Published in final edited form as:

Sex Cult. 2015 December ; 19(4): 715–736. doi:10.1007/s12119-015-9286-1.

“We are Arabs:” The Embodiment of Virginity Through Arab and Arab American Women’s Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Virginity is part of our existence in the world as embodied sexual subjects. While many meanings are associated with virginity, in most of the Arab world virginity relates to the presence of a hymen and extends to encompass the honor of the Arab community, and virginity loss commonly relate to first vaginal intercourse. This study explored the meanings of virginity from the perspectives of Arab and Arab American women. A qualitative phenomenological approach, informed by the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was used to conduct in-depth interviews with ten women. We identified one over-arching theme *Virginity as Identity*, and two major themes *Embodiment of Virginity* and “We are Arabs.” To reach an embodied virginity, participants went through a disembodied virginity process, reflecting society’s perceptions and values of virginity related to anatomical presence of a hymen and society’s honor. “We are Arabs” describes the ways women identified with the Arab ethnic identity as a shared overall identification, but differed from one lived experience to another, and influenced how participants embodied virginity. Our participants provided a better understanding of the diverse meanings of virginity that move beyond the binary of virginity and virginity loss, and into a spectrum of embodied meanings. Findings suggest the need for future research around sexuality in Arab Americans with attention to socio-political contexts in order to understand the nature and context of sexual initiation and its impact on sexual behaviors and well-being.

Keywords

Virginity; Arab and Arab American women; Phenomenology; Embodiment; Ethnic identity

Introduction

Tremendous diversity and differences in definitions and meanings of sexuality in general and virginity in particular exist within and between different racial/ethnic groups, including Arabs. Virginity is part of our existence in the world as embodied sexual subjects and, while many meanings are associated with virginity and commonly related to first vaginal

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical standard The study have been approved by the appropriate ethics committee and have therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

intercourse, in most of the Arab world virginity relates to the presence of a hymen and extends to encompass the honor of the Arab community.

Virginity, sexuality, and heteronormative gender roles are common categories identified in most studies examining Arab and Arab American identities (Ajrouch 2004; Akl 2014; El Feki 2013; Ilkkaracan 2008; Naber 2006, 2012, Read and Oselin 2008; Read 2003; Shakir 1997; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005). Virginity, heteronormative sexual expression and gender performance are important aspects of the daily lives of Arab women and are important in understanding their identification as Arab women (Amer et al. 2015; Buitelaar 2002; El Feki 2013; El Saadawi 2007; Skandrani et al. 2010); however, there is a gap in research that explores the meanings of virginity from the perspectives of Arab and Arab American women as the primary focus of the research. The purpose of this paper is to explore the meanings of virginity from the perspectives of Arab and Arab American women and what life experiences shape these meanings using a phenomenological approach.

Background

The diversity of Arabs, as well as the immigration experiences and the sociopolitical history between the Arab world and the “West,” have shaped the construction of the Arab ethnic identities in the United States (US) (Nassar-McMillan et al. 2014). Little information is available about the demographics of Arab Americans, in part because the US government does not recognize them as a minority group and classifies them as “White” (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Jamal and Naber 2008). This classification has framed Arab Americans as culturally invisible or what Nadine Naber labeled “ambiguous insiders” (Naber 2000). Naber added that initially Arab immigrants actively sought the “White” classification to fight the stigma and discrimination of not being identified as White and to ease the process of assimilation into the American mainstream; however, the White status allowed for an “invisibility” that became central to the lives of Arab Americans for decades. The events of and following September 11, 2001 (9/11), formed a hyper-visibility of Arabs in the US and subsequently reinforced stereotypes, discrimination, and Orientalist discourses (Abu-Ras and Suarez 2009; Jamal and Naber 2008).

Naber (2012) discussed the longstanding impact of Orientalist discourses on the daily lives of Arab Americans and how it changed post-9/11.¹ She argued that post 9/11, new Orientalist discourses constructed images of Arabs as all Muslim, strict and oppressive to women, backward, terrorist, and lacking democratic ideals and values in direct opposition to a liberal, modern, and civilized West. Naber (2012) and other feminists scholars (Abu-Lughod 2002) argued that new Orientalist discourses reinforced several ideas such as Arab and Muslim queers and women are oppressed by a homophobic and sexist culture (Arab) and religion (Islam). Naber described how Arab Americans reversed the American Orientalist discourses to form some kind of cultural validity expressed through what she called “the triangulated ideal of the good Arab family, good Arab girls, and compulsory

¹Orientalism, a concept attributed to Edward Said (1978) more than 30 years ago, describes the Western representation of Arab cultures. It is shaped by European imperialist attitudes that define the “Orient” in terms of cultural or religious perspectives. It is a political ideology that promotes binary differences between the East (Arabs) and the West (Europeans, North Americans).

heterosexuality, all in opposition to an imagined America and its apparent sexual promiscuity, broken families, and bad women” (p. 65).

Being part of the visibility and invisibility of the Arab Americans, Arab American women’s lives are also framed by their immigration experiences as well as by race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, and politics. Lately, more scholarly work has been conducted among Arab Americans but few focused on sexuality (Akl 2014; Ikizler and Szymanski 2014; Mousa 2011; Naber 2006). An example is Naber’s work (2006) that addressed Arab American femininities by investigating the intersection of sexuality and Arab ethnic identity in the US. She discussed the difficulties faced by Arab women living in the US, especially those who are strongly influenced by their Arab parents’ cultural and religious values and understandings of modesty, honor, and morality. Similarly, she noted that women who are strongly influenced by their parents’ misunderstandings about American women not being moral or modest, also face difficulties. More recently, Akl (2014) investigated the “multimodal expressions” of Arab Muslim women in the US and reported a focus on family life, social concerns, gender roles, sexual expression, and the use of the digital space for self-expression.

Virginity and sexuality are important categories in identity formation of Arab and Arab American women but are understudied. Our study is a step to fill a gap in the literature and add to the scant existing knowledge around virginity and sexuality and Arab and Arab American women. We aim to better understand the meanings of virginity through the lived experiences of these women.

Methods

Phenomenology is a philosophy about consciousness, knowledge, and the diverse ways of being in the world; it is an analysis of the intentional experiences in order to perceive the meaning of a phenomenon and to arrive at its essence (Sadala and Adorno 2002). Hermeneutics is a philosophy of understanding and interpretation with the acknowledgment that understanding is always positional and influenced by one’s personal, cultural, and historical background (Todres and Wheeler 2001). Phenomenology differs from other standard qualitative methodologies in that it is a philosophical methodology that is concerned with the life world and the human experience as it is lived. The overall framework that informed our study is based on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012). Through his philosophy of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty considered, “my body is my point of view upon the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012). He conceptualized the embodied person existing in a knot of relationships that opens the person to the world. The experiences with our existence in the world are interconnected and intertwined with other people’s experiences and with the world we live in. Hence, in our study, the lived experiences and meanings of virginity among Arab and Arab American women were interpreted from the perspectives of their inseparability from the world, societies, cultures, and other people they interconnect with. Experiences and meanings of virginity are developed, influenced, and transformed by relationships with other people and the situational context in which they live. In this study, we did not aim to discover the “truth” about virginity and its meanings, but rather to shed light on the complexity of this

phenomenon and the diverse ways in which Arab and Arab American women embody it. Merleau-Ponty believed that the meaning of a phenomenon is always ambiguous, no matter how much we investigate it; there is no absolute truth, and meaning is always in transformation (Thomas 2005).

We conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with ten Arab and Arab American women living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We followed a purposive sampling method using several recruitment techniques (flyers, emails, personal connections, university campuses, and snowballing). The target participants were women who identified as Arab or Arab American and had Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, Palestinian, Iraqi, or Egyptian origins; lived in the US for at least 3 years; had both parents from an Arab country; were either born in the country of origin or in the US; were Arabic-speaking; and were ages 18–35 years. The primary author conducted the ten interviews in Arabic and/or English following an open-structured interview guide; the interviews lasted between 50 and 96 min and were audio-recorded.

This paper emerged as part of the doctoral dissertation of the primary author. The study was approved by the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board in April of 2012. The data collection started in May 2012 and was completed in November of 2013. All participants signed an informed consent and received a \$25 gift card of their choice.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The transcribed interviews were analyzed in their original language (Santos et al. 2015; Suh et al. 2009) using the hermeneutical circle of interpretation guided by Paul Ricoeur's theory to analyze the textual data (Streubert and Carpenter 2011). Ricoeur's theory of interpretation provides researchers with the ability to understand and interpret the multiple meanings that are provided by the text. The interpretation was a continuous process of relating a part of some text to the whole of the text and all passages were understood in their relationship to the larger whole. The process followed three different steps (the naïve reading, the thematic structural analysis, and the interpretation of the whole) that took place in an iterative fashion. ATLAS.ti7TM, a qualitative data manager software, was used to code the interviews for meaning units.

Findings

The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 33, with five being born outside of the US. They all self-identified as middle or upper middle class and had at least an undergraduate education or were enrolled in one. Two of the participants were married, one was engaged, one was in a relationship, and six were single. Two participants identified as Christians and eight as Muslims. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

The meanings of virginity related to every theme and subtheme that emerged. Virginity could not be explained separately from the way in which it was embodied by the women in the study or from the way it was disembodied by their parents, friends, Arab men, religions, traditions, and overall Arab societies. Virginity became more abstract but interrelated to who these women were. Virginity could not be described separately from the ways these women

recounted stories of their Arab ethnic identity that was distinguished from other American and Arab identities. Salwa explicitly said: “I feel like if I did lose my virginity in that way [before marriage], I feel like I would lose a sense of my identity.” Kareen described: “I want to wait ‘cause that’s who I am.” The diverse lived experiences with their bodies, their families, their ethnicities, and their societies shaped the different meanings of virginity. For some participants, the meanings changed over time; for other participants, the meanings stayed the same but their standpoints changed over time. As we read and listened to the stories of the participants repeatedly, we heard the voices of women describing who they are, their identities. Hence, the overarching theme of the study is Virginity as Identity. This overarching theme emerged from two major themes, Embodiment of Virginity and “We are Arabs”. Table 2 summarizes the themes and subthemes of the study.

Embodiment of Virginity

The Embodiment of Virginity theme encompassed two separate but interrelated subthemes, identified by exemplar participant quotation: “Virginity felt when I was intimate with someone” and “I did not make a decision of how valuable my virginity was.” This theme reflects how participants reached the different meanings of an embodied virginity through a disembodiment process.

Virginity Felt When I Was Intimate with Someone

For this group of Arab and Arab American women, virginity was described in an abstract fashion that reflected experience, maturity, transition, responsibility, trust, and knowing and loving one’s body. Embodied virginity was described differently by different participants, but none of them defined its importance as a separate biological entity or, more specifically a body part such as the hymen. Layal recounted:

People think of it as this hymen that you have and if you get and if that’s gone then your virginity is gone. And to me my virginity felt when I was intimate with someone, when I completely felt comfortable to let go of myself and allow that person to see me naked, let’s say. I felt that was what virginity meant to me. It was that experience of you know, allowing someone in. And it’s definitely not the hymen, for me.

Layal’s decision to lose her virginity was based on positioning herself differently than some other girls who were engaging in intimate sexual relationships, yet refusing vaginal intercourse to maintain their virginity, and she never regretted it. She strongly opposed the idea that women are virgins after being physically intimate with someone, even if penetrating vaginal intercourse has not occurred. She said (translated from Arabic):

In the summer, we used to do everything, you take your clothes off, you do this, you do that. And so what’s the difference? Is it just the word [virginity]? I felt I was being very superficial with myself, and I felt that it was a hypocrisy more than anything else, and I think that’s why I slept with him, and I did it after three years of knowing him. So I was like 20 years old. I don’t have regrets.

Similarly, Zeina referred to women who engage in different forms of sexual activities except vaginal penetration as using an artificial line:

What an artificial line. People are like you're not having sex if you're doing everything but penetration! That's insane. That's insane. But that's what makes like—that's what makes you pure? Because you've done every single other thing but here where you've drawn the line?

Kareen embodied her virginity in a different manner that reflected the importance of religion and culture. She started by saying: "I'll go literal first. A woman who loses her virginity is a woman who's had sex, intercourse." Then, she described that, as a Catholic person, she is very in tune with the Virgin Mary, and as an Arab person, she wants to honor and respect her parents' values and culture. Kareen described how being exposed to different cultures and ways of thinking helped her redefine her perspectives on virginity. After perceiving virginity as the only way of being in the world for a non-married woman, Kareen viewed virginity at the time of the interview as not just the physical or scientific explanation; virginity was responsibility, intimacy and spirituality:

like intimate, spirituality, like something—like it is physical but it's more, there is a lot of I guess, of baggage associated with it cause I mean, there's no scientific—like I don't see virginity and science being together—For me virginity is more something spiritual, something you know religious and something emotional that you participate in; like sex is something you participate in with somebody else and it's something very intimate. And I think, that's the way I see virginity; who am I saving myself to? Who of worth am I gonna give myself to? Who is worthy of me?

Kareen, who was virgin was at the time of the interview, revealed ambivalence by going back and forth between describing her strong beliefs and values about remaining virgin, and describing the ideal relationship where there is a possibility that she will not wait till after marriage. Through her exposure to other people's experiences, she understood the importance of a physical relationship along with the emotional aspect to feel the intimacy and trust with a partner. Despite her ambivalence, Kareen showed agency and ownership of her embodied virginity.

The embodied virginity for the ten women in the study described a transition from "being a girl to being a woman" (Reem) that can change her worldview. For participants like Eliana and Nisreen, virginity reflected respect to self and to one's body. Eliana described how a woman needs to be happy on her own and content with herself in order to be happy with someone else. Nisreen described how there is an association between virginity, respecting self, and protecting one's body from "everyone who's not who you want to lose your virginity to." Aianna, who had lost her virginity with a boyfriend, redefined "losing" virginity by "gaining" a bond with someone. She considered that being of an Arab ancestry and living in the US contributed to her way of thinking and the decisions she made:

I guess it's something that takes a completely new level of trust to let someone in in that way. I think that just means something between you and that person. Okay, it's technically losing your virginity, but realistically you're gaining something. You're gaining that bond with someone.

The ten Arab and Arab American women described diverse ways of embodying virginity through intimacy that resonated with their lives as bodily beings, influenced by their

identity, culture, ethnicity, and religion. Despite interpreting virginity through intimacy, some participants embodied it by remaining virgins and others by not. At the time of the interview, three participants decided that they would only lose their virginity after marriage, three participants preferred not to lose their virginity till after marriage but might lose it before marriage depending on the relationship and the person, and four participants had lost their virginity before marriage.

The women consistently recounted that virginity is not *just* who they are or what their worth is. From the different life experiences and their interconnectedness with the world and other people, the participants discussed how they initially constructed the meanings of virginity through a disembodiment process.

I Did Not Make a Decision of How Valuable My Virginity Was

During the interviews, the participants reflected on their past and current experiences that led most of them to an embodied understanding of virginity. However, for most participants, the process described was a disembodied one. In other words, the value and importance of virginity were dictated by “others.” Consistently across all interviews, “others” referred to parents, extended family, religions, men, traditions, cultures, and Arab societies.

Nour considered that the great value that is given to female virginity is partly because of the importance attributed to it by all religions and partly because some people confuse traditions with religious beliefs. She disagreed with the association made between a woman’s virginity and honor, be it the woman’s, the family’s, or the society’s honor, because she argued, “We don’t associate a man’s virginity with honor.” Nour’s main concern was with how people misunderstood religions and applied virginity to women only. For Nour, virginity was one of the many forms of sexism:

I don’t add honor to virginity because no one adds honor or no one speaks of men’s virginity. There is no virginity. Virginity is always spoken of with women because it is known that there is evidence. For men, there isn’t. You cannot tell if he’s virgin or not right? So the fact that you can tell for a woman, that’s why it’s important—that’s why I question it. What’s the value of it? It’s just about the appearance of it right? That’s why there are these surgeries [virginity restoration]. It’s based on the appearance of it.

Nour considered that society’s view on virginity and its worth reduces it to the presence of a hymen; this perception was echoed by other participants as they discussed the meanings of virginity restoration. The procedure was perceived by all participants as a lie and deception that devalued women and was created by men, families and societies. Kareen said “and so by doing hymen reconstruction, that will verify that she is still virgin, that she is worthy of them.” Similarly, Rana described that from the biological sense, virginity is a tissue that does not have any physical value; virginity’s value is more abstract. Rana thought that the physical value of women’s virginity is mostly important to men. As for Aianna, neither hymen or virginity restoration nor the hymen itself were symbols of virginity.

Zeina, who lost her virginity with a boyfriend, talked about the shame, sin, and guilt conversations around losing virginity and the sexual act. She recalled that she was not

ashamed of losing her virginity until her boyfriend made her feel ashamed and consequently, she considered undergoing virginity restoration but never did. Zeina added that these conversations of shame lead women to fear their sexualities and to develop unhealthy relationships with their bodies. At the end of the interview, Zeina shared her overall thoughts on virginity that described the disembodied artificial process that Arab women go through to reach an understanding of the value of virginity:

We let something that is natural and a part of us, we let somebody else dictate to us, it is dictated to us what the value is. You know? Like it's not something that I determine, like I did not make a decision of how valuable my virginity was. I was told how valuable it was. You know my parents, my family, they said this is so valuable, it's really important, you cannot have sex, you cannot use tampons, it's so important. You know, there was no independent process on my part to arrive at the value of virginity. So it's totally artificial—So I don't know if I really know what the value of virginity is. I don't even know if it really has a value. Like what is the value in today's world of being a virgin when it doesn't come with loving yourself, or having a healthy love for your body or having no shame when you have sex. Where is the value of virginity when you don't have those things that actually make it valuable?

The women in this study clearly described the importance of the presence of the hymen as a sign of virginity, purity, and honor to the parents, the men in their lives, their religions, and their traditions. In the life stories told, we heard disconnection between the participants' value of their virginity and the outside world's value of their virginity. We pictured two different virginities: the first was the participant's, a lived being, and the second was a separate entity for the world to evaluate. The words of Zeina, "I did not make a decision of how valuable my virginity was. I was told how valuable it was," clearly spoke to the picture of two distinct virginities, one embodied and another disembodied.

The process of embodying or disembodimenting virginity is strongly influenced by how these ten Arab and Arab American women ethnically identified. "We are Arabs" describes the Arab ethnic identity of the participants that resonates with being in the world from an Arab perspective. The ten women recounted the meaning of being an Arab in general, the meaning of being an Arab woman living in the US in particular, and how these meanings intertwined and shaped the embodiment of virginity. Two subthemes emerged from the representation of the Arab ethnic identity, *Us (Arabs) versus them (Americans)* and *Me (Arab) versus them (other Arabs)*.

We Are Arabs

Throughout the interviews, categories of family and gender continually emerged and intersected with virginity, sexuality, and immigration. These categories circulated within the participants' families and communities, and were contested and redefined over time and over different generations. As the women in this study tried to describe and explain what virginity meant for them and why, their explanations circled around the overall Arab ethnic identity that was significantly characterized by family, the "good Arab girl" image (Naber

2006), gender division within the family, and the double standards of the sexual experience within the society.

Family

The life stories recounted by the participants revealed the major efforts of the family to preserve the overall image of the Arab ethnic identity. Preservation was even more crucial for Arab families in the US because of an image that is distorted by Orientalist discourses. These discourses, as initially described by Edward Said more than thirty years ago (Said 1978), reinforce the overwhelming differences between the East and the West in terms of culture (Arab) and religion (Islam).

The impact of the Orientalist discourses was evident in the stories told by participants and was emphasized by their family and centered on gender and sexuality. In the subtheme titled “Us (Arabs) versus them (Americans)” (see below), we describe the explicit differences between Arabs and Americans that the participants learned while growing up. Conversations around family dynamics, strict parenting, relationships with mothers and siblings, closeness to extended family, and at times the father image, were important aspects in describing virginity within the Arab ethnic identity.

Zeina recounted an incident from her childhood about strict parenting. She said:

You know they were very strict with us— there is no “I want and I don’t want,” at the table, at dinner, if you were to eat dinner, you sat there and you shut up! We were very disciplined—oh there was no dating; absolutely no dating. I remember once when my mom, I was on the phone, she would pick up the phone and listen in, and there was no dating! It was understood from a very early age that I was to avoid all boys.

The “Good Arab Girl” Image

The women portrayed an image of a “good Arab girl” that they were socialized to preserve. For the majority of participants, the “good Arab girl” image was a virgin and an educated woman who followed assigned traditional gender roles. The women gave examples for maintaining the image, such as dating or going out at night as being completely unacceptable. Kareen recalled:

I remember in sixth grade, a boy asked me out, and I told my parents and they flipped out! They said, “No boyfriends! No! No boyfriends. That’s it.” And from then on I said, “Okay, that’s what my parents wanted me to do, no boyfriends, okay no boyfriends.”

About a conversation with her sister, Kareen revealed:

Well my sister has told me that my mother has talked to her about the physical relationship, telling her, you know, “We are Arabs, we don’t do that, we wait, we’re good people.” Not to say that having sex is bad but I think in her mind, they’re not married.

To preserve the good Arab girl image, all women in this study were expected to be high achievers. These expectations were either instilled by parents or by the women themselves. Rana and Salwa discussed how they consistently pressured themselves to achieve more at school. Other participants discussed being pressured by their parents to succeed academically. Zeina said, “We were all very studious. We were all of course expected to do very well at school, whether we liked it or not.” Nisreen recalled:

And my mother would always say, “We want you to get an education so that if you get married and your husband was bad to you, you can leave him and you can support yourself.” So these are some of the things, the values that they instilled in me.

Many participants enacted agency over their virginity, gender roles, and performance in different modalities, using the academic success to increase parents’ trust in them and to negotiate going out and staying out late. Layal described her relationship with her father in terms of negotiating her outings and her personal space:

I was very studious at school so my dad used to love the way I think so he was always allowing me more personal space than my siblings. I used to do whatever I wanted because he trusted me. He cared a lot about my grades so, “You can do whatever you want since your grades are high; you can do whatever you want”—and in Lebanon, everybody goes out to party, and they stay out till three or four in the morning. So the first time I went out like this, my dad was shocked but then I would talk to him logically and convince him and he would say, “Okay, I trust you, you can do whatever you want.” So since then I was able to go out and party till three or four in the morning; they stopped asking me questions.

Kareen used similar strategies when trying to convince her parents to let her move out of their home for college, to live in the dormitories, and eventually to get her own apartment. When she decided to move to another state for work, Kareen negotiated her career development with her parents so that they continued to trust her and to allow her to pursue the career and educational opportunities that were awaiting her. These negotiations used by participants like Layal, who lost her virginity as a single woman, and Kareen, who showed ambivalence with respect to remaining virgin until marriage, reflect different modalities of agency over their lives. By understanding their position in the world as Arab women, Layal and Kareen navigated the webs of relations and the influence of the different cultures and gender norms they were embedded in, in order to move beyond the traditional gender roles but still maintain the good Arab girl image.

Gender Division Within the Family

In describing the meanings of virginity, the women discussed the double standards in gender role expectations or “sexism,” as the participant Nour explicitly labeled it. For participants who had brothers, the double standards and different gender role expectations were witnessed both in the home as well as outside of it in Arab communities.

Zeina recounted the fights with her mother about going to the prom:

It was always my mother who would make a big stake of this and anything; if I wanted to go to a dance, there was no dances, I mean I was—I went to the prom only after fights, fights, and fights! And of course Fadi went to all proms, my brother, and it was very different.

In addition, brothers did not have to gain trust of the parents or succeed academically to be allowed to go out or talk about sex. Layal recalled:

My brother was always in trouble at school, always failing, always making problems; he was never on good terms with my father—but in terms of going out with girls and partying, of course they [parents] never had a problem with that. My father might even laugh with him about it. But of course, I could never talk about this at home; so yeah, of course there are double standards.

The stories that most participants described, echoed the important role of families in gender role division and expectations. The double standards that were witnessed at home through simple rules such as “no dating” but for the women, reflected the reinforcement of the gender double standards at the societal level.

Double Standards of Sexual Experience Within the Society

The participants discussed the double standards within the Arab society in terms of virginity: Arab men are allowed to engage in pre-marital sex while Arab women are not. Participants attributed the virginity double standards to several factors: patriarchy and male dominance in Arab societies, misinterpretation of religious tenets, Arab men’s egos, norms of masculinity, moral hypocrisy, gender dynamics of parenting and family, and finally the assumption that the presence or absence of the hymen is an accurate indicator of a woman’s prior sexual experience. The following are excerpts from different participants’ stories about virginity and double standards:

Layal But I know that Arab men think this way. It’s very unfortunate that it’s okay for them to go sleep around but the person that wanna marry is someone who’s a virgin, but I think, things have been changing a lot in that respect—Part of it is ego. Like the men have such an ego like the person I’m with or married to is still a virgin so no one can talk about her.

Kareem In the Arab world, it is a male-dominated society. I’ve met a lot of Arab men in America who will have sex with many American women. Let’s just go and have sex, it doesn’t matter to them anymore just bring the women along, whatever. But, when it’s time to get married, when it’s time to settle down, they’ll marry an Arab woman and they expect her to be a virgin, they expect her to be, you know, a naïve person who just takes care of them when they get older.

Reem I think that like there’s a really big misinterpretation of religion in terms of like a lot of times people think it’s acceptable to label someone as a whore or label her as like a terrible person, whereas a guy like, there is no virginity test for him or whatever. I think they will never be able to quite understand that like the rules apply to the guy equally to the girl—I think all Egyptian men are hypocritical. And

like our society in general is based on very hypocritical values. People would frown upon a girl who's like not a virgin, but they would like treat a man like he's a hero.

Parents instilled and maintained the Arab ethnic identity, especially in the second-generation participants. Parents were trying to preserve the identity of "We are Arabs" through their children along the generation lines. The preservation of the Arab identity was portrayed by some of the participants, but mostly by their parents through comparisons of us, being Arabs, versus them, being Americans.

Us (Arabs) Versus Them (Americans)

Participants described ways of being as an Arab that are different from ways of being as an American. Some women recalled how their mothers constantly reminded them of the "bad American things" they should not be doing. Zeina recounted: "She [her mother] was, 'Shameful! What kind of girl would bring up her boyfriend and that's American,' you know. I had an Egyptian friend whose mother was, 'This is what we took from Americans!'" She continued by describing another incident when her mother expressed fear of her daughter becoming Americanized:

There was fear of boys, fear of drinking, oh my mom was horrified. I think she read like some letter of mine lying around like detailing some big party where everyone was drinking and stuff, and she was, she did not speak to me for months! Months! Yes. Because that's all tied up to "my child becoming so American." You know, boyfriends, drinking, bad things. They're bad! It was as simple as that. You become bad. These are American things, boyfriends, and all the things, you know. Bad. It's literally that simple.

On the other hand, participants like Salwa and Nisreen have made their personal choices not to identify with certain characteristics that they considered "American." Salwa said:

I think being an Arab woman, you are set differently. There's always that barrier between you and your American friends. I could never sleep over at my friend's house. I could never do those things. So I always knew I was different than them—I think it's what separates Arabic [*sic*] girls from everybody else. I think that's another thing too, that it's you're put on a pedestal, because you're like, "Oh, I'm not gonna have sex. I'm not American. [Laughing] I'm on a different level than these girls."

The selective assimilation into American cultures provided these young Arab women with different modalities to preserve aspects of their Arab culture and to support their desires to belong and be accepted in the American culture.

A strategy used by some participants to gain mothers' trust and to allow them personal space was to explicitly inform mothers that they are not engaging in behaviors that mothers considered "American." Aianna recalled:

I told my mom, "Hey, I'm going over to this guy's place to study," or something, and she hated it. But then I reminded her, "I'm not doing drugs. I'm not drinking. I'm not keeping it a secret from you. I'm telling you that I'm going to this person's

place, that I'm just going to study." I think that, that made her trust me more, I think. I hope.

For women like Zeina and Rana, the perspectives of who they are as Arabs compared to Americans was different. Zeina discussed the "normal healthy relationships with one's body and sex" that Americans have and is missing in Arabs. Kareen's perspective on sexuality in the US was different and she argued that one cannot generalize societies' perspectives on sexuality especially in a country as diverse as the US. She said:

But I mean also you can't generalize America either because let's say you go to the —you go to the south or something like that you see Baptist church, they're gonna preach you know virginity or even you know like those children who have those promise rings or chastity bracelets.

Older participants like Zeina, Rana, and Layal echoed Kareen's perspectives on diversity and mentioned several times during the interview that they cannot generalize their opinions of all Americans and all Arabs. Younger participants like Eliana, Salwa, and Nisreen conveyed a somewhat more universal approach in their comparisons between Arabs and Americans.

An interesting standpoint of Arabs and Americans was the one of race and assimilation. Race was a fluid construct and participants identified with it differently. Several participants referred to Americans as "Whites" as a way to distinguish them from the Arabs; in other instances, they referred to other Arab family members as "White."

Zeina talked of her own experiences when she first introduced her current American husband to her parents:

And sadly, I think my parents were just so eager for me to get married that they didn't care. Isn't that crazy? They didn't care whether he was an American or purple or whatever, they were just so thankful I was getting married and I was like, you would think I was 72! You know? Which I always say I am 72 in Arab girl years. That's how happy they were. I mean you could not wipe the smile out of my parents' faces for the last 6 months.

The fact that Zeina's parents did not care about the race or nationality of her husband—because she was in her early thirties and they were worried she will not get married—speaks to race and gender issues in addition to a different perspective regarding selective assimilation/acculturation. Many participants discussed how parents wanted their children to marry only Arabs as the acceptable standards. However, when Zeina's age became critical and thinking that no Arab man would want to marry her, her parent's standards changed.

The women's identification of who they are shifted and changed based on who they were comparing themselves to. In addition to portraying themselves as being and not being part of American societies simultaneously, they also portrayed themselves as being and not being part of Arab societies.

Me (Arab) Versus Them (Other Arabs)

Participants discussed diverse ways in which they dissociated themselves from or rejected certain aspects of other Arabs, including their parents, families, Arab men, and other Arab women. Sometimes the women showed anger and frustration with what other Arabs do in terms of sexual double standards, judging others, forcing values and religions on others, and having prejudiced opinions. Reem revealed feelings of frustration with the double standards in the Arab societies:

Our culture in general is like really burdened with the double standards. Like you always have people saying, “Oh, she’s such a slut. Look at what she’s wearing.” Then the girl herself has dated like at least 18 guys in the last year or something. So everyone’s always judging someone else and using religion as an excuse, whereas everyone is like sinning in some way or another.

Zeina described how she felt alienated from and not accepted by her relatives because she was not following the expected gender role of wearing a hijab, behaving “feminine”, or getting married before the age of 30. She said:

They looked at me like I was an alien. [...] Just because I don’t think that they knew anybody else who acted like I did. So I was 30 or 31 years old, and I would come and sit down, and they would be like you know, you gotta cover your hair, and I’d be like whatever. They’d be like, you gotta have a husband, and I would be like whatever, you know [laughing].

Both Eliana and Salwa reported that, for an Arab American woman, there is more pressure to prove to other Arabs that they are not bad people, especially because they are not veiled. Salwa recalled her visit to Jordan with her parents when both friends and relatives were impressed with her speaking Arabic, praying five times a day, and not having a boyfriend:

They just have this preconceived conception about Arab American women when they come here. I wanted to prove to people first of all that I can dorm and not become like a crazy party animal on Facebook [Laughing]. Going to clubs and doing crazy things. I wanted to prove that I can not wear the hijab and still know just as much religion as anybody else who wears a hijab or who doesn’t wear the hijab. I wanted to show that. For me, it was just a point to prove that it is possible to live in an American society without being influenced by the negative things.

On another level, Zeina discussed the consequences of an Arab woman losing her virginity before marriage. For Zeina, it’s a “huge defining line” that separated non-virgin Arab American women from Arab men—who become the others in their lives— and placed them outside of their dating and marrying pool:

Arab American women in this country, if you choose to have sex before you were married, it is a huge dividing line. And it really colors the way that people, men look at you, whether they are Arab American men or Arab men. It *completely* colors the way they look at you. I mean, I—it seems so ridiculous but it’s—I realize that when you choose to have sex, you eliminate an entire class of men that you would have met, you know, married, in your dating pool. [...] It’s a huge, it’s a

huge decision and I don't think that I appreciated that when I did choose to have sex. I didn't understand that.

Discussion

Overall, for the women in this study, the importance of virginity is described as it relates to the first sexual experience and strongly influenced by their identification as Arab and Arab American women. They valued virginity as part of their sexual being that is lived and experienced wholly rather than as a separate part of their bodies used to evaluate their worth, or the worth of their families and societies. The embodiment of virginity, whether through actual embodiment by participants or disembodiment by others, was interconnected to the women's identification of who they are as Arabs. All of the participants shared similar stories of their Arab ethnic identity; they verbalized common characteristics such as family closeness, the "good Arab girl" image, and gendered double standards as important to preserve the ethnic identity across the generation line.

The women in this study considered vaginal-penile intercourse to be a form of virginity loss, but virginity loss was more than this specific sexual act. Historically, the distinction between virginity and virginity loss has been the first penile-vaginal intercourse (Humphreys 2012) and presence of a hymen (Amy 2008; Cinthio 2015; Cook and Dickens 2009; E izo lu et al. 2011); this notion was also conveyed by the ten participants. However, meanings of virginity have been also reported to be more abstract and related to the sexual experience (Carpenter 2005). The embodied virginity among the participants in this study encompassed abstract meanings that reflected intimacy, experience, maturity, transition, responsibility, trust, knowing and loving one's body. Interpretations of virginity from women's perspectives have been addressed by few Western and Arab scholars. Carpenter's three cognitive frameworks of virginity and virginity loss were one of the first to interpret the perceptions of virginity in the US (Carpenter 2001, 2002). We found few similarities between our interpretations of an embodied virginity and her interpretive framework. For Carpenter (2001), virginity was understood as a gift (something very special given to the right person), a process (a transition, a rite of passage), and a stigma (a bad thing to be ashamed of). The gift and the process frameworks resonated considerably with how the ten women in our study gave meanings to their embodied virginity. It is a sexual experience with someone "worthy", it is gaining a new level of trust. However, none of the participants referred to virginity as a stigma; on the other hand, the women in this study perceived virginity loss as a possible reason of stigma or cause of shame. Interpreting virginity as an identity has also been reported by other scholars in the Arab world, where women had to negotiate different identities by handling intergenerational relations and Orientalists discourses (Amer et al. 2015; Buitelaar 2002; Skandrani et al. 2010). Amer and colleagues discussed how for British Arab women, being a virgin moved beyond the concept of honor to reflect a cultural symbol of "Arabness." Similarly, for participants in this study, virginity reflected who they are, and consequently was enacted differently.

The process of disembodied virginity is addressed in the literature, although not labeled as "disembodied virginity." The relationship of the concept of honor—woman's honor, family's honor, and society's honor—to virginity in the Arab societies is discussed by many

scholars. Men enact their honor through family reputation, hospitality, generosity, socioeconomic status, and power while women enact another form of honor that is restricted to chastity and sexual virtue (Zuhur 2008). Zuhur added that the honor of men, families, and communities is compromised if unmarried women lose their virginity, whether through a consensual act or not. The concept of honor in the Arab societies is nuanced and tied to sexual behaviors. Abu-Odeh (2011) considered that from a sociophysiological perspective, the hymen guarantees virginity, which labels the woman as virtuous and assures her respect and honor. El Saadawi (2007), discussing sexual inequalities based on the hymen, referred to it as “the very fine membrane called honor (p. 47).” The absence of hymen before marriage may lead to stigma and discrimination, rejection from family and community, and virginity restoration (Cinthio 2015; Ilkcaracan 2008; Shakir 1997). Participants in the study added other ramifications such as living in fear, having to lie to parents and partners, and feelings of shame and guilt. The women’s descriptions of the meanings of virginity to the “others” and the existing literature on virginity in the Arab world support a disembodied virginity.

Scholars have also discussed how women’s bodies, specifically their hymens and their virginity, move from a private to a public matter that is influenced by a broad power dynamic authorized by the patriarchal state itself (Dialmy and Uhlmann 2005; El Saadawi 2007; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005). Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005) argued that, in Arab societies, both the concept and protection of virginity lead to attempted patriarchal control over women’s bodies that are interpreted and organized around the concepts of honor and shame that further extend to control sexuality as well.

The women shared similar stories of being pressured by parents to maintain the values and principles of Arab ethnicity through appropriate gender role performance. They were more pressured as Arab women to preserve the “good Arab girl” image by remaining virgins until marriage, by attaining high educational levels, and by behaving as respectful women through their dress code and daily gender performance. Other scholars have expounded on the pressures placed specifically on Arab American women to maintain a “good Arab girl” image (Cainkar and Read 2014; Naber 2012; Read and Oselin 2008).

In her book, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism*, Naber (2012) discussed her experience with the Arabs in the San Francisco Bay Area and questioned their “more socially conservative understandings of Arab concepts of religion, family, gender, and sexuality, than their counterparts in Jordan” (p. 5). Arabs in the US show stronger expression of their “Arabness,” as Naber called it, than Arabs in their home country. Naber added that within the Arab communities in the US, young adults consistently reported pressures to understand and maintain ideals of Arab and American cultures. Similarly, Kayyali (2006) described how teenage girls are placed under strict rules, watched closely, and not allowed to date to preserve the good image. A girl’s good image reflects the family and eventually the Arab community’s good image.

The social conservatism among first generation parents to maintain the Arab ideals was also reported by the women in this study. Naber (2012) and Akl (2014) discussed how parental control and pressure to preserve the Arab identity contributed to intergenerational tensions as well as a conflict among young adults between Arab and American cultures. The tension

with parents, specifically mothers, was expressed among most participants in this study and contributed to the women distancing themselves from their parents and other Arabs in their community. Some participants like Kareen, Aianna, and Salwa, revealed ambivalent feelings between upholding the Arab family values or becoming independent and adopting some of the more “Americanized” ways of living such as moving out of home, dating, marrying a non-Arab, or losing virginity. For participants like Zeina, letting go of some of the Arab cultural values, alienated her from Arab relatives and Arab men in general.

Orientalist discourses (Said 1978) were explicitly dominant in the life stories of these women. The participants’ parents as well as a few of the participants themselves used rigid binaries to represent an image of the “East” that was fundamentally in opposition to the image of the “West.” Naber (2006) argued that binary oppositional categories of “Arab” and “American” are constructed, the “good Arab girl” and the “bad American(ized) girls”. She added that one can either have an “Arabness” identity representing a “good Arab girl” or “virgin Arab”—this is the Arab woman who conforms to traditional gender and sexual norms—versus an “Americaness” identity representing the “bad American (ized) girl” or “American (ized) whore,” which is the Arab woman who does not conform with Arab traditional gender and sexual norms.

The sociocultural and political history of Arab immigration to the US plays an important role of Arabs’ racial identification and assimilation (Abdulrahim et al. 2012; Ajrouch 2004; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007). With the first waves of immigrants, many Arabs pushed to position themselves in the white racial category in order to achieve acceptability in the American mainstream. The sociopolitical events following 9/11, reinforced different Orientalist discourses in the world in general, and in the US in particular, and the Arab White racial identification became contested in the US. Participants in this study indirectly addressed the fluidity of the racial boundaries and the way it impacted their assimilation process.

Conclusion

All of the participants had at least an undergraduate degree and self-identified as middle or upper-middle class. The homogeneity in educational level and class limited the perspectives of the life stories and meanings of virginity to a group of well-educated middle and upper-middle class women. The participants in this study did not discuss religion and their understanding of its importance to virginity as much as we anticipated. Three participants gave meanings related to religion at the beginning of the interviews but continued their discussions and interpretation with a stronger focus on the Arab ethnic identity. Similarly, only one participant questioned the meaning of virginity from a non-heterosexual perspective but the conversation was very brief.

In addition, the interviews conducted were a snapshot in time in the lives of the participants and according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), “time goes by.” Therefore, the past, present, and future are constantly changing. The interpretation of the interviews were based on co-constructions between the participants and the researchers and showed a reality of their virginity at one point in time, the present time of the interview. Over time, the stories of

embodied virginity may change and allow these women to construct their sexual and ethnic identities differently. Our experiences and meanings of certain phenomena are developed, influenced, and transformed by relationships and interconnectedness with other people and the situational context in which we live.

The study provides a better understanding of the diverse meanings of virginity that move beyond the binary of virginity and virginity loss into a spectrum of embodied meanings in Arab American women. Understanding the embodiment of virginity from a lived experience standpoint allows for change in perspectives and meanings rather than a fixed perception of a phenomenon. It makes it possible to understand how the participants negotiate and construct their sexualities in dynamic socio-political and cultural Arab and American environments. Developing the meanings of virginity was an entangled process that reflected the complexity of agency, sexuality, and nature of human beings at the intersection of ethnic identity, gender, immigration, religion, and politics. For these women, to embody virginity was to live it as an Arab or an Arab American woman; it also meant to live with the socially constructed meanings of virginity that many participants internalized at certain phases in their lives. Eventually, they were able to pave their own meanings and perceptions of virginity. Their meaning making of virginity was a complex process that was shaped by navigating different socio-political worlds and cultures.

The sociocultural and political context of these women shaped how they ascribed meaning to virginity and how they enacted their gender and sexuality thereafter. The sociocultural and political contexts have major implications for sexuality and gender researchers as we try to understand and promote the ability to live in harmony with one's sexual being and sexual body in specific populations. Understanding the meanings of virginity as it relates to identity has many implications. It allows us to recognize the changing meanings of virginity across time, individuals, communities, and societies, and move beyond a binary understanding. It is also an initial step in understating the nature and context of sexual initiation as well as its impact on sexual behaviors and sexual well-being. Findings from this study suggest that future research is needed around sex and sexuality among Arab and Arab American men and women while paying specific attention to how ethnic identity and culturally-specific contexts shape and change sexual attitudes and behaviors (types of relationships, future sexual trajectories, sexual safety, contraception, etc.) and influence the development of healthy sexualities.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the ten participants who shared personal and sensitive stories. We also want to thank Dr. Sarah Kagan and Dr. Shannon Lundeen, who served on the dissertation committee of the primary author, for their constructive feedback and support throughout the dissertation process. We want to acknowledge the financial support provided by the Office of Nursing Research, and the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at the University of Pennsylvania as well as Sigma Theta Tau, Xi Chapter.

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Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the ten Arab and Arab American participants

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Country of birth	Religion	Social status	Class
Nour		30	Palestinian-American	Lebanon	Muslim	Married	Upper middle
Kareem		26	Palestinian	USA	Christian	Single	Middle
Zeina		33	Syrian-American	USA	Muslim	Married	Upper middle
Reem		18.5	Egyptian	Kuwait	Muslim	Partnered	Middle
Rana		25	Syrian-American	Syria	Christian	Single	Middle
Layal		31	Lebanese	Lebanon	Muslim	Engaged	Middle
Eliana		20	Palestinian	Palestine	Muslim	Single	Middle
Salwa		21	Palestinian	USA	Muslim	Single	Upper middle
Aianna		21	Iraqi-American	USA	Muslim	Single	Middle
Nisreen		20	Egyptian-American	USA	Muslim	Single	Upper middle

Table 2

Major themes and subthemes

Overarching theme: virginity as identity	
Themes/subthemes	Description
<i>Theme</i> Embodiment of virginity	
<i>Subthemes</i>	
“Virginity felt when I was intimate with someone”	Embodiment of virginity by participants
“I did not make a decision of how valuable my virginity was”	Disembodiment of virginity by others
<i>Theme</i> “We are Arabs”	
Description of the Arab ethnic identity of participants characterized by categories of family, the “good Arab girl image,” gender division within the family, sexual double standards within the society	
<i>Subthemes</i>	
Us (Arabs) versus them (Americans)	Diverse ways that differentiate Arabs from Americans
Me (Arab) versus them (Other Arabs)	Diverse ways that differentiate participants from certain aspects of other Arabs, including their families, Arab women, and Arab men