

FLIRTING WITH DANGER

Power and Choice in Heterosexual Relationships

[Transcript]

MONTAGE: I don't know what to think. I don't know who to be, really, because I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't, sort of thing. And I can't sort out what I want because it's hard to separate from what's expected of me. / But the thing is that all the different things that people expect from me, those are all parts of me. I just don't know which one to choose. / And a girl can sleep with too many people and then she loses her status as sexually advanced and goes to slut. / Where do you stop once you start? Because then you become this terrible tease or something if you don't continue on or continue to please them. / I mean, that fear is always there, and girls are always aware they're not physically in charge of their space. / I don't know, because rape is such a loaded word. It's really scary to think about using it in terms of your own life. / So I totally tried to stop it, but he was like, "Come on, are you kidding? You know you want it just as much as me. You know you wanted it all along." / No, I don't think that I would call it abuse or victimization or anything because, even though it might look that way with his hand over my mouth and his hurting me and all, I just don't think that I could ever call myself a victim.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: My name is Lynn Philips. I'm a social and developmental psychologist and a professor at the University of Massachusetts. And as part of my work I've interviewed hundreds of girls and women from different racial and economic backgrounds about the joys and frustrations of their heterosexual relationships – from first kisses to hookups to long-term romances. For over 25 years, the main focus of my research has been sexuality and violence against women. I've worked with sex offenders in prison, with women in battered women's shelters and a rape crisis center, with teen girls in relationships with adult men, and with middle and high school and college students grappling with questions of power and choice in their sexual and romantic lives. And throughout this film you'll see that, very often the stories they share with me about relationships and hookups are filled with dilemmas about whether and when and why to have sex.

[Interviewee]: Not only was I scared about having sex with him but I was also sort of scared about not doing it. I felt like it was time to put up or shut up and I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it and give him what he wanted.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Their stories raise questions about what it means to give and experience pleasure.

[Interviewee]: I was never afraid of him. I was afraid of letting him down, for me as much as for him. I like to please him. I mean... I love him. I want him to be happy, right? Gives me a sense of pleasure.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And their stories force us to reexamine seemingly simple notions about consent and coercion.

[Interviewee]: I didn't exactly feel like I could say no. I hoped that he would see me crying and that he would just stop out of concern or guilt or even pity but he didn't, he just kept going. And then he was like, "Did you like it?" And I was like, "Oh yeah, it was good."

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Now in our culture, we tend to talk about sex and victimization as though they're polar opposites and there's nothing in between.

[Film Clip – "North Country"]: *Mr. Sharp, do you know the difference between consensual sex and rape? / Oh yeah. But when you're having a good time like she was, ain't no rape, that's for damn sure.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: But the more I've listened to real young women, the more I've realized that their actual experiences – and their ways of *thinking* about their experiences – can be a lot more complicated than we might expect.

[Interviewee]: If I thought of myself as victimized, then it would be like I was just a dumb little girl who got in over her head. At the time, I wanted to prove to myself how grown up I was so I didn't even want to consider that I had been taken advantage of. I mean, I knew he was really mean to do what he did. It's not like I denied what happened. It's just that feeling, like I can't really say that I was taken advantage of because then I'd be naive and stupid.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: In my first study about this, which formed the basis for my book *Flirting with Danger*, I tried to come to terms with these complications. I tried to understand why so many young women were talking about sex in ways that seemed to blur the neat line that society places between being in control of your sexual choices and victimization.

[Interviewee]: No, I don't think that I would call it 'abuse' or 'victimization' or anything because, even though it might look that way with his hand over my mouth and his hurting me and all, I don't think that I could ever call myself a victim because I'd like to think that I have it too much together to ever be victimized in that way.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: I found myself realizing that the line between consent and coercion in women's understanding of their own experiences wasn't as clear-cut as people would like to imagine.

[Interviewee]: There's always this idea, you know, in a lot of girls' heads – I mean, in the back of their minds – that they don't want to say 'no' because they don't want someone to keep going if they do so it's better to say 'yes' than to say 'no' and be ignored. Does that make sense, you know?

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Now, this is tricky stuff to talk about because we feminists have worked really hard to make the point that “no means no” and “yes means yes,” and I don’t want to suggest for a moment that force or manipulation are normal or acceptable or that women are somehow asking for it. But at the same time, I worry that I hear these nuances and seeming contradictions in women’s stories all the time and yet I don’t hear much acknowledgement of them in the wider culture. And if we don’t have a way to talk about them, we don’t have a way to offer girls and women support. In fact, what struck me in that first study was that these were women at a very progressive college who had lots of support and they expressed strong feminist views in general. And yet none of them used words like ‘victimization’ or ‘abuse’ to describe their experiences, even though 27 of the 30 women, or 90%, described at least one situation that clearly fit legal definitions of harassment or battering or rape.

[Interviewee]: He was just a real asshole. Just a slick, obnoxious guy who was always trying to prove what kind of stud he was and how mean he could be. I wouldn't say that I was abused but he roughed me up to prove what kind of man he was. Just a real asshole. / I just thank god it wasn't so extreme as women who are abused. Battered women are in horrible situations that they can't get out of. We've learned about it in my feminism classes. I was sometimes hit and sort of humiliated by my boyfriend but I wasn't battered like a lot of women. Those women I just feel so sorry for because I know I could have had it a lot worse. / I mean I was forced, yes, and I was hurt and things didn't go how I wanted but I was in the car with him. It's all really complicated. I mean... I was there. I could have chosen not to go so, no, I don't really call it rape.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And these stories haven’t changed much since I first began my research. In fact, I’m still hearing the very same dilemmas and contradictions in the interviews I’m conducting today. Now I’m not saying that I don’t hear young women talking about enjoying sex and getting pleasure from sex. Of course I do and that’s great. But far too often I hear those same young women telling me a very different story.

[Interviewee]: I guess I must have been sending out mixed signals. I mean, I can see how he would have assumed that... I mean, I brought him back to my room and we had been fooling around. I guess I understand that he would have thought that we were going all the way. But it went too far for me and I was getting scared, so I totally tried to stop it but he was like, "Come on, are you kidding? You know you want it just as much as me. You know you wanted it all along."

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: I hear so many young women talk about boyfriends who’ve treated them terribly, only to turn around in the next breath and say, “But don’t get me wrong – he’s a great guy ... he just has trouble with his temper sometimes.”

[Interviewee]: I don't think he ever meant to hurt me consciously. I mean, he was having problems I think, with his own identity and I always felt like he really couldn't control his anger and that's why he took it out on me. I just tried to understand that it wasn't about me or it wasn't about us. He wasn't abusive. He was just acting out his frustrations from his own experience. I don't think he meant to hurt me, it just sort of happened.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And, maybe most disturbing of all, I've listened to one young woman after another blame herself when she's been sexually violated.

[Interviewee]: It was my own fault in a way, I just was trying to be so grown up and just assert myself and get what I wanted. I just... I should have known better. I should have known, you can't play with fire without expecting to get burned.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: As a social and developmental psychologist, this kind of minimizing and self-blame flies in the face of everything I'm "supposed" to know about how people make sense of victimization. In most cases, people attribute bad things that happen to them to outside factors rather than blaming themselves. I mean, if we're robbed, we don't blame ourselves for carrying a wallet and refuse to say we were held up. So by that same logic why would so many women who are pressured or hurt or coerced in their sexual encounters seem to blame themselves?

[News Media]: *You know, while students are outraged, the talk amongst some of these students, they're saying that some people are actually blaming the victim. Saying that she was drunk and that she shouldn't have done that...*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Given how women who come forward to report sexual assault are treated in the media...

[News Media]: *They actually made me stand up and walk to the front of the courtroom and demonstrate the length of my skirt...*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: ...Maybe we shouldn't be surprised when, as we'll see, it seems like a lot of women are refusing to stand up for themselves.

[News Montage]: *A number of women came forward to say they are rape victims but their police departments simply look the other way in case after case. / We're seeing chronic and systemic patterns of police refusing to accept cases for investigation. / In 2004, Sarah was sexually assaulted during a robbery at the Pennsylvania gas station where she worked but when Sarah reported the crime to police, a detective accused her of lying about the assault and of robbing the gas station herself.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: If we just looked on the surface – especially in our very victim blaming society – we might be tempted to say that women are just weak or that they're asking for it, that they like abuse, or that they're just confused and don't know what they want. But in virtually every other facet of their lives, the young women I speak with tend to feel very entitled to respect and dignity and they're quick to defend other women when they're mistreated.

[Interviewee]: If I were examining another woman's experience and she said, "I went home with this guy and I didn't want to have sex but he forced me or I was so intimidated that I just did it," I would say that's rape.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: But in their own most intimate encounters, that sense of entitlement and autonomy bumps up against another reality.

[Music Video Montage]: [singing] *"I'm telling ya to loosen up my buttons babe..."*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Young women are faced with this constant barrage of contradictory messages about sex and sexuality that come at them relentlessly from across the culture. Messages and images that tell young women that being powerful and having it all together means being sexually bold and entitled, even as it tells them that being sexual means deferring to the power and pleasures of men.

[Interviewee]: Yeah, I feel like I got a whole bunch of mixed messages. "Do this, do that, be like this, be like that." You want to be a good girl but there's a million ways to be that and a million booby traps along the way. It feels like a minefield.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And it tells them that sexiness defines a young woman's worth, even as it tells them that sexual girls "deserve what they get."

[Interviewee]: I really should have been more careful. You can't go around strutting your stuff without it catching up to you. When I think about it, I mean, really what did I expect?

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And so the more I've listened to young women talk about their sexual relationships, the more I've come to realize that their willingness to rationalize bad situations has less to do with their own issues than with how deeply conflicted we are as a culture about women's sexuality.

WHAT'S A GIRL TO THINK?

[Media]: *Well, Jim, Molly's growing up. / What, already? Oh, but Alice, I thought... Well, after all I mean she's only... / Oh daddy, don't be so silly. I'm not a baby anymore. / I know dear, but... Well, no.*

[Music Video Montage]

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Girls today come of age in a culture teeming with images of hyper-sexualized women. From billboards to magazines, teen novels to TV shows, movies and music videos and porn. All cast sex as the most important of human preoccupations.

[TV Clip – "90210"]: *It's a big deal. Today I'm a virgin and tomorrow I won't be and this is really, really important to me.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And looking hot is cast as the most important of female attributes and these messages about sexuality are coming at girls at younger and younger ages.

[News Clip]: *Little girls in midriff tops, camisoles, ruffled bras and panties. This is lingerie for four year olds.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: So young girls don't just see depictions of adult sex and sexualized women—they see images of themselves as sexualized.

[News Clip]: *It's even seen in the pages of high fashion magazines. The face behind this seductive pose is just ten years old.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And this emphasis on sexuality is presented as how a modern and independent woman is supposed to think about herself. So the message is clear, you need to be out there and knowing, sexually sophisticated and up for anything.

[Film Clip – “Sorority Row”]: *Oops. I forgot to wear underwear and it's really cold down there. Maybe you could warm it up for me?*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: You're supposed to accept nothing less than an active and exciting sex life.

[TV Clip – “Sex and the City”]: *You see, this is what I'm talking about, look at her! She screams sex. It's so honest. I wish I could be more like that.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And more than anything, you're not supposed to have any questions or reservations or hang-ups about sex.

[Film Clip – “American Pie”]: *I want the right time, the right moment, the right place. / It's not a space shuttle launch. It's sex.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: You see and hear this kind of thing across the culture.

[Film Clip – “Friends With Benefits”]: *I mean the whole friendship-sex thing, kudos baby, kudos. / It's not that big of a deal.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Sex—certainly oral sex or “everything but” sex—is simply “no big deal.”

[TV Clip – “Sex and the City”]: *I've been giving blowjobs since I'm twelve. / Really? / It's the only way to get guys to like you.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: But there's another message as well, one that's completely at odds with this story of liberated female sexuality. If young women actually do have sex – or too much sex or sex too willingly, whatever that might mean – they're branded as whores and sluts.

[Media Montage “slut”]: *What a slut! / She's such a slut. / Such a slut! Total slut! / You're a slut. / All sorority girls are sluts. / Listen here, whore. / No, yeah, she's definitely a whore. /*

Boo, you whore. / If I think it's a best friend's duty to let her know that everyone, and I do mean everyone, is calling her a dirty skank.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: This is the other message in the culture and it flies in the face of the whole sex-and-the-modern-woman thing. It's as though there are all of these invisible lines—how out there you are, how you dress, how many partners you've had—and if you cross those lines, you forfeit your reputation and your right to be treated with respect.

[TV Clip – “Jersey Shore”]: *If a girl's a slut, I mean, she should be abused.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: This negative view of women's sexuality extends beyond trashy reality shows. It's actually a staple of what passes for sex education in much of this country, where abstinence-only programs have become the norm.

[Pam Stenzel – Abstinence Educator]: *What's birth control protect you from? Pregnancy. That drug, that hormone that this girl is taking has just made her ten times more likely to contract a disease than if she were not taking that drug. This girl's going to end up sterile or dead.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Only here, the message is that sex poses a danger to a lot more than just a girl's reputation.

[Lakita Garth – Abstinence Educator]: *And you know what? The reality is, there is no such thing as safe sex. That is a lie in truth's clothing.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Unlike so much of what they learn elsewhere in the culture, girls and young women are taught to “hold out” and “respect themselves” because sex is less about intimacy and pleasure than about pain and disease and unwanted pregnancy.

[Lakita Garth – Abstinence Educator]: *Every year, we see, there are young people who are dying every day because they did have sex.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And when girls aren't getting this “sex equals death” equation in the classroom, there's no shortage of voices in the wider culture telling them to watch out.

[Radio Clip – “Bill O'Reilly”]: *Five-foot-two, a hundred and five pounds, wearing a mini-skirt and a halter top with a bare midriff. So every predator in the world is going to pick that up at two in the morning. She's walking by herself, she's out of her mind drunk and a thug takes her over to New Jersey and kills her and rapes her and does all these terrible things to her...*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: From conservative talk radio to slasher films—a genre that so many teens watch—the message is the same:

[Film Clip – “Jason X”]: *...or we can have premarital sex! We love premarital sex.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: In this story, being sexually engaged is virtually synonymous with victimization. And in fact, this formula has become so routine, it's actually become a joke within the horror genre itself.

[Film Clip – “Behind the Mask”]: *This is my fault! Because I'm sexually active? I am sorry, I'm not a virgin!*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: But it's not just a slasher-film thing. You see this message across the board in American pop culture, often presented in more subtle ways.

[Film Clip – “The Twilight Saga: Eclipse”]: *I still want you this way. / It's too dangerous.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: In the hugely popular *Twilight* series of films and novels, for instance, the act of sex is so dangerous, it will literally kill the lead female character, Bella.

[Film Clip – “The Twilight Sage: Breaking Dawn”]: *No, you can't do this. Listen to me, Bella. / Let me go! / Jacob, calm down... / Are you out of your mind? You'll kill her!*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And then there's the message, repeated again and again, that sex is not about intimacy and connection and women's natural and healthy desires, but a form of failure.

[Film Clip - “Juno”]: *I thought you were the kind of girl who knew when to say when. / I don't really know what kind of girl I am.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: The presumption always in these narratives is that sex is unhealthy and even dangerous, and that girls who do have sex are making bad decisions and so they deserve what they get.

[Film Clip – “Bully”]: *The fucker just raped me. / Shit, Helen, make up your fucking mind. I mean, I told you he was kinky.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: So these are the two big stories young women hear again and again from the culture: that on the one hand sex is cool and exciting and a sign of sophistication and power, and on the other it's exactly the opposite. A one-way ticket to physical pain and social ruin. And I'd argue that this basic contradiction can't be understood without taking a step back and examining our cultural ideals of femininity from the past. In previous generations, the quintessential mother and wife was told to be devoted to her family and to her husband, with all of her activities centered around their needs.

[Historical Clips Montage]: *To her husband, she must be a companion, a sweetheart, a wife and a mother. She must know how to cook. She must know how to set her table, how to make her home comfortable. She must know clothes. She must face death to bring children into the world.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Beyond taking care of the family and the home, girls and young women were taught that being feminine meant being demure and delicate and dedicating themselves to the pleasure of men.

[Film Clip – “Summer Magic”]: [Singing] *“Be demure, sweet and pure. Hide the real you. Femininity, femininity, that’s the way to catch a beau.”*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: We may laugh at those messages now, but they’ve never really gone away. The culture still tells girls and women to be sweet and pleasing to men. Except now something has been added to it.

[Music Video Montage]: [singing] *“We want a lady in the street, but a freak in the bed.”*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: So while in previous generations there were basically two kinds of women – good girls and bad girls or virgins and sluts, and it was clear which one you should want to be – these days, girls and women are apparently supposed to figure out how to be both at the same time.

[Film Clip – “The Ugly Truth”]: *You have to be two people. The saint and the sinner; the librarian and the stripper. On the one hand, you have to push the guy away with a cold indifference. On the other, you have to be a sexually teasing tornado.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: The message women get is “go away, a little closer.” Essentially, be both slutty and virginal, a good girl and a bad girl, at the same time. We can see these very mixed messages playing out in popular women’s and teen magazines, where on one page they are told to be “hot” and “sexy,” and to seek pleasure, and to be well-versed in all kinds of sexual techniques and positions, and in the next breath they’re told to be child-like—to be “baby soft” and coy, and play hard-to-get. And while these stories about what kind of woman is most desirable may seem like polar opposites, they have one crucial thing in common: they both privilege male pleasure.

[Film Clip – “Piranha”]

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Think about Cosmo, which countless young women describe as their bibles, and which girls as young as twelve, or probably even younger, are reading. Just take a look at the cover stories: they’re all about “how to please your man,” “how to look sexy,” with the clear implication that you’re supposed to look hot for him. How to seduce a man, how to master the love tricks that make him want you more, so he won’t stray. One way or another, women are still supposed to be pleasing to men. But whereas 50 years ago a woman was supposed to know how to bake him the perfect cake, today she’s supposed to know how to give him the perfect blow-job.

[Film Clip – “Superbad”]: *I am going to give you the best blow-J ever...*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Of course, these stories about femininity and women’s sexuality also tell a story about masculinity and men’s sexuality. And these stories are just as

complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, in our culture, boys and young men have been taught to aspire to, and girls and young women have been told to seek out, the classic Prince Charming – the strong, gentle, sensitive guy you can depend on.

[Film Clip – “The Twilight Saga: Eclipse”]: *Feel that? Flesh and blood and warmth.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And on the other hand, we’ve had just the opposite: the ideal of the bad boy. It’s an image of the outlaw and the rebel that has deep roots in our culture, but in recent years has taken on a whole new life. It’s this notion, replayed again and again, that bad boys are cool, and sexy, and attractive and desirable.

[Film Clip – “The Whole Nine Yards”]: *So far, the man's killed 17 people. / Sexy!*

[Film Clip – Charlie Sheen]: *I love being under house arrest. What do I get for good behavior?*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: The idea is that masculinity tinged with violence is somehow natural. It’s apparently natural for boys to be drunk and stoned, to be aggressive, insensitive and violent; and, most of all, to be interested in one thing and one thing only – getting off.

[Film Clip – “Forgetting Sarah Marshall”]: *You're telling me that you think you have the right to just fuck anyone, anywhere, anytime. That's what you're saying? / Yes. Yeah, that's pretty much what I believe.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Should it come as a surprise that so many young women seem to struggle with how to think about and deal with abusive men in their real lives? Not only do male aggression and violence get normalized in popular culture, they also get eroticized. We’re supposed to be turned on by the violence. So we see this in music videos and TV and movies all of the time, people who are trying to kill each other one minute are in each other’s arms the next. And in this way, we’ve actually naturalized the idea that once men are aroused, they have to finish regardless of the wishes of the women they’re with. Despite decades of feminist work to insist that no means no, we see so many instances in media in which a “no” turns into a “yes.”

[Film Clip – “A History of Violence”]: [couple fighting]

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: This notion that sex is first and foremost about male pleasure runs from mainstream pop culture to porn culture. And with unfettered access to Internet porn at younger and younger ages, boys and girls are now exposed to images of male-centered sex in the most graphic and disturbing ways. And to make matters worse, we have all these much more benign stories that teach young women that inside of every insensitive, abusive beast is a loving man waiting to be discovered. The message is that if a woman just shows enough love and patience, everything will be OK. It’s a message you see again and again across a range of pop cultural forms: Even in the case of an abuser who’s beating a woman up or strangling her, beneath the surface she knows he’s really a good guy.

[TV Clip – “The Sopranos”]: *I just want you. I love you.*

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: With all of these stories in mind, the way young women talk about sex in the real world starts to make a little more sense. They’re told they have to find a way to be both sexual and not sexual at the same time and to please men at all costs, even at great cost to their own well-being, while somehow maintaining and asserting their own power and independence. And at the same time, the culture offers virtually nothing to help women make sense of these dangerous contradictions. The result is that young women have been forced to make sense out of the nonsense of the culture. That’s why we’d do well to listen to what young women are actually saying.

[Interviewee Montage]. But the thing is that all the different things that people expect from me, those are all parts of me, I just don't know which one to choose. / If a girl won't give a guy sex when he wants it, she's not taking care of his needs but if she does it then she's branded. / It's a constant balancing act, you can't look too willing or experienced. Like, you can't be more experienced than the guy is and you can't come off looking like a slut because then you'll look really bad. / I don't know what to think. I don't know who to be, really, because I'm damned-if-I-do, damned-if-I-don't sort of thing. I can't sort out what I want because it's hard to separate from what's expected of me, so it's hard to... Where do you stop once you start? Because then you become this terrible tease if you don't continue on, or continue to please them.

MAKING SENSE OF NONSENSE

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: When I share these stories with people they sometimes say, "Well, why don't women just ignore all those messages and make their own choices?" But that's the crux of the problem. None of us can just choose to ignore the culture and pick-and-choose what messages seep in. They seep into all of our heads.

[Interviewee]: It's funny how you pick up on those messages early on. It's not like anyone has to directly teach them to you or anything but you kind of just grow up hearing them and, whether you believe them in your conscious mind or not, they kind of stick.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: So when people step into a hookup or a relationship, both parties are bringing those stories with them without even necessarily knowing it. So when a young woman finds herself compelled to put up with something or do something she doesn't want, it's not as though a man needs to hold a gun to her head in order to make her feel pressured to comply. The culture's already done that work for him.

[Interviewee]: But even though my head was telling me to just say, "No," I let him do it because at the time things were moving really fast and I couldn't think of a reason I could tell him no without looking like... I don't know, without him and his friends making fun of me.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Across years of research, I find that even while the pop culture more and more presents this in your face, always up-front female sexuality, I still

consistently hear the same themes running through women's personal stories: How should I present myself as a sexual woman? How do I navigate through the dynamics of unpleasant or even downright abusive sexual experiences? And finally, how do I make sense of those situations after the fact and what do I call that? Who's to blame? And with each of these questions, we can see the confusion and contradictions they express not as a sign that young women today are having trouble making sense of the culture but as a sign that, as a culture, we are having a very difficult time making sense of young women's sexuality. Over and over in my interviews, young women tell me they understand all too well the fundamental contradiction about women's sexuality that exists at the heart of the culture and they actively, and even consciously, work to strike a balance between the conflicting demands of virgin and slut.

[Interviewee]: I like to look sexually attractive and all but I've also learned I can't just go around looking sexy because people will see that as slutty.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: One of the themes I consistently hear from girls and young women is that it needs to quote "just happen." So, they'll be at a party and, even if they get all dressed up and are looking to hook up with somebody, they still need to act like it wasn't too conscious. They'll tell me, "You know, one thing led to another and so it was all really innocent," as though admitting you want it makes you guilty? Women tell me all the time that even though they know the risks of sexually transmitted infections and even though they know they want to go out and hook up with someone, they don't carry condoms because that would look premeditated.

[Interviewee]: If I want to go ahead with having sex or expressing what I want, I'm thinking, "What will he think of the fact that I know what I want or that I want it at all?" I wonder if he'll lose respect for me, or if he'll think I'm too experienced and sort of slutty or something. / So I feel like I have to be really careful to act coy and innocent, even when that's not how I feel. So I won't be seen as a cheap, easy slut.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And girls learn this at a really young age. And unfortunately they feel like they have to make choices that box them into an identity that may come with a price.

[Interviewee]: The whole virgin-whore thing is supposed to be like a threat. For girls, it's supposed to make you want to be a virgin. But I realized when I was around fourteen that virgins were good girls, but whores had fun.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And this goes beyond how young women look and present themselves and brings us to the second question they ask themselves: Against the backdrop of a culture that has been instructing them to either please men or risk personal and social consequences, how do they navigate unpleasant or unwanted sexual experiences? Well, it really shouldn't be that surprising that one of the ways young women tell me they do this is by denying their own physical pleasure and going to great lengths to preserve men's egos.

[Interviewee]: I guess it's kind of a hassle, always stroking their egos but I mean it's more of a hassle not to. Because then you have to feel guilty or something, because it's like you have to take care of the fact that he might feel bad or inadequate or something. I think the main thing is, I don't want him to see me as a bitch.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Some young women have told me they feel so much internalized pressure to please men that they simply fake orgasms.

[Interviewee]: I feel like I always take on that role. I think women just do, you know. That's why women fake orgasms and men are allowed to get crazy and all excited. I don't know. I don't want to think this way but it feels like we put them before us. I know my friends do it.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Young women tell me fairly often that they're willing to endure discomfort and even physical pain, rather than come across as whiners or as lacking the sexual confidence and sophistication they're supposed to convey.

[Interviewee]: I maybe could have been more persistent and kept saying 'no.' But it seemed like it was my fault for being so wishy-washy. And I didn't want to seem like I was freaking out and having him think I was some kind of nut or a squeamish little kid.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: Trying to navigate between our cultural ideals of the always up for it sexual woman and the reality of sometimes wanting to say no, they're left without a way to make it stop without losing face or pissing men off. And so these societal pressures follow them right into their hookups.

[Interviewee]: I can't really explain what my thinking was because, technically, I could have left. I got so weighed down not wanting to show him how uncomfortable I was. I don't even know why because it's not like I even cared about him. But I felt like stopping would mean losing face and pissing him off. I was scared I guess. Like he'd think I was a fuck-up or a tease.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: In fact, feeling like there's no viable way out, some women tell me they play a sort of mental trick with themselves—not wanting to seem like a victim, they actually try to convince themselves that they're consenting to something that they really don't want.

[Interviewees]: I was thinking that if I could get turned on then it would be consensual, like a good experience. It was like I was trying to manipulate my own mind or something so that it wouldn't seem as bad as it really was. / I kept telling myself, just try to relax and try to like it, try to think of something exciting, try to think of someone you'd like to be having sex with so then you can get aroused and then this won't really be what it is.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: So sometimes women try to control their own perceptions of these experiences, but some also try to control the men in these situations. To feel like they're

still in control, while also living up to their obligation to satisfy men, some women talk, and often with great pride, about what I call “mastering the male body.”

[Interviewees]: I made it my business at an early age – thirteen I guess – to learn how to give the perfect blow job. I can also give the perfect hand job and that way I can just get guys off and get it over with. So then I'm totally in control. And it gives me some time to get out of the situation gracefully.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: The problem, of course, is that all of these dynamics too often play out against the backdrop of potential violence and abuse. So young women tell me that they'll do whatever it takes to get a man off, not because they always want to or enjoy giving him pleasure but to avoid running the risk of being assaulted.

[Interviewee]: I met this guy on vacation and he took me out to dinner and everything, and we hadn't even kissed yet or anything and he says to me, "Is this really all that you want to do?" Like I was a little kid or something. I wasn't really too sure what to think about him. I mean, he'd taken me out to dinner. So I was thinking, "What must he be thinking?" And that got me to thinking, "Here I am, all alone in this hotel room with this guy and I don't know a soul in this town and if I say “no” and he rapes me because he thinks I led him on, who's going to believe me? And who's going to hear me if I scream?" So I basically just gave him a blow-job to satisfy him so I wouldn't have to have actual sex with him. I really didn't want to have sex with him but I felt like I owed him something and that felt like the least offensive way to do it. Least offensive to me without offending him.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: It's a strange paradox to say the least: Young women are actively attempting to gain agency and power over men by deliberately submitting to them. But it's actually not as contradictory as it seems: If getting a guy off can stop a woman from being assaulted, then that can feel less like submission than control. And this brings us to the third question women ask themselves: how to make sense of these experiences after the fact?

[Interviewee]: Most times he's really decent, so I don't think that the times he hits me are so severe. I mean it's not like he hits me every night or something. I know that this might sound like, whatever, but he is a good person. He's not an abuser.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: There are echoes of the culture in how women talk about these kinds of painful encounters and their attempts to make sense of what they've gone through. They've been told again and again in everything from fairy tales and music videos to novels and movies that deep down inside every bad boy is a loving and considerate man. They've been told not to expect much. That their own pleasure comes from being desirable and pleasing him, not themselves. And so young women learn it's sort of inevitable to have to tolerate bad things.

[Interviewee]: I think that what's in it for girls maybe is a certain level of satisfaction because we're taught that if we can make this guy feel great, it's like, that's what you're

supposed to do so if you do it, you accomplished something. I guess, I don't know. Which is sort of terrible but I think that's what it is.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: None of this makes sense until you understand how much pressure there is, especially on young women at the cusp of adulthood, to avoid experiencing themselves as victims and instead to see themselves as having it all together. The reason for this is pretty simple: In our society, you're either a victim or you're in control of your sexuality.

[Interviewee]: Well, if you're gonna end up in the same situation whether you say yes or no, I would think that most people would rather say 'yes' and be on board then say 'no,' put up a protest and have that be ignored and be raped. I mean, that fear is always there and girls are always aware they're not physically in charge of their space, which obviously has it's consequences with hooking up.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: So it can actually seem preferable to minimize what's happening to you – to try to like it or get it over with, or try to write it off as “just a bad night” – rather than to speak up in a culture full of confusing and conflicting messages about sex and violence.

[Interviewee]: I don't know. Because rape is such a loaded word, it's really scary to think about using it in terms of your own life. I remember times when I felt like I was kind of raped but I don't know if I'd say I was raped. Number one, because I feel like I want to have enough faith that I have enough strength of character as a person to be able to say 'no.' It wasn't that I said 'no.'

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: For a lot of young women, it seems better to reinterpret it as some sort of weird, fluky, bad night, to think of it as their own fault, rather than to deal with all the hurt that might come from thinking of this as victimization.

[Interviewee]: I did internalize a lot of ideas that it was sort of my fault and how can they say its rape when I went there? What was I expecting? It's true that I was really naive but I feel that it doesn't really do me any good to explain that to anybody because it's like, nobody can really understand.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: We need to be really clear here: It's not that women don't feel upset about what's happened to them. It's that we have this cultural notion of the perfect victim and we talk about blame as though it's a zero-sum game. So if a woman has even one percent of responsibility—if she asserted her sexuality or tried to look hot, had too much to drink, or even just agreed to be alone with the guy—it's as though she's 100% at fault and he bears no responsibility for what he did. And if she doesn't fit that perfect victim mold, if it's at all complicated, which of course it always is, then there's just no language to explain what happened short of calling it a bad night or blaming herself.

[Interviewee]: I mean, there were a lot of factors in why he did what he did to me so it's awfully complicated to talk about. The fact that he forced me... I mean, it happened within a

whole lot of other things. So I don't think it's really fair to women who have actually been attacked to call me a victim of rape.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: It's no wonder so many women don't come forward to report what happened to them. It's no wonder that rape is by far the most under-reported crime in America. Unless they match the notion of what the perfect victim is, they run the risk of not being believed and not finding support.

[Interviewee]: It's just not worth it. It's already bad enough to feel what you've gone through. Why stick your neck out and talk about it if you know what response you're going to get? They would never say, "This was rape," or "This was abuse." They'd say, "What were you doing? Why didn't you stop him? Why do you want to make such a fuss?" It already felt like shit. Why make it worse by sticking your neck out and saying, "I was raped," if you know you're just gonna get rejected? And then why even call it that to yourself if you can't talk about it to anyone else? It would just make you feel even worse.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And here's the really cruel irony: Once they're out of these situations—days, weeks, even months later—The very strategies that seemed to make sense in the moment, whether it was trying to like it or giving oral sex to avoid being forced to do more, or crying and hoping he'd stop, get reinterpreted by the same women as simply, "I didn't exactly say no."

[Interviewee]: I mean, I was crying and sort of pulling away and hoping he'd notice I was upset and stop but I didn't exactly tell him "no." You know, I just sort of... I mean, I could have, I could have said, "Get the hell off me, I want to go home." But I just laid there crying and hoping he'd stop. I mean, maybe if I had said something? Who knows. But as it happened, no, I didn't tell him 'no' so I really just have myself to blame.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: And this runs so deep that it often doesn't seem to matter how clear the words are. So that even when they do say 'no' they sometimes still blame themselves. As one woman said to me, "maybe my 'no' wasn't 'no' enough."

[Interviewee]: I should have been more assertive. I was trying just to get out of the situation as gracefully as possible, so I figured I just better try to get him off so he would stop. I don't know. I should have been more assertive when I was trying to tell him I didn't want to. Maybe my 'no' wasn't 'no' enough.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: In this way, with only the limited language and stories of the culture available to them, women find ways to make their own meaning, too often at the expense of themselves. He hurt me becomes: "*Why did I let him do that to me?*" He forced me becomes: "*I should have stopped him.*" He wouldn't take no for an answer becomes: "*I guess I must have led him on.*" Even things like, "I went home with him or I agreed to the hookup" become: "*Just who did I think I was? What did I think was going to happen?*" In a rape case this would be a defense attorney's dream come true. "I should have stopped him," or "I must have led him on," makes it sound like women have complete control over the situation so how could you possibly convict the man? In fact that's why I've worried about

sharing these stories, because it's easy to misinterpret them, especially if we don't listen to them within the context of our culture. It's a lot easier to believe that individual women are confused about sex than it is to take a hard look at how confused we are as a culture about women's sexuality and how reluctant we are to insist upon male accountability. If there's one thing I've learned after years of listening to women tell their stories, it's that young women are often doing their very best to act rationally in what really is an irrational culture. Now it isn't that women with hurtful experiences should have to call themselves victims, that's not the point. It's that the way we talk about victimization in this culture doesn't acknowledge their often complicated experiences. It's that too often the language we use to describe women's sexuality fails them; it makes no sense in the context of their actual experiences. And so they keep their stories quiet, they try to make their own meanings and too often they blame themselves.

[Interviewee]: I really tried to put it all behind me and just pretend like it never happened. I just try not to think about it. And it's better now but I still think about it at least every day. And still maybe once or twice a month, it really, really gets to me. I'll be thinking that everything's fine and then something will just set me off and I'll get so angry. And I just, I feel really confused. Like, why did I let this happen to me? And I wonder if I'm even normal. You know, a normal person would just put it behind them. They wouldn't be still so obsessed this many years after it happened but I can't seem to resolve it in my mind. How could this have happened and why am I so messed up about it? I sort of feel like it ruined me. Like all of my relationships will be affected by it. I just, I can't get it out of my mind. I was so stupid to let it happen and now I'm too messed up to let it go. Sometimes I worry that I never will.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: One of the most striking things I hear from young women I talk to is that they never shared their stories before because they didn't think anyone would understand.

[Interviewee]: It feels really good to be able to tell someone that.

PROF. LYNN PHILIPS: I want to say to young women who hear echoes of your own experiences in these stories: you are not alone. And it's important that we come together to share our experiences; not just to get them off our chests but to use them collectively to demand change. And I want to say to young men, these women are your girlfriends, your sisters, your roommates, the woman you hooked up with last weekend. If you see your own behavior or your friends' behaviors in these stories, I know that can be disturbing, especially when the culture has told you that this is how sex and relationships are supposed to work. But after seeing the human consequence of those behaviors, I think caring women and men will feel compelled to work together for change.

[END]