

Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences. By Laura M. Carpenter. New York: New York University Press, 2005, 294 pp., \$60.00 (cloth), \$20.00 (paper).

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Sex researchers have long been concerned with first sexual experiences. They chronicle how old first timers are, how many wait until marriage, and whether partners freely choose their first experience or are coerced. Occasionally, scholars ask people if they found their first time enjoyable. Rarely, however, do they interrogate the meanings that people assign to their first sexual encounters. What counts for losing your virginity? What does it mean to you? These are the questions that motivate Laura Carpenter's book, *Virginity Lost*.

Carpenter interviews 61 adults, most of whom are no longer virgins, oversampling for diversity along racial, ethnic, and sexual identity lines. What she learns is that the traditional definition of virginity loss, penis/vagina intercourse, is expanding to some degree. Some, especially lesbian and gay participants, question the heteronormativity of this definition and instead define oral or anal intercourse with a same-sex partner as losing your virginity. Some others, who choose chastity after having sex in their youth, adopt an identity as "born-again virgins."

The book's greatest contribution is in exploring people's meaning of their own virginity loss. Carpenter's research found that participants cluster into three groups with different lenses through which they view their virginity and their experience of losing it. The first group sees virginity as a gift that one partner gives to another. A second group views virginity as a shameful stigma to be lost at the first opportunity. A third group considers losing one's virginity to be part of a process of gaining sexual experience and knowledge.

Carpenter's findings indicate that the role gender plays in making meaning of virginity loss is complex. Although the different metaphors are associated with a particular gender in our cultural context, each of the three metaphors were used by both men and women. Still, the gendered nature of the metaphors influenced men and women in different ways. For example, the gift metaphor is socially marked as feminine, so men who used this metaphor and saved their virginity loss for a committed partnership recalled that they hid their virginity from their peers, while women gifters did not feel pressure to hide their virgin status. The stigma metaphor is culturally associated with men's virginity. Although Carpenter interviewed men and women who used this metaphor, she finds that women in this group were more empowered in their first sexual encounters than men, who had more trouble finding a willing partner and who were less likely to reveal their virgin status to their partners.

These different ways of looking at virginity, the book argues, have implications for people's sexual behavior. For example, the stigmatized were likely to forgo safer sex protections such as condoms. The gifters avoided these troubles, as they tended to lose their virginity in trusting, long-term partnerships. However, as the gift metaphor implies, this group expected that the act of losing their virginity with a partner would be paid back with a reciprocal gift of love and commitment. Given the gender norms of sexuality in our current context, gifting

women were often disappointed by their men partners. The group that viewed virginity loss as one step in a process of learning about sex were the most likely to combine realistic relationship expectations with safer sex precautions. Carpenter concludes that the process metaphor promotes the healthiest approach to first sexual experiences.

While Carpenter conducts high-quality, in-depth interviews, her purposeful sampling method and small number of participants precludes her from extrapolating to the general population. Still, at times she cannot resist reporting the proportion of her participants who used one frame or another when interpreting their first sexual experiences, since these quantitative questions are also important to the study of sexuality. While this study cannot answer such questions definitively, this book does build an excellent foundation for future research. This framework of three virginity metaphors is a strong contribution to this undertheorized area of sexuality studies.

Much is learned when researchers ask people to reflect on their lives, to interpret the social world in their own way, rather than trying to fit explanations from a distance. Too often, however, when the subject is sex, we fail to do this when young people are the participants in the study. Carpenter lets the voices of her participants come through, highlighting both the similarities and the diversity of approaches to virginity. By building her theory from these responses, she reveals the complexity of changing social norms around youth, marriage, and sexuality. Generations of feminists have made it clear that sex and sexuality are linchpins in the study of gender. This book is an excellent way to start conversations with students, especially in courses on the sociology of gender and sexualities, to see that norms change over time, and to explore the interconnectedness of the personal and the political.

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