Sex Roles (2019) 81:399–414
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-1004-2

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Laboring to Make Sex "Safe": Sexual Vigilance in Young U.S. College Women

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Published online: 15 January 2019
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Abstract

Definitions of "safe sex" often focus on the use of condoms and contraception, but largely ignore other dimensions of safety, such as efforts to feel emotionally or physically safe. These gaps in the definition of the term safety demand greater attention to how being safe and feeling safe are interpreted by individuals who live and engage in sexual lives marked by social and political inequality. In the current study, we draw on interviews with 17 young women ages 18–28 from a U.S. urban university to examine efforts they used to protect themselves in sexual relationships. When having sex with men, we found young women relied on a range of efforts to keep themselves safe, such as controlling their own sexual desire, developing strict contraceptive regimens, and building relational contexts characterized by physical and emotional safety. We argue that sexual safety labor (i.e., "good" contraceptive behavior, "waiting" to have sex, and "careful" decision-making) offers evidence of what safe sex requires of young women. We examine this range of cognitions and behaviors as forms of labor directed at making sex feel and be safe; however, young women did not describe these efforts in terms of their own time or energy. In our analysis, we suggest that vigilance in sexual relationships has become part of young women's required repertoire of safe sex behaviors, but largely goes unnoticed by them. We connect these findings with public health campaigns that teach young people about safety and offer alternatives for researchers looking to understand and study what is imagined as "safe sex."

Keywords Adolescence · Sexuality · Relationships · Gender · Contraception

"Safe sex" as a contemporary public health message emerged in the 1980s and initially focused on encouraging men's condom use as a way to decrease their exposure to HIV (Berkowitz et al. 1983). The term quickly expanded to include heterosexual women's experiences preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (McIlvenna 1986). A missing element to these safe sex campaigns, however, has been sustained attention to how gendered power imbalances in heterosexual relationships may be relevant to issues of safety in and around sex (Amaro 1995; Wingood and DiClemente 2000). For example, researchers have identified how gender imbalances shape young women's experiences of following safe sex guidelines (i.e., using a condom with their male partners; Amaro and Raj 2000; Braun 2013). Young women also consistently describe other aspects of safety in addition to condom use, such as physical and emotional safety, that are not often included in safe sex campaigns (Bay-Cheng et al. 2011; Bourne and Robson 2009).

With these questions in mind of what is missing from, yet essential to, definitions of "safe sex," we examined how young U.S. college women described the work they did to be and feel safe in sexual experiences with male partners. We aimed to understand the efforts young women undertake to protect themselves, with particular attention to those efforts that have gone unrecognized but are essential for sex to be and to feel "safe." Without these insights, there is a risk that the full scope of behaviors that go into making sex safe remain out of sight—a risk that translates into overriding and under-appreciating the work that women do when entering into sexual relationships. We argue that women's efforts to remain safe should be of concern to feminist social scientists because these efforts are (a) difficult to assess and (b) often assumed to be an individual choice rather than a response to gendered

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-1004-2) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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social and interpersonal power imbalances. In the current study, we read young women's descriptions of safety within larger patterns of patriarchy and gender inequality. However, rather than compare the experiences of women and men to illustrate inequality, we relied on feminist theories to help understand how and if women's efforts to "have safe sex" could be read as a form of labor that has become so naturalized that it has become invisible to them—and to us as feminist scholars. We analyzed descriptions of safe sex with questions of how young women developed vigilance as a necessary part of their safe sexual regimen.

Finally, we argue for considering young women's sexual vigilance in line with contemporary movements that bring attention to the ways individuals with less power are taught to keep themselves "safe" in the face of systematic injustice (Fine et al. 2003; Zaal et al. 2007). Contemporary racial and gender justice campaigns (e.g., Black Lives Matter, #MeToo) challenge how social inequality is often framed as individuals' responsibility. Our study and its questions draw from these larger on-going critiques of how efforts for protection (e.g., always carrying citizenship documentation, listening to a police officer commands, never walking alone at night) are demanded from and deemed "natural" ways of behaving for those with less power rather than recognized as outcomes of systemic inequality (Dottolo and Stewart 2008; Lee and Hicken 2016). In other words, targeted individuals and groups are expected to behave in ways that prevent their own mistreatment. We align our questions about sexual vigilance with these critiques of how safety concerns are always embedded in social structures that make some more vulnerable than others.

For the past three decades, adolescent sexuality researchers have documented that young women's sexual experiences contain elements of desire and risk, often braided together (Fine 1988). Researchers have examined gendered power imbalances that position young women at risk for harms including unintended pregnancy, HIV, and sexual violence from male partners (Phillips 1998; Tolman 2009). This research includes, for example, work on consent (Muehlenhard et al. 2016), sexual gatekeeping (Hlavka 2014; Wiederman 2005), condom negotiation (Wingood and DiClemente 2000), and women's missing discourse of desire (Fine and McClelland 2006). Each of these offer crucial analyses of how gender, heteronormativity, and racism shape young women's sexual relationships and experiences with safety, yet these analyses have often remained separate from research and public dialogues about safe sex.

Safe sex campaigns and sex education programs, for example, often teach young women and men about sex solely in terms of bodily and emotional harms (Tolman and McClelland 2011). This includes teaching young people that the only way to be safe is to abstain from sex outside of a heterosexual marriage in order to prevent the potential consequences of pregnancy, disease, and psychological harm (Bay-Cheng 2003; Kuehnel 2009). Young women learn they are at risk for these harms and, in addition, that they are responsible for taking necessary precautions, such as saying "no" to male partners' sexual advances and being "smart" about avoiding dangerous personal and sexual situations (Phillips 2000). Many sex education programs do not, however, teach young people about how gendered and racialized inequalities shape their ability to have safe sex or other possible strategies to engage in safe sex (Fine and McClelland 2006). This leaves unanswered questions about what having "safe sex" actually looks like for young women. In the following, we present research relevant to safe sex as well as findings about how women describe safety more broadly as part of their sexual experiences with men.

Condom Use

Research related to young people, sex, and safety has often focused on specific sexual outcomes (e.g., how often do young women use condoms with male partners?) as well as the contexts surrounding those outcomes (e.g., were condoms available and/or acceptable?) (Sheeran et al. 1999; Widman et al. 2014). Rates of condom use among U.S. adolescent and young adult women remain low (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017), which has prompted researchers to examine additional factors, such as gendered sexual dynamics (Braun 2013; Higgins and Wang 2015). For example, in an interview study with young adult women and men, the majority of participants described that women are primarily responsible for ensuring a condom is used in a heterosexual context (Pulerwitz and Dworkin 2006). Importantly, several studies have found that attempting to negotiate condom use can put women at risk for disease and pregnancy if their partner refuses, as well as at risk for accusations of infidelity or violent reactions from male partners (Otto-Salaj et al. 2010; Wingood and DiClemente 2000).

In addition, researchers have argued that gender, race, and class inequities shape young women's experiences with safe sex (Holland et al. 1992). For example, Bowleg et al. (2004) found that Women of Color and women with less education reported lower rates of condom use with their male partners than their White and more educated peers, suggesting that power imbalances play a role in women's ability to have safe sex. In a study with 36 adult men and women, Higgins and Browne (2008) found that class status impacted how women imagined their ability to have safe sex; in fact, middle class participants described being able to refuse unwanted sex and use contraception to a greater extent than their socially disadvantaged peers did. These findings suggest that tracking rates of condom use as a measure of safe sex behaviors does not fully capture important dynamics related to sexuality, gender, race, and class that are part of young women's condom use. As

a result, we know too little about the parameters of what safe sex means, especially in sexual encounters that are characterized by unequal social and political power.

Physical Safety

Although not often included in discussion of safe sex, worrying about, avoiding, and contending with threats of sexual assault and coercion, as well as physical safety more broadly, are crucial factors in how safe young women feel in their sexual relationships. Young adult and college-aged women consistently report feeling concerned for their physical safety in their intimate relationships (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Morgan and Zurbriggen 2007). In a survey of college-aged women, Littleton et al. (2013) found that 20% of their 1620 participants had experienced some type of sexual assault, suggesting that physical safety is a significant concern for many young women. Jeffrey and Barata (2017) found that college-aged women reported feeling a range of negative emotions from their male partners' coercive behaviors, including feeling scared, angry, and shameful. Participants also described blaming themselves for their male partner's behaviors, suggesting that young women felt they could have prevented the coercion and violence. Surprisingly, even with this and other research about the salience of violence (and its prevention) in young women's lives, physical safety is not often described as a necessary aspect of safe sex.

Emotional Safety

Emotional safety is also not commonly included in discussions of safe sex, but it consistently appears in emerging adult women's discussions of how they worry about, avoid, and contend with sexual risk. Young adult women consistently describe wanting to be able to trust their sexual partner, feel respected by partners, and not feel "used" for sex (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Mullinax et al. 2016; Trinh 2016). Across studies, adolescent and young adult women report wanting to find partners who will be patient, kind, and trustworthy; they also report avoiding potential partners who they believe will hurt them, avoiding "unsafe" partners when they can (Bourne and Robson 2009; Farvid et al. 2017; Tolman 2009). For example, in an interview study with 12th graders, Hirschman et al. (2006) found that young women reported having a sexual partner with whom they felt emotionally safe was key to preventing feeling regretful, emotionally "destroyed" and "dirty" after having sex. Although young women are often assumed to want to have an emotional connection with a sexual partner (Tolman 2009), these findings suggest that closeness might offer young women many things, including a necessary sense of safety.

Sexual Safety

In an effort to address how safety is shaped by gendered power imbalances and subsequent physical and emotional vulnerability, researchers have argued for broader terms such as "sexual safety" (Alexander 2012; Fantasia and Fontenot 2011; Mullinax et al. 2016). This term signals greater attention to issues related to adolescents' dating dynamics, partner communication, emotional and physical safety, and environmental risk factors. "Sexual safety" requires that individuals' knowledge, skill-building, and decision-making capacities are central to discussions of safe sex, including behaviors that help preserve emotional and physical well-being (Alexander 2012). This term, in addition, requires that researchers turn to how individuals describe their efforts to be and feel safe in their sexual lives.

Safety, as described by adolescent and young adult women, consistently requires attention to several elements of their physical and emotional well-being. Most importantly, staying safe requires heightened attention to their surroundings and their sexual partner(s). For example, Bay Cheng and colleagues (Bay-Cheng et al. 2011) found that adolescent girls (ages 14–17) described developing strategies to manage potential sexual risks such as saying "no" to unwanted sex and "studying" a boy's temper to predict if he might become violent. In a sample of college-aged women, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) found that participants described the importance of being assertive and direct when communicating verbal consent to ensure a male partner understood and would listen. These findings suggest that the attention and strategies that individuals develop to anticipate and manage potentially harmful sexual situations is also a crucial aspect of safe sex. What can be understood about the extent and ways in which young women are attentive to their own sexual safety? We turn now to theoretical work that offers labor as an analytic tool for understanding the work that women do in their intimate lives and the potential for labor to be an important aspect of safe sex.

Sexual Labor

Feminism has long aimed to understand women's experiences with gender, gendered expectations, and norms around femininity (Bartky 1988; Smith 1988; West and Zimmerman 1987). Researchers have argued for greater attention to the femininity norms that assume attention, work, and improvement to be a normative aspect of female relations with others (Cacchioni 2007; Kimport 2018). Building from this work, McClelland (2017) developed a theory of gender and sexual labor to examine women's efforts at maintaining femininity and sexual availability from her interviews with women who had been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer.

McClelland's (2017) articulation of sexual labor highlights the work that women undertake to become, remain, or refuse to be sexually active in their intimate relationships. McClelland argued that women's efforts in these circumstances should be recognized as labor in the context of femininity expectations that demand women to continually "work" at themselves and their relationships. McClelland's (2017) sexual labor theory asks researchers to pay attention to women's indications of the ongoing psychological and physical efforts to be sexually active that often go unnoticed by researchers, sex educators, doctors, and women's sexual partners because of their close alignment with femininity norms. Importantly, these efforts also can go unrecognized or considered not burdensome to women themselves whose relationships and experiences are steeped in these norms. This makes it difficult—but important—to notice when norms play a role in disguising effort as part of a person's everyday life (see also Hlavka 2014; Meyer et al. 2011; Sue 2010). In the current study, we turn to sexual labor as a guiding theory for understanding young women's descriptions of working toward safety in their sexual relationships. Labor is a useful frame for this analysis because it offers a way to locate discrete efforts that go unrecognized within heteronormative and feminine norms but nevertheless require consistent effort.

The Current Study

We drew on a set of interviews with 17 U.S. college women ages 18–28 from a larger study investigating young people's experiences with sexual satisfaction (see McClelland 2011, 2014). Interviews were conducted in an urban setting with a sample of young women with diverse racial/ethnic and sexual identities. In our analysis of the interviews, we traced the concept of safety and examined how young women worked to protect themselves from a range of worries throughout their sexual relationships. With a focus on labor, we examined discourses of protection that were not limited to decisions about preventing pregnancy or disease within the moment of a sexual encounter, but rather a set of daily strategies young women used to manage the many immediate and anticipated negative consequences sex presented.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the undergraduate psychology research pool at a public university in New York City. Recruitment used a purposeful sampling design in order to include individuals with both diverse racial and sexual identities; the original sample comprised 41 men, women, and trans-identified individuals, ages 18–36. In the current analysis, we included only participants who identified as women between the ages 18–28 ($n = 17$) in order to focus on experiences in emerging adulthood. Just over half identified as White ($n = 9$) and half as racial/ethnic minorities ($n = 8$), including Latina ($n = 3$), Asian and Asian Pacific Islander ($n = 2$), Black/African American ($n = 1$), and multi-racial ($n = 2$).

Participants were asked to report their current sexual identity and whether they were partnered; if partnered, they were asked the sex of their partner. About half the women ($n = 8$) identified as lesbian or bisexual, about half identified as heterosexual ($n = 8$), and one identified as undecided ($n = 1$). Of the young women who were partnered, all reported having male partners, meaning that the heterosexual-identified women, the bisexual-identified women, and the one woman who was undecided about her identity label were partnered with men at the time of the interview.

Given the age of our sample, it is important to note that for some young women having a partner did not necessarily mean they had engaged in sexual intercourse with this partner. In other words, some participants spoke about anticipating sexual activities in which they had not yet engaged. Two participants reported they were not currently partnered, including one lesbian-identified woman. We did not exclude participants based on sexual identity or sexual behaviors because researchers of adolescents have consistently found that identities and behaviors do not always align for this age group (Dickson et al. 2013). In addition, our sampling decision meant that we did not make assumptions about the gender or sex of a participant's past or future sexual partner(s) based on their current sexual identities. The sample in the current study consisted of woman-identified participants with a range of sexual identities and behaviors in an effort to focus our analysis on the gendered aspects of how young college women describe their past and anticipated future sexual interactions.

Interview Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the second author, a queer-identified woman in her 30s at the time of the interviews. Interviews lasted between 35 and 45 min, and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. (The full interview schedule is available in the online supplement.) Before beginning the interviews, participants were presented with a definition of sex that allowed for a wide range of behaviors that would be potentially relevant when discussing sexual experiences. This definition read as follows: "Throughout this study, the word 'sex' will be used. By sex, we mean any of the following: masturbation, kissing, caressing, fondling, intercourse, genital contact, and/or oral/genital contact."

The focus of the interviews was how participants defined and rated their sexual satisfaction (see McClelland 2011, 2014

for discussion). Questions related to sexual satisfaction included: "How do you define your own sexual satisfaction?" and "Do you think this definition will change in the future for you?" In order to contextualize these definitions, the interview included several additional questions about where participants learned about sex ("How have you learned about sex?"), peer relationships ("Do you talk about sex with friends?"), and interpretations of gender ("What are your associations with words like femininity and masculinity?"). The interviews also included opportunities for participants to discuss their sexual experiences through follow up questions such as: "Can you give me an example of when you had the feeling that you're describing?" This, for most participants, resulted in descriptions of intimacy, desire, and safety, which became the basis for the current analysis.

For example, when asked "When do you know that you feel sexually satisfied?", participants often responded with descriptions about "feeling safe" as central to their satisfaction. Because others have found that speaking about pleasure can be difficult for some young women, we were particularly interested in participants' descriptions of safety as a response to questions about sexual satisfaction (Tolman 2009). Our secondary analysis of the interview data took advantage of these unprompted discussions of safety because they offered the opportunity to examine how young women discussed safe sex without being prompted to discuss condom use and other traditional images associated with safe sex. The young women spoke about the dangers they felt would happen if they had "unsafe" sex and described how safety was an important part of their sexual experiences. In the initial analysis of the interviews, the efforts (i.e., time, labor, cognitive attention) that young women described as part of their sexual safety routines stood out as central and became a focus of the current analysis.

Data Analysis

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Feminist scholars have long argued for improving research methodologies to better capture women's experiences and perspectives. For example, feminist qualitative methodologists argue for paying attention to both what and how women speak about their lives as well as considering what remains unspoken in the research context (Tolman 2009; Willig 2013, 2017). Those in the field of adolescent sexuality studies, in particular, have developed methodological tools for investigating how power shapes young women's experiences with sexuality (see McClelland 2018, for discussion). For example, McClelland and Fine (2008) highlighted how descriptions of sexuality are soaked in political ideologies of shame, danger, and protection. As a result, these descriptions are often wrapped in "cellophane" (i.e., layers of discourses of shame and norms about what can and cannot be spoken). They argued this makes it difficult for a researcher to hear, and difficult for a participant to speak about, anything beyond discourses of "safe" and "risk" and "prevention." We developed our analysis with these warnings in mind, meaning that we focused on both what participants said about sex and what was wrapped in "cellophane" and therefore might not be easily said or easily heard.

Participants often described what they did to protect themselves (e.g., take a birth control pill each morning), but they did not always speak to the energy they invested in doing so. For example, when participants reflected on considerations they made about with whom to have sex and when to have sex with a new partner, they did not do so in terms of work; they often reflected on these aspects of their lives as normal and expected. In our analysis, we did not assess these efforts as normal and expected, but instead as accumulations of effort. Feeling safe (and unsafe) were central and motivating needs for young women. We focused on the amount of energy they spent protecting themselves from dangers, both real and anticipated. In our analysis, we also interpreted this safety work as shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts that have long positioned women as solely responsible for their own sexual and reproductive well-being (Barcelos and Gubrium 2018; Ussher 2010; Willig 2013).

To develop our coding system, we turned to McClelland's (2017) theory of sexual labor. Guided by this theory, we defined sexual labor as the psychological and physical processes young women took to become, remain, and refuse to be sexually active with male partners. McClelland argued this was important because without a frame of labor, researchers might continue to interpret these processes as either "natural" to women or as freely chosen, ignoring the role of femininity norms in reproducing assumptions about how women make decisions in their sexual relationships and experiences. We operationalized "sexual labor" as moments in the interviews when participants communicated how they worked to feel safe, especially when they had also described fears about potential negative consequences of having sex. From this definition, we created codes that captured participants' laboring (i.e., physical, emotional, cognitive efforts) to have safe sex.

Coding Procedures

In our analysis, we followed coding procedures outlined by Terry et al. (2017) for a theoretically-driven thematic analysis in which codes were developed from McClelland's (2017) theory of sexual labor. This theory guided how codes were defined, as well as what elements of sexual encounters were the focus of analysis; these decisions are discussed in more detail below. Following guidelines of qualitative thematic analysis (Terry et al. 2017), we did not organize codes in a codebook, but rather coding was a flexible, on-going process in which coding evolved as we engaged closely with both the

interviews and the guiding theory, and we relied on researcher subjectivity and interpretation throughout the process. This approach aligned our analysis with feminist approaches to qualitative analysis that foreground guiding theories and researchers' interpretations of qualitative data and flexibility during coding throughout analysis (Terry et al. 2017; see also feminist re-workings of grounded theory by Charmaz 2014).

The first author read through the interviews several times to become familiar with the data. On subsequent readings, she extracted excerpts of what participants described as doing to feel safe, how they thought about safety related to their sexual life, and affective components related to feeling safe and unsafe (e.g., feeling relaxed and feeling disgusted). In addition to explicit mentions of safety, she included participants' descriptions of fear, worry, and impending risks in order to capture why participants' imagined safety as needed or important. Finally, the first author extracted language of personal control or taking action around safety to capture participants' imagined role in protecting themselves. These excerpts became the data used in the coding phase.

Both authors worked together to develop codes related to safety, which we defined as feeling or a mindset where one was protected from sex-related harms and would experience fewer (or no) negative consequences from having sex. The first author coded instances where participants alluded to impending negative consequences, an investment in safety and safe-keeping, and the physical and psychological actions that they undertook to feel safe. Along with these physical and psychological actions, we also coded participants' motives for the decisions they made because McClelland (2017) argued that motives are an important context for understanding a person's actions. Following this theory also meant that we coded instances when femininity norms and heterosexual norms were mentioned but not described as such (e.g., descriptions of "needing" an emotional connection with a male partner to feel safe having sex with them). These instances offered a way to code for norms even when participants identified them as personal beliefs. In addition, we developed a code to capture descriptions of acceptable sexual partners (i.e., "I literally can't have sex if I don't feel safe with someone") which was coded as "carefully choosing a sexual partner." Our focus in these codes was to highlight aspects of labor by capturing participants' role in making sex "safe," as well as their thoughts and feelings when they did and did not make sex "safe" through making careful choices, preparations, and managing their own and others' views about their sexual behaviors.

Lastly, McClelland's (2017, p. 37) theory further defined sexual labor as "ongoing and consistent," which we used to highlight participants' investments in safety or their descriptions of the time, energy, and emotions related to their sexual labor (i.e., "I do worry about it, like, all the time"). Following McClelland's emphasis on the ongoing nature of sexual labor, we also identified safety as potentially salient throughout a young woman's life rather than only in the moment of sexual activity. As a result, we coded elements in the interviews where participants noted behaviors or thoughts they had outside their sexual encounters that were, nevertheless, related to their sexual lives. For example, we coded when participants described gaining birth control pills before having sex, as well as when participants described worrying about how other people would view them after they had sex.

Theme Development

We used a series of tables in Word organized by code to analyze participants' descriptions of labor. After reading through excerpts organized under each code (i.e., "worries about being used by a sexual partner"), both authors independently read through excerpts. This allowed us to consider the variety within codes and also how descriptions across codes held similarities and differences related to labor. As with coding, theme development was guided by McClelland's (2017) sexual labor theory. This resulted in analyzing participants' safety efforts alongside their investments in and motivations for safety; this helped us to see participants' efforts as meaningfully motivated by fears of being unsafe and of what could happen if they were unsafe. The goal of our study was not to generalize our findings to all women who have sex with male partners, but rather to provide evidence that environments of gender inequality and safe sex campaigns form a context within which young women learn what it means to be safe and how they should *do* safety in their sexual relationships.

Results

We developed four themes that explored how young women worked to protect themselves before, during, and after having sex with male partners. Detailed information about each participant can be found in Table 1; all participant names are researcher-assigned pseudonyms. In the first theme, (a) The High Stakes of Sex, we present the range and intensity of fears young women reported about intercourse and its possible outcomes. This theme grounds the subsequent themes in participants' accounts of the risks that sex held for them. In the remaining three themes, we present three types of sexual labor that young women employed in order to manage their worries associated with the high stakes of sex: (b) Psychological Labor, (c) Contraceptive Labor, and (d) Relational Labor. Detailed information about each theme can be found in Table 2.

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Sexual Identity	Partnered (Y/N), Sex of partner
Alex	19	White	Bisexual	Yes, male
Christine	24	Asian	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Courtney	21	Black	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Drew	19	White	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Elizabeth	19	Latina	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Jane	25	White	Lesbian	No
Jennifer	25	White	Bisexual	Yes, male
Julia	26	White	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Kelly	18	Hungarian, Dominican, & British	Bisexual	Yes, male
Kristin	23	Jamaican/Chinese	Bisexual	No
Laura	22	White	Bisexual	Yes, male
Lily	20	White	Bisexual	Yes, male
Lucy	18	Asian	Bisexual	Yes, male
Maya	19	Latina	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Rachel	27	White	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Sophia	19	Latina	Heterosexual	Yes, male
Sue	28	White	Undecided	Yes, male

Participants were asked, "What race/ethnicity do you identify as? Check all that apply: Caucasian/White, Latino/a, Black/African-American, Asian/Asian Pacific Islander, Other (please describe)"

The High Stakes of Sex

Young women described a range of high stakes associated with becoming a sexually active person. These stakes included anticipating threats such as disease, pregnancy, changes to their relationships, as well as concerns about being hurt and feeling regret. Worries about danger and sex were present across interviews, highlighting the extent to which young women spoke about worry, even when they were not asked about sexual risks. For example, Alex reported, "there are a lot of things that you don't know about people and that could have bad consequences and like, my uncle died of AIDS, so I remember that too, and I don't want to get that." Alex's description of sex involved concrete negative outcomes such as contracting HIV/AIDS as well as more general descriptions of "things you don't know" and "bad consequences" that were less clearly defined. This suggested that although some of the young women's worries were linked to stories they had heard of what would happen to them if they had sex, there were also unspecified risks and an accompanying sense of worry present in the interviews.

Similarly, Elizabeth imagined that having sex for the first time would inevitably come with unspecified changes to her body:

> [Considering having sex for the first time] made me feel like it wouldn't be worth it to risk it all. Because I feel like with sex comes a lot of changes. Like not only with your personality, but your body changes. Like, I feel like it's way different. (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth's description demonstrates not only that sex would cause changes, but also that these changes were considerable. Later in the interview, Elizabeth spoke about the conditions that were necessary to reduce the risks she was imagining. These conditions included having a partner who would not force her to have sex and would not cheat on her as well as being in love; only then would she feel comfortable having sex for the first time.

Across the interviews, participants reiterated the importance of being able to trust their sexual partner, stating, "You have to trust the person"; "I do have to feel like, an emotional kind of closeness to who I am doing it with"; and "I need, like, this connection with a person, when I have sex with them." These echoes of "You have to" and "I need" offered insight to how emotional closeness and trust were not described as a preference with sexual partner, but rather was a requirement to have sex with a partner. The stakes of not developing a foundation of emotional closeness and trust was also highlighted by participants describing that they had been emotionally hurt in the past as well as how they would feel if a partner hurt them in the future: "If they just, the guy just gets up and walks away I feel really bad"; "Every time you learn to trust somebody, to walk away is almost like, where do I go from there?"; and "If I'm hurt with something else, I can't like really do anything again." Feeling emotionally hurt, confused, and hesitant about having sex in the future offer a few examples of the high stakes young women imagined they could experience.

In addition to health and related bodily risks, young women spoke about how sex came with the potential to harm one's

Table 2 Themes, descriptions, coding, and examples

Theme	Description	Indicative codes	Example
High Stakes of Sex	Range and intensity of fears about sex and its possible outcomes.	• Sex as a "big deal" • Dangers associated with having sex	"Trust, definitely a monogamous relationship because a lot of the STDs that are out there you wouldn't want to catch one." (Sophia)
Sexual Labor			
Psychological Labor	Cognitive efforts to assess and avoid negative outcomes associated with (real or imagined) sexual encounters, as well as the efforts to ensure sex with partners is imagined as "good" and "correct."	• Developing "rules" for acceptable sexual behaviors • Working to relax during sex without a condom	"And I do, I do have to feel like, an emotional kind of closeness to who I am doing it with, for the most part that, for 95% of the time, I'd say. Otherwise it just doesn't feel like, it just feels like, 'ok, like, what am I doing?' It feels kind of gross." (Maya)
Contraceptive Labor	Descriptions of time and energy in considering pregnancy risks, planning to prevent pregnancy, and descriptions of feeling protected (or unprotected) from pregnancy.	• Behaviors to obtain and regularly use contraceptives • Criteria for "correct" contraception use	"I don't think I could have sex, you know unless I was trying to conceive a child, but to not use protection or birth control just seems totally illogical to me for my own needs because there's no way I could enjoy sex of any kind if I was fearful of that or putting my body at risk in anyway." (Julia)
Relational Labor	Descriptions of the relational conditions within which sex would be and feel safe, including finding sexual partners and forming and maintaining relationships.	• Criteria for choosing a sexual partner • Strategies to regulate or communicate with a sexual partner	"It has to be with someone I'm close with, I can't just like, do it with just like anyone. It has to be someone specific." (Drew)

future. Sophia worried that sex without contraception would be "a turn off because you also have to think about the future and what the future holds for you, so you don't want to do anything that you're going to regret later." Sophia's concerns highlight how sex was imagined as harmful and always tied to one's potential future opportunities. This theme grounds the next three themes, which focus on the ways that young women worked, indeed labored, to reduce these worries and risks they associated with being a sexually active person.

Young Women's Sexual Labor

To demonstrate that sexual labor was consistently present across the dataset rather than occurring only within one or two participants, we note broader frequency descriptions within each theme. In short, we found that 88% ($n = 15$) of participants described some form of sexual labor. This further broke down into different types of labor in our study: psychological labor, contraceptive labor, and relational labor. This suggests that laboring was not exceptional or unique to a few. The Psychological Labor theme (present in 14, 80%, of interviews) highlights young women's thoughts and worries about risk and prevention; it emphasizes participants' cognitive efforts to protect themselves in sexual situations, such as developing rules for acceptable sexual behaviors and making themselves "relax" during sex when they felt worried. The Contraceptive Labor theme (present in 5, 30%, of interviews) focuses on participants' investments of energy and time in considering their risk of pregnancy, their actions and behaviors in planning to prevent pregnancy, and their descriptions of feeling protected (or unprotected) from pregnancy. The Relational Labor theme (present in 13, 75%, of interviews) highlights young women's investments and methods in building a setting within which sex with a man would be and feel safe. We analyzed how young women described criteria for selecting partners, forming relationships, and engaging with partners during sex.

Psychological Labor

Psychological labor focuses on the thoughts, feelings, decision-making processes, and judgments around morality that young women employed to make "good" decisions around their sexual experiences. These included: controlling sexual desires, positioning themselves as agents of their will, developing boundaries for wanted and unwanted sexual behaviors, deliberating over whether they were being safe, and convincing themselves to "relax" during sex when they were worried about condoms and pregnancy. In this theme we highlight the ways young women worked to be in control of the decisions around the pace of sexual activity in a new relationship, the type of behaviors permitted during sexual experiences, and their motives to have sex outside an emotional relationship. We developed the theme of psychological labor in order to better understand the worry young women felt about sex being unsafe, the guidelines they followed to manage these worries, and how they thought and felt

toward themselves when they followed (or did not follow) those guidelines.

Courtney described how she decided what she was comfortable doing with sexual partners. Earlier in the interview, Courtney had talked about how the risk of disease could apply to "small" behaviors like kissing and that it was important to follow a set of "rules" for acceptable sexual behaviors that she developed when she first had sex. In her description, Courtney describes these rules and how they were important to keep sex safe and within the boundaries of what she considered acceptable:

> [I think about] not only my own, like my experiences, but what I would want to keep in mind for the future as well. So, you know, with anyone…like there's certain rules you have for yourself that it's like, I'm not going to pass or break these things no matter who comes along… so I kind of know what I would do, what I wouldn't do, and [it] doesn't really matter who else is involved, just like if they have own, you know, views or morals on certain things, then that will be taken into consideration. (Courtney)

In this excerpt, Courtney described how her set of "rules" not only helped her figure out her personal preferences but also aided her own navigation of morality, beliefs, and imagined outcomes related to her sexuality. Courtney's discussion of rules offers one example of the process of establishing and maintaining boundaries that accompanies being sexually active for young women. We interpret Courtney's expenditure of time and energy to develop this set of rules as a form of psychological labor. Courtney further described thinking about her rules in preparation to engage with a potential partner who might disagree or have his own rules for acceptable sexual behavior. Preparing to defend and potentially negotiate her set of rules with a partner is another example of the labor she undertook to feel safe in current and future sexual experiences.

Psychological labor also consisted of the thoughts and feelings that accompanied unsafe sex. Kristin reported feeling "disgusted with [her]self" when not using a condom during intercourse:

> I feel horrible if there's no condom, like feel absolutely disgusted with myself. But I could either feel disgusted with myself the entire time, or if I just relax and let go and have trust in the person, then, you know, you enjoy it afterwards. (Kristin)

Kristin's moral judgments and feeling "disgusted" with herself "the entire time" in this case were paired with the additional psychological effort to convince herself to stop feeling this way. Kristin described a particular set of thoughts as necessary: "relax," "let go" of her worry, and "trust" her partner. The psychological labor here included not only feeling shameful for having sex without a condom, but also the labor involved in working to let go of that shame enough to enjoy the sex. The psychological labor theme enables this closer look at the work Kristin imagined as necessary while having sex, particularly when this labor is described as occurring within women's minds without knowledge or support from sexual partners.

References to being in control were prevalent throughout our study and offer another example of psychological labor. For example, participants described having a "guard up" with potential partners in order to control when and with whom they became intimate. Young women spoke about the importance of being in control of sexual desire and not having sex until one year into a committed relationship. Participants also described being in control of sexual behaviors requested by partners during sexual encounters, as evident in descriptions of refusing sexual partners' requests (e.g., "I'm not gonna do things just to make you happy"). These references to control might sound familiar as forms of sexual gatekeeping, but they should also be noted for the psychological effort they demand. Young women positioned themselves as agents and defenders of their character, using psychological will as a means of feeling prepared for and protected from harm.

Sue described how she relied on her will when evaluating her decisions to have sex outside of a committed relationship:

> If I feel like I have integrity to myself and I'm not disrespecting my person, you know, as far as casual sex, as long as I'm doing it for myself, or in my relationship, as long as I'm doing it for myself and like, my intentions are good, then you, know, I feel okay about it. (Sue)

Sue describes an on-going process of "checking in" with herself and evaluating and forming judgments on her behaviors. This process offers insight to the psychological labor required for having sex outside of a relationship context. In response to judgments that she has heard about casual sex, such as that it is disrespectful or lacks integrity, Sue positioned herself as an agent of her will ("I'm doing it for myself") who has good intentions, is always in control, and therefore can feel positively about her actions regardless of how anyone else feels about her sexual behavior. Although the language of "doing it for myself" is often interpreted as a marker of young women having (or not having) sexual agency within the context of potential judgment about casual sex, Sue's evaluation of herself as agentic (or not) can be seen as another form of psychological labor.

Participants' psychological labor came before, during, and after having sex; they worked to develop rules for engaging in sexual experiences before sex, to trust their partner during

unsafe sexual encounters, and to evaluate their choices and behaviors after having sex. This highlights the time and effort invested in developing and maintaining cognitions and feelings about safety. These elements, when seen together, help to illustrate the extensive thinking that goes into determining what is "safe," appropriate, and the right way to have sex in effort to minimize or eliminate possible negative consequences. Our analysis of the psychological labor in these excerpts is in an effort to see how feeing "in control" offered participants a sense that they could prevent negative judgments from others and from themselves, like feelings of shame, disgust, and regret.

Contraceptive Labor

Whereas psychological labor focused on the efforts of worrying, thinking, and evaluating the self, contraceptive labor focuses on efforts to protect the self from concrete consequences of having sex with male partners, such as unintended pregnancy. Contraceptive labor included worrying about pregnancy, preparing contraceptive methods, and being prepared for condom failure. Although these behaviors are routinely asked of young women in conversations of "safe sex," we present them here in order to analyze how young women described fulfilling contraceptive protection.

For example, Sophia reported a constant state of worry about condom failure:

> Condoms don't always work, they can always break, or what not, and it's scary. …I just think about how if the condom is on right, what would happen if it breaks or if something goes wrong. I do worry about it, like, all the time. (Sophia)

Sophia's worry about condoms demonstrates how risk and its attendant worry does not go away, even when young women follow safe sex practices. Recognizing the persistence of these worries, in fact, is what helps make clear that safe sex labor is more complex and more time-intensive than current safe sex models acknowledge.

Alex described doubling up on birth control and condoms in order to optimize pregnancy prevention and how these doubled efforts were an attempt to reduce the worry she associated with getting pregnant:

> I was mostly just scared of getting pregnant, above anything else, because I didn't wanna get pregnant, and they tell you all the time, "you're gonna get pregnant if you have sex," "your condom is not gonna work," so I was just afraid of that mostly. Now, I'm not really scared of that now. I mean, I've been on birth control for a while and I take it regularly, so if I control the situation best I can I'm not scared of it. [Q: And what do you mean by "control the situation"?] If I make sure, if I forget to take the pill, make sure he wears a condom, and stuff like that. (Alex)

Alex's contraceptive behaviors reflected that she had learned that sex would inevitably lead to pregnancy and that condoms were not trustworthy. Doubling up on contraception helped her to "control the situation 'as best she could'" and only with multiple methods of protection in place did she report feeling less scared of pregnancy. Alex's descriptions of taking the birth control pill every day, predicting that she will inevitably forget to take a pill, having condoms as backup, and making sure her partner wears the condom are examples of contraceptive labor. Although these behaviors are encouraged to all women in "safe sex" messaging, reading them together from Alex's perspective allows us to see the sheer effort young women expend in mapping out methods to prevent pregnancy, including preparing for their inevitable failure.

The contraceptive labor theme illustrates how safe sex, and specifically pregnancy prevention, extended beyond simply planning for and using contraception. Contraceptive labor was not described as happening only during a specific sexual encounter, but was often generalized throughout their lives, leading to an ongoing vigilance about their bodies, their futures, and their health. Although using contraception correctly is important for reducing the chance of pregnancy, we wonder about the consequences of the fear, distrust, and preparation described by participants. In addition, it is important to consider the extent to which contraceptive labor prevents women from feeling at ease and being confident in the measures they have taken to prevent pregnancy.

Relational Labor

The relational labor theme highlights how young women constructed boundaries around with whom to have sex as well as how they imagined and prepared for negative partnered interactions. In other analyses, these behaviors might be understood as individual preference (e.g., for an emotional relationship) or the development of consent procedures with a sexual partner. We, however, argue that relational labor is a useful lens for interpreting specific relational behaviors because they are (like psychological and contraceptive labor) central to making a partnered sexual experience feel safe. Participants described seeking out sexual partners whom they could get to know, establish trust with, develop emotional relationships, and even be in love with. They sought partners with whom they could speak about what they wanted and did not want, that is, those who would listen to them and respect their wishes. These methods to feel safe during sex were, like the other themes, often paired with anxiety if they had sex with a partner who did not meet these criteria. Young women also described working to construct a setting within which sex with

man would be and feel safe. Much of this labor centered on seeking a sexual partner with certain characteristics that would facilitate their feelings of safety before, during, and after sex.

Participants reported characteristics of partners they worked to avoid, including those who would treat them as sexual objects (i.e., "I don't want to be used by somebody") and those who left too soon after having sex (i.e., "if the guy just gets up and walks away I feel really bad"). Participants also reported characteristics of partners they appreciated and sought out, including those who would listen to sexual directives (i.e., "But if I would say no, he wouldn't bother me with it anymore, he would stop right away") and those whom they could trust ("one big factor is you have to trust the person; you have to be close with them, for me anyway").

In addition to laboring to find a sexual partner, participants described working to feel comfortable with their sexual partners when they did have sex. Kelly, for example, described her emotional well-being with her partner as central to her safety:

> If I had sex I would have panic attacks, so I can't really, I will still sometimes have little backlashes of that if I'm feeling ill at ease, so I really have to feel at ease with someone and really feel like I can trust them and know, and I have to know who they are, and know, I just have to feel safe. So, I literally can't have sex if I don't feel safe with someone. (Kelly)

Like other participants, Kelly described that being with a sexual partner she knew and trusted was crucial to feeling safe when she had sex. However, rather than occurring solely in the moment of partner choice, Kelly described a continuous process of working to feel comfortable with her partner. From her description, "I literally can't have sex if I don't feel safe with someone," it becomes clear that choosing a sexual partner, developing trust with them, and evaluating if they made her feel at ease was not just a preference, but also a way for her to reduce the anxiety she had experienced in past sexual experiences. Without this work, she described that she would feel unsafe, anxious, and not be able to have sex with the person. It was, in fact, a form of labor that she implemented to feel safe enough to have sex.

Fears about being forced into unwanted sex circulated in discussions of sex with men they did not know well, and participants described that those they knew (i.e., a boyfriend) would listen to what they said they wanted and did not want during sex. Some young women worked to protect themselves from physical danger during sex by intervening if a partner acted in ways they did not want. For example, Lily reported conditions under which she would feel more confident preventing a partner from being forceful during sex:

> If my partner is my boyfriend or somebody who I know for a pretty long time, I know that I wouldn't allow things like that, you know, if it's going to be forceful, with anger or maybe the person is mad, and he's just, you know, "Let's just have [sex], and I'm not asking you." I wouldn't allow things like that. I guess if it's with somebody whom I don't know that well, that maybe I'll kind of, you know, difficult for me. And I would feel uncomfortable. (Lily)

Here, Lily described a set of relational conditions where a certain type of partnered experience might not offer physical protection, but would make her more likely to be able to intervene in the unwanted sex. She pointed out that the same coercive event might occur with a boyfriend or a stranger, but she anticipated that it would likely be more difficult for her to stop a stranger from being forceful. With a boyfriend, Lily explained she "wouldn't allow things like that," meaning she would feel confident and comfortable in her ability to stop him from forcing her to have sex. Her use of the word "allow" demonstrates that Lily imagined herself as in control—prepared and able to assert herself and intervene should her partner's behavior turn violent. Lily's focus on her own capacity to prevent a partner using physical force offers insight to her labor in preparing for and intervening in harmful partnered interactions. Lastly, Lily's distinction between boyfriend and stranger—often heard and imagined as young women preferring an emotional relationship—should remind us that young women make decisions about with whom to have sex based, in part, on how effective they imagine their voice and behaviors will be and how they are able to prepare for, predict, and avoid partners who might be physically violent during sex.

Like the two previous themes, contraceptive and psychological labor, relational labor draws our attention to young women's descriptions of reducing sexual and emotional risks associated with sex, in this case, sex with a male partner. Relational labor highlights the labor in creating partnered interactions within which sex would feel safe: finding a partner who is known, trusted, and would listen to (and follow) a participant's wishes. When the three types of labor are read together, we argue that these strategies offer a way to see young women's multi-faceted efforts aimed at being and feeling safe as a form of sexual labor.

Discussion

When determining whether or not sex between men and women was "safe," researchers have often focused on whether a condom or contraception was used; they have paid less attention to dynamics, effort, or outcomes outside the sexual encounter (e.g., Widman et al. 2014). In contrast, our findings suggest that safety (and the work to be safe) extends well beyond the sexual encounter. In our study, young women

attended to sexual safety before, during, and after sexual intercourse. They reported developing personal rules for sexual behaviors, having birth control and condoms prepared, and working to find, define, and sustain relational contexts where their physical and emotional safety could be ensured. Our findings suggest that young women undertook labor to keep themselves safe in their sexual interactions, yet they did not describe this labor in terms of the time and energy required to do so. Importantly, this labor aligns with and reproduces norms about femininity and gendered roles in sexual and romantic relationships. As a result, young women's labor often goes unrecognized, is imagined as correct "feminine" behavior, or is interpreted as an indicator of agentic sexual decision-making. We offer a different interpretation that highlights how sexual labor requires young women to remain vigilant. We use these findings to theorize about the contours of sexual labor and vigilance in young women's lives more generally (Fanghanel and Lim 2015).

Sexual Vigilance

Marginalized groups often depend on vigilance (i.e., anticipating and attending to a non-immediate stressor) to protect themselves from discrimination, harassment, and harm (Clark et al. 2006; Meyer et al. 2011). Research about gender-based harassment has found evidence for women's vigilance over behaviors related to sexualized forms of harm (e.g., not walking alone at night, not drinking too much, or not wearing shoes with heels) and attempts to safeguard against being physically harmed by men in public spaces (see also Burt and Estep 1981; Fanghanel and Lim 2015). We use our findings to argue that sexual vigilance extends to the thoughts and emotions, as well as behaviors and decision-making, in which women engage to anticipate and avoid sexual harm.

The young women in our study described experiences in which they chose male partners who would not be physically forceful; they developed rules around which sexual behaviors they would and would not do; they restrained sexual desires until they found specific kinds of relationships; and they carefully prepared methods of contraception to prevent pregnancy. Theorizing these processes as examples of sexual vigilance enables us to see not only the range of ways young women worked to feel safe, but also the time, energy, and preparations they devoted to making sure they would feel safe in any future experience. Although we did not aim to study the health effects of sexual vigilance in the current study, future researchers are encouraged to investigate health outcomes related to consistent (and anxious) surveillance of one's sexual and reproductive body (see Meyer 2003).

In our analysis, we focused on sexual labor in young women's lives. Different theoretical perspectives would offer other compelling interpretations of the same data. For example, participants' descriptions of working toward safety might be seen as evidence of their knowledge of the risks of having sex with men and their (commendable) intentions to practice safe sex (Frost et al. 2012; Robin et al. 2004). Other analyses might highlight participants' mature decision-making and responsibility as markers of sexual subjecthood, increased self-efficacy, and agency; a heightened sense of responsibility could, indeed, offer feelings of autonomy regarded as important for a young person's developing sexual authenticity (Curtin et al. 2011; Pearson 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2015). Rather than reading our analysis of young women's sexual labor as contradictory to these analytic possibilities, we argue that the analytic frame of sexual labor offers insight about the unspoken, overlooked, and even denied forms of female labor in sexual encounters.

Research Implications

Our findings build on prior work on sexual safety (Alexander 2012; Fantasia and Fontenot 2011). "Sexual safety," in contrast to "safe sex," highlights knowledge, skill-building, and decision-making that individuals use to keep themselves safe in (and in between) sexual encounters. In addition to these elements, we offer an amended definition of sexual safety that highlights other key factors that researchers might also include when assessing whether sex was in fact "safe." In addition to traditional elements of safe sex, such as a person's behaviors (e.g., using condoms), we argue that sexual safety should include the cognitive and behavioral efforts to assess potential harms in a sexual interaction, as well as the time and energy spent attempting to mitigate these harms. This labor might include, for example, trying to predict whether a potential partner might be physically forceful or working to "let go" of one's shameful feelings in order to have sex. These additional elements highlight a broader range of safety concerns (e.g., contraceptive, psychological, relational) that involve labor in order to maintain conditions of safety. In other words, definitions of sexual safety should include the significant work needed to make sex feel and be safe; this would allow further investigation into sexual safety labor experience reported by those with less social and/or political power. This approach, we believe, has implications for our understanding of "responsibility" in sexual encounters.

For example, future research could use a sexual labor or sexual vigilance lens to investigate gay men's experiences with taking medications such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). This might include the emotional and physical labors that are increasingly routinized and expected in order to engage in safe sexual activity (Koester et al. 2017). PrEP's routines and requirements (i.e., daily use and to be taken outside sexual scenarios) offer an important parallel to the current study's findings of young women's everyday work to prevent sexualized forms of harm. With this point in mind, we encourage future researchers to consider gay men's HIV-prevention

routines from the perspective of safety labor. Investigating individuals' efforts to protect themselves and reduce worry might offer insight into larger patterns of inequality in which members of some groups come to see protection effort as naturally part of their daily lives.

Practice Implications

We see three important implications for public health, sex education, and feminist research. First, public health messages about safe sex ask young people to be aware of dangers related to sex and encourage individuals to work toward safety, often without support from other social institutions (Fine and McClelland 2006). Sexual vigilance may, therefore, offer young women a way to feel successful in their sexual relationships because it demonstrates their capacity to prevent negative outcomes on their own, without support from others. These descriptions of vigilance reflect contemporary priorities of rigorous personal safe-keeping and daily self-management which continually focus on the heightened responsibility of the person but too often overlook the growing absence of public institutions and social safety nets (Bay-Cheng 2015; Tolman 2012; Turrini 2015). Our findings contribute a reminder to this critical conversation to remain attentive to the influences of inequity that are often invisible, such as actions that continually turn to the marginalized for individual change rather than maintaining a demand for institutional change. We also offer our study as an example of how inequity might be found in descriptions of what makes one feel protected or successful in evading harm. Because labor is erased from the work of making sex "safe," we fear that public health messages will continue to interpret young women as naturally oriented toward working on their relationships and playing the role of sexual gatekeepers (Farvid and Braun 2006; Hollander 2001) rather than interpreted as, in fact, working to create and maintain safe (or safe enough) environments for sex.

Second, our findings are applicable to sex education settings. As long argued by adolescent sexuality researchers, sex ed. programs should include curricula in which students learn how social identities play a significant role in their sexual and reproductive experiences (Estes 2017; Fine and McClelland 2006; Kuehnel 2009; Lamb 2010). We add another layer to this discussion: Insight into the under-appreciated consequences of sexual vigilance and the labor of remaining "safe" in one's sexual life. Although young women's vigilance might be unavoidable in a society structured by gender inequality, sex education programs should not simply reinforce women's vigilance as a necessary component for safe sex.

Third, we argue that as feminist researchers we must not rely on young women's vigilance as a necessary component of agentic sex. The conflation of sexual vigilance and agentic sex may create an impossible (and laborious) sexual scenario for women. We join other feminist scholars and ask: What are the hidden costs of developing an agentic sexual self (Bay-Cheng 2015; Rutherford 2018)? Even if young women do not describe sexual vigilance or the labor involved as difficult and may even describe it as "good," we argue that feminist scholarship still has a responsibility to document sexual labor, even when it is denied or recast as "no big deal" by those who do this labor (McClelland et al. 2016).

Study Limitations and Future Directions

There are several directions for further investigation into the labors of sexual safety, including differences due to social location and the potential health impacts of ongoing sexual vigilance. Although we were not able to assess this possibility in the current study, sexual labor likely varies with access to social and political resources. In the current study, we focused on sexual labor particular to the gendered experiences of women having sex with men. We did not assess group differences related to sexual identity; as a result, the protective behaviors we note here may not generalize to women's relationships with other women. However, research on same-sex relationships has found lesbian and bisexual women describe negotiating stigma around sexual identity disclosure and erasure, which indicates some important overlaps in how one might work to anticipate and prevent harm stemming from experiences of sexism and discrimination related to sexuality (Flanders et al. 2016; Klesse 2005). Future researchers might focus on how sexual identities and experiences of sexual stigma shape individuals' experiences laboring for sexual safety. This future research is crucial for investigating whether a sexual labor framework is limited to heterosexual contexts or if it would be useful in understanding sexual safety experiences in same-sex couples as well.

We found evidence for sexual labor across a racially diverse group of young women. In order to highlight and describe a wide range of efforts directed at sexual safety, we did not compare or identify patterns for specific racial/ethnic groups, but rather focused on participants' experiences as women living in sexist environments. Future research is needed to investigate the intersecting structures of sexism, racism, and classism in shaping how women describe laboring for safety in sexual relationships. This future research is particularly important because of the history of public health campaigns' targeting communities of color. Safe sex campaigns have focused on how often young Women of Color use or do not use condoms, with attention to when they describe foregoing condoms as a means to demonstrate trust and commitment to a relationship (Bowleg et al. 2004; Ibañez et al. 2017). Future research from the perspective of sexual labor could offer further insight into how young Women of Color define and contend with several types of sexual safety in their relationships and the limits of "safe sex" discourses when attending to these demands (see also Lima et al. 2018).

Conclusion

Safe sex messages, such as the importance of consistent condom use, are commonly geared toward young women who have sex with men, yet they overlook gender dynamics in sexual relationships. In the present study, we found that young U.S. college women were vigilant in working toward safety. We examined descriptions of the work young women reported before, during, and after sexual encounters with male partners to draw attention to the labor involved in having "safe sex." Tracing young women's sexual labor highlighted how vigilance was an expected aspect of their sexual lives. We argue for researchers to use the term "sexual safety" to recognize that how young women understand what it means to be and feel safe is embedded in contemporary discourses of femininity and heterosexuality. We urge researchers to consider how minor and even mundane actions can indicate larger patterns of labor that should be documented and to think about how this work may be unevenly distributed. Our study illustrated that young women imagine, have, and desire to be sexual, yet they operate from social locations where they feel afraid for their own sexual safety. In addition to asking "Was the sex safe?," more useful questions might include "Who labors to have safe sex and how?"

Acknowledgements Thank you to Abby Stewart, Jacqueline Mattis, and Elizabeth Armstrong who provided feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval The research presented within this manuscript was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the American Psychological Association and the Institutional Review Boards of the relevant authors' institutions. This manuscript is not currently under review at any other journal, nor has any portion of it been published previously.

Informed Consent Anonymized data from participants who consented to data sharing are available by e-mailing the corresponding author.

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