Those familiar with Christian Smith and Marie Denton’s *Soul of the American Teenager* may fear *Sex and the Soul* is an attempt to piggyback on the strong reputation of Smith and Denton’s work. One quickly discovers, however, that *Sex and the Soul* stands as a solid research piece in its own right. In *Sex and the Soul*, the unit of analysis is the college student, not the high school student and the research is narrowly focused: the association of collegiate sexuality and religiosity.

*Sex and the Soul* stems from an on-line survey with interview follow up at seven American colleges and universities. While Freitas anticipated 1000 responses to her survey, nearly 2500 undergraduates volunteered to participate. Of those who expressed interest in being interviewed, a random sample from each college were selected and interviewed in depth.

Students from four kinds of institutions are represented in this study: Catholic, evangelical, nonreligious private, and public. This becomes telling because one major finding of the *Sex and the Soul* study is this: In Catholic, nonreligious private and public college/universities the “hook up” culture was considered normal and proscriptive. Here the sexuality scene “…is definitely not about the joys of free love, but about the ways in which young women have been persuaded to participate in activities that were once only fantasies in the minds of men…College women are learning to attach a male defined and male controlled sense of sexiness to self worth…” (p.13). Among the students at these schools the author found virtually no connection between religious faith (if any) and sexuality. “When it comes to [these campuses] sex and religion are irreconcilable” (p. 174).

By contrast, the author felt as if she had landed on a different planet when visiting evangelic colleges. Here, while there was some “hooking up” going on, the majority of men and women ascribed to a purity culture in which spirituality had profound and deeply ingrained impact on male/female relationships and sexuality. “Godly students…see religion and sex as inseparable, at least at a theoretical level. Sex is a gift from God designed to be experienced and enjoyed only inside a religiously sanctioned marriage” p.173).

At non-evangelical colleges while much “hooking up” is going on, there is also a great deal of doubt, unease, and even remorse. Freitas goes to great lengths to document and illustrate the stress and even the anomie that the hook up culture is creating. For example, of 589 students who answered questions related to their “Morning After Hookup Reactions,” only 36% felt fine. “Dashed hopes” describe 41% of the
respondents, “mixed feelings” another 10%, and “depends on the situation” another 13% (p. 154).

The study design details are found in the appendix and a careful reading will satisfy most sociologists that Frietes has done her homework. One strength of Frietas over the Denton and Smith Soul study is that her initial survey allowed space for respondents to narrate their own feelings and experiences. Many did so, at great length. She posits that this design feature facilitated more nuanced information being available than a simple Likert scale survey only. She also suggests that some important content would never be revealed in face to face interviews.

Of course one always wonders about the others on these seven campuses who did not participate. Yes, 2500 did, but about 137,000 did not. Ultimately, Sex and the Soul is only about the 2500 survey participants. “Hooking up” was very much on the minds of the survey participants, but is routinely getting drunk and having sex with virtual strangers the norm in most American colleges and universities? This study cannot answer the question.

As with any academic work on the subject of sex, one walks a fine line between supplying enough specific information to keep the interest of the reader without the content becoming tabloid fare. Freitas succeeds well here. Yes, there are specific. For example, Amy often gets drunk at parties. “I threw up…the room was spinning…when we went to bed…the next thing I know I was giving him oral sex. He was basically masturbating into my mouth because I was too drunk to do anything more than hold my mouth there” (p.8) This is indeed explicit.

Freitas is also apt at explicitly describing the feelings students who live in this hook up culture. One young man wrote “…my stomach is in a knot and I try to suppress memories of the night before, misplaced guilt wells up…the morning [brings] destructive thought and regretful recollection” (p.155).

Some will be uncomfortable with her final chapter, as the author goes beyond the results of the study, with a series of “oughts.” In her own words, it is a chapter serving as “A Practical Guide to Sex and the Soul: three musts for your college to do list, what to say to your child, student, parishioner, friend…” (p.211)

She is very concerned that new students and their parents have some notion of what is going on when it comes to sex, parties, and campus attitudes toward sexuality. This is laudable and that she raises the issue is important.

Some of her practical tips, however, are very hard to imagine. Will parents get a straight answer from any backward walking (“And over here is the chemistry building…” twenty year old tour guide to questions like “Are there theme parties here? If so, do they follow the ‘pimps and ho’s’ model or the ‘girls wear as little as possible’ format? Do you have any statistics?” (p. 232). Or asking “How is dating perceived? Do people date here? If so, what do people typically do on dates?” (p. 232) How will any student tour guide, Dean of Students, or College Recruitment Dean answer this question with any credibility? Or perhaps someone in the student counseling service department may have an answer for a question like “How do students who get reputations handle social ruin? Is it possible to make a comeback? If so, how?” (p. 232).

While some of the author’s campus sex practices questions stretch credulity, her questions related to “soul” issues seem more answerable. Among them: “What sort of
pastoral counseling/spiritual mentorship and/or advising is available to students?” (p. 236)

In my mind this whole final chapter is salvaged, however, in her words directed to specific kinds of persons. I quote her paragraph (p. 238):

“If you are a parent: use this list as a guide to identify the relevant issues to discuss and maintain a truly open dialogue with your child both before and during college.

“If you work at a college: use this list to inquire whether these activities or problems exist there and to identify ways to respond to these issues.

“If you are clergy: use this list to educate yourself about the realities that college students face so that you can help them tackle these issues from the perspective of your faith tradition.”

In Sex and the Soul Donna Freitas has made an important contribution to the sociology of religion. Here we get a meaningful treatment of some student experiences in their own life-worlds. Others will, no doubt, extend and deepen the study of religiosity and sexuality.

833 Word Version


Leonard Kageler
Nyack College

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