

“THE GIFT THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US”: BAPTIST MOTHERS’ IDENTITY  
ENACTMENT DURING SEX TALKS WITH CHILDREN

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"The Gift that God has Given Us": Baptist Mothers' Identity  
Enactment During Sex Talks with Children

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## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

Religions of all kinds have held strong beliefs about sex (Endsjø & Graves, 2011). Having the second-largest membership of all religions in the United States (U.S.) (Pew Research Center, 2019), the Baptist faith community has stood at the forefront of the purity movement in the U.S. since the denomination's inception, tying Christian doctrine of sexual purity to human morality. As Baptist congregations instill values into members, these values are extended into the home as families enact church teachings. In this way, parents may draw upon their own Baptist identity and church teachings to socialize morality into their children. However, parental socialization does not occur in a vacuum. Although American political and educational systems have traditionally been infused with some Christian treatments of sex, children and adolescents are inundated with other socializing messages from secular sources, such as the Internet, public schools, social media outlets, film and television media, celebrity culture, music, news media, and peers. Therefore, Baptist parents engaging in sex talks with children from a Biblical perspective may attempt to mediate and dispel information from these sources.

Taking together the Baptist doctrine of sexual purity and the prevalence of larger secular treatments of sex, parent-child sex talks in the Baptist home are particularly important and may demand that parents carefully perform multiple identities at one time (e.g., Baptist, parent, educator, etc.). Modern media portrayals of sex and sexuality are often at odds with Baptist doctrines of purity. This conflict between outside sources of sexual information and Baptist visions of proper sexual teachings place Baptist mothers, who are often in charge of children's sexual education in the home, in a difficult and often conflicting situation. Mothers, therefore, perform many identities during sex talks that might be seen as "nested" (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Meisenbach and Kramer, 2014). That is, mothers may prioritize and reorder certain

Baptist, maternal, spousal, feminine, political, and occupational identities depending on the given context. Nested identity has primarily been studied in corporate environments (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014; Zanin et al., 2020), however, faith identities consume more of church members' lives, are stronger, and bleed into other social and organizational identities. Thus, Baptist mothers' faith experiences may become an integrated part of all other nested identities. When situations such as sexual education place Baptist identity into conflict, the tensions mothers experience are potentially more stressful than in corporate environments. Mothers may be forced to integrate problematic situations to both educate their children and reconcile their own conflicted identities. This study, therefore, examines how Baptist mothers instill religious sexual identities in their children and advances the notion that religious identities bleed into other kinds of identity performances, inform and resolve problematic integrations, and intensify stress associated with ambiguity.

This chapter will set the scene of this study, first tracing the history of the Baptist Church and then describing the Baptist doctrines of marriage and sexuality before finally highlighting how these doctrines have impacted and diverged from sex education in the U.S. The study of current Baptist cultural teachings of sex and sexuality first requires a cursory understanding of its complex history and foundation.

### **The Baptist Faith**

The modern Baptist faith community is not controlled by any singular governing body. Although the denomination is driven by several central tenets, beliefs and practices regarding sexuality are not entirely unified. A brief overview of the history of the church will illustrate this fragmentation. Tracing its roots back to the 1630s, Roger Williams founded the First Baptist Church in America on the premise of absolute separation of Church and State in Providence,



Rhode Island. The church upheld traditions emphasizing the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, baptism of all believers, educating believers to competently read and interpret Scripture, have a direct, personal relationship with God, the influence of the Holy Spirit, and a separation of Church from State free from government interference (American Baptist Churches, USA, n.d., a).

As the Baptist denomination solidified and spread throughout the U.S., there were several points of fragmentation at which separate conventions and societies were established. In the 1840s when the issue of slavery divided the nation, the Southern Baptist Convention separated into its own entity under the Baptist denomination over the American Baptist Home Mission Society's decision to not appoint any candidate who owned slaves. Today, a large percentage of Baptists are members of one of six organizational bodies -- the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), American Baptist Association (ABA), National Baptist Convention (NBC), National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. (NBCA), American Baptist Churches USA (ABC), and Baptist Bible Fellowship International (BBFI), although there are several more (Ernst, 1996). As of 2017, the Baptist World Alliance estimates there are 19,766,653 Baptists in North America, and 47,500,324 Baptists world-wide, spanning 125 countries and territories. According to a Pew Research Center poll (Pew Research Center, 2019), behind Catholics, those who identify as Evangelical Baptist make up the second largest religious group in the U.S. (9.2%), with the SBC being the largest Baptist convention (5.3%).

As the First Baptist Church of America was founded in fear of hierarchical oppression, there is no singular governing body over the denomination. The congregational governance system gives autonomy to individual local churches and, therefore, some beliefs may vary among Baptists (Leonard, 2005). However, the denomination is unified through several Biblically-derived doctrines that most churches accept and practice distinct from other

denominations of Christianity, one of which describes the age of accountability. Whereas other Christian denominations, such as Catholicism, baptize infants, Baptists believe in a complete liberty of consciousness, which stipulates that individuals can enter Christianity only through a conscious, voluntary choice, free of coercion (Shaw, 2015). Therefore, Baptists can only be baptized once they are of an age when they can understand their commitment to Christ and can be held accountable for their sins. The point at which an individual is mature enough to make this decision is referred to as the age of accountability.

There has long been dispute among conventions about at what age a child is able to understand sin and salvation. Traditionally, Baptists consider age eight the age of accountability. Nevertheless, some congregations allow children as young as six to be baptized, which has caused concern for some Baptists, particularly Southern Baptists, as six-year-olds may not be mature enough to understand what their Baptism means (Wayland, 1971). Some conventions point to other religions such as Judaism for justifying the age of accountability to be somewhere in adolescence, around age 12 (Ramm, 1958). More recently, many congregations believe there is no one particular age due to variation in maturity and physical development. For this reason, some Baptists have renamed the age of accountability, the *stage* of accountability. Instead of placing emphasis on any particular age, some look to individuals' abilities to decide for themselves to accept Christ as Lord and Savior (Godwin, 2018). However, there remains a strong connection between salvation and the age of accountability. Therefore, the environment within which a child is socialized is central to their moral development. Children do not only obtain Biblical understandings through the church, however, as the family is the first, and often primary, place where children learn right from wrong. Moral development of children in this way is directly tied to the family and socialization.

## **Baptist Doctrine of Family and Marriage**

Parents model for their children correct behavior in the home and pass down church doctrine in everyday interactions. For Baptists, beliefs about sex and sexuality are inherently tied to marriage and family roles. Husbands assume the role of provider and head of the household, whereas wives take on roles of caregiver and nurturer. Specifically, as of 2015, the SBC states:

[A husband] has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation... Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God's pattern for marriage (SBC, 2015).

These role distinctions are rooted in complementarianism, which espouses equality of men and women, but difference in God-ordained roles so that husbands' and wives' duties complement each other. Within this framework, Shaw (2015) states "submission is an act of agency;" it's something a woman chooses to do in obedience to God that involves "mutual respect, discussion, and joint decision making" with her husband (p. 187). In practice, traditional gender roles are encouraged such that women stay at home to cook, clean, and raise children and men are tasked with maintaining a job to provide economic security to the family. As the SBC is comparatively more conservative than other conventions, it is not surprising that some other conventions do not specifically denote these roles for men and women. However, as the SBC has the largest

membership and individual congregations have the freedom to choose how to enact doctrine, remnants of this ideology pervade throughout other conventions.

One common thread throughout Baptist conventions is that marriage is a sacred covenant made between one man and one woman for a lifetime. From this perspective, sexual intercourse is reserved only for marriage. Many Baptist conventions have placed statements on their official website in direct response to political rulings, such as the Supreme Court Decision deeming gay marriage constitutional, and other social and political events. For example, after President Obama publicly stated his personal opinion in support of the legalization of gay marriage in 2012 (before the Supreme Court decision in 2015), The National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. placed a position statement on their website entitled, “A Statement on the Same-sex Marriage Issue, Voting and Christian Responsibility” (Scruggs, 2012). Julius R. Scruggs wrote:

The National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated does not dictate to its constituent churches what position to take on issues because we believe in the autonomy of the local church. However, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. affirms that marriage is a sacred biblical covenant between a man and a woman.

Further, the American Baptist Churches USA convention, a comparatively progressive group stated in response to the 2015 Supreme Court ruling (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) determining marriage between same-sex couples constitutional: “Who submit to the teaching of Scripture that God's design for sexual intimacy places it within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, and acknowledge that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Biblical teaching” (American Baptist Church, USA, n.d., b). Although there are some differences in the

official beliefs among Baptist conventions, the most formal organizations denounce same-sex marriage and promote the image of marriage as being between one man and one woman.

In sum, parents draw upon church doctrine of family and marriage to perform such roles at home, which model correct behavior for children. For Baptists, “the restoration of happy and Biblical family relationships is one of the most critical moral imperatives,” which involves teaching children right from wrong (Hollis, 1982). Parents pass down doctrine from the church to their children in order to instill in them values consistent with Biblical teachings. One particular teaching essential to moral development is the value Baptists traditionally place on sexual purity.

### **Sexual Purity**

In addition to providing prescriptions for proper marriage and family functioning, many Baptist churches also disseminate a doctrine of sexual purity. Within this view, sex is “a gift from God to enable God's children to procreate, and to be enjoyed in mutual expressions of love between husband and wife” (American Baptist Churches USA, n.d., b). Specifically, Hollis (1982) points to three major theological themes related to sexuality accepted by the SBC:

(1) God the Creator has created sexuality for human enrichment, communication, and procreation, and he calls on humans to celebration and stewardship of sexuality; (2) God acting as Judge condemns the misuse of sexuality as sin, and he calls on humans to repent sexual sins and to work to oppose misuse of sexuality in society; (3) God acting as redeemer provides the means by which humans can express sexuality responsibly, and he calls human beings to express love and to work through the church to provide responsible teaching about sexuality (p. 2450).

Not only does Baptist doctrine state the importance of proper use of sex, but it also links the church as the source by which members should draw upon for correct teachings. Further, central to the Baptist doctrine of sex and sexuality is a focus on adolescents and young adults exercising abstinence until marriage. The True Love Waits campaign was founded by a Baptist church in the 1980's and encouraged adolescents to make a commitment of sexual purity to God (LifeWay, n.d.). Those who take the pledge recite, "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship" (Colter, 2013). The movement gained traction throughout the 1980s and 1990s as youth all over the country made a vow to submit their sexual lives to God, including sexual thoughts, touching, and other acts that might lead to sexual arousal. The movement gained significant media attention when 11-year-old Joe Jonas of the popular boy band The Jonas Brothers made it publicly known that he had made the pledge and vowed to wear a purity ring until marriage (Lee, 2013). Although Jonas later revealed that he had premarital sex at age 20, the media coverage the story gained is indicative of the cultural impact True Love Waits had on American youth.

The True Love Waits campaign has faced scrutiny from both researchers and church members alike, which has led to its decline since in the 1990s. Namely, some have pointed out that making a pledge to sexual purity does not necessarily mean individuals will actually remain abstinent until marriage. Research tends to support this critique. In their study of newly married young adults attending Texas Southern Baptist churches, Rosenbaum and Weathersbee (2013) found that most participants (72.9%) reported having had vaginal or oral sex before marriage. Further, Christian blogger, Grace Thornton, articulated her disappointment of abstaining from sex until marriage, only to find herself in her thirties still single. She wrote, "It's a graveyard of

hearts, this place where single church girls crash into their late 20s and early 30s...Some of them have prayed their whole lives for a husband, and he hasn't shown up" (Thornton, 2012).

Thornton's blog points to the dilemma many young Baptists face between abstaining from sex until marriage and remaining single far beyond young adulthood. Although the original True Love Waits movement was essentially dismantled after 20 years, Baptists still uphold sexual purity as a value and encourage adolescents to abstain from sexual intercourse, oral sex, and other sex acts until marriage.

As parents model and teach right from wrong in the home, children reach an age at which they are accountable for their decisions. Instilling sexual purity as a value is important to Baptist children's moral development; as children reach the age of accountability, they are expected to understand that premarital sex is against God's intended purpose. Therefore, the ways parents draw on Baptist doctrine in order to instill these beliefs is an important piece to children's acceptance of sexual purity as a value, and to their moral development as a whole.

### **Sex Education in the United States**

The church is not the only source of sex education; children and adolescents receive information about sex and sexuality primarily from media, schools, peers, parents, and partners (Dailey & Eyal, 2008). Historically, the federal government has contributed \$178 million toward abstinence-only education through legislature such as Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act in 1996, Community-Based Abstinence Education projects through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, and the Adolescent Family Life Act program. In order to receive grants, the federal government required programs to adhere to strict definitions of abstinence-only education and prohibited programs from giving instruction on contraceptive use (Breuner et al., 2016). These federal legislations, then, seem to mirror Baptist values of sexual purity.

However, at the same time, some progressive political groups have called for public school curriculum that is science-based and includes lessons related to contraceptives, birth control, consent, non-penetrative sex acts, and LGBTQ+ inclusion (Fay, 2019; Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; SIECUS, 2019). Therefore, sex education in the United States, as a whole, remains in tension between abstinence-only curriculum and secular treatments of sex.

### **Sex Talks in the American Family**

As political tensions ensue on a national level, individual families play a significant role in children's sex education. In fact, research indicates that communication about sex between parents and teenagers can reduce risky sexual behaviors in adolescents, though to be most effective, these conversations should take place before adolescents first have sex (Clawson, & Reese-Weber, 2003; Trejos-Castillo & Vazsonyi, 2009). As more information and parent resources become available on the Internet, the breadth of topics parents might cover in sex talks with their child has increased. Although puberty and sexual intercourse are primary areas parents may choose to cover initially, some may also inform their teen about masturbation, body safety, pornography, and consent, among other things, and adapt sex talks as their child ages. Further, Grossman et al. (2013) found several themes in conversations between parents and adolescents about sex: risks of early parenthood, sexually transmitted infections, delaying sex, and using protection. For religious and conservative parents, some of these themes may be consistent with a moral value of abstinence until marriage. Parents who instruct their child to wait until marriage to have sex may draw upon Christian purity doctrine to instill these values into their children. Conversely, parents may not talk to their child about sex extensively or at all.

Additionally, family roles play an important part in how parents educate children about sex. Discussions about sex and sexuality do not occur equally between mothers and fathers.



Mothers are the primary communicators about sex (Meschke et al., 2002). As Kirkman et al. (2002) found, fathers reported that discussions about sex are difficult and distressing and that they generally leave the task of talking about sex to mothers. However, results indicated that fathers also perceive the responsibility of communicating to be a shared one. Further, some studies have suggested that sons receive more communication about sex from their fathers than mothers (Tobey et al., 2011), although these findings are inconsistent with metanalytical research showing that most sex-related communication comes from the mother (Flores & Barroso, 2017). Additionally, it is possible that the way parents talk about sex with their children is largely consistent with the way their family of origin approached the topic (Kniveton & Day, 1999). Therefore, mothers' role of educating children about sex may be passed down from the family of origin.

### **Rationale for This Study**

This study seeks to uncover how mothers navigate multiple identities (i.e., maternal, marital, religious, political, etc.) when engaging in sex talks with children by using problematic integration theory and the concept of nested identity as a theoretical framework. The focus, then, will be placed on Baptist mothers' identity enactment and message exchange during sex talks with children. Because sexual identities are formed at the crossroads of church, home, education, and media, the messages mothers communicate to children are of particular importance, especially when considering religious attitudes often directly contradict media portrayals of sex.

Problematic integration theory is fitting for this context because it helps illuminate tensions individuals may experience as a function of evaluative and probabilistic orientations. Because sex is a topic that is inherently tied to morality and spiritual purity, mothers may make assessments of secular attitudes and behaviors related to sex that do not align with Baptist

doctrines of sex. Additionally, this study draws upon the concept of nested identities, a derivative of social identity theory, which describes how mothers order multiple, and possibly competing, identities at once. Baptist mothers' multiple identities involved in child socialization may be considered nested, that is, fit together. As mothers engage in sex talks with children, it is likely that mothers negotiate saliency of identities, points of convergence, and conflict. By intersecting these bodies of literature, this study will address the gap in current communication research related to how religious identity management informs, and is informed, by socializing messages to children about sex.

The Baptist Church is a particularly fruitful religion to study due to its historical foundations emphasizing the separation of church and state. As reviewed, there is no singular Baptist governing body to disseminate a unified doctrine on sex. Instead, individual congregations are granted dominion over the messages and teachings, usually informed by the convention of which they are members. Therefore, the exact messages mothers extract from church teachings, or whether they draw upon church teachings at all, are not altogether clear. Further, sex education is most interesting through this Baptist lens due to churches' adherence to gender roles and the moral value placed on sex. Because of the significance Baptist doctrine places on mothers' role of nurturer and educator in the family, Baptist mothers are central to children's sex education. Sexual socialization in this context is not just pragmatic or educational, but also moral and spiritual. As sexual purity is directly tied to moral goodness, the ways that mothers choose to talk to children about sex and sexuality has a significant impact on children's moral standing. Therefore, mothers may draw upon church doctrine on sex in order to socialize a sexual identity that aligns with Baptist ideology. However, in changing religious, political, and digital landscapes, it remains unknown how much emphasis mothers place on such doctrines and

how mothers order various identities during sex talks with their children. Thus, this study investigates from where Baptist mothers draw upon for information, guidance, and lessons on sex and how mothers' identities inform the ways in which they talk to their children about sex.

## CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study examines how Baptist mothers' identity performance informs and is informed by sex talks with their children through the lens of problematic integration theory and social identity. Although social identity theory and problematic integration theory are rooted in social psychology and cognitive psychology respectively, message exchanges between parents and children are fundamental to these processes, making this study an important contribution to the communication discipline. This study, therefore, places focus on the communicative aspects of identity and problematic integrations. Although there is some extant research applying problematic integration theory to issues of sex and identity, much is still unknown about how individuals create and attempt to resolve problematic integrations as they relate to religion, sex, and morality. This chapter, therefore, first reviews problematic integration theory as a framework to understand parent-child sex talks. Then, what follows is a review of relevant literature on social identity theory and its derivative, nested identity theory. Finally, this chapter concludes with an illumination of how these two bodies of research together might address the two questions driving the present study.

### **Problematic Integration Theory**

The theory of problematic integration (PI) was first proposed by Babrow and colleagues (Babrow 1992, 1995; Babrow et al., 2000; Hines et al., 1997) and provides a general framework through which to understand tensions that arise between expectations and desires. Initially applied to health contexts, PI theory rests upon four main claims. First, individuals form probabilistic orientations toward their world. That is, people tend to make predictions about the probability of an object, characteristic, event, or outcome occurring. For example, a probabilistic orientation would answer the question, *how likely is it that it will rain tomorrow?* Second,

individuals form evaluative orientations toward their world, meaning, they decide whether the object of thought is good or bad. Keeping with the previous example, an evaluative orientation would decide whether the outcome of rain tomorrow would be desired or dreaded. The third claim of PI theory asserts that individuals do not make these assessments separately. Rather, both probability and evaluation orientations are integrated together in lived experience and, therefore, are interdependent in many ways (Babrow 1992, 1995, 2002). It is difficult (some would say impossible) to make one assessment without the other. Thus, integrations occur when individuals assess the likelihood and valence of a particular phenomenon.

Fourth, at the heart of PI theory is the claim that integrations can often be problematic in that they produce a tension or cognitive conflict between what a person assesses is likely to happen and the valence of that outcome (Bradac, 2001). According to the theory, there are four forms of problematic integrations: divergence, ambiguity, ambivalence, and impossibility (Babrow, 1992). *Divergence* occurs when there is a discrepancy between what a person desires to happen (probabilistic orientation) and whether that outcome is good or bad (evaluation orientation). Again relying on the previous example, a divergent PI occurs when an individual believes that it is probable that it will rain tomorrow, but evaluates that outcome as negative due to a scheduled outdoor soccer game tomorrow afternoon. Similarly, the opposite assessments would also produce a divergent PI. Babrow (2002) proposed that divergence can occur both retrospectively when a person looks back at past phenomena (evoking feelings of frustration, disappointment, shame, sorrow, etc.) and prospectively when someone anticipate future phenomena (prompting feelings of anxiety, fear, excitement, hope, etc.).

*Ambiguity* causes problematic integration in that a person may desire or dread an outcome but is uncertain about the likelihood of that outcome. For example, a pastry chef

entering a baking contest might experience ambiguity if they desire to win the contest, but cannot predict who will win. In this case, and all instances of ambiguous PI, the problem arises not only because of an inability to accurately predict the outcome, but also because there is a desired or dreaded outcome associated with the ambiguity. Assuming they had no stake in the contest, the judges would likely not experience ambiguity because they don't have a preferable outcome. In all, as Babrow (1995) states, "ambiguity is problematic because it confounds one's probabilistic orientation but also because of the difficulty of integrating a strong desire with an ambiguous chance" (p. 285).

Third, *ambivalence* can also cause integrations to be problematic in two ways: (1) when a person must choose between two equally attractive mutually exclusive outcomes, and (2) when a single idea, outcome, person, act, event, or object evokes contradictory evaluations (i.e., love-hate relationships). In the latter case, choosing to value one thing decidedly requires an individual to ignore or devalue the alternative, even when it is just as equally meaningful. For example, a person might experience ambivalent PI if they applied for a job and evaluated the outcome of getting that job as being both positive (the new position would be a promotion from the last job) and negative (I have to move to a new city away from my family).

Finally, an *impossible* desire (or the certainty of a negative outcome) creates a PI. As Babrow (1992) notes, impossibility is not merely an extreme type of divergence, but a category all on its own. The nature of truly having no chance of obtaining an object of desire (or the absolute inevitability of experiencing a dreaded outcome) is distinct in nature from divergence in that there is certainty in probabilistic orientation. In all, these four kinds of integrations are problematic because they produce in individuals a tension between what they believe is likely

and what they desire or dread. These tensions tend to evoke negative emotions and cognitive conflict.

Although on the surface it may seem as though PI theory is rooted in cognition, Babrow and colleagues make it clear that communication plays a central role in how individuals form and attempt to resolve integrations that are problematic. Particularly, Babrow (1995) described communication as being a source, medium, and resource of problematic integrations.

Communication is the source of all integrations, problematic or not, in that individuals can only understand the social world through communication. In many cases, people make predictions not about tangible objects in the moment, but about symbolic representations of events, actions, and outcomes likely (or not) to occur in the future. Further, communicative acts can also themselves be an object of problematic integration. Communication is also a medium by which PI spreads, both through causal every-day talk and through more formal and intentional communication. Finally, individuals may turn to communication as a resource to resolve or manage problematic integrations. In all, it is not enough to examine the role of communication in relieving tensions between probabilistic and evaluative orientations, but rather, it is important to understand the role communication plays in simultaneously creating, spreading, and mitigating problematic integrations.

PI theory is a useful framework to apply to health contexts. In fact, a growing body of health communication research has used this framework to help advance understandings of how individuals and family members make appraisals of possible health choices and outcomes (Cohen, 2009; Ohs et al., 2017), enact caregiving duties (Polk, 2005), and cope or provide social support in the face of negative health diagnoses such as breast cancer (Dennis et al., 2008). Central to many of these studies is an examination of uncertainty management and support-

seeking behaviors of individuals dealing with PIs of ambiguity and impossibility. Due to genetic risk factors, considerations of mortality/morbidity, and the (at least in part) unpredictable nature of disease and illness, health contexts centered around diagnosis are rife with problematic integrations and have garnered the attention of health communication scholars. However, what remains largely understudied are health contexts centered around day-to-day health and wellness choices that also generate uncertainty and discomfort. Koerber (2012), for example, conducted nine focus groups to better understand local infant-feeding practices (e.g., breastfeeding) of mothers through the lens of PI theory. Although decisions related to infant breastfeeding may not necessarily be life-or-death (though they certainly are in some cases), these kinds of health decisions are important and present individuals with tensions between probabilistic and evaluative orientations.

Sexual communication is another health and wellness context in which PI theory can lend itself to illuminating similar tensions. Huang and colleagues (2019) studied Taiwanese adult men who have sex with other men and their communication about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) on smartphone applications. Implications of this study suggest that even individuals without illness or disease experience problematic integrations when considering preventative care. This study focuses on decisions adults make about their own sexual wellness and behaviors, though, educational and socializing sex talks between children and parents have shown to inform risky sexual behavior for adolescents and adults later in life (Coakley et al., 2017), pointing to the importance of parent-child sexual communication. These sex talks, especially for families of the Baptist faith, are often infused with moral values, which blur the line between health, organizational, and interpersonal contexts. Therefore, sex talks in the family may present different opportunities for unique tensions than other, more strictly health-centered contexts.



When considering religious orientations to sexual communication, identity performance as it relates to these tensions warrants additional investigation. In order to fully understand the interplay between problematic integration and identity, a cursory understanding of social identity theory and its cognate, nested identity, is necessary.

### **Social Identity Theory**

First developed by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s, social identity theory is concerned with the processes by which individuals create and shape their own self-concept in relation to the social groups they belong to (in-groups) and those that they do not (out-groups). In this way, scholarship on this topic examines the cognitive and communicative processes by which individuals form social group membership. Therefore, social groups in this context can be defined as “a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view of themselves as members of the same social category” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). From this perspective, groups, which exist within social structures, provide individuals with a sense of belonging to the social world.

Drawing upon Burke’s (1968) dramatism, social identity theory treats identity presentation as a performance; in some contexts, an individual may choose to present one identity in the front stage while hiding others in the backstage (Scott et al., 1998). Traditional concepts of social identity understand identity performance as a shuffling of identities. That is, much like an actor decides which costumes, scripts, and voices are appropriate for a given scene, an individual makes decisions about which identities are appropriate to perform in a given context (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). For example, a doctor may deem it appropriate to ask her patient what medications he is taking due to the duties and responsibilities attached to her role in that context. Alternatively, if the doctor saw her patient in the grocery store, she would likely

deem it inappropriate to ask him any kind of medical-related questions because she is not expected (or desired) to perform her identity of doctor outside a patient-doctor interaction. As exemplified, individuals make decisions about when, where, how, and to what extent a certain identity should be performed in a given situation.

To address these decisions in depth, the concept of nested identities presents a framework to understand identity performance beyond a mere two-dimensional shuffling of identities. For Baptist mothers, a more nuanced approach to organizational ontology, interpersonal roles, and the tensions that could occur between the two are necessary to acquire a complete picture of identity performance during sex talks with children. Therefore, this study employs the concept of nested identity, a cognate of social identity theory, to explain how Baptist mothers might shift and order various identities.

### **Nested Identity**

The concept of nested identity extends social identity theory to explain the process of how individuals navigate multiple identities at one time, using a metaphor of Russian stacking dolls (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). In the case of Baptist mothers, individuals may simultaneously be members of the Baptist faith, an individual church congregation, their family, a political party, and the more general female group, all of which occur in the same time and space. However, the concept of nested identity posits that while several identities may intersect at one time, an individual may discursively decide to present one identity over others depending on the social setting. This is not to say that identities can be removed or are non-existent in certain situations. Rather, identity can be nested within others, hiding, while remaining present at all times. For example, a working mother may present her organizational identity while at her

job, nesting her maternal identity, then switch these presentations as she returns home with her family.

Ashforth and Johnson (2001) theorize how individuals attempt to nest identities within each other in organizational settings, suggesting that nested identities can be described as higher or lower order in relation to one another. They provide three criteria to evaluate identity order in any given social context: inclusivity/exclusivity, concreteness/abstractness, and proximity/distance. Lower order identities are those that are (a) more exclusive due to their membership being more restrictive, (b) more concrete because they tend to be more precisely defined and tied to particular behaviors, and (c) more proximal because they have a more immediate impact on the individual. When likening nested identities to Russian stacking dolls, lower order identities are more central and closer to the core of an individual. In contrast, higher order identities are those that are more (a) inclusive of membership, (b) abstract in definition, and (c) distal due to their impact being indirect and delayed to the individual. These identities would be layered close to the outside of the stacking doll where they are more outwardly visible.

Identities become nested in everyday talks. Particularly, Meisenbach and Kramer (2014) surmise that identity is conceptualized as individuals continually attempt to answer questions of *who am I?*, making sense of the self communicatively. In this way, social identity is ordered through relational processes taking place in a variety of social contexts. Historically, nested identity theory has placed focus on occupational and professional practice, examining how members of an organization negotiate competing identities while attempting to accomplish multiple goals simultaneously (Norander et al., 2011). Further, Meisenbach and Kramer (2014) looked toward the non-profit organizational sphere to understand how identity is nested in volunteer settings. Results suggested an application of nested identity theory beyond traditional

workplace (i.e., for-profit settings) settings. Therefore, it stands to reason that individuals may also attempt to order certain identities in interpersonal settings, particularly when those individuals enact organizational roles in the home. For Baptist mothers, church doctrine may inform how mothers are to perform their Baptist, marital, and maternal identities when communicating with family members.

Additionally, the concept of nested identities allows for investigations into how individuals experience and reconcile performing multiple competing identities at once. For example, Zanin et al. (2020) conducted a discourse-analysis to better understand how participants of an all-female youth sport organization negotiate oppositional discourses of identity. When girls encountered oppositional discourses (i.e., girls are collaborative vs competitive; girls are insecure vs confident), the results indicated that they managed these tensions by either fleeing, challenging, constricting, or expanding identity layers. Some girls took on an either-or orientation by fleeing or challenging one pole of the discourse (e.g., did not attempt to be both collaborative and competitive), whereas others took on a both-and orientation by attempting to constrict or expand their identity to encompass both poles (e.g., girls can be confident and secure). At the heart of these identity management decisions were evaluations of each pole. Girls who used a both-and orientation were able to flexibly stretch their identity layers to encompass both pole when they evaluated them as being positive. Conversely, identity performance became uncomfortable for girls who evaluated both poles as being negative. Thus, Zanin and colleagues' theoretical extension of nested identity addresses tensions between identity layers and strategies individuals might employ to ease those tensions. However, what remains unanswered is how and why individuals order some identities over others.

Problematic integration theory bridges this gap. Although there is little research combining issues of identity performance and problematic integration theory (Frank & Gill, 2015; Shi & Babrow, 2007), the tensions individuals experience when facing issues of identity performance can be explained through problematic integrations. First, probabilistic orientations involve beliefs and expectations. When applied to identity, assessments of probability might answer questions such as *who am I? What groups do I belong to? and How did I become who I am today?* Further, evaluative orientations might determine whether it is good or bad to possess a certain characteristic or identity. These evaluations could depend on the context in which the identity is performed. When integrated problematically, individuals likely experience significant tension.

For instance, Shi and Babrow (2007) used a PI theory framework to understand the multicultural identity performance struggles of young Chinese Americans. Participants reported several problematic integrations related to identity including: a divergence between their desires and expectations to be just like everyone else, ambiguity surrounding which identity – if any – would be accessible to them as they continued living in the U.S., and ambivalence toward being bicultural. The tensions these integrations produced stemmed from issues of identity, but were also resolved by a reframing of one's self-concept. It is clear from this study that PI theory has incredible potential to add to current understandings of tensions that stem from identity performance. However, there is very little research that confirms, strengthens, or extends the work on identity and PI beyond multicultural communication.

Taken together, this study seeks to use a problematic integration framework to understand how Baptist mothers order and perform nested identities when talking to their children about sex. This approach is particularly relevant to Baptist mothers engaging in sex

talks with their children in an information-saturated society. Due to the importance members of the Baptist faith place on Biblical ontology and sexual purity, as well as the educating role mothers often play in Baptist families, Baptist mothers make for a theoretically interesting subject to study. Thus, this study seeks to understand:

RQ1: How do Baptist mothers' faith experiences inform how they talk to their children about sex?

Although communication scholars have extensively examined the communicative acts that create, sustain, and resolve problematic integrations, questions remain as to how these acts relate to tensions caused by issues of identity performance, particularly religious identity performance. Both PI theory and the concept of nested identities together may provide a richer framework to understand how individuals navigate these tensions. Due to the varying role expectations of mother, Baptist, woman, wife, and professional, it is possible that Baptist mothers may experience tensions between desires to perform multiple identities at one time while communicating with children about sex. Mothers may choose to draw upon Baptist doctrine of sex and family, or upon professional experiences, or upon larger societal treatments of sex, and so on. Due to the unique nature of church membership (as opposed to other kinds of organizational memberships) and the emphasis placed on doctrine, however, religious identity may be theoretically different from other kinds of identity layers. Thus, this study also seeks to address the following question:

RQ2: How do Baptist mothers navigate multiple identities as they talk to their children about sex?

## CHAPTER THREE. METHODS

### Framework

This interpretive study is ontologically grounded in a social constructionist understanding of identity performance. This perspective recognizes identity as a fluid and symbolic social reality in which identities are given meaning through action and interaction. Based in the work of Dewey (1929), Corbin and Stauss (2008) define the relativist assumptions that underlie qualitative inquiry. They advance an interactionist philosophy wherein human interaction creates new meanings and alters existing ones. Unraveling this process of identity construction, deconstruction, maintenance, and performance calls for employment of methods that privilege participant expressions of their constructed meanings and power relationships with their churches and families in their own words, as it is through the study of verbal and narrative communicative data that knowledge claims about social action and phenomena are recorded and expressed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Qualitative methodology relies on three core concepts: self-reflexivity, context, and thick description (Tracy, 2012). First, self-reflexivity refers to the careful considerations about how the intersections of researchers' experiences, world-views, opinions, and roles impact interactions with participants and data interpretation. As qualitative methodology relies on the epistemological assumption that researcher attitudes, beliefs, and values cannot, and should not, be completely eliminated from the process, self-reflexology is important because it allows researchers to acknowledge their own subjectivity. Second, research driven by qualitative methods are particularly interested in context. Instead of examining variables in a sterile laboratory setting, qualitative research assumes that context inherently gives meaning to communicative behaviors. That is, an utterance in one setting may mean something completely

different in another. Third, related to context, thick description of the social scene is necessary for researchers to understand and depict the context in which the study is situated.

With all three core concepts in mind, I determined that the present study best lends itself to qualitative methodology, in contrast to quantitative methods. The goal of this study is to gain a careful and detailed understanding of the intersection of identity and socialization, which is not easily quantifiable. Further, whereas quantitative methods use tools such as survey items and experiments to collect data, qualitative methods assume that I, as the researcher, am the tool. Of the various qualitative approaches, conducting interviews allows me to create and share local meanings with participants, ask follow-up and clarifying questions, and make observations about participants' non-verbal behaviors. Thus, I used a qualitative framework employing semi-structured participant interviews and an interpretive analysis.

### **Participants**

Participants included 14 Baptist mothers with at least one child age 8-18 still primarily residing in the mothers' home. As reported, 71% ( $n = 10$ ) identified as white/Caucasian, 14% ( $n = 2$ ) as Hispanic/Latina, and 14% ( $n = 2$ ) did not report their ethnicity. Participants' ages ranged from 34 to 52 ( $M = 40.0$ ), though two did not report their age. Further, participants reported having between one and five children ( $n = 33$ ) and the ages of participants' children ranged from 4 months to 21 years old ( $M = 10.8$ ), though two did not report.

I specified that participants must be a current or former member of a Baptist church and did not limit participants to any particular convention within the Baptist faith. This allowed individuals to participate if they considered themselves a member of a Baptist church as an adolescent or young adult, but converted to a different denomination or left the church altogether at the time of the study. Similarly, participants who were not raised in the Baptist church but



converted later in life were also allowed participation as long as they, at any time, considered themselves a member of a Baptist church. Nine participants reported being raised in the Baptist faith and still consider themselves a member; two participants reported being a member of a Baptist church at the time of the study, but were raised in a non-denominational faith or Christianity more broadly; two participants did not report. I did not restrict participation to members of one particular convention. Eleven participants reported their current or most recent Baptist church as being affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention; one with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists; two did not report.

The age of children was limited to at least one being ages 8-18 due to the importance Baptists place on the age of accountability. Although talks about sex may begin at earlier ages, the age of accountability is important to consider because this is the point at which children are responsible for understanding and accepting moral teachings about sex. Therefore, the significance of sex talks for children at this age may be greater than those that occur at younger ages. Further, I limited the age of the children because parents often choose to engage in sex talks around the time their children reach age eight. For some, this may be the age at which children begin asking questions about sex, prompting formal “birds-and-bees” talks. Puberty may also be a catalyst for sex talks. Although some public schools provide a puberty seminar in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, one study indicates that the number of Caucasian girls who reach pubertal maturation at seven years old has nearly doubled since 1997 (Fisher & Saenger, 2010). Therefore, it may be important for young children to understand puberty sooner rather than later. Although some parents may choose to focus on hormonal bodily changes, puberty can often prompt more explicit sex talks. Some parents may begin to engage in sex talks with younger children, though they often continue these talks and change the content of the conversations as their children grow

into adolescents and young adults. Further, some simply may also choose to wait to have any kind of conversation until their children become adolescents.

Lastly, I chose to limit participation to mothers who have children primarily residing in their home, as opposed to those who have children splitting time with another parent or who live on a high school or college campus. This limitation is important because sex talks often occur in face-to-face contexts, rather than over the phone or in digital spaces. Although it is possible for children living in a home part-time to receive information about sex from their mother, it is likely that the nature of those talks is different than those between mothers and children who reside in the home full-time.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Following IRB approval, I began recruitment procedures for interview data. First, I sent recruitment messages (see Appendix A) to personal contacts, then allowed for snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013). Additionally, I posted recruitment messages on online religious and motherhood-related social media sites and directly contacted Baptist churches in my own residential area, as permitted by the IRB. Baptist churches that agreed to post recruitment ads either printed a flyer, sent an email to members, included the ad in their church-wide newsletter, or suggested individual church members to contact. Although initial recruitment was focused on contacts near my residence, participation was not limited to a specific region; some participants reside in other states and were recruited from snowball sampling.

After obtaining signed consent forms, I conducted interviews. Interviews were completed either in person, through an online conferencing application such as FaceTime or Skype, or by phone. Two participants are related to each other (sisters-in-law) and elected to interview together instead of separately. Participants were given suggestions for interview locations (i.e.,

my private office or a local coffee shop) but were given the choice of where they felt most comfortable to meet. I used the same list of flexible questions (see Appendix A) across all interviews, but allowed for probes and follow-up questions. I also encouraged participants to discuss topics outside the provided questions and tell personal stories if participants wanted to. Tracy (2013) calls this kind of approach *unstructured interviews*, which she notes are “more flexible and organic in nature,” as compared to structured interviews (p. 139). Because I am not a mother or a Baptist, myself, an unstructured interview guide allowed for participants to focus on emerging topics that were most important to them instead of strictly adhering to a list of standard questions I created before-hand. Interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes in length, though some were longer, and were recorded using a digital recording device.

I manually printed and transcribed all interview data to be analyzed. In my approach to data analysis, I employed an *iterative* analysis in which I “[alternated] between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories” (Tracy, 2013). Using this approach, I had a theoretical lens in mind as I analyzed the data but allowed themes and other theoretical directions to emerge throughout the process. Following what Tracy (2013) describes as primary- and secondary-cycle coding processes, data were analyzed in three stages. First, in the primary cycle, I read interview transcriptions for general descriptive impressions which focused on basic activities and processes in the data. I created first-level codes based on these impressions, allowing for codes to expand and collapse as the data were analyzed. A code book was used to organize and maintain code definitions. Second, I began secondary-cycle coding in which I critically examined the codes created in the primary cycle. I then organized and collapsed codes into interpretive concepts which serve to explain communicative patterns and rules in the data. Once second-level codes were created and defined,

I returned to the interview transcriptions and coded individual lines of data into the scheme. Single lines of data were allowed to be coded into multiple categories. Every line of code identified in the data was entered into a codebook. After analysis was conducted, I completed member checks to verify that the results are representative of participants' experiences. When writing results, I replaced all participant names with pseudonyms (chosen via random name generator) and redacted all children's names and all other identifying information (e.g., place of residence).

## CHAPTER FOUR. FINDINGS

The research questions guiding the present study seek to understand how Baptist mothers talk to their children about sex. I first ask, *how do Baptist mothers' faith experiences inform how they talk to their children about sex?* Secondly, *how do Baptist mothers navigate multiple identities as they talk to their children about sex?* Emergent themes of the data point to the tension between mothers' understandings of sex and societal norms as informing the strategies they used to communicate with their children. In other words, larger societal ideals and treatments of sex did not align with mothers' evaluations of sex. Due to the uncontrollable nature of inappropriate information about sex and temptations, sex talks with children emerged as a problematic integration of ambiguity in which mothers expressed uncertainty surrounding their children's sexual and religious futures. The ways in which mothers communicated with their children about sex given this PI is suggestive of their identity performance.

What follows in this chapter is a thorough explanation of these findings described in three broad categories: mothers' ontological understandings of sex, their experiences living in the larger society, and the strategies they used to talk to their children about sex. First, mothers' ontology of sex describes the socializing messages mothers received (and did not receive) from their own parents, the church, friends, and other sources that shaped their current understanding and treatments of sex. Analysis of these messages yielded three ontological truths, or guiding beliefs that inform behavior, about sex: (1) God has set a righteous path for his followers, (2) sex is a beautiful gift from God, and (3) open communication about sex with children is essential.

Second, participants described their experiences living as a Baptist among secular treatments of sex as being discordant with their ontology of sex. Most broadly, mothers expressed that because of sin, they live in a fallen world which presents challenges that may

make it difficult for their children to stay on God's intended path for sex. Two particular societal deviances mothers pointed to were their children's unlimited access to inappropriate sexual information and the temptations their children might experience that could lead them astray from God's path.

The final category describes the strategies mothers used to talk to their children about sex, divided into strategies that attempt to control uncertainty and those that come to terms with the uncontrollable uncertainty. Investigation into these approaches produced four themes: (1) designation of the self as sexpert, (2) implementing rules to shield and roadblock against inappropriate information, (3) setting realistic expectations for children that do not adhere to Baptist values, and (4) communicating God's grace and forgiveness in the face of mistakes. The first two strategies intended to control and mitigate uncertainty, whereas the latter two allowed mothers to come to terms with uncontrollable uncertainty.

### **Ontology of Sex**

Mothers described the socializing messages they received (or did not receive) from their parents, church, friends, and other sources that shaped their understandings of what sex is/is not, how and when it should be used, and how families should talk about it. Taken together, these understandings comprise mothers' ontology, which describes what mothers know to be true and untrue about sex. Ontology, then, emerged as mothers' evaluative orientation by which they assessed treatments of sex. In other words, mothers' ontology acted as a measure by which they determined whether a sex practice or behavior is good (i.e., righteous) or bad (i.e., sinful) for themselves, their children, and the larger society. Mothers derived several truths, or guiding beliefs that informed their actions, from ontological sources. Three important truths that were foundational to Baptist mothers' ontology included: God has set a righteous path for His

followers, sex is a beautiful gift from God, and parents should talk to their children openly about sex starting at a young age. Each of these truths were directly tied to a Biblical understanding that sex is sacred and should be handled with care.

### **God Has Set a Righteous Path**

The first truth mothers expressed was God's intention for sex. Participants talked about life choices, particularly as they relate to sex, in terms of a righteous path that God set for his followers. Understandings of the boundaries of this path, right and wrong choices, and the fruits and detriments of staying on this path were primarily derived from Biblical scripture and Baptist ideology. Mothers conceptualized God's path for His followers as remaining abstinent, or sexually pure, until marriage. From this perspective, only husbands and wives should engage in any kind of sexual activity. As Debora put it, there is a clear line between right and wrong: "When you choose to have sex before marriage, you've sinned. You sinned against God, you sinned against your own body. You sinned against your [future] marriage...it's not something you can't recover from, but let's call it what it is." This distinction between God's intention for sex and misuses of sex was at the core of mothers' evaluative orientation. This ontological truth in particular provided mothers with a standard to compare righteous treatments of sex – only between husbands and wives – to sinful treatments of sex – everything that falls outside of God's path including premarital sex, homosexuality, pornography, impure intension, etc.

Other mothers joined Deborah in her understanding of God's purpose for sex. Rachel explained: "God's the one that created and designed sex...because He's the one that designed it, He knows how it's best put into practice and best used. He said that it should be saved for marriage." Later in the interview, Rachel further articulated the purpose of God's path by using a metaphor to explain how God's rules are meant to protect us from harm:

Your dog wants to run in the middle of the street, but you know that's not what's best for him. And so, you're going to do everything to make sure he doesn't do that. That's why [you] have a fence in [your] backyard...they're to keep you in a safe territory.

This metaphor highlights the idea that God placed rules about sex as a way to protect people from emotional, physical, and spiritual harm.

Based on these understandings of God's purpose for sex, mothers described clear relational, emotional, and health benefits to remaining abstinent until marriage, as well as the dangers of having premarital sex. When asked about her hopes for her daughters' futures, Kathy talked through the emotional benefits of waiting to have sex:

My biggest hope is that they decide to remain pure until marriage. I mean that's like the biggest thing because I know that will protect their hearts in a way that a lot of other choices – well, I think it'll make their lives less complicated.

Similarly, Sharon entertained the thought of her children “choosing a different way” (i.e., having sex before marriage) and ultimately said:

I mean, what we want for our kids is the best. Just like [how] God has laid out that path for us. And if that's what you take, it'll be easier for your life. And that's what I tell my kids – it will go well with you if you just listen to me.

Mothers also understood decisions that fall outside of God's path as sinful and making life unnecessarily difficult and emotionally strenuous. As Sarah explained, having a sexual history before marriage could breed jealousy or insecurity between husbands and wives:

I mean, that's the reason lots of people struggle with having had a lot of sexual partners before marriage. You compare. I don't know if that's how God intended



it to be, you know?...When [sex] is auditioned outside of marriage, you think “Oh is he comparing me to somebody else?”

In all, mothers described God’s intention for sex as an ontological truth. By following God’s path, mothers evaluated the outcomes to be fruitful and straying from God’s path as sinful and dangerous.

### **Sex is a Beautiful Gift From God**

The second truth mothers expressed addressed individuals’ responsibility to handle sex with care. Central to God’s righteous path for sex is mothers’ conceptualization of sex as a beautiful gift from God. As Kathy put it:

Sex is something God has provided as a gift to us for marriage. It’s something that has to do with, you know, obviously procreation...but even more than that, it’s a gift that God has given for intimacy between a husband and wife.

In this way, the mothers conceptualized sex more as a noun, rather than a verb; it is something to be used, received, and enjoyed in marriage. In this way, Kathy, Rachel, Susan and Teresa placed an emphasis on sex being good and pleasurable. Rachel explained: “First of all, God designed sex. It’s not an ugly thing. It’s not a bad thing. It’s designed to be a wonderful thing.” Further, Teresa explained the dual nature of sex: “[sex] is good, but just like anything that’s good, we can use it badly. And there’s consequences when we use it badly.” Deborah also spoke of this duality when she said: “Sex is a gift when used properly, but then it’s a weapon when it’s in the wrong hands.” The way Deborah uses the metaphor of gift and weapon as two polar opposites points to the seriousness she places on sex. From this perspective, the same sexual act can “create an emotional bond” in the context of marriage, and at the same time, be emotionally damaging in any other context.

Thus, taken together with the truth that God has set a righteous path for His followers, free will is fundamental to one's decision of when and with whom to have sex. Consistent with Baptist ideology, participants pointed to individuals' responsibility to take his or her gift seriously. Rachel, for example, acknowledged that sex is wonderful and beautiful, but "it's not for just any time, anyone, anywhere." In this way, mothers described people who treated sex as a gift from God as following God's path, and those who mistreat God's gift as straying from God's path.

### **Open Communication about Sex is Essential**

Finally, the mothers described a truth related to how families should communicate about sex. Because mothers place such an importance on following God's path and using his gift responsibly, they derived a truth that parents need to talk to their children about sex openly. Mothers' own socializing experiences (or lack thereof) in their family of origin, in the church, and other memorable experiences shaped their understanding of the importance of talking to children about sex. Mothers tended to draw this ontological truth not from the Church, but from their own parents and upbringings. Some participants reported positive experiences of having open communication within their families of origin. This was particularly true for Teresa, Rachel, and Deborah. Teresa, for example, was able to learn lessons from her parents' stories and avoid those same mistakes:

My parents were open about their own sexual experiences. So something that was formative for me was like my mom telling us the story [of having sex for the first time]...It was in the back of the car. I was like "Oh no, I didn't want to lose my virginity to my boyfriend." So those were formative conversations, like those

casual conversations. Like I actually thought like, “well that seems like a bad idea.”

Later in the interview, when asked about how she talks to her own children about sex, Teresa reflected back to her family of origin and said: “What I learned from my parents is that [sex] is not something to keep secret.” Similarly, all other participants spoke about their own parents not fostering open communication about sex and the negative impact that had. Nancy, for instance, described her family of origin as not having any communication about sex:

My parents didn’t say anything about [sex]. They never told us anything. And I remember specifically looking back, I was told two jokes at school that were very sexual – and I know now clearly, they were sexual – and I’m coming home and telling my parents about that joke in the kitchen and they completely froze. And they just walked away. Like there was not anything...I think that right there is just a great snapshot of how sexual issues were handled in my family.

Later, Nancy indicated that not communicating about sex “just doesn’t go well.” Kathy also found this to be consistent with her sex education in Catholic school: “There was a lot of conversation about how this is not something we should talk about. Like, it’s something between married people so you don’t need to worry about it. So there was really a stigma with sex.” In nearly all cases, these participants spoke to how the lack of communication in their family, school, and church had negative consequences, and thus, fostered an understanding of the importance of frequent and deliberate parent-child sex talks.

Participants also drew on professional experiences as confirming the necessity to communicate with children about sex. For example, when asked about any fears she has for her children, Julia immediately thought of experiences she’s had as a juvenile prosecutor:

You can't imagine how many twelve-year-old girls I've had that are pregnant. I've had them say, "Well, I didn't know I was pregnant." You know, they had no idea. And so that's another reason that I'm super up front about it. So many girls. I have one now – she's fourteen – and I just found out [she's] pregnant. I'm like "Well, what are you going to do?" She's like "I'm going to keep it" ...it's just a continuous cycle.

These professional experiences mothers recalled functioned to corroborate the truths they gleaned from Scripture and strengthen their convictions about sex. Not only were open conversations about sex important to participants, but the necessity and responsibility of parents engaging in open communication with their children about sex emerged as an ontological truth. Mothers evaluated frequent and open conversations as good and infrequent or nonexistent conversations as harmful to children's understanding of sex.

In all, three ontological truths emerged as central to participants' treatment of sex: God has set a righteous path for His followers, sex is a beautiful gift from God, and open communication about sex is important. Although not all socializing messages came from the church or Biblical sources, the three truths ultimately aligned with Biblical treatments of sex. In this way, mothers' ontology of sex functioned as an evaluative orientation by which they determined whether a sex behavior or attitude is in line with Biblical standards for sex or not. Secular and societal treatments of sex were the targets of these evaluative orientations.

### **Lived Experiences in Society**

Mothers described the difficulties and feelings of discomfort living in a society that does not value Biblical treatments of sex. Participants drew upon their ontology of sex as a high marker of how individuals should value and treat sex. However, mothers explained that the

world they live in falls short of that standard due to sin. Overall, mothers discussed having to navigate outside societal pressures and treatments of sex that do not align with their three ontological truths (i.e., God has set a righteous path, sex is a beautiful gift from God, and parent-child conversations about sex are essential). Under this general evaluation of the larger society, mothers pointed to two particularly salient sources of divergence related to sex: children's unlimited amount of inappropriate information about sex from outside sources and children's temptations to stray from God's path. Due to the uncontrollable nature of these two sources of divergence, mothers lived experiences in a secular society emerged as their probabilistic orientations of their children's futures.

### **We Live in a Broken World**

Mothers negatively evaluated their everyday experiences living in the social world through the lens of their ontology. In this way, there was an overarching discordance between their ontology of sex – based in Scripture and Baptist ideology – and how the larger society views and treats sex. Given what they know to be true about sex, it was not surprising that several participants discussed the difficulties of raising their children in a “fallen world.” Kathy, for example, drew a line between living from a Godly perspective and living from a worldly perspective:

I think it's important as a Christian to understand, you know, that everyone around you isn't going to have the same beliefs as you. Jesus said, 'In this world you will have trouble.' So we talk about not being of the world. I mean, not just about sex, but just, anything. There are beliefs that we have and there are guidelines that the world doesn't necessarily buy into. You know, you're going to be different than other people.

Sharon similarly reported living in a “broken world” and added that it’s only getting worse for younger generations due to the “expansion of options:”

For [my children], I think if they make a choice to follow what God wants and what I feel like he’s lined out, that it will be, it may even be harmful to them, whether it’s in their position or their friends. I think that here in [Southern state] we’re a little bit luckier. But like, I’ve even had a conversation with a friend that lives in New York and she’s saying, you know, ‘Would you go to a gay wedding of two women?’ And it’s just questions like that that our kids are going to have to answer more than we have had to answer.

In both of these examples, the participants indicated that the world generally does not align with their Biblical values, which makes maintaining those values while navigating social life more and more difficult. Other participants specifically cited premarital sex, promiscuity, homosexuality, gender fluidity, pornography, and abuse as socially acceptable or prominent and not aligning with Biblical values. Two sub-themes that were particularly discordant for mothers were their children’s unlimited access to inappropriate sexual information and the possibility that their children will most likely be tempted to stray from God’s path.

### **Unlimited Access to Sexual Information**

Mothers spoke about the unfortunate reality that their children may learn inappropriate information about sex from outside sources, such as the Internet, older siblings, friends at school, and media. This concern was particularly salient for mothers with children in elementary and middle school and was focused primarily on the Internet. Participants spoke of the sheer volume of information and pornography as being dangerous to their children and difficult to monitor. On that topic, Deborah explained:

Even as Christian parents, you can still be doing your best, but at some point, I mean, [pornography] is just everywhere. Sadly, it's just so prevalent. It's not like when my husband grew up, where you had to get your hands on a dirty magazine.

It's so accessible now.

Sharon felt as though what her child sees online is out of her control: "I just hate that innocence is going to be gone so quickly. I know that there's not going to be a way to stop it." Further, as Michelle pointed out, some sites (e.g., [whitehouse.com](http://whitehouse.com)) are inconspicuous and easy to mistake as safe or appropriate for children, when in fact, they are pornography sites. Michelle explained that she tries to be careful about what her children see, but there's no way to prevent them from seeing all inappropriate information online.

Mothers also expressed concern about their children receiving inaccurate or inappropriate information from other individuals, not just the Internet. As Kathy put it, "If we don't talk to our kids, someone else will." Susan, for example, was surprised to discover her elementary school aged son was listening to xxxTentacion's music after a friend at school showed him an inappropriate song. She talked about her son starting middle school the next year and explained: "That is my biggest stress because I saw a lot of stuff I shouldn't have way too early, and I don't want that for my kids." Taken together, mothers felt a lack of control over the information their children receive about sex, whether it be from the Internet or other kids at school.

Uncertainty about their children's futures, then, was centered in mothers' desires to gain control over the information their children receive (and do not receive). As it related to outside sources of information, participants acknowledged they could not effectively control all the information their children might receive about sex, and therefore, could not accurately predict whether their children see something inappropriate or not. Therefore, when considering mothers'

probabilistic orientation toward their children's sexual and religious futures, it is clear that mothers experienced ambiguity.

### **Temptations to Stray From God's Path**

More distressing than the innocuous ways children might be exposed to inappropriate information, mothers talked about the temptation their children may experience to engage in sexual activity outside of God's intentions (i.e., to have premarital sex, engage in heavy petting, watch pornography, etc.). This fear was more prevalent for mothers of teenagers and adolescents. Not only did this concern stem from the near unlimited access to sexual information online, but also their children's biological/pubertal sexual desires. Deborah, Michelle, Sarah, and Sharon acknowledged that it's natural to have a sexual desire as an adolescent. However, as Sarah explains: "We want them to wait, knowing that God's desire for sex is to wait until marriage. But that doesn't change the fact that there's that desire for sex before marriage for sure." Although these mothers acknowledge that these desires are natural, they understood desires as fostering temptation in their children to engage in sexual activity before marriage, which is inconsistent with their Biblical values.

In particular, some mothers feared that their teenagers who have a dating partner might be especially tempted to have premarital sex. Michelle, for example, saw that her son and his girlfriend had more opportunities to be tempted, and therefore, must be careful. She reflected back to how she might have parented a little differently:

I wish I kind of pushed my kids to have a higher standard than just don't have sex outside of marriage. Like, you can be careful in how you have a relationship, you know, don't be alone after a certain hour...it's a slippery slope.



Additionally, Sarah expressed her concern for young girls who may be tempted to agree to have sex with their dating partners as a way to gain respect or please them:

Men are different than women and so they have a different desire or need. A girl could find herself being willing to do things that maybe she wouldn't normally do in order to hold onto that guy...So they want to hold on to that person, and [heavy petting or intercourse] seems like a logical way to show that they care and love and respect.

As both of these examples demonstrate, mothers perceived that having a biological sexual desire coupled with being in a committed dating relationship fostered a particularly intense temptation to have premarital sex. This temptation was problematic in that it conflicts with God's intention for sex.

Some participants reported that their children have already given in to some of these temptations. For example, four mothers disclosed that their adolescent son struggles with an addiction to pornography (or lust, as one mother put it). Rachel, for instance, called back after we ended our interview to speak more privately about her 16-year-old son's struggle with pornography. After being exposed to online pornography at a sports camp, her son asked that his mom be one of his "accountability partners." She candidly discussed the difficulties of monitoring her son's progress and the family's efforts to keep her son on God's path. She wanted her son to know that "[pornography] can really alter your expectations of your relationship and make it so that you're not satisfied." This has been an ongoing "spiritual battle," she explained:

When he first came to me, you know, I did not scold him or express any kind of condemnation. We talked about that it was wrong and that it was a battle that he needed to fight, you know, this kind of thing...I'm at a bit of a loss, you know,

how to navigate this. It's not something I've ever struggled with and so I can't really speak to it. I feel like I'm praying for him for sure. And you know, I'm very much a person who is willing to evaluate, is there a better way to handle things? I definitely don't feel like an expert at how to handle this.

Although biological desire may be at the base of premarital sex, heavy petting, and pornography, mothers understood their children's temptations to be of this world, as opposed to consistent with God's intentions for sex. As Sharon articulated: "[pornography] breaks the rules because that's not private and it's not between a husband and wife. So it's an easy way to say that's [not] God's way."

In all, whether accidentally or purposefully consumed, mothers understood the prevalence of inappropriate sexual information and pornography as part of the broken world they live in. Because participants experienced a lack of control over how the larger society treats sex and sexual information, they could not be certain that their child would remain on God's path. Taken together, mothers ontology of sex and their perceptions of how society views and treats sex did not align, thus, creating a tension between an ideal life mothers wanted for their children and the uncertainty of their children's sexual and religious futures. Therefore, mothers' ontology of sex and lived experiences created an ambiguous problematic integration. Findings indicate that mothers addressed this PI by implementing various strategies when talking with their children about sex.

### **Communicative Strategies for Talking with Children about Sex**

Finally, the messages participants communicated to their children about sex were indicative of how mothers dealt with the aforementioned uncertainty of their children's futures. In order to resolve the discordance between their ontology and lived experiences, mothers used

strategies that attempted to control and minimize the uncertainty of their children's futures and/or strategies that attempt to face the uncertainty head-on. Parent-child communication, then, was particularly central to participants' uncertainty management. These strategies were not mutually exclusive. Most mothers attempted to control as much uncertainty as they could, and also came to terms with the uncertainty they could not control.

### **Attempts to Manage Uncertainty**

The most salient strategy mothers used to control and reduce uncertainty was communicating to children that their mothers are the ultimate experts on sex. Although mothers acknowledged that they cannot change the world they live in, they reported that openly communicating with their children about sex was an important way to integrate, control, and mediate the kinds of information they receive. However, it was not enough to just communicate openly; mothers tended to center themselves as their child's most important resource for sex information. Hence, I use the label *sexpert* to describe the role mothers play when they assert themselves as the primary and final authority on what their children understand about sex. Not only did mothers express a desire for their children to come to them with any questions about sex, but they also wanted to control and filter the kinds of information their children receive from outside sources.

Mothers drew from their ontological truth that families should communicate about sex openly when using the *sexpert* strategy. Julia, Susan, Michelle, Kathy, Marie, Sharon, Carolyn, and Claudia specifically expressed a determination to communicate more openly than their own parents did as a way to create a better family environment for their children. For example, Michelle wanted her children to be able to come to her with any questions because, as a child, she felt too nervous to ask her own mother questions: "I think that has shaped me into the kind of

mom I am, because I don't want my kids to ever be nervous [asking questions about sex]."

Carolyn also talked about sex being a taboo topic in her family of origin, but wanted to change that for her own children: "I'm generally not willing to keep taboo topics taboo. So I don't feel like there's anything off limits. If I feel like there's something that needs to be said, I'll say it."

It's important to emphasize that mothers did not want to just be one source of information to their children, but rather, *the* source. For example, Sharon wanted her son to know that he should come to her to ask questions about sex, not his friends:

Because of my background and my mom not talking to me, I was determined to not be that way because I just wanted to be number one. I wanted [my son] to come to me when he had questions. So he's almost fifteen now and the commentary always is that you will never get in trouble for asking a question about a word or phrase. And he has asked me some doozies. So, you know, I want [him] to think that I'm the expert, not [his] friends.

This example points to mothers' experiences and fears that their children may be exposed to inappropriate information from outside sources (such as friends). However, as Sharon demonstrates, mothers attempted to mitigate the outside information by communicating to children they should trust their mothers as the expert on sex. Further, participants indicated that they want their children to disclose their sexual activity. When Claudia imagined what her reaction would be if her children had premarital sex, she explained that she just wanted them to tell her: "We don't have to hide it [and] we don't have to be ashamed of it, but we can just talk about it."

Finally, another way mothers attempted to control uncertainty was by implementing rules to shield or roadblock inappropriate information. Reflecting mothers' concerns about their

children having access to sex information from outside sources and being tempted to stray from the path, rules were meant to both prevent children from accidentally seeing and purposefully seeking out inappropriate information or behaviors. The most commonly reported rules had to do with access to the Internet, television/movies, and significant others of children (e.g., my son's girlfriend can't spend the night). As Rachel explained, setting rules for her son, like keeping his cellphone in the kitchen overnight, were "logistical roadblocks" to prevent him from being tempted by pornography.

### *Coming to Terms With Uncertainty*

Another strategy mothers used when talking to their children about sex was coming to terms with the uncertainty of their children's futures. For some, this entailed setting realistic expectations for their children and, for others, communicating God's grace and forgiveness in the face of mistakes. Realistic expectations emerged as messages mothers communicated to their children that hold abstinence until marriage as the ideal path, but permits children to eventually have sex under other appropriate circumstances. Only two mothers – Marie and Susan – spoke about setting realistic expectations for their children. In contrast to other mothers who placed abstinence as the one and only righteous path for individuals to follow, these mothers acknowledged that their children may choose to have sex before marriage and incorporated that possibility into their sex talks. For Marie and Susan, this meant communicating with their children that, whereas it would be ideal to wait until marriage to have sex, it's more important to be in a committed, loving relationship. For example, Marie spoke about her hesitation to only emphasize abstinence to her two daughters:

As I've gotten older, I've started to realize that ideally, I want my girls to be with someone that they're in love with. Does it have to be who they're married to?

That's not realistic. I don't ever want them to feel used or shame about that. I want it to be a good experience...I want them to have a belief system, but I don't want to put them in such a box. I mean, do I want my fifteen-year-old having sex right now? No. But I don't want them to think [sex] is like this horrible thing.

When asked if communicating these beliefs to her children was in any way compromising on her Baptist values, Marie explained that she does not feel like she's necessarily compromising, but rather, allowing her daughters to choose for themselves:

There are some things within the Baptist church where it's like, well, I don't necessarily agree with all of that but I'm going to take bits and pieces of it and try to instill that into my kid. Then, [my daughter] will come up with her own beliefs and values as she gets older.

In this case, Marie repackaged the Biblical value of sexual purity into a more realistic expectation for her daughters. Susan expressed a similar interpretation of Biblical values when she explained:

I have come to a place in my faith, which is maybe different than other Baptist moms, but I don't really want [my children] to have premarital sex obviously, but it's not the end of the world to me if that happens. In my own faith I don't actually consider that like a sin as much. We're not going to encourage them to [have sex before marriage], but we're going to have some pretty honest conversations about how that should be someone you love and care about a lot.

In both of these examples, Marie and Susan did not give up on their Baptist values, but interpreted and incorporated those values into how they talk to their children about sex in a way

that was more realistic to them. They still described sex as God-given and something to be taken seriously, but did not place the most emphasis on waiting until marriage.

In contrast, Deborah, Kathy, Sarah, Sharon, Carolyn, and Teresa did expect their children to abstain from sex until marriage, but turned to God's grace as a way to face the possibility that their children may stray from God's path. Participants explained that while they communicate that abstinence until marriage is how God intended people to use sex, they acknowledged that it is possible that their children may make mistakes. These mothers understood sex outside of marriage as sinful. When considering the uncertainty of their children's future choices, mothers communicated to their children that they expect them to remain on God's path, but also reminded them of grace and forgiveness as a way to get back on God's path if they make a mistake. As Sharon put it: "I know [my children] are not going to be perfect. I know they're going to make mistakes, and because of my faith, there's not just hell and damnation, but there's grace and mercy."

Grace, then, emerged as something mothers could lean on when imagining their children's futures. Whereas grace and forgiveness did not seem to completely assuage mothers' uncertainty, it helped reframe their fears for their children. Therefore, these mothers understand premarital sex as sinful, yet it is also redeemable based on their understandings of God's mercy. Sarah expressed this sentiment when she talked about her son's "lust problem" and her response to his disclosure:

There's grace if you've made a mistake, if you've done something that you're not proud of. Regardless of what it is or what we're talking about, there's grace. You don't have to be saddled by a decision you're not happy with. You don't have to be living under that.

In all, mothers came to terms with the uncertainty of their children's futures in two different ways: setting realistic expectations to children and communicating God's grace. The significant difference between these two approaches was centered around mothers' understanding of premarital sex as sinful (or not sinful).

### **Conclusion**

In sum, findings indicate that mothers believed there to be a divergence between their ontology and lived experiences which generated uncertainty about children's future sexual and religious decisions. In response to this ambiguity, mothers attempted to control the information their children receive (and do not receive) about sex by deeming themselves a sexpert and setting up rules to roadblock inappropriate information and temptation. Further, findings also indicated that mothers came to terms with uncontrollable uncertainty by either setting realistic expectations for their children or extending grace if their children make a mistake. The particular strategies mothers used in these talks were shaped by and reinforced the ordering of their identities. Theoretical implications of mothers' integration strategies and ordering of identities is explored in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine identity enactment of Baptist mothers during sex talks with children using problematic integration theory and the concept of nested identity. Findings indicated that mothers' ontology of sex pointed to their evaluative orientation and understandings of societal treatments of sex to their probabilistic orientation. When integrated, sex talks with children emerged as a problematic integration of ambiguity surrounding children's uncertain futures. These findings suggest several important theoretical contributions. First, the strategies mothers used when engaging in sex talks with their children are suggestive of mothers' identity performance. Specifically, I propose a theoretical reconceptualization of nested identity in which some identities (i.e., religious) overtly inform the performance of others. Second, findings suggest that identity both creates and resolves problematic integrations. This reciprocal nature of identity and PI is theoretically grounded in assumptions that communication is simultaneously the source, medium, and resource of problematic integrations. Finally, this study adds to the theory of problematic integration by illuminating how religious identities informed by ontology may intensify the stress associated with PI. In all, this data highlights the potential for richer understandings of religious identity enactment using a PI framework and the concept of nested identity.

### **Baptist Identity Colors All Other Identity Layers**

Current conceptualizations of nested identity suggest the roles individuals perform function as distinct layers that can be more or less nested within each other. Like Russian stacking dolls, the outward most layer is most visible while nested identities tend to be hidden, though this concept suggests individuals reorder identities depending on the context. Sometimes communicative contexts foster tensions between desired identity performance, as Zanin et al.

(2020) point out. These researchers suggest that identity, in these cases, can stretch and pull to encompass multiple goals and social demands, even when identity seems conflicted.

However, as the results of the current study suggest, conceptualizing identity performance as a shuffling or stretching of various roles and values inward and outward may not provide the best explanation of how individuals perform religious identities. Instead, where religious identity is concerned, religious ontological values, roles, and scripts may bleed into all other non-religious identity performances. This implies that instead of acting as a singular distinct layer that individuals can choose to perform in a given context, religious identity functions more as the paint that colors all the other identity layers (e.g., mother, wife, teacher, women, etc.). In the case of Baptist mothers, participants' religious identity was not necessarily in tension with, or pulling apart from maternal, spousal, and feminine identities; rather, Baptist values and ideologies shaped the way all other identities were performed during sex talks with children. Therefore, these findings suggest that religious identities may be more totalistic and encompassing than other kinds of identity with the potential for values, beliefs, and goals to bleed into other areas of one's life.

In the current study, Baptist identity informed how participants performed other higher-order layers such as mother, wife, woman, and professional (e.g., teacher, healthcare professional, etc.). In this way, Baptist ontology provided scripts and role requirements for how participants should talk to their children about sex as their mother, as a professional, and as a woman. This was especially true for participants who reported not experiencing a conflict in the kinds of messages they wanted to communicate to their children about sex. These participants understood their role of mother, wife, professional, etc. as being consistent with their role as Baptist. In this way, all other identities were colored by Baptist ontology. This was evident in the

strategies mothers used to talk with their children about sex. With the exception of setting realistic expectations for their children, each strategy mothers used drew upon Biblical treatments of sex.

For example, the strategy of designating mother as sexpert allowed participants to instill Biblical values of sex into their children and dispel inappropriate secular treatments of sex. In this way, mothers' conception of what it means to fulfill the role of "mother" involved being the primary agent in socializing their child into a Biblical understanding of sex. It is likely that many parents, Baptist or not, desire to be the primary source of sexual information for their children. However, for the Baptist mothers in this study, at the center of this desire was an intention to draw upon Biblical teachings of sex to enhance or contest the information children might receive from sources outside the home, making religious identity distinct from those not tied to organizational membership. Placing rules to shield and roadblock inappropriate information, as well as communicating God's grace and forgiveness when children make mistakes, both similarly demonstrate how mothers' Baptist identity informed the performance of maternal identity.

### **Identity Both Informs and Resolves Problematic Integrations**

The findings of this study also suggest a reciprocal relationship between identity and PI in which identity both informs and resolves problematic integrations of ambiguity. As it relates to PI theory, ambiguous integrations are uncomfortable due to the tension between an individual's desire for a particular outcome and the uncertainty that the desired outcome will come to fruition. Although there is some research to suggest an interplay between identity performance and tensions caused by problematic integrations (Frank & Gill, 2015; Shi & Babrow, 2007), the current study demonstrates that identity is not just the cause of ambiguity,

but can also be a resource to resolve the ambiguity. Baptist identity, in this study, both informed the tensions mothers experienced about the uncertainty of their children's sexual and religious futures and also helped them reduce and come to terms with that uncertainty.

First, mothers' identity laid the groundwork for a problematic integration. Participants in this study experienced problematic integrations of their Biblical ontologies of sex and the larger societal treatments of sex. Because of the broken world they live in and the standard God set for sex, mothers reported not being certain that their children would remain on God's path. This is suggestive that identity has the potential to inform problematic integrations. Consistent with foundational literature on problematic integration theory (Babrow 1992, 1995, 2002), the uncertainty alone does not create the PI. In fact, it is safe to say that most parents experience uncertainty surrounding their children's futures. Rather, it was the conflict between mothers' ontology of sex, which informed a singular correct outcome (i.e., sexual purity until marriage), and the prevalence of inappropriate secular treatments of sex that contributed to uncertainty. In this way, Baptist teachings of sex, as well as mothers' experiences that shaped their ontology of sex, created an expectation for how their children should engage in sexual activity.

However, mothers also predominantly drew upon religious identity, reflected in their constant deference to Biblical teachings of sex, to resolve this tension. They did so in two ways: managing as much uncertainty as possible (i.e., designating themselves as a sexpert and implementing roadblocks to information) and coming to terms with unmanageable uncertainty (i.e., communicating God's grace). Each strategy, excluding setting realistic expectations for children, was directly tied to participants' role enactment of Baptist as previously discussed. Even communicating God's grace in the face of mistakes was a way that mothers drew upon Baptist identity to resolve ambiguous tensions. Unlike strategies aimed at managing uncertainty,

communicating God's grace was not intended to change the likelihood that their child might stray from God's path. Rather, mothers acknowledged that their children might make mistakes, but felt comfort in knowing that they could lead them back to God's path. In this way, mothers drew upon Biblical understandings of sin and forgiveness to change their evaluations of their children's potential behaviors. Thus, religious identity informed the ways mothers attempted to resolve the tension they experienced as a result of ambiguity.

Taken together, that mothers' Baptist identities informed a PI of ambiguity and that they turned to that same identity to resolve the PI, the findings suggest a reciprocal relationship between problematic integration and identity. Where Babrow and colleagues (Frank & Gill, 2015; Shi & Babrow, 2007) treated identity performance as a byproduct of problematic integrations, this study suggests a deeper interplay in which identity is simultaneously the cause and solution of PI. This relationship parallels Babrow's (1995) assertion that communication is the source, medium, and resource of problematic integrations. Because identity performance is communicative, this mirroring is not altogether surprising. Therefore, if performing one's identity is conceptualized as communicatively foundational to cognitive appraisals of one's reality, identity becomes a lens through which individuals make evaluations and predictions. It is possible, then, that identity performance plays a bigger role in problematic integrations than previously thought. Future research should investigate how the entanglement of identity in other forms of problematic integrations (i.e., divergence, ambivalence, and impossibility).

### **Religious Ontology Exacerbates Tensions of Problematic Integration**

Finally, findings suggest that particularly totalistic identities may intensify the struggle of PIs. Sex is a peculiar topic to study communicatively because it can simultaneously fit into health, organizational, interpersonal, and family contexts. Therefore, conceptualizations of sex

and sexuality can be quite fluid depending on how researchers and participants approach the topic. In the case of socializing messages Baptist mothers communicate to their children, sex becomes more than just a health concern; sex is God-given, sacred, and to be handled with care. In fact, mothers repeatedly referred to sex as a beautiful gift from God that should only be opened in the context of marriage. Additionally, mothers leaned on their ontological truth that God has set rules and guidelines to sex, and that all other behaviors that lie outside of God's intentions are sinful. Therefore, Baptist mothers' ontology suggests a moral quality to sex.

It is this moral quality that heightens the stakes for children's sexual futures. It stands to reason that parents who do not draw upon Biblical teachings of sex would still be quite concerned about sexual health, safety, and maturity for their children. However, due to Baptist foundations in free will as well as treatments of sex as moral/immoral, Baptist parents share these concerns about health, safety, and maturity in addition to the spiritual implications for sexual activity. Thus, the tensions mothers experienced related to ambiguity seemed to be exacerbated by the moral treatments of sex. Not only does identity performance create opportunities for problematic integrations more generally, but totalistic religious identities in particular may intensify these integrations. When considering the theoretical implication that religious identities bleed into others, tensions of PIs become more intense because Baptist mothers cannot (and do not wish to) separate religious values from other identities. Therefore, mothers cannot simply nest Biblical understandings of sex under higher-order maternal, professional, or feminine identities. PI tensions in this way intensify in religious contexts.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The findings and theoretical implications of this study are important, but limited. Although I specified that participation is not constrained to one particular Baptist convention, all

but one participant reported their church being associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. This is not altogether surprising given that the SBC is the largest convention across the U.S. and is particularly saturated in Southern states, where most of the participants resided. Due to the decentralized nature of the Baptist organization, it is possible that churches associated with other conventions may have slightly different doctrines related to sex, marriage, and family that could influence the kinds of messages mothers communicate to their children about sex. Further, this study only investigated Baptist mothers' identity enactment during sex talks. Future research should consider identity performance of other religions with strong ontological teachings on sex, such as Islam and Catholicism.

In all, this study prompts further questions about the reciprocal nature of identity and problematic integrations, religious identity enactment as it relates to nested identity, and organizational treatments of sex. I am most curious about how religious identities seem to inform the values, beliefs, and practices related to other identities, in this case maternal, marital, professional, and gender. I propose a new understanding of nested identity in which religious identity is not just one deeply nested layer of the Russian stack doll, but also the paint that covers all the other layers. While it seems as though religious identity, in this sense, is distinct in nature from other kinds of higher-order identities, more research is needed to determine whether other types of identities function similarly. Political and professional ideologies, in particular, come to mind. However, future research should further investigate not just which kinds, but how social identity informs the performance of others.

### **Conclusion**

This study employed interview data with fourteen Baptist mothers to interpretively address two research questions. First, *how do Baptist mothers' faith experience inform the way*

*they talk to their children about sex?* Mothers pointed to their ontology of sex as being in tension with secular treatments of sex and sexual information. Thus, mothers' sex talks with children emerged as an ambiguous problematic integration. To resolve his tension, participants reported using strategies to reduce uncertainty or come to terms with uncertainty when talking to their children about sex, drawing upon Baptist Biblical understandings of sex. Second, this study addressed the question, *how do Baptist mothers navigate multiple identities as they talk to their children about sex?* In particular, the strategies mothers used during sex talks was indicative of identity performance in that Baptist identity seemed to inform the enactment of all other identities. These findings have important theoretical implications. First, I propose an addition to the concept of nested identity in which religious identity functions as the paint that covers all the other layers. Second, identity was both a source and resource of ambiguity. Finally, Baptist treatments of sex suggest that religious identities may exacerbate tensions of problematic integrations.



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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Message

Hello, my name is Katie Kassler and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at TCU. I'm conducting a study which seeks to examine how Baptist mothers' faith experiences inform how they talk to their children about sex and sexuality. I would love to get in touch with any moms who are interested in the study!

To participate, you must be 18 years and older, a mother of at least one child age 8-18 still living at home with you, and a current or former member of a Baptist church.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to interview with me for approximately 45 minutes. Questions will center on your experiences as a mother and member of your church talking to your child about sex. Interviews may be conducted in person privately at my office at TCU or other local location of your convenience, or may be conducted electronically through Skype or FaceTime, or over the phone at a time that is convenient for you.

If you'd like to set up an interview or have any questions about this study, please email me at [katie.kassler@tcu.edu](mailto:katie.kassler@tcu.edu) or text/call me at (817) 879-2194. You can also PM me. Thank you!

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about how you became involved in the Baptist Church.
2. Tell me about your own experiences being educated about sex/sexuality.
3. Explain to me how you educate and talk to your child about sex/sexuality.
  - a. How old was your child(ren) when you first talked to them about sex?
  - b. How does your faith inform you on what to teach your child(ren) about sex?
4. How does the prevalence of sexual information online influence how you parent/talk to your child about sex?
5. How important do you see your role as mother in educating your children about sex?  
Please explain.
6. Have there been times when your role as mother has conflicted with your role as a member of the church? Can you explain?
7. What are your fears for your children related to this topic?
8. What are your hopes for your children related to this topic?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences as a Baptist Christian mother talking to your child(ren) about sex/sexuality?



## VITA

Personal	Katie Kassler Weatherford, TX
Education	Diploma, W. E. Boswell High School, Fort Worth, TX, 2014  Bachelor of Art, Communication Studies, Writing, Texas Christian University, 2018  Master of Science, Communication Studies, Texas Christian University, 2020
Experience	Graduate Teaching Assistantship, 2018-2019, Texas Christian University  Editorial Assistantship, 2019-2020, <i>Communication Monographs</i>
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## ABSTRACT

### “THE GIFT THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US”: BAPTIST MOTHERS’ IDENTITY ENACTMENT DURING SEX TALKS WITH CHILDREN

By Katie Kassler, 2020  
Department of Communication Studies  
Texas Christian University

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Taking together the Baptist doctrine of sexual purity and the prevalence of larger secular treatments of sex, parent-child sex talks in the Baptist home are particularly important and may demand that parents carefully perform multiple identities at one time (e.g., Baptist, parent, educator, etc.). This study, therefore, seeks to examine the identity performance of Baptist mothers as they talk to their children about sex using a problematic integration and nested identities framework. Findings suggest that during sex talks with their children, mothers experienced a tension between their Biblical ontologies of sex and secular treatments of sex, which informed the strategies they used to communicate with their children. Sex talks with children, then, emerged as a problematic integration of ambiguity. The findings of this study advance the notion that religious identities bleed into other kinds of identity performances, inform and resolve problematic integrations, and intensify stress associated with ambiguity.