

Involuntary Celibacy: A Life Course Analysis

Denise Donnelly, Elisabeth Burgess, Sally Anderson,
Regina Davis, and Joy Dillard
Georgia State University

Using a life course perspective, we explored the development and maintenance of involuntary celibacy for 82 respondents recruited over the Internet. Data were collected using an open-ended electronic questionnaire. Modified grounded theory analysis yielded three groups of involuntary celibates, persons desiring to have sex but unable to find partners. Virgins were those who had never had sex, singles had sex in the past but were unable to establish current sexual relationships, and partnered were currently in sexless relationships. These groups differed on dating experiences, the circumstances surrounding their celibacy, barriers to sexual activity, and the perceived likelihood of becoming sexually active. They were similar, however, in their negative reactions to celibacy. Pervasive in our respondents' accounts was the theme of becoming and remaining off time in making normative sexual transitions, which in turn perpetuated a celibate life course or trajectory.

In an era when sex is used to sell everything from toothpaste to transmissions, the idea that large minorities of adults might have little or no sexual contact with others seems incongruous to many people. Yet, one researcher found that as many as 16% of married couples had not engaged in sexual intercourse in the month prior to a representative national survey of U.S. residents (Donnelly, 1993). Another group of researchers reported that 14% of men and 10% of women in the U.S. had not had any sexual activity involving genital contact in the past 12 months, and that 3% had none since their 18th birthdays (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994).

Certainly, some persons are celibate because they have chosen this lifestyle for religious or personal reasons. Others, however, would like to have sex but lack a willing sexual partner. For them, celibacy is not a choice. Since involuntary celibacy is a relatively new area of inquiry within the field of sex research, few studies have dealt with the dimensions, etiology, and consequences of this phenomenon.

In this research, we define the involuntary celibate as one who desires to have sex, but has been unable to find a willing partner for at least 6 months prior to being surveyed. The 6-month mark reflects the reality that people often go without sex for weeks or months (Laumann et al., 1994), but after a certain length of time, begin to worry. We realize, however, the arbitrariness of choosing a specific length of time, and suggest that what is really important is whether or not persons define themselves as involuntarily celibate. As Thomas (1966) pointed out, "situations we define as real become real in their consequences" (p. 301). Thus, for our

purposes, length of time without sex is less important than self-defining as involuntarily celibate. Involuntary celibates may be married or partnered persons whose partners no longer desire to have sex with them, unpartnered singles who have never had sex, or unpartnered singles who have had sexual relationships in the past, but are unable to currently find partners. Involuntary celibates include heterosexuals, bisexuals, homosexuals, and transsexuals.

We used a life course perspective to understand the process by which persons become and remain involuntarily celibate. In doing so, we compared and contrasted three groups of involuntary celibates, exploring the transitions and trajectories by which involuntary celibacy developed and was maintained.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant celibacy research tends to focus on persons who are celibate by choice, such as those who are celibate for cultural or religious reasons (Abbott, 2000; Goergen, 1974) or those who fear HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, or pregnancy (Netting, 1992; Siegel & Raveis, 1993; Sprecher & Regan, 1996). Some research has focused on *voluntary virgins*, persons in their teens and twenties who choose to wait until marriage to become sexually active (Sprecher & Regan, 1996), and the religious media has introduced the idea of *secondary virgins*, persons once sexually active, but who are now celibate by choice (Stafford, 2001). The scarce research focusing on involuntary celibacy, however, tends to be limited to certain groups, such as celibates in ancient times (Abbott, 2000), married celibates (Donnelly, 1993), persons with chronic diseases or disabilities (Greenblat, 1983; Kiernan, 1988), and the elderly (Mulligan & Palguta, 1991; Quinnan, 1997; White, 1982).

While not focusing specifically on involuntary celibates, Kiernan (1988) found that celibates (defined in her British study as nonmarried persons) were more likely to be introverted and ambitious, and to have parents who married at later ages. In addition, celibate women were more likely to

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Please address correspondence to Denise Donnelly, Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30303; e-mail: socdad@gsu.edu.

have attained high educational levels and occupational statuses, while celibate men were more likely to be lower class and unemployed.

Other researchers (Donnelly, 1993; Medlicott & Waltz, 1993) investigated persons in sexually inactive marriages. While not distinguishing between voluntarily and involuntarily celibate marriages, Donnelly (1993) found that unhappiness with marriage, plans or desires to leave the relationship, lack of shared activity, increased age, the presence of preschoolers, and poor health were significant correlates of sexual inactivity in marriage. Additional reasons for sexual inactivity include pregnancy, recent childbirth, or acute illness or injury (Greenblat, 1983). Some persons also experience relatively permanent physical problems such as chronic illness or handicaps that hinder sexual activity (Greenblat, 1983; Kiernan, 1988).

Even though celibacy increases with age (Laumann et al., 1994), not all older persons stop having sex (Mulligan & Palguta, 1991; White 1982). In fact, most elders who are in good health and who have available partners remain sexually active (Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991; Starr & Weiner, 1981). Because women live longer than men, however, elderly women tend to have fewer potential partners than elderly men (Moen, 1996).

Not only is research on involuntary celibacy scarce, it is fraught with conceptual and methodological problems. For example, Kiernan (1988) equated singlehood with celibacy, and used the terms interchangeably in both defining and measuring celibacy. Other researchers (Donnelly, 1993; Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991) failed to distinguish between the voluntarily and involuntarily celibate in their analyses. Even when focused specifically on involuntary celibacy, samples have been restricted to a few small groups, such as the institutionalized elderly (White, 1982) or gay men in large metropolitan areas (Seigel & Raveis, 1993). Finally, in many studies, little explanation was given for why respondents became celibate, how long they had been this way, or their feelings on celibacy (Donnelly, 1993; Laumann et al., 1994; Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991). Therefore, given the lack of knowledge about noninstitutionalized involuntary celibates, coupled with the limitations of extant research, we focus here on describing the transitions and trajectories by which one becomes involuntarily celibate and maintains this status over time.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary researchers have drawn upon a variety of theoretical perspectives, including scripting theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) and developmental theory (Freud, 1953; Lancaster, 1994), to explain sexual behavior. While these perspectives provide a sound basis for examining some aspects of sexuality, their linear focus and attention to developmental stages and sexual scripts fail to adequately address the complexity of adult socialization and the interactions of social context and individual and cultural change over time.

Thus, we posit that the lives and circumstances of involuntary celibates can be best understood when viewed

through a life course perspective. This perspective emphasizes how age-based transitions are “socially created, socially recognized, and shared” (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985, p. 35) and acknowledges that change over time can occur on multiple dimensions (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Despite the prevalence of life course perspectives in research on families and aging, few researchers, with the notable exception of Rossi (1994), have integrated the life course perspective into the study of sexuality.

Our study of involuntary celibacy emphasizes transitions and trajectories—two elements central to the life course perspective (Hagestad, 1990). Transitions are brief events that mark chronological movement from one state to another. First sexual intercourse and commitment to a monogamous relationship are two examples of transitions. Trajectories are more complex measures, not unlike careers, which measure the long-term processes and broader patterns of events in an individual’s experience in specific life spheres over time. Sexual histories and marital relationships are examples of trajectories.

Cultural expectations suggesting that certain events and patterns are normative for different age groups exist in all societies. According to Hagestad (1996), these expectations can be examined along four key dimensions: (a) *timing*, or when life transitions occur; (b) *sequencing*, or the order in which events occur; (c) *duration*, or how long life events last; and (d) *prevalence*, or how many persons experience these transitions. We suggest that involuntary celibates may experience each of these dimensions differently than the voluntarily celibate or the noncelibate.

Most industrialized societies have normative expectations about sexual transitions, assuming that persons will begin to date in their teens or early twenties, experiment with and initiate sex at some point thereafter, and eventually marry or partner in a long-term relationship which includes an active sexual component (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Thorton, 1990). As people reach late adulthood, ironically, the expectation is that interest in sexual activity will level off or decline (Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991). For the majority of persons in Western societies, dating, sexual experimentation, and mating take place sequentially, with individuals progressing from one to the other in a somewhat linear fashion. Moreover, although the timing and duration of these initial transitions may vary, the majority of adults are presumed to have completed these life events, at least once, by the mid to late twenties. This can be thought of as the normative sexual trajectory. Persons (unless celibate for religious reasons, handicapped, or chronically ill) are expected to follow this trajectory and remain sexually active for major portions of their adult lives. Expectations for regular adult sexual activity are reinforced by a variety of social agents, including family members, peers, and the media. Individuals use these normative expectations to measure the progress of their own lives, judging themselves and others as “on time” or “off time” by these standards (Hagestad, 1996).

In contemporary Western societies, the timing of many life transitions has become less important, as people marry,

divorce, remarry, and have children at increasingly diverse intervals (Coontz, 1992). In these cases, being off time has few consequences. In other areas, such as sexual activity, cultural expectations seem to be more rigid and have greater consequences (Lawrence, 1996). With the exception of those who choose celibacy, adults who have never had sex, or who go for long periods of time without a partner, may begin to feel off time in regards to sexuality. Once the person begins to feel different from others, it may become more difficult to interact and establish intimacy, and chances for sexually intimate relationships may be reduced. This may be particularly true when the person wants a sexual relationship and feels that everyone else his or her age is more experienced at and knowledgeable about sexual matters.

The same dynamic probably takes place with partnered involuntary celibates. They are expected to have sex with their partners, except when the partner is ill, disabled, or late in pregnancy (Donnelly, 1993). Thus, they may begin to feel off time and experience themselves as different from other partnered persons. The longer the relationship goes without sex, the harder it may be to reestablish this component. The norm may become sexual inactivity, and research suggests that the longer it lasts, the longer it is likely to last (Donnelly, 1993).

In summary, we theorize that involuntary celibacy is more than one event, it is a combination of the timing, sequencing, and duration of sexual behavior. A life course perspective suggests that persons who become off time in regards to life transitions involving sexuality begin to feel as though they are no longer traveling the same path as their peers (Hagestad 1996). Once this happens, it may be difficult (but not impossible) to conform to the normative sexual trajectories that their age peers are following.

Based on a life course perspective on sexuality, we focus on four research questions:

1. What social factors inhibit initial transitions to sexual activity for involuntary celibates?
2. At what point do the sexual trajectories of involuntary celibates become off time?
3. What is the process by which involuntary celibates become off time in regards to sexuality?
4. What factors keep involuntary celibates off time and inhibit the establishment and maintenance of sexual relationships?

METHODS

Background and Procedure

In September 1998, one of the members of an on-line discussion group for involuntary celibates approached the first author via e-mail to ask about current research on involuntary celibacy. As discussion ensued, it became apparent that little information was available. At this point, several members of the discussion group volunteered to be interviewed and a research team was put together to study involuntary

celibacy. Because the initial respondents discussed the project among themselves and with the first author, this may have influenced the ways in which questions were answered. As feminist methodologists (Reinharz, 1992) argue, however, this sort of interaction can actually enhance understanding between the researcher and the researched, and often leads to higher return rates in survey research, since the persons being studied feel a sense of "ownership" in the project.

Initially, a questionnaire was e-mailed to the 35 on-line discussion group members who agreed to participate in the study, with a return rate of 85%. It was later posted to a web page to make it more easily accessible to potential respondents. These later respondents found the survey through links on web pages for involuntary celibates or web-based search engines, or obtained the web page address from prior respondents. We were unable to determine the return rate for the web-based respondents, since counters measured each visit to the site and there were multiple visits by our research team, our colleagues, and others curious about the on-line survey.

All respondents read an informed consent form, and were asked to complete and return the questionnaire if they agreed to participate in the study. Identifying information was removed from transcripts before distribution to the research team, and no records were kept of the respondents' e-mail addresses or identities. Because of the open-ended nature of the questionnaire, completion times reported by the respondents ranged from 1 to 4 hours.

In order to ensure that there was only one response per person, the web page was set up to accept only one completed survey from an e-mail address. To guard against one person answering the survey from two or more separate e-mail addresses, we compared responses to demographic questions using SPSS to make sure that no two surveys were completely identical. Questionnaires were read and screened during the week in which they were received. If they were incomplete or seemed fabricated or outlandish, they were marked for full review by the research team. Six questionnaires were discarded because they contained little or no usable information, and four because the responses were obviously made up. In each case, we had 100% agreement by the research team regarding the disposition of the questionnaire.

Participants

The 82 persons who comprise our sample (60 men and 22 women) are described in more detail in Table 1. Sixty-three percent were age 34 or younger (the modal category was ages 25-34). Twenty-eight percent were married or living with a long-term partner. Only 5% had not completed high school, while 89% had attended or completed college. Professionals and students were the two largest occupational groups in the sample, with 45% identifying their occupational status as professional and 16% identifying as students. Eighty-five percent of the sample was White. Eighty-nine percent were heterosexual, 5% bisexual, 3% homosexual, and 4% identified as confused or unsure. Seventy percent

resided in the U.S., with 30% of respondents living outside the U.S. (primarily Western Europe, Australia, or Canada).

Because we recruited respondents on-line, the sample characteristics are reflective of the group of persons most likely to have access to computers (Taylor, 1999). The majority are young, male, White, well-educated persons who hold professional jobs and enjoy middle class lifestyles. They are skilled in computer usage and spend substantial amounts of time on the computer. Moreover, 30% of our respondents were from outside the U.S. While sexual norms tend to be fairly similar across the U.S. and Western Europe, we recognize that some aspects of involuntary celibacy may differ depending on culture (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). In general, we found no national differences between respondents in terms of their sexual transitions and trajectories, with one exception—persons growing up in Western Europe were more likely to have received sex education as children, both from their parents and from other sources. This is consistent with what other researchers (Berne & Huberman, 1999) have noted. Contrary to Keirnan's (1988) finding that female celibates had higher education and income levels, however, the males in our sample were more likely to have graduate or professional degrees than the females.

Our sample is nonrandom; thus, results cannot be generalized to other groups (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Rather,

the utility of our research lies in the rich descriptive data obtained regarding the lives of involuntary celibates, a group about which little is known. In addition to allowing us to begin theory building (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), this information is useful for the respondents themselves, persons working with involuntary celibates, and researchers interested in designing more representative studies in this area.

Measures

The questionnaire contained 13 categorical closed-ended questions assessing demographic characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, living arrangement, income, education, employment type, area of residence, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious preference, political views, and time spent on the computer. Fifty-eight open-ended questions were used to investigate areas such as past sexual experiences, current relationships, initiating relationships, sexuality and celibacy, nonsexual relationships, and the consequences of celibacy. Consistent with a modified life history approach (Wallace, 1994), the questionnaire was organized so that demographics appeared first, followed by chronologically organized open-ended questions. We started by asking about childhood experiences, progressed to questions about teen and early adult years, and finished with questions about current status and effects of celibacy.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

	Virgin		Single		Partnered		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Sex								
Male	76	26	80	20	61	14	73	60
Female	24	8	20	5	39	9	27	22
Age								
18–24	41	14	24	6	—	—	24	20
25–34	44	15	40	10	30	7	39	32
35–44	12	4	32	8	44	10	27	22
45–54	—	—	4	1	17	4	6	5
55–64	3	1	—	—	9	2	4	3
Race								
White	85	28	96	23	86	19	85	70
Hispanic	—	—	—	—	5	1	1	1
African descent	—	—	4	1	9	2	4	3
Asian	6	2	—	—	—	—	2	2
Multi-racial	6	2	—	—	—	—	2	2
Education								
Less than H.S.	6	2	8	2	—	—	5	4
H.S. degree	9	3	4	1	6	1	6	5
Some college	29	10	24	6	35	8	29	24
College degree	21	7	32	8	26	6	26	21
Some graduate school	6	2	8	2	9	2	7	6
Graduate degree	29	10	24	6	26	6	27	22
Residence								
Within U.S.	71	24	64	16	68	17	70	57
Outside U.S.	26	9	32	8	22	5	27	22
Sexual orientation								
Heterosexual	86	29	83	20	100	23	89	72
Bisexual	9	3	4	1	—	—	5	4
Homosexual	3	1	4	1	—	—	3	2
Other	3	1	4	2	—	—	4	3
Total	42	34	31	25	28	23	100	82

Because this paper is part of a larger project on involuntary celibacy, the questionnaire is too large to include here. A copy is available upon request from the first author.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A coding sheet was developed for basic demographic data. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and modal categories were then calculated for each variable. For qualitative data analysis, we used a modified grounded theory approach borrowed from the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998), blending our techniques with theirs to come up with useful ways of analyzing the data that were uniquely suited to our research questions (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 9, for a discussion of this technique). Unlike many qualitative researchers who begin with the data and build theory from it (an inductive approach), we began with research questions suggested by previous literature and theory (a more deductive approach) and used the research questions to guide and focus our analysis. We then used the results of our analysis to refine the original theory and to add to the literature in new ways. This interplay of deduction and induction (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) formed the basis of our analysis.

In analyzing the data, we looked for instances in the transcripts that addressed one of the four research questions, and used continuous coding to identify emergent themes within these answers. Themes represented similar ideas or ways of viewing celibacy that emerged over and over again in the responses. At biweekly meetings, we relied upon notes made during coding ("memos" in the language of Strauss and Corbin) to inform our discussion of emergent themes. Once we agreed upon the major themes, we developed a number of categories pertaining to each. Categories represented the variations themes took for individual respondents. As analysis continued, some categories were combined, some dropped, and others developed into two or more new categories (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). All five researchers read and coded each transcript, and four of the five (80%) had to agree upon the set of themes and coding categories to be used, as well as upon the ways in which each category was coded. Once a fairly stable set of themes and categories were in place, the most representative quotes were chosen to illustrate each. These quotes are presented in the sections that follow in the original language, spelling, and punctuation of the respondents. Final themes included celibate status, teenage experiences with dating and sex, becoming celibate, barriers to sex, and the consequences of celibacy. The underlying concept running through our research was that of becoming off time sexually.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Celibacy Status

In determining the celibacy status of our respondents we examined two dimensions—whether they were currently partnered and whether they had any past sexual experience.

Our respondents fell into three categories (see Table 1), which included 34 virginal celibates, 25 single celibates, and 23 partnered celibates. *Virginal celibates* were not currently partnered and had never had sexual experience. *Single celibates* were not currently partnered, but had past sexual experience. *Partnered celibates* were currently partnered and had past sexual experience. None of the respondents were currently partnered and had never had sexual experiences, so a category was not created for this group.

As shown in the first column of Table 1, *virginal celibates* tended to be younger than the other two groups, and to have never (or rarely) dated. Seventy-six percent of the virgins in our sample were male, and 24% were female. The information on *single celibates* is presented in the second column of Table 1. This group included those who had dated or lived with a partner in the past, as well as a small group of males who had previously used the services of sexual surrogates or prostitutes. Eighty percent of the singles in our sample were male, and 20% were female. The *partnered celibates*, shown in the third column of Table 1, had been sexually active with their partners at one time, but because of problems in the relationship or a lack of interest by themselves or their partners, they were no longer sexually intimate. This group as a whole tended to be older than either the virgins or the single celibates. Partnered celibates had the highest proportion of women responding, with 61% of the sample male, and 39% female.

Teenage Experiences With Dating and Sex

While varying somewhat by gender and religion, by the time they reach adulthood many U.S. adolescents have masturbated, dated, and experimented with sex with partners (Janus & Janus, 1993; Laumann et al., 1994). Similar to their age peers, 78% percent of our respondents had discussed sex with friends and 84% had masturbated as teens. The virgins and singles differed from national averages, however, in their experiences with dating and interpersonal sex.

The majority of virgins (91%) and singles (52%) never dated as teenagers. As one virginal male, aged 18-24, writes, "I have never even had a date." A virginal female in the 18-24 age group says simply, "Never, not ever." Traditional gender role norms appeared to influence our sample, with males reporting hesitancy in initiating dates, and females reporting a lack of invitations by males. Even for those who dated, experiences tended to be very limited. As a single male in the 18-24 age group notes, "I didn't date all that much as a teenager. I dated a total of two females during high school. I was always shy, bashful and quiet."

Only 29% of the virgins in our sample reported first sexual experiences that involved other people (kissing, petting, etc.). Frequently, they reported no sexual activity at all, except for masturbation. As a male virgin in the 24-35 age range noted, "Unless you count masturbation (I don't), I haven't had any sexual experiences."

Singles were more likely than virgins to have had initial sexual experiences that involved other people (76%), but

they tended to express dissatisfaction with these encounters, as the experience of a single male in the 25-34 age group illustrates:

I was 18. It was not satisfying. I had sex with a girl that I didn't care about, that I didn't find attractive, and we didn't use a condom. Luckily, she didn't get pregnant. We did it in my car and, later in a motel room. It was cheap, it was sleazy and I felt really dirty afterwards. I slept with her because she was easy and I was really messed up emotionally. I needed to feel wanted and loved by someone, ANYONE.

Seventy-eight percent of partnered respondents recounted initial activities involving other people (kissing, petting, oral sex, intercourse). One partnered male, aged 45-54 described this, "I was 16 when I first felt a girl's breasts (I had kissing-only relationships before that) which eventually led to oral sex." His response illustrates more adherence to the normative trajectory of dating and increasingly intimate forms of interpersonal sexuality than do those of the virgins (and many of the singles) in our study.

In summary, while most of our sample had discussed sex with friends and experimented with masturbation as teens, most of the virgins and singles did not date. Singles were similar to partnered persons in terms of first sexual experiences, while the majority of virgins reported first sexual experiences that did not include another person. As the data illustrates, virgins and singles may have missed important transitions, and as they got older, their trajectories began to differ from those of their age peers. As Thorton (1990) noted, patterns of sexuality in young adulthood are significantly related to dating, steady dating, and sexual experience in adolescence. It is rare for a teenager to initiate sexual activity outside of a dating relationship. Thus, persons reaching young adulthood without dating may have missed an important opportunity for sexual experience. While virginity and lack of experience are fairly common in teenagers and young adults (Sprecher & Regan, 1996), by the time many of our respondents reached their mid-twenties they reported feeling left behind by age peers. We suspect that this is especially true for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. In fact, all eight of the nonheterosexual respondents in our sample were either virgins or singles. As previous researchers have shown, a major reason for becoming off time in making sexual transitions is the process of coming out to oneself and others (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). Even for the heterosexuals in our study, however, it appears that lack of dating and sexual experimentation in the teen years may be precursors to problems in adult sexual relationships (Thorton, 1990).

BECOMING CELIBATE

Many of the virgins in our sample reported that becoming celibate involved a lack of sexual and interpersonal experience at several different transition points in adolescence and young adulthood. They never or rarely dated, had little experience with interpersonal sexual activity, and had never had sexual intercourse. Singles were more likely to have dated and experimented sexually, but had difficulty in

finding and maintaining relationships. They tended to go for long periods of time between sexual partners. Consistent with traditional sex role expectations, 20% of single men reported that their only sexual encounters had been with paid sex workers, although no single women reported this type of activity.

Partnered celibates generally became sexually inactive by a very different process (Donnelly, 1993). All had initially been sexually active with their partners, but at some point stopped. At the time of the survey, sexual intimacy no longer (or very rarely) occurred in their relationships. Because partnered celibates are different both from other partnered persons and from other celibates, we discuss them in more detail here.

The majority (70%) of partnered celibates started out having satisfactory relationships, but slowly stopped having sex as time went on. They described the process of becoming celibate as an evolutionary one. A woman in the 25-34 age group who had been married three years said, "[It was] not a conscious decision - just evolved and now it seems to be our way of life and neither likes it." A man in the same age group noted, "We started out active, but by the time of the wedding (18 months) it had already decreased to near nothing. She has no desire for it. She doesn't seem at all interested."

Thirteen percent of the partnered celibates reported that one partner had been sexually reluctant from the beginning of the relationship. Illustrative of this group was the woman in the 35-44 age group who had been married 21 years and had one child:

Within the first month he started avoiding sex and me. Generally sex happened once every 2-3 months. This was the norm for 16 years. Five years ago, after a 9 month abstinence, I approached him and he pushed me away and told me to leave him alone. I am hurt and could care less. I have not had sex with him or anyone else in 5 years.

Another man noted that there were danger signals from the beginning of his marriage. This respondent is in the 35-44 age group, and has been married for 20 years. He and his wife have two teenage children.

Before we were married, we lived together for two years. We had fundamental sex twice a week at the time. My wife was very conservative and responded that she wanted to "save something for our married life" when I suggested less conservative activity. Once married, the only change was the frequency of sex tapered off. When I was "allowed" sex, it was at her convenience, and always followed the same pattern, I stimulate her to orgasm, then I can enter her (in the missionary position). The past ten years has seen us in bed together a total of three times.

Seventeen percent of partnered respondents reported one partner making a conscious decision to suspend sexual activity. This often occurred in the context of pregnancy or childbirth. As a woman in the 35-44 age group noted, "My husband made this decision two years ago. It seems that it was a conscious decision after I became pregnant with my second child." In another case, reported by a man in the same age group, his partner, "stopped 6 years ago,

shortly after our last child was born. She has no drive, now feels sex is dirty, doesn't want . . . to be touched." When a partner decides to stop having sex, often there is little that the other can do about the situation. There were no male-female differences among partnered persons, since all were not having sex and unhappy about it.

Thus, the trajectories by which each group of celibates arrived at their present condition varied greatly, with virgins becoming off time in their teens and early twenties, and never experiencing a transition to sexual activity. Single celibates showed some signs of difficulty as adolescents, but appeared to have been at least somewhat similar to their age peers in establishing sexual relationships. Similar to partnered celibates, they tended to get off time as adults, when they were unable to maintain sexual relationships. Partnered celibates were unique, however, in that they were currently in relationships that had over time become nonsexual.

Barriers to Sexual Relationships

Once respondents felt off time in their sexual trajectories, they suspected that several factors kept them from having sexual relationships. Similar to other researchers (Jackson, Soderlind, & Weiss, 2000; Joiner, 1997) we found that shyness was a barrier to developing and maintaining relationships for many of our respondents. Virgins and singles were more likely to report shyness (94% and 84%, respectively), than were partnered (20%). The men in these two groups were more likely to mention being shy than were women (89% vs. 77%). In addition, 41% of virgins and 24% of singles reported an inability to relate to others socially. As one male virgin said,

The biggest barrier to developing a relationship is my lack of social/dating skills. At my age (34), people are expected to have already gone through several real relationships, while I remain a perpetual teenager in terms of relationships potential.

Thus, the lack of social skills was seen as a barrier keeping this respondent who was chronologically approaching middle age trapped in a situation more common to persons half his age. Feelings of being off time worsened as respondents aged. One male virgin said, "I'm thirty years old, for Christ's sake, everyone I know is married with kids."

Still celibate as adults, this group of respondents often felt like the single woman in the 35-44 age group who was, "nervous, unhappy, depressive, lost." Similar to another single man in his late fifties, some even worried that they might no longer be considered sexual beings, "[Being a celibate adult] has contributed to my bouts of depression. It has also caused me major anxiety. I am concerned that I am no longer a sexual being."

For virgins and singles, another barrier to establishing ongoing sexual relationships is body image. Researchers (Trapnell, Meston, & Gorzalka, 1997; Weideman & Hurst, 1998) suspect an indirect link between body image and sexual experience. They suggest that persons with negative body images tend to avoid social situations, and

by doing so miss out on sexual opportunities. Consistent with their hypothesis, one third of our respondents reported considering their weight, appearance, or physical characteristics as obstacles to attracting potential partners. Virgins (47%) and singles (56%) were more likely to mention these factors than partnered persons (9%). For example, this bisexual male virgin in the 35-44 age group said,

I am terribly over-obese. I have a terrible set of teeth, a huge nose, bad skin on my body (lots of stretch marks . . .). No one likes to think of "Frankenstein" in a sexual way. I move uneasily and have problems with personal hygiene as a result of the excess weight (bathing is a real workout). The rest is self-evident.

This respondent felt that because of his physical appearance people would not want to be around him, and he thus avoided social situations. Although we chose his words to illustrate this theme, in general, the women in our sample were more likely to mention being overweight as a problem, while men mentioned being underweight as more of an issue. This is consistent with media and cultural images that demand that women be thin, and men be toned and muscular.

Living arrangements, work arrangements, and lack of transportation all probably contributed to the self-perpetuating nature of celibacy for virgins and singles. Twenty percent of virgins and 28% of singles reported these barriers. A virginal female in 18-24 age group noted, "Where I'm living right now, there aren't a lot of extracurricular activities that I'm interested in, and most of the people I meet are older and already married." Another single male in the 25-34 age group illustrated the cumulative nature of structural constraints by saying:

Well, the fact that I live at home is a pain in the ass, but not insurmountable. Being unemployed is a HUGE barrier that seems rather difficult to scale and not having a car is just horrid. I'm lucky to leave the house as much as I do, but meeting people without my own form of transportation just doesn't work.

Virginal and single men were more likely to be in sex-segregated occupations than their female counterparts, and to see this as a barrier. One virginal male in the age 35-44 age group noted that, "I work in a male-dominated field, and other than church activities, don't get out that much." Another male virgin in the 25-34 age group reported, "Lack of social circle through which to meet women—working in a primarily male environment."

In all likelihood, the relationship between these barriers and involuntary celibacy is reciprocal, rather than unidirectional. While shyness, lack of social skills, poor body image, living arrangements, and sex-segregated occupations contribute to involuntary celibacy, it is also likely that celibates are shyer, less confident in social situations, view their bodies more negatively, and are less likely to leave housing or job situations that isolate them from potential partners.

For partnered celibates, children (50%), commitment to marriage (32%), and finances (27%) seemed to be the biggest barriers to leaving current relationships. Even though 82% had thought of leaving, 86% reported no plans to do so. As one partnered male respondent in the 45-54

age group lamented, "Currently, establishing another relationship is impossible because I am in a committed relationship with many responsibilities." Another woman in the same age group noted, "we have a child, we own a house together - those things mean a lot." Moreover, most persons in this group planned to stay in their current situations, but because of concerns about their families, moral constraints, or lack of opportunities, were reluctant to establish extramarital sexual relationships. Thus, the barriers to establishing sexual relationships appeared to be very different for the partnered and the nonpartnered.

The Consequences of Celibacy

Thirty-five percent of celibates expressed dissatisfaction, frustration, or anger about their lack of sexual relationships, and this was true regardless of their partnership status. As the quotes presented below illustrate, partnered persons tended to express dissatisfaction over not having sex with their spouses or partners, while singles and virgins were unhappy about the lack of sex with any partner. As one bisexual virginal male in the 25-34 age range put it, "I feel very bad about it. I feel as if I am not seen as an adult functional human being because of it. I feel very unwanted and feel like spending a lot of time crying and lonely as hell."

While many virgins and singles reported unhappiness about the lack of sexual contact, some expressed a greater sadness about not having love or a relationship. As this virginal male in the 35-44 age group explains,

My lack of any sex has had some very serious effects upon me. Obviously, I could get a prostitute any time, but I haven't done that. It would be no different than glorified masturbation. It is the fact that no woman has ever wanted to be sexual with me (and as far as I can tell, even considered sex with me) that I find so painful. It makes me feel sexually worthless. And the fact that no woman has loved me or cared for me enough to have sex with me is tremendously damaging to my self-esteem. It makes me feel like a freak, an unloved person who is not worth anything to anyone. I know intellectually that these feelings are to a large extent misleading and wrong, and that in fact they are damaging to me. Nonetheless, this is the visceral feeling in my gut that I get when I think about this—and I think about it every day, every hour. Sometimes every minute.

Consistent with the life course perspective we employ in this analysis (Hagestad, 1990), one major correlate of involuntary celibacy for virgins and singles was feeling off time, as though opportunities had passed them by, and their sexual development had somehow stalled in an earlier stage of life. Largely due to perceptions that "everyone else" was having sex, 44% percent of virgins and 56% of singles said that they were different from their peers. One female virgin expressed her frustrations as follows,

A sense of immaturity—a lack of completion. The great divide between childhood and adulthood hasn't been leaped despite my being almost thirty years old. Also, let's face it, men think it's a bit strange when they date me and I have no history whatsoever.

And indeed, lacking sexual experience probably not only leads to a feeling of being off time, but also to suspicions

that they may never catch up with their peers. As another virginal female in the 25-34 age group put it,

It makes me feel like everyone else is going through some mythical gates into "grownup land" while I sit out in the courtyard with the children. So it makes me feel resentful sometimes and I feel childish and inadequate at times.

A male virgin in the 18-24 age group felt that he was so off time that people were unnerved when they learned the extent of his celibacy. His quote suggests a sense of both despair and resignation over the situation.

I feel it is important to highlight the extent to which I have not had a romantic relationship. Outside of [manually stimulating a female friend to orgasm], and a kiss a couple of months earlier, there has been no non-platonic activity in my life. I have had crushes, and have frequently been attracted to someone, but never in a way that was reciprocated. No sex. No intimacy. No dating. Over the past year, I have been able to flirt, but it has been at the harmless, very unserious level. Most people assume some experience, and get unnerved [by my lack of experience.]

For partnered persons, the issues were different. Unlike the others in our sample, they had successfully made the transition to sexual activity, and many had experienced a relatively normative sexual trajectory until the sexual components of their relationships dwindled. Many in this group reported feeling different from other partnered persons, and were frustrated by their partner's lack of interest. When they tried to initiate sex, they were often met with rejection, as this female in the 25-34 age group describes:

I would like to have sex with my partner. He doesn't want any physical contact in terms of touching, kissing, and sex. Yes, I tried, but every time I was brutally refused with a very serious warning not to do this. . . . Talking about sex, or us having sex is out of the question.

These refusals and rejections seemed to occupy the thoughts of many partnered celibates, and even went so far as to cause problems in other areas of their lives. A partnered male, age 55-64, probably describes it best, when he says:

It has a deleterious affect on my overall life. I dwell on sexual thoughts and fantasies. My depression is intertwined to this situation. My professional life is impacted because of the time I devoted to trying to understand my circumstance and deciding how to deal with it.

There was also a sense of being off time, but rather than feeling late in making the transition to sex, they reported being dissimilar to their age peers in that they were no longer having sex, something expected only of the sick, handicapped, and elderly in our society (Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991). Many mentioned frustration at being stuck (possibly for the rest of their lives) in sexless relationships. A married woman in the 25-34 age group who had no plans to leave her husband lamented, "He's prepared to live with me like this is not problem—I can't accept this as a way of life." Another woman (aged 35-44), had resigned herself to the situation, describing it as "[Lots of] hurt, tears. Knowing it will always be this way and missing intimacy. Forever."

Regardless of celibacy status, however, our respondents overwhelmingly perceived their lack of sexual activity in a negative light. In all likelihood, the relationship between involuntary celibacy and unhappiness, anger, and depression is a reciprocal one. Involuntary celibacy can certainly contribute to negative feelings, but these negative feelings probably also cause persons to feel less self-confident and to be less open to sexual opportunities when they occur. In fact, the longer the duration of the celibacy, the more likely our respondents were to view it as a permanent way of life. Virginal celibates tended to see their condition as temporary for the most part, but the older they were, the more likely they were to see it as permanent. For single celibates, the longer they were without a partner, the more likely they were to feel that celibacy was a permanent status. Partnered celibates, on the whole, saw their situations as unlikely to change unless their current relationships ended.

CONCLUSION

As our data indicate, the experience of being off time appears to be different for virginal, single, and partnered celibates. Although we discuss issues of timing, duration, and sequencing as they relate to multiple dimensions of sexual history, the theme of sexuality becoming off time permeates the stories of our respondents. It is important to recognize that while all three groups reported being off time with regard to their sexual behavior, they are celibate for different reasons and with different consequences. For virgins, the issue of timing is more evident because they have not met the cultural deadline of sexual intimacy with a partner. The duration of virginity has gone longer for them than for many of their peers, and they have not followed the same sequence of dating, relationships, and sexual activity. Though singles have met the cultural deadline of initiation to sexuality, the timing and sequencing of dating and long-term relationship formation is different from the normative trajectory. Moreover, they report worrying about the duration of their celibacy. Partnered celibates have followed the normative sequence for sexuality, but have stopped having sex at an age when most of their peers are still sexually active. These celibates have made a transition that generally is acceptable socially and culturally only for older persons, and they expect the duration of their inactivity to be much longer than that of their peers. Thus, as a group, all involuntary celibates appear to have difficulty with the timing and maintenance of culturally sanctioned age-based norms of sexuality. This is consistent with a life course perspective, which emphasizes the significance of multiple transitions and trajectories (Hagestad, 1996).

Although the timing of celibacy was significantly different by partnership status, the experience of being celibate appeared remarkably similar. Despair, depression, frustration, and a loss of confidence were commonly reported. Developing a sense of being off time appeared to negatively affect the ways in which respondents viewed themselves, and they seemed less likely to take the steps necessary to initiate sexual activity. The longer the duration of the celiba-

cy, the more they may have despaired of ever having a "normal" sexual relationship. One final quote, by a male virgin in the 25-34 age group, who is unsure about his sexual orientation, aptly illustrates this trajectory:

I learned about sex by hearing older friends talk about it. My parents gave the very scientific, antiseptic explanation of the whole sex act. [They] basically said that I should not even approach it until finishing high school. When I finished high school, I was very goal oriented and was scared that I would either catch a deadly disease from sex, or have it hamper my career and choices. The longer I waited, the more intimidated I became about the whole process, and just never had the courage to pursue a sexual relationship.

Cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity also appear to have affected our respondents in several ways. For example, the men we interviewed were more likely to have graduate or professional degrees than the females, to work in sex-segregated jobs, and to spend more time on the computer. By following traditional male trajectories that emphasized the importance of an education and directed them toward certain jobs, their "maleness" became a barrier to meeting and dating available women. Similarly, traditional feminine scripts affected the females in our study. Women were less likely to report being shy than men, but were more likely to feel that their bodies were a real barrier to establishing a sexual relationship and to feel constrained by gender role norms which influenced them to act in traditional ways. Moreover, the males in our sample often mentioned feeling trapped by traditional expectations that they should take the initiative in relationships, while females felt that they should not initiate dates or sexual activity.

While there seems to be a trend among some segments in our society toward choosing virginity or celibacy (Sprecher & Regan, 1996; Stafford, 2001), this was not the case for our respondents. Their stories and their use of the label *involuntary* indicate that these are not persons saving themselves for marriage or consciously reclaiming their virginity. Instead, these are individuals who deeply desire a sexual relationship, who feel left behind by their age peers, and who are truly troubled by their lack of sexual intimacy.

Unlike others who use the Internet to fill sexual needs by viewing pornography, engaging in sexually explicit chatting, or having cyber sex (Maheu, 1999), less than a quarter of our sample (22%) reported engaging in these behaviors. In fact, they appeared to be using the Internet more to find moral support than for sexual stimulation. For most, the Internet was used to create a sense of community and to fill emotional needs. Just as they were hesitant to begin sexual relationships in real life, our sample tended to be hesitant about establishing sexual connections on-line as well.

While our project represents a start toward understanding involuntary celibacy, additional research is needed. Groups such as females, elders, persons of color, and the poor and working class were underrepresented in our sample. This is probably because the data were collected using

the Internet. Other possible reasons may be due to the nature of these groups. For example, it is possible that women see celibacy as less problematic than men. Sprecher and Regan (1996) note that males are more troubled by lack of sexual experience than are females, since they are socialized to be sexual aggressors and to expect to have plenty of sexual partners. Moreover, all of our respondents were under 65, so we learned little about older adults. We suspect that elders may not have responded to our survey because they felt they should not be worrying about lack of sex at their age. Persons of color may have been hesitant to respond because they have been socialized to believe that talking about sexual activity (or a lack thereof) is particularly shameful (Wyatt, 1997). Because our survey was computer based, we had few persons from the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. We also recommend that future investigations include adequate numbers of this group in their samples, since their transitions and trajectories may differ from the educationally and materially privileged. Finally, although the proportions of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in our sample are similar to those found by Laumann et al. (1994), larger samples are needed in order to learn more about the causes and consequences of involuntary celibacy for this group.

Probably the most important next step is to conduct studies of nationally representative samples of adults, in order to determine the true prevalence of involuntary celibacy in the U.S. and in other nations. Using the groundwork that we have laid in this paper, hypotheses about the causes and consequences, transitions and trajectories, of involuntary celibates can then be adequately studied. In conclusion, until the phenomenon of involuntary celibacy has been fully investigated and the results disseminated, it will remain a taboo topic, cloaked in mystery and ignorance, and untold numbers of persons will continue to suffer in silence and isolation.

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