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The lived ethics of abstinence: Christian young men's experiences of romantic relationships

Relationships and sex education (RSE), as set out in the UK government's recent Bill making RSE compulsory for all English schools, should be appropriate to the religious background of pupils. This paper suggests that this appropriateness is best found by gaining the best understanding about religious young people's lived experiences of relationships and sexuality. Our in-depth qualitative research with three Christian young men aged 17-18 from a large charismatic evangelical church in the U.K Midlands investigated experiences of romantic relationships, focusing on the 'ethical moments' in which the Christian ethical principles of sexual abstinence are negotiated. Through attending closely to both the theological and the non-religious discursive resources that these negotiations draw upon, we demonstrate the different ways that abstinence becomes meaningful in their lifeworlds. We conclude that a sex education based on ethics in practice might engage best with religious young people.

Keywords: Relationships and sex education, religion, sexual ethics, abstinence, moral breakdown.

Introduction

In the Children and Social Work Act passed by the UK government in March 2017, the call for relationships and sex education to be made compulsory for all English schools was accompanied by the proviso that 'the education is appropriate, having regard to the age and the religious background of the pupils' (2017). As discussion and debate unfold as to what the new statutory curriculum might include and how it might best be taught, this question of how RSE can be appropriate to religious background will need to be answered. To answer well, educational policy-makers will need to draw on up-to-date knowledge about the lives of religious young people in England. More specifically, they will need to draw on knowledge about how religious young people are making sense out of romantic relationships and sexuality. In this project, we take an in-depth, qualitative approach to a small group falling within this demographic of concern

– Christian young men aged 16-18. We hope that, as well as providing some important case studies of how religious and sexuality intersect in the complex lives of religious young people in modern England, the research will provide helpful resources for future research with diverse religions and genders.

Issues of abstinence in sex education

We focus in this paper on one salient theme that arose in the course of our project on Christian young men's romantic relationships – abstinence. Abstinence has been a persistent topic of debate in the scholarship around sex education, primarily due to the controversies around the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of so-called 'abstinence only' education for the reduction of negative adolescent sexual health outcomes such as underage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection contraction (Blake and Frances 2001). Evidence has been found for the ineffectiveness and counter-productiveness of abstinence only sex education (Kirby 2002; Santelli et al. 2006), but also for its effectiveness in combination with other pedagogical approaches, sometimes called 'abstinence plus' education (Birch, White, and Fellows 2016; Poobalan et al. 2009). Frequently opposed to 'abstinence only' approaches is comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), which aims to combat the notion that sexual knowledge is dangerous for adolescents by presenting the best, scientifically accurate, clear and frank information (Germain 2015). However, the clear separation often theorized between abstinence and comprehensive approaches has been challenged by Jeffries et al. (2010), who notes that CSE approaches are increasingly likely to teach similar content to abstinence only approaches. More pertinently for our project, research has also interrogated the meaning and purpose of perhaps overly simplified and assumed meanings and significances of notions of abstinence. Nancy Lesko (2010) has found new insights regarding abstinence education by attending to the 'affect' that both

approaches draw on, namely that of nostalgia. Through this analysis she persuasively demonstrates that there is more in common between the two approaches than the dualistic debates would have us believe. We want to build on research of this kind, research that attends more to the complex meanings of commonly assumed notions in sexuality education discourse. There is a growing body of research that takes this sensibility, and of particular note is research that attends to adolescent's own meanings of typical sex education concepts such as risk (Abel and Fitzgerald 2006), pleasure (Hirst 2013) and sexual knowledge (Allen 2001), troubling adult definitions (Jones 2011).

We want to build on this body of work through engaging with lived, intersubjective personal meanings of abstinence. There are multiple methodological approaches that could be taken to address this topic. In our case we wanted to test the usefulness of understanding abstinence as a personal ethic, enacted and performed by individuals differently in various contexts. We draw on Sarah Winkler Reid's (2014) important ethnographic work [in a London school -with-adolescent girls, showing how they in which she shows how adolescents](#) draw on a sexual ethics of 'force and efficacy' (p.184, citing Keane 2010), deploying this notion in our own formulations of how ethical discourses are enacted. Our work also relates closely to the innovative research of Sarah-Jane Page and Andrew Yip, who take an intersectional identities approach to religious young people and sexuality (Page and Yip 2013). They find evidence for the 'democratization' theory in religious and sexual intersections, noting the deregulation of religious language, doctrine and symbolism and the adoption of a wider array of cultural resources for the construction of a pragmatic, individualized integration of sexuality/religion. They note that this does not entail 'a clear-cut rupture from the past', but rather an 'adapting critically to the established' while 'jettisoning what does not

work' (p.157). This involves a non-unidirectional relationship between theology/doctrine and lived experience of sexuality/religion whereby one's own experience is allowed to interpret and interpellate the religious system. Our own approach follows the in-depth, qualitative sensibility of Page and Yip. However, we believe there is much to be gained from an approach that focuses on differences *within* religious perspectives as well as across multiple diverse perspectives. Further, Page and Yip's methodology involved an interviewing approach dominated by discussion of beliefs, attitudes and opinions. We believe that Page and Yip's work can be extended by taking an ethical approach following Winkler Reid. Further, foregrounding the role of theological discourses and how they are variously drawn on in recounted lived experiences will allow us to better make connections between the ethical aspects of these discourses and their enaction.

In terms of the literature relating directly to sex education, we also build on previous research examining adolescents' definitions of abstinence through finding out which sexual acts they considered to constitute a loss of virginity (Bersamin et al. 2007). We extend these findings by moving from *definitional* abstinence-meanings to *ethical* abstinence-meanings. In addition, by investigating meanings of abstinence for religious (in this case Christian) young men, we are better able to understand how religious notions contribute to the construction of these meanings. Sexual abstinence is frequently associated with religion and its various entanglements with the discourse of sexuality education (Baker, Smith, and Stoss 2015). This is in part down to the extensive volume of research produced concerning the U.S. government's ongoing funding for 'abstinence-only' sex education and the role of religious arguments in supporting this (Moslener 2015). However, recently research has begun to add nuance to the issue over religious support for/against 'abstinence-only' education, with

enquiries into evangelical parents' support for CSE (Dent & Maloney 2016), and Christian church leaders' willingness to participate in CSE programmes (Hach & Roberts-Dobie 2016). Focusing on religious young people allows for a further layer of complexification of the assumptions that may govern the connections between abstinence and religion.

Abstinence in lived experience

A simple working definition of abstinence can be formulated as 'the practice of abstaining from various forms of sexual contact'. However, we want to capture the complexity of notions of abstinence as they emerge in individual Christian young men's lives. In our case, we do not take abstinence to necessarily entail 'abstinence only until marriage', though this may apply in some cases. Rather, we are interested in the personal meanings which underpin decisions to abstain from *certain* forms of sexual contact in *certain* specific instances. We propose that these decisions be considered as 'ethical moments' which can be better understood by engaging with those ethical discourses (religious and otherwise) of 'force and efficacy' which are being drawn on. Following Winkler Reid, our interpretative approach is guided by the conceptual and theoretical tools provided by the 'turn to the ethical' in anthropology and sociology that has emerged in the last few decades (Faubion 2011).

Michael Lambek's influential volume *Ordinary Ethics* (2010) formulates one possible way of theorizing the entanglement of the ethical with human action and intention. In an inversion of Durkheim, he asserts:

... there is no great methodological danger in dissolving the ethical into the social once the social is conceived as (Aristotelian) activity, practice, and judgment rather than (Kantian/Durkheimian) rule or obligation. (Lambek 2010, p. 28)

Thus, Lambek's call is for anthropologists to pay attention to the way that ethics is implicated in 'everyday comportment and understanding' (2010, p.3) rather than just exceptional or highly visible cases. However, theorizing of the deep entailment of the ethical and the social is problematic, since we are left with the problem of discovery, given no analytical tools for the myriad ways in which the ethical might become 'visible' and thus ethnographically accessible (Lempert 2013). In one alternative conceptualization of the place of ethics in everyday life, Jarrett Zigon argues that we must focus our attention more carefully:

... the ethical dilemmas, difficult times, and troubles in which people do on occasion find themselves can best be described as a breakdown. Just as the hammer is usually and for the most part ready-to-hand, so too are moral expectations and dispositions...it is upon these moments of moral breakdown, when ethics must be performed, that anthropologists of moralities should focus their methodological and analytic attention (Zigon 2007, p. 137)

Our approach here follows Zigon in showing how ethics are revealed in points of moral breakdown. This conceptual heuristic allowed us to engage in our interviews with the multiple ways our participants represented certain interpersonal and intrapsychic struggles associated with the practice of abstinence. First, we attend to the religious and Christian theological meanings that these negotiations draw on, e.g. the idea of sacramental covenant marriage whereby a faithfully committed married couple symbolically repeats the faithful commitment of God to his people (Ash 2005). We agree here with Simeon Zahl in his recognition of the 'affective salience of doctrine' – namely, that specific theological discourses can have empirically observable affects (Zahl 2015). Second, we attend to the imbrication of these religious sexual discourses with non-religious ideals. We agree here with Kim Knott project of the fertility of methodological approaches that interrogate the boundary between the religious and the

non-religious (Knott 2010). Recognizing the shifting nature of this boundary, particularly with regard to sexuality, helps us to better account for both the psychological and sociological dimensions of abstinence ethics in lived experiences.

In the same way that research has also investigated personal meanings of risk and pleasure as they are constructed by relevant systems of meaning, our research reveals personal meanings of abstinence through experiences of romantic relationships. Further, these personal meanings must be understood with hermeneutic sensitivity rather than naively – as Zigon puts it:

... a critical hermeneutics recognizes that although many of our informants may utilize the dominant moral vocabulary available today, ethical imperatives often exceed that which is intended or meant by this vocabulary, and thus such an approach considers the concepts of this moral vocabulary as the beginning of analysis rather than its end. (Zigon 2014, p.747)

This hermeneutic imperative is part of our chosen methodological approach described below (interpretative phenomenological analysis, henceforth IPA). We do not suppose to construct an argument from our findings for or against a particular form of sex education, abstinence-based, comprehensive or otherwise. Indeed, there are significant disagreements between the two authors over the normative dimensions of sex education pedagogy. Rather, our concern is to better understand the personal meanings of abstinence, in the shared understanding that the best teaching comes from the best understanding of those that we would teach.

Methodology

In this project, the first author followed closely the methodological principles of IPA (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2010) to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with three Christian young men aged 17-18 from a large charismatic evangelical church

in the Midlands. The detailed, nuanced analysis, requiring close attention to idiographic elements, means small sample sizes are the norm in IPA studies (Smith 2004 p.42; Brocki & Wearden 2006 p.94). Further, because of the central methodological focus on lived experience, it is recommended that samples be as homogenous as possible – this explains our decision to interview only Christian young men rather than diverse genders. In the full interpretative write-up of our research attention was paid to gender, and we acknowledge that this is a central issue given the deep entanglements of sexuality and gender. However, in our deliberate centralization of the religious identities of participants we necessarily sacrifice the attention that could have been paid to gendered notions of sexuality and relationships being deployed. Future research of this nature can and should take the relationship between Christianity and masculinities into full account (Gallagher 2003).

Participants were recruited through the youth provision that the first author is involved with at the church he attends. Relationships with the participants were pastoral in nature and developed over the course of three years running a discussion group on issues the young people were facing in relation to their Christian faith. To assess whether responses were in any way over-familiar or showed other indications of any such bias, the transcript data were independently reviewed by the second author. The second author also checked whether the first author's relative levels of familiarity with the participants affected the way the interviews were delivered comparatively across the three cases. This was to ensure that the content of responses showed no indication of threats to internal validity from experimenter effects. Further, to account for the possible bias and favourable treatment during the analysis and interpretation, the second author was involved extensively in checking the full table of themes produced during analysis. The analysis and write-up was undertaken in line with De Witt and Ploeg's

(2006) criteria for rigour in IPA (balanced integration, openness concreteness, resonance).

It was also important that the interviews were carried out in a way that ensured the participants were comfortable talking about sensitive topics. The first author made sure to look for verbal and non-verbal indicators of discomfort or distress during the interviews and none were apparent at the time or when audio transcripts were reviewed by the second author. Further, through the process of obtaining informed consent he made sure that the participants were aware of their right to 'pass' on a certain topic of conversation, switch off the recorder, or end the interview at any stage.

IPA is 'phenomenological' insofar as it places rich descriptions of personal experience centre stage, and 'interpretative' insofar as it prescribes a clear, step-by-step process for data analysis while leaving open the interpretative possibilities and requiring an open, reflexive, and creative adoption of an interpretative approach(es) to the data that are anchored in the rigorous, text-anchored analytical process. Interviewing method for IPA aims for minimum interviewer intervention, aiming to draw out as much rich, in-depth experiential data as possible. Overall, the aim of IPA is to understand the lifeworld of an individual with regard to the chosen phenomenon. In its comparative and synthetic mode for multiple case samples, it seeks to identify the convergence and divergence of personal meanings across common thematic aspects of experiences.

One of the most important limitations of the argument we present here stems from the methodological purview of IPA. The validity and rigour of IPA rests on its holistic approach whereby specific part of transcript cannot be divorced or separated from the whole. In presenting our data so selectively and thematically here, we in some sense do violence to the methodological foundations of IPA which relies on comprehensive analysis synthesizing multiple transcripts into a rich and diverse table of

themes and sub-themes grounded in the data. We recognize though, that this is the cross that holistic lifeworld research has to bear – the necessity of adaption and mutation of holistic accounts for different audiences subject to the vicissitudes of research agendas. Indeed, this is one of the central and perennial ethical issues of interpretative qualitative research. As such, we focused our analysis and writing for this paper on justifications, i.e., those aspects of the interviews in which reasons for (in)action were given. This is only one possible approach to the study of moral breakdown that has been inaugurated by Zigon. However, an analytic restriction to reason-giving allows us to show how this interpersonal, situated reasoning, as an intentional and submerged self-presentation (and thus in need of a hermeneutic approach), reveal the ethics in practice of these religious young men.

A further limitation is that, given our drawing on anthropology of ethics, our methodology is limited in utilizing only interviews rather than the wider tools of ethnography that are so fundamental to anthropologically oriented research approaches. Nevertheless, it has been possible to take an ethnographic approach to our interview data, capturing as it does (even in a limited sense) the embodied response of the participants (Finlay 2005). Ethnographic research on issues around young people's sexuality is fraught with ethical issues (Kuyper et al. 2012), such that developing future research of this nature will be challenging but worthwhile task.

We think our methodological and interpretative approach is original within the field of sex education, and one that has great potential for educational research in general. We think there are strong reasons for further research utilizing insights from the anthropology of ethics and morality in the field of educational studies, and that in particular the academic debate about sex education has much to gain therein.

Data Analysis

We begin with a brief pen portrait of each participant. Phil is white British. He is a tall, sporty person with a very light-hearted attitude. He is intelligent and articulate, with a keen interest in politics. He is from a committed Christian family and his father is very involved in the church outreach projects. His parents are divorced. Phil talks about his relationship with Liz, whom he never ‘officially’ dated, was attracted to for a period of couple of months and has, as of about a month ago, decided not to take the relationship any further.

Steve is white British. He is a tall, quiet, steady individual who is very mature in his attitudes and behaviour in comparison to his peers. He has just recently started coming to this church, although he is from a committed Christian family and has been going to church all his life. He helps lead the Christian Union at his college, which has been an important part of his life and faith. Steve talks about both his past relationship with Florence two years ago, and also his current relationship with Olivia, a girl who goes to the church youth group.

Chris is mixed white and black Caribbean. He is a quiet and very confident young person who has a keen interest in the academic and intellectual side of his faith, and enjoys deep debate and discussion about the Bible and faith issues. He is from a Christian family and has been a Christian all his life. Chris talks about his relationship with Ellie, which was never official yet continued over a period of two years up until Chris was sixteen.

In IPA, data analysis is a lengthy and rigorous process involving working closely with the text and delaying movement to the abstract, conceptual and interpretative. Following the word-for-word transcription and anonymization of the audio recorded interviews, there are three stages to IPA analysis. In the first stage, the text is memoed in three different modes: descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. The

second stage consists of working closely with the memos to identify patterns and recurring themes, grouping memos together into superordinate and subordinate themes. In the final stage, the developed thematic structures for each transcript are synthesized to create a master table of cross-case themes and sub-themes.

We followed the above steps, as outlined in the IPA ‘textbook’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2010), in order to produce a full, holistic analytical system integrating the whole of each interview comparatively. As part of this process, the first author also completed a full interpretative write up of the complete analytical table of themes and sub-themes. The full table can be seen below:

[Table 1 to go here]

As noted above, the fracturing of this complete data is necessary for any kind of productive research output. As a result, in the data presentation that follows we focus on one sub-theme within superordinate theme A - ‘relationships shaped by personal Christian faith’. Our chosen sub-theme is ‘interpreting and applying Christian (sexual) ethics’. Within these identified thematic extracts, we focus our attention on the moral breakdowns that are exhibited. Through a focus on ethics in practice, we see the effect/affect of religious sexual norms reproduced in the discourse and practice of the participants and how these norms take on meaning and significance for the participant through reflection on and representation of past memories and future imaginings.

Early in the interview, Phil mentions how his parents gave him ‘the talk’ once he had hit puberty:

They talked about things, like the classic sex before marriage and about how... I didn't necessarily understand it at the time, but the idea about making yourself pure or keeping yourself pure. And then the idea that that's what makes marriage special, the fact that it's just that one person.

The term 'sex before marriage', called 'classic' by Phil, illustrates how the cluster of ethical issues represented by the term 'sex before marriage', particularly the idea of abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage, is treated as a Christian norm (this can also be seen in Chris's interviews when he refers to it as 'the big one that is brought up a lot'). Phil then explains more about the idea of not 'spoiling' yourself:

I use the word spoilt because as a Christian it's seen as... sex before marriage as being a bad thing. Therefore the world spoilt is associated in order to convey that you shouldn't do it... your almost ruining, your almost polluting slash ruining your future marriage by the fact that when you first have sex with your wife it's not a special thing, it's just someone else that you're doing it with.

It is important to note that in this extract Phil is not describing his own justification for abstinence, but rather *an existent* justification. This given reason for adherence to abstinence before marriage is the avoidance of a 'spoiling... ruining... polluting', of both himself, through the loss of the opportunity to have sex for the first time in marriage, and also of the future marriage relationship through the permanent loss of the possibility of having shared that level of intimacy with one person (now considered as 'just someone else'). In contrast to his presentation of *one possible* justification, Phil's own engagement with the ethical apparatus of abstinence-reasoning is more complex, as he is not sure about the extent to which he agrees with these ideas. Having mentioned his ambiguity regarding the extent of his adherence to the sexual ethic, he goes on later to talk about how this negotiation happens:

When... a guy feels attracted to a girl all the time, that's natural biology. And I think, wouldn't it be great to have sex with this girl, I'd really enjoy it, but then the next thing I think is along the lines of is that what God would want slash does that match up with your faith or it's like that question of, as someone said, does it bring you closer to God? But then you have like the mini debate over it, where you think

yes it's not bringing me closer but is it taking me further or not and you're just kind of left ... unsure.

Firstly, we should note that regardless of Phil's recognition of the salience and importance of abstinence before marriage, the way the ethic of abstinence *actually applies* in Phil's relational experiences is in the *avoidance* of the need to make a decision that may have drastic consequences. The fact that Phil feels so paralyzed in his decisions demonstrates clearly the pervasive power of the idea that sex before marriage brings 'impurity' to the highly valued virginal marriage. This power is continuously present in spite of his uncertainty regarding his personal adherence. This paralysis and uncertainty is part of the moral breakdown that is occurring as Phil engages in these reflexive ethical negotiations.

Secondly, and more importantly, we need to observe the quality of these negotiations as they are described. The experiences of moral breakdown described are pervaded by a theological discourse drawing on a sense of 'closeness' to God. This closeness to God functions as something non-negotiable – for coherence to be retained, the sense of closeness must be retained. What can shift is the 'classification' of sexual activities that might negatively affect this sense of closeness. Thus, what Phil negotiates is whether one can partake in certain sexual acts and preserve a sense of closeness to God.

A final extract from Phil's interview highlights the co-existence and dependence of characteristically religious and non-religious moralities:

There's a couple at school, I know one of them's a Christian and they've been together a while and I know they've done it but they didn't rush into it, I suppose you could say that they started their relationship at what you might call the immature stage 14-16, of the relationship, at that point the issue was 'we're too young anyway', and then they did it at some point when they'd actually matured in the relationship more. As in it wasn't the case of him going out with her because he

wanted to have sex with her, he went out with her, you could say because he loves her. And then it's years later, well not years later but significantly further down their development as a couple that he's thought 'I want to do that'.

The key part of this quote is the *reason given* – the ethical justification – for the relationship which is under consideration; in this case 'not... because he wanted to have sex with her... because he loves her'. Crucially, Phil compares this directly to his own situation:

I was attracted to a Christian girl ... And I did think, you know, how has he done it. Could I do that? Would that work for me?

In this part of the interview Phil was exploring an alternative morality, possibly applicable to himself, through ethical reasoning about the legitimacy of his friend's sexual relationship on the basis of love rather than sexual desire. Thus, something distinct from, but related to, the religious sexual ethic of abstinence and negotiation of the moral status of sexual acts, is being engaged with here. It is a non-religious ethic of love-legitimation, in which relationships and intimate activities within are morally justified provided there exists the (one can only assume mutual) subjective feelings of love. These two alternative ethical frameworks are used independently of one another in different moments of moral breakdown. What Phil is attempting in this final extract is a transposition of the non-religious ethic of love-legitimation into his own theological negotiations about qualifying relational and sexual activities. In this case, it would be love that grants the relationship and its sexual element moral legitimacy in the sight of God. This is characteristic of Page and Yip's theorization of the pragmatic, individualized integration of religion and sexuality, and also demonstrative of Knott's complex theorization of religion/non-religion, as Phil attempts to transfigure something

apparently 'non-religious' (love-legitimation) into his own system of religious sex-ethical acceptability.

This picture of the moral hesitancy and confusion brought about by this Christian ethic may be somewhat familiar to readers. However, Steve and Chris's experiences are perhaps less familiar because they both internalize the ethics of pre-marital abstinence more extensively – though there is significant difference in meaning between them. For Steve, adhering to the Christian ethic of sexual abstinence is a way to even greater sexual fulfilment in marriage. Abstinence before marriage is something that he has:

... always kind of known... I remember my youth leader saying something like this actually – 'It's not that God wants to deprive you of enjoyment and fulfilment, but he wants to bring it more abundantly later on', sort of thing.

This shows that Steve fundamentally accepts and deeply assumes the ethic of abstinence before marriage. Indeed, in Steve's interview, the ethical moments take place most frequently around issues of romantic relational dynamics rather than sexual decision making. Sexual abstinence for Steve is not, as for Phil, an ethical 'problem that arises'. However, he goes on to clarify:

I realized it's like God wants to bring more, and more fulfilling... end result almost in marriage. And the way I see it is that it makes stuff so much more messy as soon as relationships get sexual.'

Though the above justifications for his own adherence to abstinence are not experienced as a moral breakdown, for Steve this happens vicariously through the experience of his friend who had a sexual relationship:

I kind of feel like he's staying in a relationship simply because it's sexual and because he's kind of locked in, rather than... he's not a Christian or anything so it's

like... but I feel like, if it hadn't have been, they probably would have realized that the relationship was not right and it probably would have ended.

He immediately goes on to compare this situation to his own, during the aftermath of the end of his first relationship with Florence:

I did sort of talk to a friend after a break up with an ex-girlfriend, and the first thing he said was 'are you sleeping with her?' and I was like 'no' and he was like 'oh that's good because it makes it so much less messy', sort of in terms of like disentangling it and in terms of emotionally and physically, and sort of for peace of mind as well, I think it would be an awful lot harder if it had reached that level.

These metaphorically vivid ideas of sex as an 'entangling' act that causes people to be 'locked in' to relationships give shape to the reasoning Steve is engaged in here. It supplements the positive idea of greater sexual fulfilment in marriage, as well as drawing on a discourse of risk and regret analogous to that described by Phil, though in this case emphasizing the emotional consequences rather than the sense of moral failure. It is unclear from the interview exactly what ethical provenance this has, but it is possible that there is here an elision of a theological discourse drawing on the idea of sexual partners becoming 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24), and a psychological/biological discourse drawing on the notion of 'bonding' hormones released in some sexual acts, again demonstrating in practice Knott's notion of the complex relationships between religious and non-religious discourses. For Steve, drawing on his friend's experience, it is not that these entanglements are inherently bad, but that they are very painful to endure when a relationship ends. He further anchors the meaning of abstinence in a theological framework through drawing on notions of guilt and forgiveness:

I also feel like if I had been in a sexual relationship I probably would have regretted it, and at some point I would've come to the realization that God's

forgiven me and stuff and it's alright, but still in some small way I'd look back and say 'I've messed up in that area' in regards to my faith.

We can see here another instance of imagined future sexual moral failure. The risk of an imagined future state of regret is a motivating factor for maintain sexual abstinence. Here Steve draws on the central Christian motif of God's forgiveness for sins, but emphasizes that 'still, in some small way', the sense of failure would remain permanently in this imagined future. We can thus extend the notion of moral breakdown temporally, to include ethical moments that arise when imagining various alternative futures, a practice also engaged with by Page and Yip (2009), though not in the ethical register we adopt. These imaginative exercises serve to reinforce currently held moralities and thus safeguard a coherent future identity.

Chris also describes this idea of regret and forgiveness but reflects instead on his unethical treatment of Ellie. This is the central narrative thread of Chris's interview, which features a number of episodes in which Chris feels that he may have 'led her on', and culminates in a confession that he has treated her 'like a toy'. He describes this summarily in an earlier part of the interview:

Well I think she liked me a lot more than I was fond of her. So she would be trying to text me all the time, and being friendly, flirty, and... so I let it happen, but in my head nothing was going to happen, but I'm not sure she thought the same thing. So in my head well she was saying 'do you wanna meet up' and I was saying 'yeah sure soon...' But I... I think I probably... maybe led her on? I don't know. But I did find her attractive but I knew in my head that I didn't want to have that kind of relationship.

Chris's interview was thus unique in that the moral breakdown was occurring 'live'. At the end of the interview he looks back on his relationship with Ellie:

So! Just talking about this it makes me feel like I was horrible to her, and it... you know?

I: Yeah.

And I never would have described myself as a nasty person. But I was never this particular...

I: So do you feel like in the course of talking about it, you are now realizing that you weren't very nice to her.

I think I knew it but it's not something that I dwelt on or... just something that happened I guess.

Chris's sense of moral breakdown does not concern abstinence from sexual contact, but does concern 'leading her on' - part of the same theo-ethical discourse that forecloses pre-marital expressions (and reciprocations) of sexual desire. This is particularly salient given his clear refusal that he would ever have a relationship with a non-Christian or, as he perceived Ellie to be, a nominal Christian. Thus, for Chris, abstinence means abstinence from any kind of desire-reciprocal relationship with a non-Christian girl. In this way, the sense of having 'led her on' was a breakdown in both his attested ethic of 'abstinence' from non-Christian relationships and the reciprocities of desire, but also the connected set of moral issues, e.g. how to see and value other people rightly:

I know that if I was to come into contact with her again, I wouldn't see her in the same sense that I do. I don't know if I knew this before, but I can look at her and say that she is a daughter of God and he died on a cross for her. So I do not have the right to treat her as... as... a toy.

Observable within this ethical moment is what theologians have referred to as 'theological anthropology' - theological discourse about what it means to be human, a created being in relationship with a Creator (Kelsey 2006). For Chris, this discourse

prescribes a certain normative 'way of seeing' others, which is made clear through reflection on his own actions and intentions towards Ellie. This norm has several other ethical forces, but most relevant here is the notion that a responsibility towards obeying the 'Creator' implies a certain set of obligations towards the 'created'. In this case, the sense of failure/moral breakdown comes through Chris's recollection of their relationship, in which he could have closed down the possibility of a future romantic relationship but did not, due to his own enjoyment of Ellie's various advances. These acts of 'desire-reciprocity' for Chris constituted a violation of the ethic of abstinence, which extended for him beyond sexual interactions to inner dispositions and reciprocal communication of intentions. Thus, the ethic of abstinence for Chris is not only about maintaining one's own moral standards, but also about the flourishing of the other person as a creature in relation to a Creator.

Summary

Engaging with the theological meanings underneath Phil, Steve and Chris's ethical negotiations, observable in the moral breakdowns evident in the interviews, demonstrate how Christian sexual theo-ethics provide uniquely forceful meanings to various abstinence practices and feelings of transgressing them. Phil wrestles 'in the moment' with the practicalities of pre-marital abstinence and what it means for his sense of closeness to God, while imagining an alternative ethic of love-legitimation. Steve describes a positive future vision of fulfilling marital sexuality blessed by God and its ethically legitimated emotional and physical 'entanglements'. Chris struggles with a sense of sexual moral failure in leading someone on, while using this as an opportunity to reflect on the ethical demand of another person's created status and his growth into this realization. At the same time, understanding that these religious ethics are in a dialogical relationship with secular discourses about relationships and sexuality

accounts for the complexity of religious subjectivity in contemporary England and guards against a naïve correspondence from religious belief to praxis. Taking this approach has demonstrated the lived significance of the ethic of abstinence beyond just ‘sexual acts’ to cover inner states, future intentions, communications of desires and super-empirical realities.

Conclusions

Our findings build on Winkler Reid’s (2014) school-based observations that young people possess sexual ethics of ‘force and efficacy’ (p. 183). We have shown how religious young people, in this case Christian young men, appropriate religious and non-religious discourses to perform ethics of ‘force and efficacy’ in their experiences of moral breakdown. Following the analytical process of IPA, which centralizes cross-case comparison highlighting similarity and difference, we have seen the various convergences and divergences in the participants’ ethical reasonings varying over a variety of temporal configurations – past, present and imagined - and how this flows in part from their varying interpretation and application of Christian sexual ethics and the associated theological discourses. We have drawn attention to how an engaged understanding of the theological discourses that their performances are rooted in allows us to understand the situated ‘force and efficacy’ of their sexual ethics concerning abstinence. Our research thus extends the important work of Page and Yip through focusing on variations within a single religious perspective and adding nuance through foregrounding theological discourses and their affective salience. We have seen further evidence for what they call ‘individualized’ (2013, p.157) sexual ethics, whilst our phenomenological approach has situated this within the context of recounted lived experience.

In terms of the relevance to sex education, this research adds nuance and complexity to the debates around abstinence by drawing attention to the diversity of personal meanings and ethical motivations around abstinence, even within single Christian congregations (Tusting, Guest, and Woodhead 2004). We suggest three possible ways that this research may be responded to or built upon.

First, where religion is discussed in RSE curricula, policy and in classroom practice, effort should be made to attend to the diversity of intra-religious voices, and the various theological discourses that justify and give meaning to personal beliefs and practices (Stoeckl 2017). Instead of a 'grid' approach where students learn what each major religion thinks about each major sex-ethical issue (Blake and Kattrak 2002) we suggest a more engaged approach where students are introduced to the lived (ethical) complexities of religious people's sexualities through vignettes, case studies, and 'live' interviews.

Second, in connection to the above recommendation, we hope that in highlighting an under-researched area, and proposing an innovative methodology, that future research will provide us with an improved understanding of religious young people's lifeworlds regarding romantic relationships and sexuality. We hope that through research that builds on this, that English RSE can fulfil the admirable goal of being appropriate for the diverse religious beliefs evident amongst young people in England today.

Third, we believe that both these sets of findings give support to the growing number of scholars calling for a sex education curriculum based fundamentally on ethics rather than on behaviour modification or individual empowerment (Lamb 2010; Carmody 2015). The success of exemplary programmes of this nature have been recently reported (Lamb and Randazzo 2016). We agree with Winkler Reid that

adolescents' sexual negotiations, both inner and interpersonal, have a moral or ethical character. Thus, an ethics based approach represents the best possible way forward for sex education that engages with the lived experience of young people, conversant with their own terminology and meanings, rather than imposing the language and agenda of adults onto young people (Cameron-Lewis and Allen 2013).

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