s plan that you get
married to this person. Dating outside [Inter Varsity] has different intentions, like, it’s just for fun.

I liked Teddy for a long time but I didn’t want a distraction in my relationship with God. There is this kind of cheesy thing we say in Christian circles which is that people have a ‘God-shaped hole.’ People try to fill this hole with other things—a girlfriend, drinking, popularity, but God is the only thing that can fill it.

I asked, “so how does that apply to dating?”

Non-Christian relationships are trying to fill a hole rather than to satisfy an emptiness. In Christian relationships the hole is already filled [by God] and the rest is supplemental. In high school people wouldn’t be able to tell by looking at my life that I was a Christian. I mean I was-- I still talked to Jesus-- but it wasn’t at the level that I am at now. When I broke up with my high school boyfriend I could feel the hole. Now, I mean, I really really like Teddy, but if we were to break up, I think I would be ok because the hole is filled by my relationship with God.

Dinah touches on the anxieties faced by college-aged women around being desirable. According to Dinah, this anxiety is a hole that people try to fill with boys and popularity and, I would suggest, products or commodities and ways of behaving that have been sold to them as culturally desirable. Dinah suggests that evangelical women do not face these anxieties to the same extent because they are filled by God.

I asked Dinah what she thinks about the drinking and sex that other students participate in, and her response was just what I had come to expect by this point in my research. “I have seen other Christians be self righteous, but I try not to judge other people because I know without grace my life could be right there.”
Frannie

Frannie is not a Penn student, but a member of the Inter Varsity staff at Penn. She and her husband Tom*, also a staff member, met as undergraduates in Inter Varsity at Penn a little more than ten years ago. She is Euro-American and from a rural area of Pennsylvania. Kat had told me that Frannie was particularly concerned with the dearth of men in Inter Varsity. Because she is a leader, and someone who had been around for more time than the students I interviewed, I wanted to ascertain her perspective on evangelical women at Penn.

When I asked why she thought women were disproportionately attracted to Inter Varsity Frannie told me that “Jesus has had more women followers since day one. He has always attracted the disabled and oppressed, and women. And still today there are more evangelical women than men. Broadly speaking people need Jesus and women are more aware of their needs.” Frannie also attributed the small numbers of men to the fact that there are fewer male staff members. And again alluded to some “immature male leadership leaving Inter Varsity because it was based more in personality than in virtue.”

I asked what it meant for evangelicals, who believe that women shouldn’t interpret the Bible, to have so many women leaders and staff on Penn’s campus.

“Frannie explained that a lot of the beliefs surrounding women’s roles have been re-interpreted. God honors man and woman together, we are all one in Christ.” Frannie also said, “women are more relational. Man and woman are made for a relationship. It is very purposeful. We were both made in God’s image together. We get a sense of something bigger than ourselves in our relationship with God.”

Here again is a reference to evangelical views about women that have been reinterpreted by Inter Varsity to be more encompassing. In this sense we see that Inter Varsity as an institution
has entered a “cognitive bargain” with the dominant ethos surrounding women’s roles in contemporary America, presumably in order to remain relevant. In a world where religion has been pushed to the margins, even evangelical institutions must compromise with the dominant secular messages to retain membership.

Frannie went on to describe something that was very interesting to me which was that Christians achieve a sense of something bigger than themselves in a relationship with God. “Jesus wants less polarization for gender roles. He wants sensitive men and confident women.”

This comment struck me because it mirrored so closely much of the feminist rhetoric that I had read for some of my classes that outlined the need for men to become more feminine (cooperative, relational, feelings-oriented) for gender relations to improve in the workplace. In the evangelical community, gender roles may be not be blurred, in the sense that a division of labor still exists in the ideology, however, true hierarchical dominance does not appear to be a goal of the movement. It is interesting that evangelicals would have a value for men who are sensitive and caring, relational and kind, but at the same time powerful and have authority. Essentially, in their view, these are all characteristics that evangelicals would use to describe Jesus.

I also questioned Frannie about clashes she might have had with Christian culture and the culture of Penn.

Well, the culture at Penn is very much inclusive of all beliefs and Christians believe that Jesus is the only way. Also I saw this in my classes. I was an English major and they had this idea that as each person reads a book they determine what it means. There was a need to be inclusive of the other and the truth was seen as something self-determined. But God determines everything. You don’t determine what’s true and not true in absolute terms,
but you still think for yourself. I mean there is a right and wrong, not everything is entirely subjective. Religion isn’t self-determined. God created it. But it is self-fulfilling.

I asked Frannie about her very conservative evangelical background. “Women’s role was seen as child care. They were not encouraged to teach and lead, and men were the theologians and teachers. But women were really honored, especially in their role as mothers, which is something I don’t see in the secular world.” Frannie said that her views about women’s roles began to change when she came to Penn. She met Shannon, a confident woman leader of InterVarsity. She was “challenged by Shannon’s confidence” and that caused her to question what the Apostle Paul had written. It was at this point when she began to have a different reading of Paul’s passages in the Bible, though she insists she is not looking at it through a feminist lens.

There is a hierarchy in marriage, but it’s not really a hierarchy. Man is to woman, as Christ is to the church. He has authority but it is different from how you might usually think of authority. It is a kind of loving authority, an authority of serving. I really want men to understand the importance of building the confidence of women in the church. Hospitality is what is provocative and relevant in Jesus.

Evangelicals believe that women have a different role in the church than do men. This seems to be something that many of evangelical women at Penn struggle with. I would suggest that this is due in large part to the degree of cognitive dissonance between women’s roles as evangelicals, and their roles as Penn students. As evangelicals they are told that they do not have the same kind of authority as men, whereas at Penn they are told that a woman can do anything a man can do. Perhaps this is why these women, who largely take the Bible at face value, do some
extra interpretation of the sections that seem to limit the role of women, to bridge the gap between evangelical and secular culture.

**Miranda**

Miranda is a sophomore in the business school. She is Asian-American and from Northern California. She grew up Christian and her mother wanted her to go to a Christian school but didn’t have any interest in going to a Christian school because it is an unreal environment, and it wouldn’t prepare her for the “real world.” Miranda did not want to live in a “Christian bubble” where all her peers would think and act the same way she does. “Being a Christian is not exclusive.” Miranda tells me, meaning that Christians purposely want to hang out with non-evangelicals in hopes of witnessing to them through their behavior and ministry.

Miranda describes the dating in Inter Varsity in terms more befitting to skydiving. It’s a personal decision. It’s a really big risk. You have to be really careful. Dating in a fellowship is both good and bad. It’s good because you get to spend a lot of time with the person, but if you are not ready to date yet, it can be very distracting. Also it changes the dynamic within a fellowship, and if you are not careful youth groups can become a dating pool.

By defining dating as a risk, Miranda removes some of the pleasure associated with romantic relationships. Rather than seeing a romantic relationship as a commodified goal, something to attain, as many college-aged women do, Miranda and other evangelical women see it as a potential set of relations involving risks.

I asked Miranda why she thought there were more girls in Inter Varsity. “It’s harder for a guy to be a committed Christian,” she said. “Being a Christian is further from where society wants him to be. Like society says the boys should be interested in girls and drinking, but for
girls who use sex and drugs, well, they might be considered sluts. So for a guy to be Christian, it is further from the social norms.”

Despite the fact that evangelicals sometimes seem to live by a their own rules, instead of secular society’s, evangelical women cannot change the fact that they live in a patriarchal culture where the double standard still exists especially in the Penn sub-culture. In fact, the appeal of evangelicalism to Penn women may be due, in part, to the difficulties of dealing with their ambivalently defined role in secular culture. Swamped my media messages telling them to be sexy, while at the same time recognizing the consequences of a woman who freely embraces her sexuality (i.e. being called a slut, getting a bad reputation) women may seek the clear cut role defined for evangelical women. Men on the other hand may not be drawn to evangelical groups because they do not experience such cultural ambivalence in regard to their sexual role.

Miranda thinks that “the way the gospel is presented may appeal to women more, but its not just women, we all have a need to be accepted unconditionally. Jesus has a lot of depth, people relate to him in different ways.”

I asked Miranda if she ever felt that Penn culture conflicted with Christian culture. “Penn is very performance oriented. Its not enough to just be you, you must accomplish stuff. But the gospel is not about works. Penn values what you do, but God loves you no matter what. What you do is secondary.”

I asked Miranda if she thought this had anything to do with why she doesn’t want to date. Yeah, God gives me this steadiness. I don’t need a guy to be a beautiful person. I don’t need a guy to be valued and loved. We all have this yearning. Also I am really close to my dad, and it’s kind of like that. You know how they say if you have a close
relationship with your dad you don't need a guy for self worth, but girls who don't have that turn to the outside for love. It's like that with God. It helps to know he has a plan.

Again Miranda stresses the importance of relationship. She refers to the pop-psychology idea that women who don't have a strong relationship with their father will be sexually promiscuous. She then ties this to the idea that a strong relationship with Christ will also prevent promiscuousness. But the essential factor here is another relationship that affirms self-worth thereby making it unnecessary to seek outside approval in a romantic relationship. In other words, women who have a relationship with Christ do not have to look elsewhere to be desired.

Gwen

Gwen is an international student from Singapore. She is a freshman and studies in the college of arts and sciences. At her church in Singapore she was taught that the Bible is the basic foundation to faith and that you should always go to the Bible first. She also thinks that people take the misogynist parts of the Bible out of context, and that what the Apostle Paul was really referring to was "propriety and orderly worship."

I asked why there are more women in Inter Varsity and she said, "It is not a matter of whether it is easier for men or women to come to Christ. It is the same for everybody." But then she seemed to change her tune when she said, "women need more emotional support and are more receptive to a spiritual side of things. Guys have other stuff to do. More even at Penn than in Singapore. It's kind of stereotyped, [being a Christian] isn't cool like Greek life."

I asked Gwen to describe the Inter Varsity dating scene.

I don't really pay attention. It is hard enough being international at Penn, it would be too hard to read cross-cultural signals. But dating here does have a biblical basis. People don't date just for fun, they are exploring the possibility of getting married. Inter Varsity
couples are all seniors, they need a few years before they are ready to date. I am glad to be single. You can’t be happy dating until you find your self-worth in yourself instead of guys. Well really your self-worth is in what God made, not you, that would make you a scum bag. But God sees you as beautiful just the way you are. You don’t have to change for a guy. The Bible’s definition of beauty is different from the world’s definition. The Bible doesn’t mention looks. Gentleness and submissiveness are beautiful, a certain character. There is a focus on courage. The Bible says, ‘do what is right and do not give way to fear.’

Here Gwen describes the evangelical woman’s strategy for avoiding media messages about desirability. She negates the message of the outside culture and defines beauty not by the physical, not by products that she can buy to make her sexy, but rather by character. Again we see a mix of both typically feminine and typically masculine values as the ideal character. Someone who is beautiful by God’s standards is both gentle and submissive, as well as courageous. Interestingly, Gwen first references the secular advice that a woman needs to have a strong sense of self before she enters a romantic relationship, but when she realizes that this internalized cultural view does not fit with her evangelical world view, she cognitively retracts by retracting her statement and stating that only God can provide self worth.

Gwen says that she couldn’t be in a relationship.

I need God to work in me a bunch of things. Sometimes I don’t even feel fulfilled by God. It would be too hard to fill that with a guy, a human who will fail you. Right now I just want to run to God for comfort. You need to be filled by God first. If you can’t understand God’s love first, you can’t understand human love.
Here Gwen describes God as the ideal man. Her relationship with God is superior to any relationship she might have with a man because God is perfect, and men are not. She sees her relationship with Christ, though it is not physical, as a desirable one, and at this junction, she sees romantic relationships as undesirable. She also expresses the idea that God must make some changes in her before she will be ready for a romantic relationship, which reiterates the seriousness that evangelicals place on romance.

Eloise

Eloise is a freshman from Texas who grew up in San Antonio, Texas. She is Euro-American and studies nursing.

"There is a dating scene in Inter Varsity?" she laughs when I ask her perspective. Eloise says she is not interested in anyone at Penn, but she would like to meet someone. "I am looking for a strong Christian and that eliminates about 99% of Penn students. I am looking for someone with a certain character, and personality. But I am not really searching, it is more characteristic of a Christian woman to look more long term."

Out of all the girls I talked to, Eloise was the most frank about wanting a romantic relationship. Eloise also told me that she spends a lot of time with non-Christian friends, and I suspect that because of her increased contact with dominant cultural messages about dating and relationships she may be more desirous of a romantic relationship. However, she still holds on to her evangelical values for purity and character, and surmises that she will not find anyone who fits these criteria at Penn.

"Christian women have different opinions and different values. We find our value through God, we don't look to an outside place for approval. Why look to anything less than God?"
When I asked why fewer guys are involved in Inter Varsity Eloise surmised, “In the college fellowships there are more women. But it is easier to find a good girl than a good guy. Maybe it is harder for a guy to live it out. The cultural pressure for college males is not about God, it’s about sex and alcohol. It’s harder for them than it is for girls. Girls don’t like masturbation and pornography. But I think men return to God after sowing their wild oats.”

Evangelical women come again and again to the idea that boys are more lascivious than women, and that they have a physically harder time being virtuous and pure. In fact, none of the women I interviewed discussed struggling with sexual desire at all. This belief informs the evangelical woman’s identity. Because these women conceptualize themselves as not driven by sexual desire, they may find it easier in practice to control any desires that they might have. By construing activities such as premarital sex, masturbation, and looking at pornography as not only un-Christian, but also, un-womanly, they doubly reinforce aversion of these behaviors. Eloise goes as far as to suggest that women are more “good” than men. She also reiterates the idea that God is the ideal man, and that self-value comes from that relationship, and not worldly romantic relationships.

Kat

Kat is a senior from southern California. She is Euro-American and studies communications in the college of arts and sciences. She is the leader of a small group in Hill House, another freshman dorm.

As a leader, Kat has noted the lack of men in Inter Varsity. “In leaders’ meetings we say we are ‘praying for a truckload of men to show up.’ We have also been thinking of ways that we can really care for men, to help recruit and retain them.” Kat told me that the small group she
leads is all boys but that it is common for Inter Varsity across the nation to be female dominated.

When I went to an international mission’s conference called URBANA there were 20,000 people there. The breakdown was 70% women and only 30% men. I was talking to some of the girls there and we thought it might be that men are taught to be bread winners while women can see themselves living a missionary lifestyle. Also women are excluded from other leadership, but they are allowed to be missionaries.

I asked if the gender-lopsided nature of Inter Varsity could be explained by Christianity itself.

Well, women are really relational. Recently I have been looking at the scripture to see how Jesus interacts with women. It’s shocking how much more women are honored in the Bible than today. Now we see women being valued through beauty, body image, and their relationships with men. We try really hard to be desirable. Even Christian still struggle with [the need to be desirable]. But Christians conceptualize dating differently, we know a relationship won’t fulfill us because God does that. Also, we have different ideas about purity. Purity is a goal, but Christians don’t always have pure pasts. There are such severe emotional consequences to pre-marital sex. It can have very bad effects on your marriage. It can take away from it.

Here Kat practically quotes Fryling word for word indicating the extent to which she has internalized evangelical ideas about dating. Furthermore, Kat brings up the idea of honor, which I would argue is key to the appeal of evangelicalism to women. Rather than be commodified, as they are by the media, evangelical women feel not only loved by Jesus, but respected by evangelical men as more than sex objects. While the secular culture can be disturbing and lead to
feelings of low self-esteem, by choosing to avoid many of these media messages (i.e. R-rated movies and trashy fashion magazines) as well as feeling honored by Jesus, evangelical women adopt a counter strategy.

I asked her how a relationship with Jesus plays into that. “God thinks we are so desirable. He sent his son to die for us. Our value doesn’t come from how we look, or what we do, we don’t have to prove or maintain. Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of what we would look for in a man.”

Kat’s last statement is almost a summary of what all the women said in their interviews. A relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship. But more than that, Jesus is model for a romantic partner. Evangelical women seek a man who, like Jesus, is sensitive and courageous, as well as one who will honor them and love them for being themselves rather than beauty or sexiness. This type of relationship is idealized in the goal-schema of a marriage.

Conclusions

While evangelicals may exist under the radar of other Penn students, evangelicals can’t help but be exposed to Penn culture. Although many of the cultural models embraced by Penn students are clearly rejected by members of Inter Varsity, other aspects of the hegemonic culture are relevant to evangelicals and incorporated into their world-views. Inter Varsity members at Penn are in a constant process of weighing these messages in comparison to those messages from purely evangelical sources and “bargaining” their way to a world-view that allows them to maintain their identities as evangelicals, while at the same time navigating the atmosphere of a secular university with as little conflict as possible.
One of the cultural models that evangelicals at Penn have contested very strongly is the sexual permissiveness that is normative on Penn's campus. However, the dominant culture of the United States tells college-aged women that they need to be not only beautiful, but desirable, and sexual. At the same time, evangelical and non-evangelical women who do internalize these cultural models and adopt sexual behaviors motivated by these messages may be stigmatized as sluts. Even evangelicals cannot entirely avoid the messages about being desired that permeate our culture. Yet, for evangelical women a cognitive dissonance exists between the messages they receive as from evangelical sources and the dominant model. Because these women see evangelicalism and a relationship with God as foremost to their identity (a master schema), they tend to express views that are consistent with evangelical messages about sexual purity. However, in order to do this they must employ several strategies that help to build cognitive and behavioral walls between the evangelical and the dominant culture.

During our interviews the women identified many of the strategies that they use to reinforce the evangelical goal-schema for dating, while blocking out the messages of sexual permissiveness that surround them. The first of these strategies is the slow process towards dating outlined by Olivia and Kat. If couples are forced to go through hours of prayer and council before they even begin the process of dating, this not only builds a relationship, but makes the anonymous hook-up an impossibility. Secondly, the practice of conceptualizing future mates as real people with feelings and concerns creates a imaginary relationship that can be talked about with other women, as if it were real. This exemplifies a bargaining strategy that evangelical women employ to compromise with the dominant culture in which women might talk about their boyfriends in the same manner. Conceptualizing the future husband as a real person also makes evangelical women accountable to that person, and thus is a strategy for
maintaining the purity that is espoused in the evangelical models of romance. Thirdly, there is the tendency to frame dating as something dangerous. Dating is dangerous because it might infringe upon the woman’s relationship with Jesus. Which leads me to the single most effective strategy in adhering to the strict dating standards in the face of a deluge of conflicting messages. Evangelical women’s relationship with Christ is a clear substitute for a romantic relationship. From the comments of the women I interviewed the relationship with Jesus not only serves as a distraction from dating, but also fills the need to be desired by men with an unconditional love. Because evangelical women are thusly filled, they need not seek out the approval of men. Furthermore Jesus is seen as the ideal man. Not only does he have traits that are valued and admired by evangelicals, evangelical women hope that their future husbands will emulate the unbounded love that Jesus shows.

At the same time there is a question of why more women are drawn towards evangelicalism. I would argue that in a world that gives women mixed messages about their roles an ethos that provides a well-defined (although reinterpreted) role for women holds a certain appeal. Furthermore, college-aged women especially face many struggles with the need to be desired, a need which manifests itself in phenomena as diverse as eating disorders or engaging in unwanted sexual activity. Because evangelicalism is such a strict and non-normative ideology, InterVarsity is unlikely to attract those: A) who do not already consider themselves Christians (as Dinah did in high school), or B) people who are unsettled and searching for answers (as Olivia was). However college is full of women who, under the conflicting pressures of being desired and not being a slut, may be attracted to the philosophy of InterVarsity -- in essence because it protects them from having to negotiate society’s contradictory messages about dating. In this sense, being evangelical gives them a reason to say “no” to the sexual advances of men.
under the auspices of religion, rather than appear as if they have not mastered the appropriate balance of sexiness for romance (see Holland).

I would like to return to the idea of dating being dangerous. Some evangelical women see dating as dangerous because it may take time away from their relationships with Jesus. However, I think that some adopt the structured evangelical model of dating in order to avoid the dangers that Fryling alludes to in her article, namely being compared and evaluated as a product in a market of female bodies. To use Holland’s terminology, these women are “novices” who must rely upon strict rules to function in the sea of conflicting messages about romance(80). Evangelicalism and other strict religious groups are seen to be the only ones offering a firm set of rules about sexual ethics. These rules, which appeal to women who are confused by the conflicting messages, may not appeal to college men who receive fewer contradictions in the way society instructs their sexuality. Thus for a college male to embrace the evangelical rules for romance, he must simply find his identity as a Christian more salient than the deluge of cultural messages about sex. I suggest this as an explanation for the greater number of women involved in Inter Varsity.

When I first came to know the members of University of Pennsylvania’s Inter Varsity, their world-view could not have appeared more foreign to me. However through my observation and interviews I came to understand these views as functional. Evangelicals bargain with the secular culture in order to participate in the secular university without compromising their values. But simply discovering their needs and adaptations would be of minimal interest if it didn’t impart knowledge about the dominant culture.

By recognizing of the tactics that evangelical women use to avoid culturally dominant behaviors towards sex, the pervasive social pressure to be desired by men among college-aged
women is exposed. This social pressure is so strong that even a group whose philosophy is opposed to cultivating physical desire must develop a repertoire of strategies to avoid this pressure. And while evangelical women may reject the pursuit of male desire, many college women fall prey to the psychological dangers of this pursuit. The dominant American culture’s ambivalent messages about women’s sex role breed these insecurities and anxieties. While some media messages tell women that their value lies in their beauty and sexuality, there are competing messages say that women should not be sexually aggressive, or promiscuous.

The University of Pennsylvania is home to thousands of intelligent and successful women. However, a peek below the veneer of control often exposes deep insecurities, eating disorders or disordered eating, sexual abuse and sexual shame. Even our society’s brightest and most promising women struggle with basic issues of self-esteem and sexuality. To me this pervasive sense of self-doubt implicates a culture which produces a definition of female sexuality full of gaping holes, pitfalls for the young women first exploring their own sexuality. Evangelical women elude some of this insecurity through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, filling in the holes of female sexuality with the security of Christ’s unconditional love. Consequently, evangelical women’s struggle to evade ambivalent messages about female sexuality elucidates the wider, and for the most part unsuccessful, struggle of college women to be comfortable with their own sexuality.
Works Consulted


Interview A (Kat), 11/07/01, notes in possession of author.
Interview B (Frannie), 11/14/01, notes in possession of author.

Interview C (Miranda), 11/27/01, notes in possession of author.

Interview D (Gwen), 11/28/01, notes in possession of author.

Interview E (Eloïse), 11/30/01, notes in possession of author.

Interview F (Ruthi), 12/13/02, notes in possession of author.

Interview G (Olivia), 12/19/02, notes in possession of author.

Interview H (Dinah), 01/14/02, notes in possession of author.