IJoC | Sexuality Research in Communication

Interpretive Theorizing in the
Seductive World of Sexuality and Interpersonal Communication:
Getting Guerilla with Studies of Sexting and Purity Rings

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Introduction

As Elissa Foster (2008) notes in her increasingly relevant and still vibrant essay "Commitment, Communication, and Contending with Heteronormativity," relationship scholars—particularly in interpersonal communication studies—are still uncertain about how to proceed in ways that generatively draw from reflexive epistemological stances, especially when it comes to ways of understanding, marking, measuring, or otherwise acknowledging sexuality. This coyness is reflected in the subject index of the most recent *SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal Communication,* where *sex*, *sexuality*, *sexual orientation*, *sexual identity*, or any other ostensibly sex-oriented word is notably absent (see Knapp & Daly, 2011). Diamond (in press) echoes these frustrations, noting that studies about sexuality—in terms of both identity and physical expression—are often removed from relational contexts and instead artificially placed into two areas of inquiry: *studies of relationships* and *studies of human sexuality*. Those two areas of study are largely interdisciplinary and, as such, are likely to find scholars working amid a tension between promoting themselves to their more traditionally recognized discipline (e.g., communication, psychology, sociology) and engaging larger transdisciplinary discussions about relationships and sexuality (Manning, Vlasis, Dirr, Shandy, Emerson, & De Paz, 2008). As this brief overview suggests, those who are interested in studying relationships and sexuality together face at least three challenges: (1) uncertainty about how to proceed on what many still consider new terrain; (2) scholarship paths that separate sex and sexuality from relationships; and (3) tensions that often accompany inter- or multidisciplinary work.

As I moved along my own path of studying sexuality and relationships—often through an interpretive lens—I learned that those who want to perform qualitative studies of sexuality and relationships must always be ready to make it evident why their work is important. In addition to the well-documented bias against interpretive work in interpersonal communication (see Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Tracy & Muñoz, 2011), many have treated research topics about sex or sexuality as novel. This ranges from dismissive questions such as, "Isn't this work a bit shallow?" or "This kind of stuff only applies to a select group of people" to fetishizing responses in which the scholarly value of the work is minimized and only the sexual content recognized. I have even been asked whether I am "just trying to rock the boat" with my work, as if studies about an everyday part of people's lives should be shocking. As I hope to illustrate here, sex research should not be something that rocks the boat, but

rather should be an integral part of the boat itself and worthy of continued exploration for relationship scholars.

In my research program, I explore sexuality as something that is inherently a part of everyone's lives. Identity is marked by sexuality: sometimes from its ambiguity, sometimes because it cannot be ignored, sometimes relationally between an individual and other people. In romantic relationships, cultural discourses about sex make it always already present, as relationship discourses mark sexuality as a preformed, inevitable, and expected element of romantic connection. Sexuality marks other relationship types, too, ranging from "friends with benefits" to parents who want to discuss sex and sexuality with their children. Even when sexuality is psychologically absent or symbolically unmarked in relationships, it always lingers near, as the human potentials for sexuality are always waiting to be pointed out or co-constructed by others. This co-construction of sexual understanding—and thus experiences—are acquired from people's communicative experiences with parents or other family members, religious doctrine and leaders, popular texts, news stories, and countless other cultural sources. Every day multiple and often competing discourses are defining, rewarding, expanding, limiting, controlling, or otherwise making intelligible sex and sexuality.

With such a wide range of sexual understandings and experiences, it makes sense that communication scholars would and should study sexuality from a number of vantage points and through various methods. To be certain, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to examine how sexuality studies have been approached across communication's many theoretical traditions in a constitutive field of communication (see Craig, 1999; Craig & Muller, 2007). I began my own work exploring sex and sexuality using a sociocultural approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm. This paradigm was appealing to me both because I was interested in how people negotiate meanings of sexuality in relationships and by virtue of having little past research in the area to draw from, as interpretive work is often exploratory in nature (2009b). In the hope that others will join me on this research path and contribute to the growing conversation, here I offer an overview of interpretivism as it applies to studies of sex, sexuality, and relationships. To do so, I first briefly explain interpretivism. Then I turn to glimpses of two studies that offer insights into how interpretive qualitative research can create connections between method and theorizing. Finally, I offer practical considerations and reading sources that will prove helpful to those interested in doing this kind of work. Ultimately, I seek to provide a better understanding of one approach to doing sexuality research within the field of communication.

Interpretive Qualitative Studies of Sex, Sexuality, and Relationships

To understand how interpretive qualitative studies enable reflexive research findings, one must first understand interpretivism itself. As Blumer (1969) explains in his work developing an interpretive approach, meaning is found *across a social scene and the action in it*. People make sense of this meaning through interaction, and, as such, meaning—both as it is perceived in the mind and as it is laden in objects or ideas in a social scene—is always in flux and continuously changing as people continue to interact. That does not mean that any search for meaning is hopeless. Instead, it suggests that a research focus should be placed on how people interact to make meaning rather than some inherent meaning to be found in an object or a person's interpretation of an object. This understanding happens through

consideration of meaning and context. As this implies, interpretive approaches to studies of relationships are unique in that they explore how relationships are *constituted* through communication (Baxter 2004; Manning, in press-a). That is, because interpretive approaches assume interaction itself is what constitutes understandings of social worlds, interpretive qualitative studies are inherently communicative (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014, pp. 1–3 for a fuller explanation).

The notion that meaning making happens in a social scene is particularly relevant to studies of relationships, sex, and sexuality, because understandings of all three are so fluid. For example, in a classic study (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), it was revealed that 11 different understandings of the phrase *had sex* were reported by participants, ranging from deep kissing to penile-vaginal intercourse. Participants were asked, "Would you say you 'had sex' with someone if the most intimate behavior you engaged in was . . . ?" with different behaviors listed for them to mark as counting as having sex or not. As the findings revealed, the simple phrase *had sex* could mean different things to the same person, but it could also mean different things to different people. Such methods might appear to be interpretive in that they explicate the potential for negotiation of multiple meanings in a social scene, but, because of the close-ended survey method used, would actually constitute a sociopsychological, postpositivist approach where an effect of communication is measured to understand some sort of truth about an individual's social world. Indication of how the words are negotiated in everyday interaction with others is lost.

Alternatively, an interpretive study would not be centered on the particular effect or effects of a given stimulus, but rather would engage an individual in open interaction in a way where meaning could be located in active use. That is, an interpretive approach would look at how the array of possible meanings could come into play—sometimes even allowing new, previously unconsidered meanings—as the fluid nature of meaning making is demonstrated through interviews, open-ended surveys, participant observation, or a host of other qualitative methods. The data from these methodological approaches would then be used to locate meaning in the observable communication.

Interpretive Approaches to Theory and Method in Practice

To make these ideas clearer, two examples from my own work illustrate ways that method and theory can be reflexively used in communication research to develop understandings of relationships, sex, and sexuality through interpretive approaches. In the studies I take special care to detail how I developed method and analysis as part of the research process, a common and often appropriate choice in interpretive research (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). This, in turn, allows me to draw from existing conceptual or theoretical bases and consider them in conjunction with the data. This peek into two research studies, then, should demonstrate how interaction between theory and method is an important element of interpretive qualitative research. I begin with a study exploring sexting.

Study 1: Understanding Sexting

Although sexting has become something of a buzzword—it was named as a finalist for word of the year in 2009 by Oxford University Press (Gardner, 2009)—it still remains largely unexplored in academic domains. The limited exploration that does exist often examines sexting as a legal (Humbach,

2010) or dark-side interpersonal issue (Manning, in press-c) related to adolescence. When explored in an adult context, sexting research has been primarily limited to studies of political scandal (e.g., Juntunen & Väliverronen, 2010), although one study involving young adults in the United States estimates 59% of them are sexting (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & Cosmogirl.com, 2008). Given how little is known about adults who are sexting, and in consideration of the limited public discourse about such behavior (Manning, in press-c), I became interested in how adults were sexting. Fearing that I might fall into the same traps that those who have tried to quantify digital sexual behavior have fallen into (Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011), I wanted to understand how sexting was being used in everyday talk as well as in functional practice. Doing so would help me to understand what participants—and people in everyday talk—meant when they used the term.

To accomplish this task, I developed an analytical technique I call *participant definitional analysis*. The data for this study came from 10 participant interviews, which resulted in the creation of a survey completed by 68 additional participants. Participants were mostly White (75.6%), but they were diverse in age (ranging from 18 to 54 years), sex (55% female, 45% male), and sexual orientation (13% identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual). In addition to participating in an interview or survey focusing on their understandings, experiences, motivations, and views of sexting, they were asked to share any sext messages they had on their phones (excluding pictures for potential legal reasons).

Participant Definitional Analysis to Define Sexting

As mentioned, seeking previous studies to assist in understanding how and why adults were sexting yielded little insight, but one insight in particular was quite important: researchers were having a hard time operationalizing sexting in a way that findings would be consistent across studies (Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011). Such problems suggested to me that researchers might be having a hard time *understanding processes*, or making sense of the actions and events occurring in a situation (Manning & Kunkel, 2014)—in this case, sexting. To consider how participants were describing the process of sexting, I looked to two reflective elements of the study: a portion of the survey/interview where I asked them to directly define sexting; and how participants were actively talking or writing about sexting when answering other questions. I also examined the sext messages provided by participants to examine how sexting was actively taking place. Coding across the three kinds of data enabled the creation of a definition that was not pre-formed by me as a researcher, but that instead was created by the participants in the study as they communicated about the process.

The result is a definition that can be used in qualitative studies for contrast and comparison and as a grounded way of operationalizing quantitative studies: Sexting is *the willing interactive exchange of sexual-oriented messages using a digital mobile communications device*. As a validity check for this definition, I engaged quasi-statistics (Becker, 1970) that demonstrated that the definition satisfied the way sexting was used by 77 of the 78 participants in the study (or 98.7%) in both the protocol-reflective (meaning how they talked about sexting in interviews or during surveys) and active (based on the sext messages shared) cases. This definition did, however, vary for an overwhelming majority of participants from the definition of sexting provided at the beginning of the study. Details about this variance are provided in the discussion of each element of the definition.

Willing interactive exchange. A key element of participants' definition of sexting is that it is an *interactive exchange*, not one that is one-sided. As a 38-year-old heterosexual White woman shared in a survey, "For it to be sexting, it has to be that the person is texting you back. Just sending a message to someone doesn't count, because it doesn't mean that they're into it or want to do it." A 47-year-old heterosexual White man agreed, noting in an interview that, "I've gotten messages from women who are bad news. They send something they shouldn't. And I ignore it. We're not going to be sexting." Some even pointed to sending unwanted sext messages as a form of aggression. As a 23-year-old heterosexual Black woman shared in a survey, "I don't like it when guys send you sexy messages and you don't want them. To me that's almost like they are assaulting you or making you read sexual things you should not have to read." As these data exemplars all illustrate, participants only see an interaction as sexting if both are *willingly* exchanging messages. "But you don't have to both be doing the sexual stuff," said a 21-year-old gay White man in an interview. "My ex, he said he didn't know what to write, but he told me to keep sending him stuff. So that's how we did it."

Sexual-oriented messages. Sexting involves messages that are sexually oriented, but not always in the form one might expect to see. Many, in attempting to articulate a definition of sexting at the beginning of the protocol, shared that they would "know it when I see it," or "you can tell it is sexual because it is about sex." Looking at the actual sext messages provided by participants, however, left me at a loss as to how they were sex-oriented. In enacting member checks (Manning & Kunkel, 2014), I specifically asked people about how messages that did not seem sexual in nature (e.g., "I'm still smiling thinking about you in that dress" or "You lifting weights right now?") were sexual. Participants helped me to understand their meaning-making process, with one succinctly noting,

> It doesn't necessarily mean that you are trying to have sex with the person, or that you're even being sexually explicit. But you know it is sexual because you two had something outside of that message that lets you know exactly what they mean.

As a 40-year-old bisexual Black woman shared in her survey, "Most of the time sext messages are quite dirty, but sometimes they mean much more when they only hint at sex." As that data excerpt, as well as many others, helps to demonstrate, sext messages do not have to be explicitly sexual in nature (e.g., "Are you wet?" or "I'm licking every inch of your body") but are often sexually oriented to the point that only those who are involved in the interaction may be able to identify it. Additionally, even though the exemplars provided here are text based, many participants indicated that sexually oriented pictures constituted sexting, and a few participants (all gay men) reported sharing links to erotic material.

Digital mobile communications device. A final element of the definition is that sexting uses a digital mobile communication device. As was clear from participant talk, they almost always assumed—and shared sext messages from—smart phones or less-sophisticated cellular phones. During interviews some participants asked me if Skype or chatters counted as sexting, and I returned the question to them ("What do you think?"). Most argued that such interaction was really not the same, with one saying that he could see where some would think that even if he did not personally.

Study 2: The Multiple Discourses of Purity Rings

Just as sexting has gained attention in popular discourse, so too have purity pledges and their oft-accompanying rings (Gardner, 2011). Purity rings are rings young women (and sometimes men) wear in place of a wedding ring to symbolize that they have vowed to refrain from sexual activity until married. Scholarship about purity pledges is limited, but what has been learned is revealing. In terms of their efficacy, research shows that those who wear purity rings are more likely to delay having sexual intercourse, but when they do have sex they are also less likely to use protection (Bruckner & Bearman, 2005). Research also indicates that if someone chooses to enter a pledge on their own it is more likely that the vow will be honored than if someone is encouraged to pledge (Bersamin, Walker, Waiters, Fisher, & Grube, 2005). All things considered, in most cases purity pledges do not seem to have any long-term effect (Rosenbaum, 2009). Lack of efficacy aside, purity pledges and abstinence-only education have also been critiqued by critical and feminist scholars (e.g., Doan & Williams, 2008; Valenti, 2010) who have identified such programs as sexist, harmful to the self-esteem of women, ignorant of scientific research, and ineffective.

To date, most of the research about purity rings has been based on public discourses or media accounts, with little—if any—research coming from interactions with families about what the rings mean to them and how various family members make sense of their pledging experiences. To remedy this, I engaged multiadic interviews (Manning, 2010) with 13 families (57 total research participants) from two U.S. communities. Each of the daughters in the study wore a purity ring and had signed a purity vow. The families were ethnically diverse but mostly White.

A Multiadic Approach to Discourses

As with the sexting study, I wanted to capture multiple discourses that allowed different vantage points for examining how family members made meaning about the pledge process and particularly purity rings. I was especially interested in the rings as a cultural discourse, or a way of making meaning about significant or ritualized elements of life—in this case, sex. To do that, I used a multiadic approach to discourse collection (Manning, in press-b, in press-d), a form of discourse gathering that involves "a variety of discourses to be collected so that they can be compared and contrasted to allow for multiple ways of knowing in a given study" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 155). After some initial investigation, I decided that process should involve the following: collecting the materials used as part of the pledging process as one discourse; interviews with each family member away from the full family to understand their individual viewpoints; and then a joint interview with all family members using the same protocol so I could see what discourse they generated together as a family unit.

Multiadic Analysis

For this study, I also was interested in developing and utilizing what I call *multiadic analysis*, or a way of tracing relationships between discourses as well as considering where discourses may be segmented or muted from one discursive situation to another. I developed this form of analysis as part of the research process after I quickly realized that many statements made by mothers and daughters were

shared with me in private personal interviews, but these same discourses never entered full family interviews. These discourses were often about sexual behavior, and comparing their presence in the individual interviews with their absence from the joint interviews illuminated understandings about how these discourses—like many sex-oriented discourses—could be both partial and multifaceted. The use of multiadic analysis also facilitated understandings of nonsexual discourses, particularly the meaning of the purity ring. Although many meanings were offered for the purity ring (and will be presented in another research manuscript, as will the implications of the private sexual discourses shared by the mothers and daughters), one articulated meaning stood out because in joint interviews it matched exactly with what fathers said in solo interviews.

Families symbolically boasting through purity rings. Without exception, and across all joint interviews, a discourse was generated in which family members invoked the ring and what it represented as symbolic of their family. One father directly stated, "This ring is our family," and another that "They see that ring, they see us." Statements such as these discursively placed the family into the ring, a process known as symbolic boasting (Manning, 2008, 2012). Mothers were most vocal about this particular discourse, with one saying,

> I believe this ring, it shows who we are. We see here what everyone in the family wants, and what we have and that's in the ring. Even those who don't agree with it, they see it too and they know what this family stands for . . . even if they don't know us personally.

Absence of boasting and presence of loyalty in mother and daughter interview discourses. As mentioned, fathers were likely to mention the ring as a symbol of the family and its values in the private individual interviews. Similar statements were not made in individual interviews with mothers and daughters, however. Instead, a discourse that did not appear in the joint family interviews—a discourse of loyalty—was present. As one mother shared, "Really, I do this because I think it makes Alan feel better. I don't think it makes a big difference, but it makes a difference to him. So I back him up on it." Another mother offered, "Yeah, I think it's important. Not as important as my husband, but, you know, he brought it up and I thought, yeah, I'll support you and do it." When asked directly what the ring symbolized to them, mothers had similar answers: they saw it as a sign of loyalty to the family, as a way of helping their daughter avoid mistakes, and as a representation of the vow their daughters took. No mother said it was symbolic of the family in individual interviews. Daughters also tended to share discourses of loyalty, only the loyalty was not only to their fathers but to both parents as a coherent unit. "I do this because it makes my parents happy," one daughter said. "I know it makes them feel like they're being good parents, so I do it," said another. When asked what the ring symbolized, there was no mention of the family. In most cases, daughters only answered that it represented the vow they took. As these findings suggest, the methods used in this study generated different discourses in different situations that yielded different insights into what purity rings mean to families.

Making a Home for Qualitative Studies of Relationships and Sexuality

Despite their usefulness and a continued growing presence, interpretive qualitative studies are somewhat rare in an interpersonal communication context. As Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) found in

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their analysis of 19 core communication journals, only 13.9% of interpersonal communication articles published from 1990 to 2005 were interpretive. Braithwaite and colleagues recently replicated that study to extend through 2012 and the results were similar. Additionally, a January 2013 search of the database Communication and Mass Media Complete using the strings *interpersonal*, *sex* or *sexuality*, and *qualitative* yielded only 15 unique article hits. To be sure, there is work to be done to make a home for this work in the communication discipline. At the same time, because there is so little accessible published research in the area, it offers some exciting possibilities for scholars to make unique and much-needed contributions. As a final consideration, I offer two ways that scholars interested in this work can make inroads: the use of "guerilla scholarship" and some suggestions about how to take advantage of the natural interest others often have in this kind of work.

Getting Guerilla

Drawing from Rawlins (2007), who details how he was "seduced in all my earlier work by the dominating ethos of quantitative social science into aping its trappings, writing style, and subdivisions" (p. 59), Ellingson (2009) makes a bold assertion regarding how qualitative research can be sold to academic audiences:

> If you feel as passionately as I do that your work holds the potential to help people, to promote social justice, to shed light on a complex problem, and/or to significantly influence your discipline, then make sure your important work that most directly serves those goals gets done and published. If that goal requires adapting to a format you do not particularly enjoy, so be it . . . If subterfuge is required to effect change, then do it. Do not fear that you sell your soul; instead, embrace your righteous guerilla persona and infiltrate mainstream publication outlets. (pp. 134–135)

A guerilla approach is about ways of pushing research boundaries when conventional boundaries do not create an always-welcome space for method or genre.

Ellingson's (2009) favorite form of guerilla scholarship involves citing "multiple other works that reflect different methods, genres of representation, ideologies, even paradigms" (p. 135). She contends that this will lead to scholars tracing those sources back to their nondominant origins and "straight into a forest of new practices that could broaden her or his horizons" (p. 135). I also assert that this practice encourages communication scholars to be aware of multiple traditions in the discipline and adept at understanding them and using them in their own work. Ellingson points out that these citations do not have to be limited to reference sections, but rather can come in the form of footnotes, interludes, epigraphs, or other discourses that can push boundaries and make room for marginalized scholarship. My own way of enacting a guerilla approach has been to seek publication outlets that are amenable to expanding methods or topics in communication research. Some may label some of these journals as small or note that book chapters are difficult to discover and cite; but as long as the scholarship does not sacrifice quality and each publication is making a contribution to one's research program, then that body of work is creating a base that can be cited later. Ideally, that will facilitate further work on the topic and

ensure that a theory or method will be published in outlets where the work can be accessed and used more easily.

Seducing Our Fellow Scholars

Another way to advance interpretive sexuality studies is to take advantage of their seductive nature. Sexuality studies often involve topics that are quite interesting and that can generate a lot of attention. When I mention studies about listening or uncertainty reduction to people, they often respond politely and smile. When I tell the same people that I have studied sexting or purity rings, their eyes widen as they seem to genuinely want to know more about what I have learned. The trick is to not let these studies appear to be novelty pieces—something that is identified as a weakness for inquiries about sexuality and relationships—but to dazzle the willing audience with rich theorizing that adds to existing scholarly conversations and begins new ones. Doing that depends on being well-read and developing a rich methodological, theoretical, and conceptual knowledge base from which to draw. Those interested in qualitative relationships research might turn to a research guide specifically aimed at developing such research (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014) and supplement that with other primers that can provide additional insights (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013). As any good methods guide will attest, understanding the value of analysis to qualitative theorizing is important, and so a coding manual (e.g., Saldaña, 2013) will provide a full range of options available that may inspire original approaches. The writing or presentation of the research should reflect these approaches. Tracy (2012) notes that a "toxic" practice for qualitative researchers is to try and fit interpretive work into writing styles that make them look more deductive in nature (p. 109).

For a rich theoretical understanding, it is helpful to understand how interpretive approaches fit into a larger communication discipline, and so metatheoretical reviews (e.g., Anderson, 1996) or models (e.g., Craig, 1999; Craig & Muller, 2007) are good for big-picture perspective. Knowing similarities and differences across paradigms will make it easier to explain work to scholars from various backgrounds and to use their work in considering a study. Handbooks (e.g., Knapp & Daly, 2011; Vangelisti & Perlman, 2006) are great for explaining common topics in relationship studies and common theoretical themes that help to explain them. Again, that can help to place studies of relationships and sex or sexuality into a larger conversation. Books have also pieced together strands of research dealing with sexuality and relationships (e.g., Noland, 2010; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993) as have state-of-the-art essays (e.g., Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2006). It is important to consider differences in theoretical backgrounds in the interdisciplinary field of sex science, too. For example, *queer theory* is different than *GLBT studies* (Lovaas, Elia, & Yep, 2006; Manning, 2009a), and so those studying sexual identity might pick up a collection (e.g., Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003) that can clarify those distinctions.

Conclusion

Interpretive qualitative studies of relationships, sex, and sexuality hold great promise for advancing theoretical development and conceptual understanding. Finding strong exemplars for how others are doing this work can be helpful. The reference list at the end of this essay will offer connections to research articles and book chapters that can serve as models. Attending a conference such as the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality (see http://www.sexscience.org) can

allow for firsthand observation of sex scientists from many disciplines sharing their work. It can also facilitate connections for carrying out research projects or finding a publication home for sexuality studies. With increased attention to reflexive connections between theorizing and method, however, the problem of finding a home for such vital and important work can soon be a thing of the past.

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