

Original Article:

**“YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN:”
RAPE, SEXUAL ASSAULT, AND CONSENT IN
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN DATING BOOKS**

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Abstract

Despite decades of education, myths about rape still abound in U.S. society. Because of the existence of these rape myths, it is important to question how societal power structures create and perpetuate meaning surrounding rape and sexual assault. By deconstructing the texts of Christian dating books, I investigated how one major power structure in U.S. society—Evangelical Christianity—addresses rape and sexual assault. I found that although Christian dating books do not overwhelmingly support rape myths, they reinforce sexist attitudes—such as benevolent sexism, animalization, and traditional gender role attitudes—that correlate with rape myth acceptance, while ignoring autonomy and consent, and blurring the lines between rape and consensual sex.

Keywords: Rape, sexual assault, Christianity, evangelicalism,
religion, sexuality

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INTRODUCTION

Every two minutes in the United States someone becomes a victim of rape or sexual assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2006-2010; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network [RAINN], 2012). According to The National Violence Against Women Survey, one in six women and one in 33 men will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in their lifetime (as cited in Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Eighty percent of these victims are under the age of 30, while 44 percent are under the age of 18 (BJS, 1997). Only 40 percent of victims will ever report their rape to the police (BJS, 2008-2012; RAINN, 2012), and only three percent of rapists will ever spend time in prison (BJS, 2002-2006; RAINN 2012). These statistics indicate that it is important to understand the messages people in U.S. society receive about rape. According to Katie Edwards and her co-authors, it is not enough to challenge rape on an individual level, anti-rape activists must challenge rape at an institutional level as well, which includes challenging religious institutions (2011). As an example, Edwards and her co-authors quoted Hyman et al. (2002), saying, “because many of the roots of devaluing women are based on religions and cultural beliefs, church and community leaders [are] considered to be in an ideal position to provide support as well as to change social norms regarding violence” (p. 289).

Religious institutions can both frame and challenge the ways their adherents view rape and sexual assault. In the United States, according to a recent Gallup poll, 78 percent of people¹ identify as Christians (Newport, 2011). Not only do a majority of people in the United States identify as Christian, but especially with the rise of the Religious Right², Evangelical Christianity holds a great deal of influence over politics and culture in the United States (Williams, 2010). The ideologies that Evangelical Christians hold motivate them to engage in political activism (Soper, 1994). About 47 percent of the general population in the United States self-identifies as Evangelical (Newport & Carroll, 2005). However, because the definition of the term “Evangelical” can vary, Newport and Carroll define this group as white, non-Catholics who self-identify as Evangelical when addressing the power structure of Evangelicalism, which makes this number smaller (2005)³. Out of white, non-Catholic Americans, about three in ten are Evangelicals (Newport & Carroll, 2005). Evangelicals—both white and non-white—make up the largest protestant Christian denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention (Lindner, 2011). Out of the white, non-Catholics who identify as Evangelical, 56 percent are women and 11 percent of these white, non-Catholics are ages 18 to 29 (Newport & Carroll, 2005). These statistics indicate that there is an overlap between the Evangelical community and those most affected by rape and sexual assault, as most rape survivors belong to an age range that constitutes a significant section of Evangelical Christianity.

Because a majority of Evangelical Christians are women, and because a significant number of these women belong to the age range most affected by rape and sexual assault, I asked: what do Christian dating and relationship books say about rape and sexual assault? To answer this question, I conducted a content analysis of four popular Christian

relationship books and found that although Christian dating books do not overwhelmingly support rape myths, they reinforce several attitudes that correlate with rape myth acceptance, while promoting a vision for sexuality that ignores female autonomy and consent.

Edwards and her colleagues argued that institutions can use the power that they wield to make a positive impact in the fight against rape (Edwards, et al. 2011). Also, religious institutions can be a source of empowerment for rape victims and for anti-rape activists. By studying the messages Christian dating books send to Evangelical Christians about rape and sexual assault, feminists and anti-rape activists strengthen existing approaches to working with religious institutions on issues of rape and sexual assault.

Attitudes toward Rape and Sexual Assault

Boswell and Spade argued that rape's foundations lie in societal structures and in socialization rather than in biology (1996). Other researchers have asserted that certain values and beliefs in a society can create a "rape culture" where, because of beliefs and attitudes toward rape, rape victims, and rape perpetrators, rape is more likely to occur and rapists, rather than victims, are more likely to find support (Buchwald, Feltcher, & Roth, 1993). One foundation of a rape culture is the persistence of false ideas about who is to blame for rape, how often rape occurs, and why it occurs.

Rape Myth Acceptance. Rape myths are "a specific set of attitudes and beliefs that may contribute to ongoing sexual violence by shifting blame for sexual assault from perpetrators to victims" (Aosved & Long 2006, p. 482). Examples from the Illinois Rape Myth Assessment Scale include "If a girl initiates kissing or making out, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex," "If a girl acts like a slut she is going to get into trouble," and "When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Though many people—not just rapists—accept these myths as true, a strong belief in rape myths can correlate with perpetration of sexual assault (Aosved & Long, 2006). The factor most highly associated with rape myth acceptance (RMA) is the sex of a person. Males are much more likely than females to accept rape myths (Aosved & Long, 2006). Along with sex, a belief in sexism, which often involves the dehumanization of women, and traditional gender roles, increases RMA. It is important to note that sexism takes a variety of forms, including and not limited to hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, dehumanization, and traditional gender role attitudes.

Hostile and Benevolent Sexism. As noted, sexism is the greatest predictor of rape myth acceptance next to a person's sex (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003). Researchers have differentiated between hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism refers to more blatant forms of sexism that involve negative attitudes toward women.

Hostile sexists seek to control and exploit women through “derogatory characterizations” of women (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, refers to a more subtle form of sexism that paints women in a relatively positive light. According to Glick and Fiske, benevolent sexism “relies on kinder and gentler justifications of male dominance and prescribed gender roles; it recognizes men’s dependence on women...and embraces a romanticized view of sexual relationships with women” (1997, p. 121). Though hostile and benevolent sexism “differ in the valence they place on women...both serve to justify and maintain patriarchal social structures” (1997, p. 121). Both forms of sexism maintain these social structures by reinforcing paternalistic attitudes toward women and traditional gender role attitudes, and by treating women as sexual objects (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Research has found that hostile sexism, more than benevolent sexism, predicts rape myth acceptance (Abrams et al., 2003). Hostile sexism also significantly relates to a higher proclivity of rape and sexual assault (Abrams et al., 2003). Though benevolent sexism did not relate to the proclivity of rape, it did relate to rape myth acceptance in cases of acquaintance rape (Abrams et al., 2003), which accounts for about two thirds of all rapes committed (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005; RAINN 2012). People who ranked high in benevolent sexism were more likely to pass blame onto victims because they saw victims as transgressing traditional feminine gender roles (Abrams et al., 2003) [See Table 1]. Two components of both hostile and benevolent sexism—dehumanization and traditional gender roles—especially contribute to unhealthy attitudes surrounding rape and rape victims.

Dehumanization and Gender Roles. The tendency to dehumanize women not only predicts negative attitudes toward rape victims, but also correlates with higher sexual aggression in men (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). Dehumanization denies women agency and autonomy (Nussbaum, 1999), and is often expressed in one of two forms: animalization or objectification. Animalization is the tendency to view a person as uncivilized, or as having the properties and characteristics of animals (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). Objectification is viewing women as objects or machines and as lacking the characteristics of living things (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). Research by Rudman and Mescher (2012) found that both forms of dehumanization correlate with RMA and rape proclivity.

Table 1. Acceptable vs. Unacceptable Women

A study by Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, and Zhu (1997) demonstrates how sexist men categorize women as either “traditional” or “non-traditional,” and as either being “sexy,” or “deviant” with their sexuality. The following are examples from their results, which show what characteristics of women sexist men used to divide women into these categories:

Characteristics of “Acceptable” and “Unacceptable” Women	
<u>Categories</u>	<u>Characteristics</u>
Nontraditional	Intelligent, Aggressive, Feminist, Bitches, Athletic
Traditional	Homemaker, Mother, Family Oriented
Sexy Women	Cute, Attractive
Sexually Deviant	Unattractive, Whores, Sluts, Lesbian

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In addition to dehumanization, another form of sexism that relates to RMA is the acceptance of traditional gender roles that can limit women's choices in society and disempower women who do not fit into those roles. Corrigan and Konrad defined gender roles as “beliefs concerning behaviors, responsibilities, and activities appropriate for women and for men.” (2007, p. 847) Though gender roles differ from culture to culture, traditional gender role attitudes in the Western world rely on strict differentiation between men and women (Glick & Fiske, 1997). These roles tend to reinforce the idea that the woman's place is in the private sphere of the home, and a man's role is in the public sphere (Judge 2008). For example, a traditional gender role attitude would see women as

homemakers, and men as breadwinners (Corrigall & Konrad, 2007), and would expect women to remain chaste until marriage (Abrams et al., 2003).

Researchers have found that acceptance of traditional gender roles correlates with higher RMA, even in cases of benevolent, rather than hostile, sexism (Abrams et al., 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002). Glick and Fiske have found that those who are benevolent sexists toward most women may display more hostile sexist behaviors toward “bad” women who transgress gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Viki and Abrams saw a connection between this idea and the many rape myths that perpetuate victim blaming attitudes toward women with “bad” reputations (2002). Their research found that in cases where the survivor was seen as violating her gender role, benevolent sexists were more likely to show attitudes of RMA (Viki & Abrams, 2002). This relationship makes Evangelical Christianity, with its emphasis on traditional gender roles, a place of particular concern for those who wish to challenge the acceptance of rape myths.

Religion, Sexism, and Rape Myths. Some feminist theorists see religious institutions such as Evangelical Christianity as promoting and supporting sexist attitudes toward women. Burn and Russo found that high religiosity in an individual does relate to higher levels of benevolent, but not hostile sexism (2005). With this in mind, it is not surprising that religious men are more likely than non-religious men to agree with rape myths (Freymeyer, 1997). However, religious women are actually less likely to agree with rape myths (Freymeyer, 1997), which suggests that religion is not the only reason for such RMA. More intolerant religious beliefs—beliefs that lead to stereotypes and discrimination against those from other religious groups—are stronger predictors of RMA than tolerant beliefs (Aosved et al., 2003).

Sheldon and Parent found that harmful attitudes toward rape victims are present, not only among religious laypeople, but also among clergy members (2002). They found that most of the clergy members they researched showed attitudes of victim blaming and RMA, and concluded that these clergy members needed to be educated about sexual assault (Sheldon & Parent, 2002). Knowing that RMA is prevalent in religious circles—perpetuated by benevolent sexist attitudes—Christian dating books are an important site for investigating the intersection between religion and ideas about rape and sexual assault.

METHOD

Data and Methods

To examine how Evangelical authors are framing discussions of rape and sexual assault, I conducted a content analysis of four popular Christian dating books. My sample included four Christian dating books: *Real Marriage* by Mark and Grace Driscoll, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris, *When God Writes Your Love Story* by Eric and Leslie Ludy, and *Dateable* by Hayley DiMarco and Justin Lookadoo. I selected these books using

a combination of a convenience and a purposive method. I wanted to find books that were popular in mainstream Evangelical circles. Yet, because of my own limited resources for conducting this study, I also had to factor in accessibility. In order to find these books, I conducted a search on Amazon.com for “Christian Relationship Books” and sorted the search by “Popularity.” Two books—*I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and *Real Marriage*—I chose because they appeared to be the most popular and both were number one national best sellers. The other two—*When God Writes Your Love Story* and *Dateable*—I chose because of convenience, as they were readily available.

These dating books present themselves as authorities for how Christians should interact with one another in romantic relationships. They discuss how partners in a relationship should interact, whether or not traditional gender roles should be strictly enforced, how partners should handle sex, and more. Because of their popularity, these books have cultural significance and are important for understanding the messages that are being received about rape and sexual assault.

Postmodern scholars have argued that the deconstruction of texts can reveal the power that forms our language and social world (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007) I chose to conduct a content analysis of the text of these four books. This method allowed me to study the way the authors of these books construct gender and sexuality, and how these constructions relate to ideas about rape and sexual assault. I coded instances of rape myth acceptance or rejection; acceptance or rejection of sexism, gender roles, and dehumanization; and instances of consent.

I operationalized my codes using my literature review. For rape myths, I followed the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. I defined sexism according to Glick and Fiske’s model (1996), which defines sexism as a set of stereotyped views of and restrictive attitudes toward women. Continuing with Glick and Fiske’s model, I differentiated between hostile and benevolent sexism—hostile sexism referring to prejudiced, chauvinistic attitudes toward women, and benevolent sexism referring to the “kinder and gentler justifications of male dominance” that Glick and Fiske discuss (1997, p. 121). I defined dehumanization as the tendency to describe people as either objects or animals, or the tendency to talk about people as if they lacked “human” characteristics or characteristics of living things such as autonomy, or the ability to feel pain (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). For traditional gender roles, I looked for instances where either men or women are told that they should or should not do something or act in a certain way based on social gender expectations (Corrigan & Konrad, 2007). I used the definitions of rape and sexual assault used by the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN). According to RAINN, sexual assault is “unwanted sexual contact that stops short of rape or attempted rape” while rape is “forced sexual intercourse, including vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. Penetration may be by a body part or an object” (2009). Finally, I defined consent as a “voluntary, sober...enthusiastic...mutual, honest, and verbal agreement” to intimacy that is not coerced, implied, or given when a person is unable to respond to, challenge, or reject the

agreement being made (for example if the person is underage or severely mentally disabled) (Vasser College Sexual Assault Violence Prevention, 2013).

A limitation of my study was that, with a content analysis, I could know how people will respond to the messages embedded in these books. Therefore, my study was limited to the messages themselves and the cultural and political power of these messages, which I discuss below.

IF YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN, WHOSE ARE YOU?

I Corinthians 6:19 of the New Testament says, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you...and you are not your own?” In this context, “you” refers to early Christians belonging to God, rather than to themselves. Eric and Leslie Ludy use this verse in their book *When God Writes Your Love Story* to discuss how much choice people should have when it comes to deciding on how to navigate romantic and sexual relationships (2009). This approach to bodily ownership, choice, and autonomy emerged as a theme throughout my findings; people, especially women, were described as not belonging to themselves, but belonging to someone else. Though either rape or sexual assault was mentioned at least once in each book I studied, only one of the books had a full discussion of the topic. However, themes of bodily autonomy and consent emerged throughout all of these books.

The goal of my research was to find out what these Christian dating/relationship books had to say about rape and sexual assault. Upon my first read-through of these books, the answer I came up with was that (with one exception) they had next to nothing to say about rape and sexual assault. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and *Dateable* both mention rape/sexual assault only once (in passing). *When God Writes Your Love Story* tells one story of a young girl who, as they word it, “was forced from childhood into womanhood” and another young woman who was sexually abused (Ludy & Ludy, 2009). Despite these stories, actual discussion of rape and sexual assault is significantly limited. *Real Marriage* stands as a surprising exception, with a whole chapter dedicated to discussing sexual assault, and mentioning either rape, sexual assault, or sexual abuse over forty times. Though discussions of rape and sexual assault are largely absent from these books, these books are still articulating messages relevant to this topic.

Four main themes emerged in this research, all of which work together to deny the autonomy of women and tell them, “You are not your own.” I will discuss each of these themes in detail, but briefly, I found that, first of all, benevolent sexism, traditional gender roles, and dehumanization create an environment ripe for rape myth acceptance. Second, I found that throughout these books, women are discussed as property and denied the right to autonomy over their lives and bodies. Third, I found that discussions of consent are often lacking, and when they are present, consent is mostly an illusion. Finally, I found that any discussion of rape and sexual assault is marred by the fact that all of these books blur the lines between rape and premarital sex, or other “sexual sins.”

An Environment of Rape Acceptance

With the exception of *Real Marriage* (which rejects several rape myths), there is no clear rejection or acceptance of rape myths in the books. However, I found that the “environment” these books created provides fertile ground for RMA. As I have discussed, sexism, traditional gender roles, and the dehumanization of women are some of the greatest predictors of RMA. I found that all of these books promoted sexism and traditional gender roles, and that three out of four of the books promoted dehumanization.

Benevolent Sexism. Each of these books clearly promoted traditional gender roles and sexism. However, almost every author(s) claimed that the ideas they were putting forth were not sexist. An example of this comes from Joshua Harris in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. He writes: This applies specifically to the guys who I believe should be the ones to “make the first move.” Please don’t misunderstand this as a chauvinistic attitude. Men, we’re not to lord anything over girls⁴; that’s the exact opposite of the Christlike servanthood husbands must show their wives. But the Bible clearly defines the importance of a man’s spiritual leadership in marriage (2003, p.196).

The authors believe that only a hostile sexist view of women is harmful. In fact, many of the books speak out strongly against hostile sexism. However, the authors also support benevolent sexism (sexist attitudes that are framed positively as good for women), not only by contrasting it with hostile sexism, but also by heralding it as the solution to hostile sexism. As the Driscolls write in *Real Marriage*, “We in no way accept domination. And the Bible commands wives to submit to their husbands by respectfully following their leadership. In doing so, a woman is protected from the abuse of other men” (2012, p. 83).

Benevolent sexism is related to RMA, especially in cases where women transgress traditional gender roles (Abrams et al., 2003). Though none of these books draw the direct conclusion that a woman who steps outside of the protection of men is putting herself at danger for rape, they do perpetuate the idea that women are safest when they do not question traditional gender roles. The authors of *Dateable* state that women who step outside of their traditional gender roles make themselves a target for men to disrespect them. In a chapter to teenage girls: “Boys Will Be Boys...And You Are Not One,” the authors tell girls that if they decide to transgress their feminine gender roles and in order to spend time in “guy world,” they will be treated badly. Illustrating this idea is a picture of one man is shooting a target that another man is holding in front of a woman. The authors say that this treatment “makes you [girls] feel like you don’t belong there. The reason is...you don’t!” (Lookadoo & DiMarco 2003, pp.154-155). Whether or not this thinking would be applied to rape was beyond the limits of my research. However, the idea that submitting to benevolent sexism and traditional gender roles protects a woman from hostile sexism contributes to an environment ripe for RMA.

Dehumanization. Rudman and Mescher's research showed that the tendency to dehumanize women by comparing them to objects or animals was related, not only to RMA, but also to higher rape proclivity (2012). In three of these books, I found either objectification or animalization of women. However, I was surprised to find that men were also dehumanized. Where the authors discussed women as if they were objects or animals in ways that made them seem passive, they talked about men as if they were animals in ways that made them seem aggressive. The authors used this animalization of men to either absolve men of some of the responsibility for doing harm, or to present men's doing harm as a biologically determined act (though still wrong). *Dateable* contains the most blatant animalization of men. They compare men to Pavlov's dogs, horses, cavemen, and multiple times refer to the "male species," as if men exist in a category other than human. Concerning men, Justin Lookadoo tells young women, "Don't tease the animals... Please, PLEASE don't tease us. To show us your hot little body and then tell us we can't touch it is being a tease. You can't look that sexy and then tell us to be on our best behavior" (Lookadoo & DiMarco 2003, p.117). Here, Lookadoo animalizes men in a way that excuses inappropriate behavior toward women.

When God Writes Your Love Story also describes men as having an "animalistic...attitude toward sex," compared to women (Ludy & Ludy 2009, p. 97). Throughout the book, men are called to treat women with respect. However, Eric and Leslie Ludy still join Lookadoo and DiMarco in perpetuating the idea that an "animal-like" approach to sex is natural for men—a point of view which only supports the idea that women need to submit to benevolent male leadership for protection. While the dehumanization of men puts men in the role of aggressors and hunters, the dehumanization of women puts women in the role of prey, or objects to be won or bought. DiMarco and Lookadoo (2003) frequently objectify and animalize women, describing them as prey to be hunted by men (p. 182), fish being hooked on bait (p. 82), meat (pp. 108, 110, & 118), and "uncharted territory" (p. 182). *Real Marriage*, and *When God Writes Your Love Story* are not as blatant in their dehumanization of women. In fact, these books discourage hostile dehumanizing language similar to that used in *Dateable*. However they still describe women as passive objects. *Real Marriage*, for instance, rejects the violent language of conquering women in favor of a more benevolent approach. The authors write: Too many men are more like conquerors than explorers. They get married—which is akin to landing on the beach of an unexplored land—yet fail to explore the landscape... Our wives do not want to be conquered; they want to be explored emotionally (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2003, p. 51).

When God Writes Your Love Story also dehumanizes women, talking about a woman as a "precious pearl of purity," a "glistening, and untarnished gem," or a "treasure" to be kept protected her future husband (Ludy & Ludy, 2009, p. 118). Women who—by having sex or getting too emotionally involved with partners before marriage—are "careless with [their] treasure" are compared to "hamburger meat" (Ludy & Ludy, 2009,

pp. 99-100). With language that presents women as objects, prizes, prey, land, and food, these books present women as stripped of their autonomy over their lives and bodies.

While men's dehumanization partially absolves them of responsibility for their actions, women's dehumanization often puts a greater burden on them, holding them responsible for their own dehumanization. In *Dateable*, dehumanization is often used as a hostile threat for women who transgress traditional gender roles. For example, one image in the book "...If you dress like a flesh buffet, don't be surprised when he treats you like a piece of meat" (Lookadoo & DiMarco 2003, p. 118). Elsewhere, the book shows a drawing of "Tom's Meat Market," a building with women's torsos inside, hanging from meat hooks (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, p. 109), illustrating this idea of men treating women "like a piece of meat." Though the dehumanization of men in these books empowers men, the way women are dehumanized as if they are weak animals or objects makes it easy for these books to begin talking about women as being owned by someone else.

Bodily Ownership

The same sexism that is related to RMA also creates a world where women do not have ownership over their own lives and bodies. My second finding was that people (especially women) are denied autonomy throughout these books. The authors discuss people as if they are property that can be owned by others, including parents, partners, and God.

Women as Property. The idea that an unmarried woman's parents own her and control her life comes across clearly in both *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and *When God Writes Your Love Story*. Joshua Harris, in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, calls for a return to days of traditional courtship, when women were seen as the property of their fathers, and later their husbands (2003, p. 29). Harris believes that only adult women who are ready for marriage should be in romantic relationships, yet he encourages men pursuing a relationship with a woman to recognize her parents' "authority" (2003, p. 198). He even encourages men to ask a woman's parents' permission to pursue a relationship with a woman before even asks the woman herself. He writes, "In my friend Jason's case, Shelly was actually the second person to find out about his desire to pursue marriage... Before he went into action, he chose to give proper honor to Shelly's parents, first by asking their permission to grow closer to their daughter for the purpose of pursuing marriage" (2003, p. 197).

Eric and Leslie Ludy, in *When God Writes Your Love Story*, demonstrate this idea as well, sharing their own life story. Leslie Ludy says, of herself, "God had given me to my parents as a treasure they were to care for, provide for, and protect" (2009, p. 223). She writes about how her husband Eric asked permission from her parents before even expressing feelings of romance toward her. She writes, "[Eric] had always thought of me as an individual, independent and making all my own decisions. Now he realized God had

put a protective covering over my life—the authority of my parents” (2009, pp. 222-223). Both Harris and Leslie Ludy place a woman’s parents’ desire for her life above a woman’s autonomy over her own life. Such language sends the message that an adult woman’s life and body can be controlled by her parents in the name of “protection.”

Spouses as Property. Besides being the property of their parents, the women, along with the men in most of these books are also described as being the property of their spouses. These books promote the idea that being married means giving your body over to the ownership of another person. As Joshua Harris states in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, “A husband and wife may enjoy each other’s bodies because in essence they belong to one another” (2003, p. 94). *Real Marriage* backs up this idea with Biblical scripture, quoting I Corinthians 7, which states that “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does” (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2012, p. 161). Eric and Leslie Ludy go one step further to suggest that this ownership begins even before a couple has met. Eric Ludy talks about a time before he met his wife, when he began to daydream about his future wife with another man. He writes, “I imagined this sweet-talking imposter pulling my wife close...and kissing her...I was ready to *kill* this guy! He was touching something that was solely mine!” (2009, pp. 73-74). Ludy encourages both single men and single women to “give your future spouse your heart, mind, and body now” (2009, p. 80).

Even in discussions of relationships that do not result in marriage, these books talk about ownership. Men and women are told not to give too much of themselves away in dating relationships, in case these do not end in marriage. Joshua Harris tells the story of a woman who has a dream about her wedding day. In this dream, her fiancé’s ex-girlfriends stand up from the crowd, and take their place at the alter as her fiancé says his wedding vows. He writes: “‘They’re the girls from my past,’ he answered sadly, ‘Anna, they don’t mean anything to me now...but I’ve given part of my heart to each of them.’ ‘I thought your heart was mine,’ she said. ‘It is, it is,’ he pleaded. ‘Everything that’s left is yours’” (2003, pp. 13-14).

In sum, people are meant to be owned by their spouses or future spouses, but every romantic relationship before marriage puts them at risk for being potentially, partially owned by someone else. Harris suggests that people avoid casual dating relationships, lest they risk having nothing left to give their future spouse (2003, p. 14). In Harris’ view, any romantic or sexual connection with another person besides one’s spouse compromises one’s sexual purity, and is equal to giving one’s self away to be owned by another.

Everyone as Property. Throughout the books, is the idea that no one should truly be in control of his or her life—everyone is expected to submit to God. The title alone of *When God Writes Your Love Story* exemplifies this idea. Throughout this book, Ludy and Ludy encourage readers to stop trying to write their own love story, and relinquish the

“pen” to God (2009, pp. 3-6, 9, 16, 46-47), letting God choose who they date and eventually marry. These ideas of ownership likely contribute to the lack of discussion in these books regarding consent.

An Illusion of Consent

A third theme was the notable absence of discussions of consent. When people, especially women, do not have the right to autonomy over their bodies, it is not surprising when their right to choose whether or not to have sex is ignored or minimized. In these books, I found that, though some language seemed to promote ideas of consent, it only did so to mask the fact that women are limited to choosing from one option. Before marriage, that option is to say “no” to sex, while after marriage, that option is to say “yes.”

Before Marriage. A woman’s only acceptable option before marriage, according to these books, is to say “no” to sex. The authors of these books use empowering language to discuss a woman’s right to say “no” to sex. *Dateable* refers to this right as “girl power,” and tells women who say “no” that they are “high-designer, gotta-have[s]” (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, pp. 120 & 129). *When God Writes Your Love Story* refers to young women who do not have sex as “princess[es] of purity” (Ludy & Ludy, 2009, p. 176). Though these books support and encourage unmarried women who choose not to have sex with empowering language, the language changes when women decide to say “yes.”

According to *Dateable*, a teenage girl who decides to have sex before marriage is no longer using her “girl power.” In fact, this book describes such girls as “dollar store leftovers” (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, p. 129). Also, in cases where women transgress traditional gender roles by dressing immodestly, the “girl power” language is turned against women. Lookadoo and DiMarco tell them, “Girls, you control how far you go,” (2003, p. 115) and deny “bad” women the right to have any say about how men treat them: “If you dress like a piece of meat, you’re gonna get thrown on the BBQ... You can’t look that sexy and then tell us to be on our best behavior” (2003, pp. 110, 117-118).

In *When God Writes Your Love Story*, when a “princess of purity” decides to have sex, she becomes “disgusting... A turnoff... Totally unattractive” (Ludy & Ludy, 2009, p. 121). With this language, these books send the message that the ideal woman should never express her desire for sex, which frames sex/sexual pursuit without consent as normative. This illusion of consent, where a woman can only choose from one option continues even after she marries, however, her one option changes.

After Marriage. Throughout *Real Marriage*, the Driscolls state that sex without consent is rape (2012, p. 121), that sexual assault is never acceptable in marriage (2012, p. 202), and that husbands should never coerce their wives into sex (2012, p. 163). Yet, though women supposedly have the right to say “no,” even in marriage, Driscoll and Driscoll refer to women who use this right as “selfish lovers” (2012, p. 156). Mark Driscoll tells the story

of a married couple he met that did not have intercourse because the wife did not enjoy it and had no interest in it. Instead, they participated in other acts of sexual intimacy. Mark Driscoll says, about the wife in the relationship, “When we met, she seemed surprised to hear that she was selfish” (2012, p. 156). Later, the Driscolls say that one of the “ways we are selfish lovers” is when we “only have sex when we both feel like it at the same time.” (2012, p. 165) Even women who do not enjoy sex with their husbands because they have not yet been able to heal from past sexual abuse are called selfish (2012, p. 168). The same illusion of consent that women face before marriage takes on a different form after marriage. Yet in both cases, a woman is limited to choosing from one option. Choosing anything else opens them to shame and guilt.

Rape and Consensual Sex

Consent is what separates sex from rape and sexual assault. With the lack of discussion surrounding consent in these books, the lines between rape and sex often become blurred. In fact, several of these books describe sex or romantic relationships as one-sided acts such as hunting (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, p. 182), winning a prize (Ludy & Ludy, p. 122), or exploring a piece of land (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2012, p. 51). These one-sided metaphors often sound violent, as we see in *Dateable*. They write, “Guys love the battle. They love the adventure. The chase. It goes way back to the caveman days of clubbing Dino in the head for food. It’s built into that Y chromosome. Hunt. Chase. Conquer. Ugh! We’re the same when it comes to girls. We want a challenge. A chase” (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, p. 182). Not only is consensual sex described in sometimes violent language that ignores the autonomy of one partner, but rape and sexual assault are described using language that makes it hard to differentiate between rape and other “sexual sins.” Rape and sexual assault are presented as having the same consequences and being on the same level as other “sexual sins.”

Both *Real Marriage* and *When God Writes Your Love Story* have chapters where they tell the story of someone who suffers from rape or sexual assault. In *Real Marriage*, Grace Driscoll tells the story of her own sexual assault. Though she states that she did not deserve to be sexually assaulted, she compares her sexual assault with other acts of consensual sex that she considered sinful. This often results in confusing language where the lines between sexual assault and consensual sex are blurred. For example, she states, “I committed the sin of commission, by having sex outside of marriage. At first it was voluntary, and later he assaulted me. Both types of sin are hurtful” (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2012, p. 135).

Both books describe rape/sexual assault and consensual sex as having similar “consequences.” *When God Writes Your Love Story* tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl who is raped by an older boy. This story is immediately followed by the story of a college-aged couple who decide to have consensual sex. Both stories emphasize “lost virginity” (Ludy & Ludy, 2009, p. 235), but do not point out the difference between two people

choosing to engage in sexual intercourse for the first time and a young girl being raped. The solution to rape/sexual assault and sinful consensual sex are the same as well. Both books emphasize letting Jesus “wash you clean, white as snow, and give you a fresh start” (Ludy & Ludy, 2009, p. 245).

DISCUSSION

Conclusion

I began this study with the question, “What do Evangelical Christian relationship books have to say about rape and sexual assault,” and found that discussions of rape and sexual assault were largely absent. I found instead that these books create an environment ripe for rape myth acceptance, deny people’s ownership over their own bodies, lack discussions of consent, and blur the lines between rape and consensual sex. In addition, I found that these books, despite all of their animalization of men, still called men to be in control of their actions. Though the “natural” state of men was presented as animalistic and uncontrollable, men—especially Christian men—were taught that they could overcome their “biology” with “theology” (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2012, p. 155). Though the reasons cited for this self-control usually included benevolent sexism, and often contradict the depiction of men as animals, it is important to note that these books do not completely absolve men of responsibility for their actions.

Also, though most of the books were almost completely silent on discussions of rape and sexual assault, Mark and Grace Driscoll’s *Real Marriage* contains some important discussions that educate readers about rape and sexual assault, tell them how to seek help, and reject rape myths. For example, Driscoll and Driscoll have an entire section dedicated to debunking myths about marital rape. They write, “Under no circumstances is sexual assault of any sort acceptable in marriage...If there has been a sexual assault in your marriage, you need professional and possibly even legal help” (2012, p. 202).

My research focused on female rape. However, as my findings indicated, further research focusing on male rape is needed. It is not just women, in these books, who are dehumanized and robbed of their bodily autonomy. Males are treated as animals that cannot control themselves, and are still said to be “owned” by their partners after marriage. Further research could examine how these findings relate to attitudes toward male rape and male rape victims. Also, these books are entirely silent on relationships outside of the heteronormative binary, an area that needs examination. In addition, further research could examine how the messages in these books have been/are being received. Further research focused on human subjects could provide more insight in this area.

In conclusion, I argue that these findings can be used to start new conversations about rape and sexual assault in the Evangelical church. Religious institutional power can be an influential force for spreading ideas, and many religious institutions are already

working to promote healthy attitudes toward women, and survivors of rape and sexual assault. According to Hyman and colleagues, “because many of the roots of devaluing women are based on religions and cultural beliefs, church and community leaders [are] considered to be in an ideal position to provide support as well as to change social norms regarding violence” (Hyman, Guruge, Stewart, Ahmad, 2000, p. 289). By deconstructing the messages that Evangelical Christianity sends about rape and sexual assault, perhaps we can begin the work of changing these social norms.

Footnotes:

1. According to Gallup's website, this number is based on the interviews of “...a random sample of 327,244 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia...Samples are weighted by gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, adults in the household, and phone status (cell phone only/landline only/both, cell phone mostly, and having an unlisted landline number).” (Newport, 2011, para. 8 & 11)
2. According to Williams (2010), conservative evangelical Christians in the United States began to gain political power in the 1970s, likely in response to social issues such as *Roe v. Wade* and the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan “allied himself with the Christian Right...[increasing] their control over the Republican Party” (p. 7). By the mid-1990s, conservative evangelicals held significant influence over the Republican party, giving them significant political power in the U.S. As Williams states, “It became impossible for any Republican presidential candidate to ignore the Christian Right's demands on abortion, gay rights, and other social issues” (p. 8).
3. It is important to note that, not only is the message of this passage sexist, but the language used is revealing as well. According to Deborah Cameron (1985), “sexist language teaches us what those who use it and disseminate it think women's place ought to be” (p. 91). Harris uses the word “men” to describe adult men, yet when talking about adult women, he uses the word “girl.” This reflects his views on what he believes a woman's place is: always under the protection of someone else, similar to the place of a child

4. Although black churches in the United States are Evangelical, these churches typically hold different political stances and have less political power than predominantly white Evangelical churches (Newport and Carroll 2005). This is why some researchers have narrowed their focus to white people when discussing Evangelicalism as a political movement.

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