

Discourses of Sexual Morality in *Sex and the City* and *Queer as Folk*

JANET M. CRAMER

IN A POSTMODERN AGE WITH DECLINING EMPHASIS ON THE INSTITUTIONAL disciplinary powers of school, church, and even the family, popular culture may assume increased importance in the regulation and/or production of moral standards. Regular consumption of the standard fare of soap operas, serial dramas, situation comedies, and advertisements provides a kind of cultural and social barometer of the mores of our time (Gauntlett 2–13; Rosenkoetter 463–65; Salwen and Dupagne 545–47). With respect to sexual mores, then, programs with explicit sexual content are significant for the attitudes, morals, and standards they portray or implicitly endorse. This view of media is contrary to the “secularization thesis” which says that postmodern moral debates will be matters of personal opinion and that the “public sphere” will not deal with such questions. Rather, as Kenneth Thompson and Anita Sharma argue, “representations of sexuality in the mass media may lead to an accentuation of public disputes and debates over morals” (434). From this perspective, the “moral paradigms” which are portrayed in the mass media become the “primary context for moral knowledge” (Stivers 29). While scholars have noted how popular culture is used to construct ideas about sexuality (e.g., Wilcox; Brown), to make sexual choices (e.g., Keller & Brown), and to promote ideal sexual figures (e.g., Roberts), it is important to consider as well how popular culture provides a framework for ideas about sexual morality.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the constructions of sexual morality in two cable television programs: *Sex and the City* and *Queer as*

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Folk. The focus on mediated constructions of sexuality derives from insights provided by Michel Foucault with respect to discourse and the construction of ideas of sexuality and of the subject. Foucault's work on sexuality takes a characteristically genealogical approach where he first exposes the fallacies of the Victorian Repressive hypothesis. In other words, rather than privileging the power of restrictions on sexual discourse, his hypothesis claims that a proliferation of discourses actually constructs our ideas about sexuality and about the human subject. Thus, the juridical restrictions on discourse about sexuality are not the site of real power; rather, the discourse itself is constitutive of the sexual subject and of the "apparatus" of sexuality (*History of Sexuality* 3–12, 100–02). This perspective is appropriate given the proliferation of sex and sex-related topics on these shows. The questions addressed here are similar to those Foucault has asked (*History of Sexuality* 11): What has been said about sexuality? How has sex been put into discourse? What [moral] knowledge has been formed as a result of the power of this discourse?

Foucault's focus on the constructive powers of discourse, personal autonomy, and resistance to restrictive structures can provide the possibility for constructing alternative moral frameworks with regard to sexual pleasure. Such frameworks may allow for postmodern and even alternative representations of sexuality and sexual morality that do not privilege heteronormativity or the prescriptions for sexual behavior that limit sexual activity to heterosexual, committed couples. In other words, the emphasis here will be on an alternative to a modernist, Kantian approach to morality wherein a certain set of standards is assumed to be functional in all situations and contexts. Rather, the approach will be to consider whether an alternative moral framework emerges from these programs. For example, although the television industry established a set of guidelines in the 1950s that provided restrictions on nudity and language, it would not be appropriate to use that standard for these cable television shows. Using those standards, this article could only expose the blatant portrayal of sex in these programs. It could only be an observation of how they violate 1950s standards about proper sexual conduct and its representation on television. Instead, I want to explore the type of morality conveyed in these programs that so flagrantly violate established norms and ideals, including conventional ideas regarding monogamy, sex within the context of a committed relationship, and hetero/homosexual preferences.

In this way, sexual behavior is more than the collision of desire or natural instinct with a set of restrictions; it is, as Foucault writes, “the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience, and the value one attaches to it” (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture* 287).

Foucault recognized that morality consisted of a “set of values” or “rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth” (*The Use of Pleasure* 25). But he also argued that it referred to “the real behavior of individuals” and “the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a precept; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values” (*The Use of Pleasure* 25). This definition assumes a certain subjectivity and autonomy for moral decisions. Indeed, Foucault was interested in uncovering the history of how individuals constituted themselves as “subjects of moral conduct” and how one engaged in self-reflection and self examination (*The Use of Pleasure* 29). Michael Gardiner claims that Foucault was seeking “to develop an alternative to modernist ethics [and] . . . to challenge proscriptive moral systems, the archetypal example being Kant’s categorical imperative, because such moral codes function to ‘normalize’ subjects and to integrate them into the apparatus of power/knowledge.” Gardiner argues that Foucault’s vision was for the individual to reach those standards by her or himself so that the subject would be formed “according to self-delineated rather than externally imposed criteria” (28). In this sense, then, the individual becomes one’s own moral authority rather than conforming to overarching, universal codes of conduct.

One idea guiding this study is that sex and sexual pleasure are intrinsically good. In contrast to more restrictive codes that suggest that sex is somehow wrong or bad (unless confined within boundaries that make it acceptable, heterosexual marriage, for instance), the assumption here is that sexual pleasure is fundamentally positive. The assumption that sexual pleasure is intrinsically good rather than negative is a more appropriate starting point for viewing and analyzing the discourse of programs with such explicit sexual content, thus avoiding one-dimensional judgments. It also allows for the possibility of alternative, perhaps proactive, frameworks based on sexual pleasure rather than the restriction of sexual activity.

Analyzing Content

The foundation for analyzing content of *Sex and the City* and *Queer as Folk* departs, then, from traditional, modernist notions of sexual morality in order to explore the different types of morality that may be present in these programs.

These programs were selected due to their overt sexual content and story lines of singles who are sexually active. In addition, *Sex and the City* is one of HBO's most popular programs, earning Emmys for best comedy show, best actress, directing, casting, and costume. It has also incited copycat columns on several college campuses and spurred such commercial spinoffs as tours of New York City where show locations are sites on the itinerary, shopping sprees with discounts on show-related products, and related books—both about the series and by the stars of the show. It has also become a popular export product. Alisa Tang of the Associated Press recently reported that in Asia, *Sex and the City* is “a smash among young professionals” and is a “golden marketing tool” for attracting advertisers and encouraging sales of related products.

Queer as Folk is Showtime's highest-rated original series. The show has aired for two seasons and was recently renewed for two more beginning in 2003. Showtime made a deal to produce the series in the United States as a way to rival HBO's racier offerings (Gross 182). The original series was produced in Britain beginning in 1999 as a way to develop British Channel 4's “distinctive place in British broadcasting for radical, experimental, minority television” (Munt 531). The name itself borrows from an old Yorkshire saying, “There's nowt as queer as folk” (Gross 182). The US version uses the same characters as the British series but adds an additional cohort to the group. It is included in this research so that ideas about sexual morality may encompass both heterosexual and homosexual practices.

Although both shows have received recent scholarly attention, the focus is primarily on representations of women or homosexuals in these shows. Jane Arthurs has explored the consumer culture of *Sex and the City*, Helen Richards and L. Kim have examined the postmodern identities constructed in that show, and Jules A. Odendahl has discussed how the show constructs ideas of whiteness. Similarly, David Gauntlett has looked at how *Queer as Folk* constructs a particular homosexual identity, but most of the research focuses on how

shows with homosexual characters represent an evolution in mediated representations toward more sexual inclusivity, such as the work by Larry Gross and Andrew Holleran. Indeed, much of the more recent research on homosexuals in the media—for example, the work of Bonnie J. Dow; Susan Stearns and Meta G. Carstarphen; and Larry Gross—considers how these shows contribute to the visibility of gays and lesbians in popular culture. However, Helene Shugart has observed that such representations may also serve to rearticulate heterosexual privilege. Such work illustrates the importance of considering how identities are constructed in popular culture. As yet, however, the constructions of sexual morality in these shows has not been explored.

Sex and the City takes place in Manhattan and follows the lives of Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker), a newspaper columnist; Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), a corporate lawyer; Samantha (Kim Cattrall), a public relations executive; and Charlotte (Kristin Davis), an art gallery owner. The women represent particular images of women: Miranda is the successful, serious one; Samantha is the lusty vamp, and Charlotte represents a restrained, prudish viewpoint. These, of course, are gross generalizations, but they provide a short-cut understanding of the way these characters are portrayed. Carrie is the one who holds the group together, and her narration is the thematic glue of the program as well. The show is about the relationships these women have, both casual and serious. We watch them as they chat in coffeehouses and in bars, attend art gallery openings, and discuss their various sexual exploits. Conversations range from the mundane (farting in front of a partner) to the serious (can I still be me after I am a wife and mother). We watch Samantha pick up a guy at the bar and sleep with him that night and listen to Charlotte chastise her for not believing in romance. The show contains nudity and explicit sex scenes.

Queer as Folk takes place in a gay enclave in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Its main characters are Michael (Hal Sparks), Brian (Gale Harold), Ted (Scott Lowell), Emmett (Peter Paige), Justin (Randy Harrison), Melanie (Michelle Clunie) and Lindsay (Thea Gill). The four core friends are Michael, Brian, Ted, and Emmett. These, too, are somewhat stereotypical portrayals. Michael is the child-like innocent, Brian the promiscuous prowler, Ted, the serious nerdy type, and Emmett, the flaming queen. Melanie and Lindsay are a lesbian couple. The show takes viewers to gay bathhouses, discos, and the local health club.

The language is explicit, the nudity full, and the sex scenes leave nothing to the imagination.

The questions this research sought to address were: What ideas about sexuality are presented in *Sex and the City* and *Queer as Folk*—that is, what are the prevailing themes about sex and sexual activity? What kind of sexual morality is constructed from these ideas and themes? A method of discourse analysis (as described by Norman Fairclough, Michel Foucault in “The Order of Discourse,” Ian Hodder, John Pauly, and Teun Van Dijk) was used in which the emphasis is on prevailing themes and story lines—the ideas that seem to recur most often and the discursive structures that are linked to these ideas. The first task was to see what themes emerged from the programs with respect to sexual activity. All episodes from the first two seasons of *Sex and the City* (1998, 1999) and all episodes from the first season of *Queer as Folk* (2001) were included in this analysis. Plot lines, dialogue, character development, and settings were summarized and classified according to emerging, overarching themes or ideas. Although the shows also convey various ideologies with respect to gender, race, and class, a discussion of these would exceed the bounds of this research. Although one could rightly argue that these themes constitute profoundly moral issues, if they were not specifically linked to sexual morality, they were not included.

Discourses of Sexual Morality

Overall, the findings suggest that putting one’s needs first is the primary moral value presented in these programs. An absence of consideration of the partner in one’s sexual activities is evident in both programs. One’s self, however, does not exist in isolation. Rather, both programs present the self in relationship with others. This is presented primarily as the relationship with one’s circle of friends, although as will be shown, even sexual partners help the individual define oneself as a sexual subject and a moral subject.

Single or Married?

The most prevalent theme in *Sex and the City* is the undesirability of the single state and the elusive goal of marriage. The single life is described as “an empty haunted life of stunted adolescence” (“Bay of Married Pigs”), as cause for humiliation and a state of panic when one

realizes she might die alone (“Four Women and a Funeral”), and as a lifestyle that leads to “random and sometimes miserable relationships” (“The Man, the Myth, the Viagra”). Carrie frequently refers to the elusive goal of marriage, as when she describes Manhattan as an Ellis Island with “hordes of single women crowded into a hot, cramped space hoping to make it to their final destination: the state of matrimony” (“The Freak Show”). When Charlotte tells her three friends about “a married man who got a divorce because he fell in love with someone else and they lived happily ever after in Connecticut,” Miranda tells her that it is just an “urban myth, concocted by women to make their love lives seem less hopeless” (“The Man, the Myth, the Viagra”). Although occasional references are made to the fun of single life, as when Samantha says, “if you’re single, the world is your smorgasbord” (“The Chicken Dance”), the overriding concern is finding the right guy. Carrie frequently muses about whether it’s OK to settle for someone in order to not be alone, and in an episode where “faking it” is the theme, she wonders if it is better to “fake it than to be alone” (“They Shoot Single People, Don’t They?”). In the end, however, she acknowledges her fear of being alone and decides not to run away from it, but the fear remains nonetheless to re-emerge in future episodes.

This quest for marriage presents an interesting paradox when balanced against the fun and freedom in the portrayals of the singles’ lifestyle these women enjoy. That is, although comments regarding the desirability of marriage appear most frequently, they are accompanied by frequent references to sex as a “fun” activity; i.e., implying no commitment or deeper intimacy with another (“Sex and the City”; “The Turtle and the Hare”). In addition, references to the amount of sexual activity these women engage in occur almost as frequently as their laments about the single life. A three-month hiatus from sexual activity drives Miranda “crazy” (“The Drought”) and Samantha is shocked when Charlotte has been dating for three weeks and still has not had sex with her new man (“Take Me Out to the Ballgame”). In several episodes, three weeks is the uppermost limit for lack of sex in a relationship.

Frequency of sex is one barometer of sexual activity; the number of partners is another. When Samantha admits that she could not remember having slept with a guy, Charlotte asks her how that can happen. Carrie answers, “Toto, we’re not in single digits anymore.” Samantha says she has had so many men she has probably slept with

every man in Manhattan (“The Chicken Dance”). This is not something that the women exhibit any shame or remorse about. Indeed, in one episode, Carrie has a conversation with a 25-year old woman who is a virgin. The woman wants to write a memoir, like Carrie’s newspaper column, but she wants it be about “not having sex, about saving it for marriage.” “Saving what for marriage?” Carrie asks. The girl tells her she is a virgin, which shocks Carrie. The girl replies, “It’s not that I don’t want to have sex with men; I just feel like these previous generations of women have devalued sex to the point where it’s not even special anymore . . . Is this supposed to be shocking, wagging one’s pussy at every good-looking stud who walks by? Please!” To this Carrie non-defensively responds, “And what is it you like about my column?” (“Twenty-something girls”).

Less ambivalence about marriage desirability versus singles’ fun and freedom exists in the content of *Queer as Folk*. Here, the single life is unequivocally presented as the more desirable alternative. Marriage is equated with being tied down, having boring sex, and losing the opportunity to be with one’s friends. Brian admits to twenty to thirty tricks a month, and when a friend of Justin’s tells Brian that she is never getting married because she does not want to be tied down, Brian tells Justin, “I love this girl!” (“Episode 10”). Later in that same episode, Michael is telling his friends about a gay couple who recently celebrated their fiftieth anniversary. They have told him how wonderful it is to have someone to share your life with. But Brian refers to them as “poor suckers” and Emmett wonders if “they still do it.” The implication is that sex cannot be sustained in a long-term relationship. After Michael breaks up with his partner, David (though they are reunited later), he admits to his friends that the sex was great, “but it gets boring with the same person after awhile” (“Episode 11”). Michael’s relationship prevents him from being included on club outings with the rest of his friends. Even when David encourages Michael to go ahead and party with his friends but remember to come home to him, Michael chooses the stay-at-home option, playing the stereo and choosing to dance with his partner in their living room (“Episode 14”). In spite of the dialogue between the two, the show’s message remains clear: when married, stay home; when single, party with others and enjoy multiple sex partners.

One apparent advantage to being single, then, portrayed in both programs, is the ability to enjoy one’s friendships, and it is this theme

that most rivals the marriage desirability (*Sex and the City*) and marriage avoidance (*Queer as Folk*) themes. In other words, being single is tolerable—or preferable—because one gets to enjoy close and loyal friendships in that state as opposed to when one is married. Or, conversely, close and loyal friendships support us in our miserable state of singleness. Either way, it is clear from the content of *Sex and the City* that friendships are indispensable and are to be supported loyally even if it means losing the current boyfriend or missing out on an important function or date. And in *Queer as Folk*, friendships are one's lifeline when experiencing multiple sexual partners and experiences. Lifeline, here, could be construed literally in one episode of *Queer as Folk* when Ted takes drugs during a casual sex encounter. As he stumbles and just before he falls to the floor, he focuses on a picture of his friends. Meanwhile, his date leaves the scene while Ted convulses on the floor. It is his friends who will eventually discover him and get him to an emergency room where he recovers ("Episode Three").

In both programs, then, friendships are presented as the relational context in which the individual is both free to express herself or himself and to exercise respect and concern for others. This is in stark contrast to the images of sexual activity as primarily hedonistic and self centered that comprise the next theme: care of self.

Care of Self

In both programs, characters place a high priority on taking care of one's self. This is expressed as honoring one's limits with respect to relationship dynamics, having a sure sense of self esteem, and practicing safe sex (which could also be construed as care of others). Carrie, for instance, breaks up with Mr. Big when she realizes that he does not value her as much as she values herself. She wants him to tell her that she is "the one," but he cannot. Carrie realizes she has faith in herself and in her ability to find someone who will be sure she is "the one" and that she does not need to settle for anything less ("Oh Come All Ye Faithful"). Although she reunites with Mr. Big, Carrie's self awareness leads her to question whether she is a masochist to stay in the relationship and, ultimately, will decide again that it is best for her to leave. When Mr. Big ends up finding another woman and marrying her, Carrie is initially deeply shaken. But the story she ends up telling herself about Big and about their relationship reaffirms her own value.

She compares the story to the movie "The Way We Were" and concludes that Big, like Robert Redford in that movie, cannot handle complex, wild women. She values her independence and thinks to herself: "Maybe some women aren't meant to be tamed. Maybe they need to run free until they find someone just as wild to run with" ("Ex and the City"). This affirming message in the midst of rejection is an example of self-authoring one's stories and coming to a place where caring for and valuing one's self is a cornerstone of moral responsibility.

In *Queer as Folk*, Brian is the character who most exemplifies self-care, even to the point of appearing irresponsible. He proclaims that his ultimate responsibility is to himself, and his friend Lindsay admires him for "doing exactly what he wants, no excuses, no apologies" ("Episode One"). What Lindsay finds most admirable about Brian, however, is what some find most despicable and childlike. "A stiff prick has no conscience" one friend of Lindsay's tells her. Brian is shown to be responsible when it comes to his son (conceived through artificial insemination with Lindsay, who shares the boy with her partner), and he is willing to make great sacrifices for his friends. But this is not in the context of sexual morality. In sexual encounters, Brian puts his own needs first. He roams the bathhouses seeking easy sex and avoids committed relationships. He defends sex for its own sake and pleasure as the ultimate end.

Practicing safe sex is another representation of self-care. *Queer as Folk* makes more explicit references to this, frequently showing the use of condoms and incorporating them into scenes, even in sometimes artful ways. When Brian seduces a co-worker in his office, the scenes show him first ripping the man's shirt off then tossing a condom package in the air and catching it between his teeth ("Episode 13"). In another episode, Ted and Emmett are at the drugstore and they see a former partner of Ted's getting a prescription for HIV medication. Ted blanches, and Emmett asks, "What's the matter, you were safe weren't you?" When Ted tells him there was not time to think, Emmett says that is no excuse, reinforcing the necessity to protect one's self at all times ("Episode 11"). In *Sex and the City*, there are fewer references to safe sex, and birth control is an invisible, assumed practice. Often, we do not see the women using condoms or other forms of protection. Caring for one's self in *Sex and the City* seems primarily to focus on emotional protection, whereas in *Queer as Folk*, physical care is emphasized.

Although the emphasis here is on self-care, it is important to note that in the discourse of these shows, self-care is realized in and through the conditions of relating to others. In other words, the boundaries of self, the evaluations of self, and the defense of self are all realized in the social process of forming and enacting relations with others. Self-care, as portrayed in these programs, would not be necessary were it not for the relationships the characters in these shows encounter. Thus, even in the context of fairly hedonistic portrayals, a deeper meaning about our interdependence is crafted in which one's relationships with others is a necessary prerequisite for choice making and the formation of morals. Using others in this way, however, is not the same as caring for others.

Care of Others

While self-care is a predominant theme in these shows, caring for others is less evident. In this sense, this is a theme notable in its absence, particularly when considering the prevalence of moral frameworks that stress this aspect. For instance, feminist scholars have observed that women's moral development is based on care for others as the primary ethical value. Belenky et al. in their landmark work, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, wrote that women's conceptions of self come through relationships with others, and that the overriding moral imperative is based in care for others. Thus, women's moral development is not based on applying a set of abstract principles but on understanding the needs of each person involved and wanting to do the best possible thing for each person. Belenky et al. cite Carol Gilligan's study in which she observed that morality was based on notions of responsibility and care for others. This places a focus on who we are in a collective sense that demands a recognition of our oneness with others. With this perspective, sexual ethics would be less focused on our individual needs and goals and more on who we are—and what we need—together, in the world and in our smaller social circles, in our work and love, as partners and colleagues, and as friends and lovers. Obviously, such a perspective addresses those acts of sexual immorality that deeply injure the life of another: rape, incest, molestation, harassment, and other forms of violent objectification of the other. Care of others, then, recognizes how we are bound to others and encourages a perspective of respect and nonviolence with regard to our sexual activity.

As mentioned above, however, a sense that others are cared for is not as evident in both programs as care for self. Aside from the apparent practice of safe sex, the needs and reactions of others are not acknowledged as often as self-needs are. The one exception, as discussed above, is loyalty to one's friends. But in sexual relationships, the others with whom these characters are involved are usually flat, undeveloped characters or disappointing characters. In both cases, the other is not worthy of consideration and the consequences of one's actions on the other are not considered.

A story line in *Queer as Folk*, however, does represent the one exception to this observation, and it exemplifies both honesty and responsibility for another. In the first episode ("Episode One"), Brian, who is 29, picks up 17-year old Justin for what he thinks will be a one-night fling. It is Justin's first time, and he develops strong feelings for Brian and expectations for an ongoing relationship. But Brian flatly tells him that sex is only for fun, and that Justin needs to "run along and do his homework." The story takes a twist, however, in Episode Eight when Justin's father throws him out of the house upon learning that he is gay. Despite Brian's protestations that Justin is not his responsibility, he lets him stay at his apartment, and they do develop an ongoing (though definitely not monogamous) relationship. Justin is a loyal and supportive sexual companion, and though this relationship would seem to be one of an older man exploiting a younger man, the relationship is one of the few that exhibits care and consistent regard for the other. Brian watches over Justin and gives him advice. Justin reciprocates. In one episode when Brian is unfairly accused of sexual harassment, Justin seeks out the accuser, places him in a compromising position, and then threatens him unless he withdraws his charge against Brian ("Episode 10"). Brian is unaware of what Justin has done for him, but this episode is only one example of how Justin cares for Brian unconditionally and supports him—common for the friendships in these shows but a rare occurrence among sexual partners.

In *Sex and the City*, male characters are stereotyped, fairly undeveloped, and often labeled. The one male character who could be considered the leading male character on the show (Carrie's long-term love interest) is never referred to by name but by the nickname she gives him: "Mr. Big." Other men are referred to as, "Mr. Cocky," "The 'we' guy," "Catholic Guy," "The Marrying Guy," "Manhattan Guy," and "Mr. Pussy." In addition, men are often discussed in terms of their

anatomy and how they perform sexually. In this sense, they are objects. We do not see the potential effects of casual sex on these men, and the women themselves focus mostly on what they need in a relationship without regard for their partners. Men with whom these women have more serious relationships are referred to by name, but even these men are portrayed as consistently disappointing: they cannot commit, are childlike, impotent and impersonal, and so on. From the standpoint of ethics and morals, such characters do not provide a reason for these women to have a sense of other-awareness and the resulting conscience from seeing the effects of one's actions on another. If these were sympathetic, multi-dimensional, or only realistic characters, the four women in *Sex and the City* would be presented with far more profound dilemmas regarding their choices and the consequences and effects of those choices.

Honesty

Where care for others is less reflected in the discourse, honesty is a frequent theme. Ultimately, characters are honest with their sexual partners, usually about their feelings about the relationship and in admissions of affairs with other people (when monogamy might be assumed, given the nature of the relationship). An entire episode of *Sex and the City*, "The Cheating Curve," explored the theme of cheating. Carrie's narration indicates that even though cheating is not tolerable, one has to be forgiving of "human nature." She ponders whether cheating is like "the proverbial tree in the forest—it doesn't exist if there's no one around to catch you." Though characters in the show may initially lie to each other, there is always a reckoning, where honesty is the final outcome. Still, this is not presented as an absolute value. In this same episode, when Big calls Carrie at home to tell her that he loves her, he does not know she is in bed with someone (even though they have not had sex). Though she feels guilty, she does not tell Big because "everything before 'I love you' doesn't count." This example of situational ethics represents the fluid nature of sexual morality in *Sex and the City*, especially with regard to honesty. It is fine to lie if it gives you time to think or if you are afraid of someone's reaction. But if the secret could damage the relationship, this compels the characters to be honest with themselves and others.

Honesty can also be seen in the light of fidelity to relationships and being authentic in them. In other words, fidelity and faithfulness are not conceived solely as monogamy. Rather, faithfulness may be construed as a kind of trust that someone is being honest with us and exposing who they really are to us rather than presenting a false idea or withholding vital information. Thus, honesty is the way we care for relationships and preserve a sense of trust. In *Sex and the City*, honesty is a way of relieving one's conscience, but it is not practiced specifically for building a relationship and taking care of another in the context of that relationship. In this sense, then, honesty is another form of self-care and not an example of sexual ethics where actions and consequences are brought to bear on the quality of a relationship.

Honesty in *Queer as Folk* is treated a bit differently. Here, characters do not agonize over whether to tell the truth or not. When Melanie has a one-night affair, she tells Lindsay the next day and accepts the consequences. Her dalliance does not permanently damage the relationship, but it provokes an understandable reaction, and ultimately, portrays this character as one who is genuinely concerned with preserving her own integrity as well as the integrity of her relationship. As described above, when Brian is honest with Justin about himself, his limits, and his refusal to enter into a committed relationship, Justin is hurt, but the relationship that develops is built on a clear understanding between the two men. Ironically, then, even though it is not a stable, monogamous relationship in traditional terms, it is an authentic relationship that is built on honesty and an appreciation of each person as they are, not as they are imagined or wished to be. In Michael's presumed monogamous relationship with David, a crisis occurs in "Episode 18" when Brian discovers David in the bathhouse one night. He confronts him, tells him the duplicity is what is most egregious about his behavior and warns him not to hurt Michael (give him a disease). When David admits to Michael what he has done, Michael is hurt. When Michael talks to his friends, Emmett tells him to dump him, but Brian and Ted tell him to be forgiving and understanding, that monogamy is a myth, not just for gays but for all men. "So I should just let him do whatever he wants with whoever he wants?" Michael asks. Brian says maybe they should set up rules, or limits, but that the main thing was that David was honest with him. "Well maybe I should just go out and sleep with someone else," Michael says. "Then do it," Brian answers, "and quit sounding like a wounded housewife."

The moral dilemma in response to David's behavior is clear, but what set it in motion was honesty and the desire to be authentic. In spite of David's actions, his honesty in this situation represents a key aspect of moral behavior.

Voice/Dialogue

Perhaps most significant in terms of moral reasoning and in the development of a sexual morality framework in these programs is the emphasis placed on dialogue with others. Mark Tappan has observed that one comes to a sense of moral authority and responsibility through the practice of storytelling or "the ways in which individuals 'author' stories or narratives about their lived moral experiences in the world" (51 "Narrative, Authorship" 7). In other words, when we author a moral story, we claim authority and responsibility: "human moral experience, in particular, has a fundamentally narrative form and character" (8). This is similar to Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogism, but as Gardiner points out, it is the outcome of listening to one's inner voices with which we have a dialogue and then engaging in dialogue with others: "The activity of authoring, therefore, always takes place in the context of a relationship, in the context of an ongoing dialogue between self and others" (12). Belenky et al. observed this when one internalized another's words and made them one's own. In other words, authoritative discourse is the voice from outside; personal moral authority is when that discourse is internalized and becomes one's own story. This necessarily requires an awareness and acceptance of one's own voice as well as the voice of others, and it privileges the act of speaking that truth to others, thus becoming a dialogic process of resolving moral conflicts and making moral choices (Haight 157–60; Tappan, *Power, Privilege and Critique* 165–69).

Both programs illustrate the moral functioning that occurs when listening to one's voice and the voice of others. In *Sex and the City*, Carrie narrates her thoughts (and in an omniscient way, the thoughts of others). Episodes have a running narrative of Carrie's thoughts, her questions, and her interactions with the thoughts and questions of others. This is accomplished in three ways: voice-over narration, voice-over narration tied to the writing of Carrie's column, "*Sex and the City*," and in conversations among the four friends. At the end of each program, Carrie has come to some truth or value about relationships, sex,

herself, or her friendships, revealing that the narrative voice and the voice in dialogue with others represents an aspect of moral authority.

In *Queer as Folk*, the season began with Michael's voice-over narration, but toward the end of the season, this disappears altogether. When it was employed it did not provide the same function as Carrie's voice in *Sex and the City*. Rather, in *Queer as Folk* we watch the characters interact and influence each other. In the scene described above, Michael comes to a different understanding of David's behavior after talking to his friends about it. He still has his own affair but realizes it is not satisfying. After reacting to an authoritative voice (relationships should be monogamous), listening to his friends' advice (we all make mistakes; we're men), and listening to his own voice (I don't enjoy having sex outside of my relationship with David), Michael comes to a mature sense of his expectations and limits with regard to the relationship (don't promise anything; we may not always be monogamous, but that doesn't mean we don't love each other). This, then, is a moral standard achieved in dialogue with self and others.

Listening to the voice of others may be construed as listening to the voice of outside authorities as well, whether legal, social, or religious. In other words, the voice of one's "God" could be construed as an element of voice that is central to making moral and ethical sexual decisions. As the two programs illustrate, this voice may be construed negatively or positively.

One episode in *Sex and the City* conveys an anti-God/religion message. Discovering the religious background of someone you are dating is "scary," according to Carrie, and the Catholic in this episode who is dating Miranda thinks sex is dirty. Miranda later announces that "Catholics, Episcopalians, Buddhists, Shakers, and Quakers are all the same, all designed to fuck up our sex lives" ("Oh Come All Ye Faithful"). The obvious implication is that religion represents judgment and restriction and is best abandoned altogether.

In an episode of *Queer as Folk*, however, God is viewed as a benevolent, understanding force. While organized religion is not referred to in any episode, the presence of a deity occurs significantly, especially when Emmett makes a promise to God that he will go straight if God spares him from being HIV-positive. He believes that this is what God wants. But Ted and Michael confront Emmett. Ted tells him that they still love him, "maybe not as much as Jesus, but almost." Michael tells him he loves the way Emmett dances with his hands up in the air.

"Thanks," Emmett responds. "But I don't think God appreciates it quite as much as you do." To which Ted replies:

[God appreciates it even more] because he created you in his image. . . . If God is love and God doesn't make mistakes then you must be exactly the way he wants you to be, the way he intended you to be. And that goes for every person, every planet, every mountain, every grain of sand, every song, every tear, and every faggot. We're all his, Emmett. And he loves us all. ("Episode 14")

Emmett ultimately is convinced by this speech, which illustrates the power of accepting the voice of others, listening to one's inner voice, responding to the voice of an outside authority, and making choices and decisions that are most authentic and responsible for one's self.

This type of moral functioning reflects, in some ways, Foucault's ideas about confession. Foucault understood the practice of confession as a way of coming to self-knowledge. As Dreyfus and Rabinow describe, it is a practice rooted in honest self-examination and speaking the truth about one's self to another, thus acknowledging "that sex is significant and that sexual thoughts as well as actions must be confessed in order to learn about the state of the individual soul" (176). While this could be seen in a positive light, Foucault believed that confession also exposes the confessor to an examining, controlling institution. It was a technique of surveillance and control. In these shows, however, the discourse of confession is a free and voluntary expression, representing how exposing one's inner thoughts is a means of coming to know our sexuality and developing a sense of sexual ethics.

Conclusion

With shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Queer as Folk*, one could apply a conventional, modernist definition of sexual ethics and condemn these programs for their portrayal of sexually active singles, sex outside of the bounds of a committed relationship, and a casual attitude toward the profound, serious act of sexual relations. Similarly, a focus only on stereotypical portrayals of the vamp and the virgin or the promiscuous and the nerdy would have resulted in limited analyses. Rather, this article sought to uncover an alternative framework of sexual morality discourses in these programs. In other words, if modernist, traditional

morality is not presented in these programs, then what is the moral framework that is presented?

The primary value presented in the programs is self-care, making one's needs and desires a priority. As argued, this is a cornerstone for moral authority and a vital prerequisite for any relationship. Self-care may be construed in a variety of ways. For Foucault, it referred to the act of being a subject, an agent who constructs for one's self a life that embodies certain values. In other words, to care for one's self is to practice certain self-imposed rules of conduct that make one's life unique and "aesthetic"—what Foucault referred to as the "arts of existence" (*The Use of Pleasure* 10–11). Thus, rather than being subjected to the dictates of other, the individual chooses acts that honor one's values and that contribute to the quality of one's life. These are, truly, subjective norms, not determined by outside forces. Foucault referred to them as "practices of self" which are "independent of moral legislation" (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture* 260). But they are also subject-ive norms in that the subject "is constituted in the act of obtaining knowledge about one's sexual self" (Berard 203). What this implies, then, is that an individual will—through self-reflection—make choices that will enhance one's life and create an artful, aesthetic existence consistent with one's values and beliefs. At the core of this assertion is that self comes first when one is considering choices about sexual behavior, because, ultimately, what one is creating is one's self and one's artful life.

But maintaining ethical and moral relations within the context of a sexual relationship also requires a loving, respectful consciousness not a disinterested, objectified view of the other. While certainly commendable for their portrayal of self-authority, both shows fail to present consistently an ethic of other-care within the bounds of a sexual relationship. At least two episodes of *Queer as Folk*, however, show sexual partners engaging in honest dialogue, concern for the other, and compromise regarding the form of relationship that will best suit each person. Mostly, however, it is non-sexual relationships—such as friendships—that are portrayed as the form of relationship in which a person is able to exhibit the ethical qualities of respect, affection, support, and loyalty. It is worth noting that neither program presents forms of sexuality that are inherently harmful or violent to another. In that absence, sex is seen as fun and good and not as a form of power, manipulation, or exploitation. Any real-life moral framework, however,

must take these realities—or the potential for this activity—into account.

Foucault's observations regarding the aesthetics of self, the privileging of desire, and the pleasure of sex comprising its most powerful discourse, may provide the most useful framework for assessing the constructions of sexual morality in these programs. That is, despite the observations that emphasize the interrelated nature of our moral functioning and the findings that suggest that women, in particular, use relationships with others as guides for moral conduct, these shows represent more the values of self-care and self-authority as essential for one's moral framework. *Queer as Folk* successfully illustrates the moral negotiation that can occur when care of self, care of the other, honesty, and listening to one's voice and the voice of others are employed. Still, the starting and ending points are the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Foucault observed that in some societies (such as China, Japan, India, and Rome), the primary locus of truth was in *ars erotica*, the erotic arts, in which pleasure was its own end and that "truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience" (*The History of Sexuality* 57). This is contrasted with the Western approach of *scientia sexualis* in which the focus is not on pleasure but on the analysis of pleasure so that we might come to a greater understanding of morality or truth with respect to sexual practices. Even though the two programs studied here provide evidence that characters acknowledge the voice of others in their reflections on sexual morality, the overarching message is that sexual activity is pleasurable and desirable and that individuals should regulate it according to their own dictates, needs, and conscience. Pleasure is its own end and in the practice of pursuing that pleasure, one learns their limits, their values, and their own personal, subjective morality. Thus, using the content of these shows as a guide, *ars erotica* would indeed seem to provide the most fertile ground for understanding one's sexuality and sexual morality.

Although this is clearly a form of hedonism, the shows portray other aspects of moral depth. It is interesting to note, for instance, that in both programs, friendships are presented as the relational context in which the individual is free to explore and express herself or himself most fully and with most respect for self and others. The sexual relationship is still presented as fraught with peril for the individual subject, as if the choice in such a context is always between one's needs

or the relinquishing of those needs. And researchers still need to explore this tension for the way it is constructed and represented in popular culture. We need, too, to explore how other forms of relationship are presented, such as friends, families, neighborhoods, religious communities, and other communities of life and support. If it is to our advantage to embrace a more community oriented way of being, then popular culture is key in how it represents self, others, and our relational moral arrangements.

Returning to the primary point of departure for this analysis, the postmodern ethos discourages a universal application of moral and ethical principles; therefore, it is left to individuals to interpret their own definitions of moral and ethical sexual conduct. Representations on television programs such as *Sex and the City* and *Queer as Folk* may provide the opportunities for those debates. Admittedly, the analysis here only covers thematic content in both programs. The reception of these programs has not been addressed here. Certainly, a next step is to consider how audiences interpret the moral narratives of these programs, using the standards suggested here and using their own interpretations. Of further interest will be the social positions and sexual preferences of viewers, inviting an analysis of the intersections of race, class, and sexuality into discussions of sexual morality. Ultimately, rather than accept wholesale the frameworks for moral decision-making portrayed in these fictional and unrealistic programs, one can use these ideas to author one's own framework and to enter into constructive dialogue with others about these ideas. This function, then, in addition to the discursive constructions of morality, must be seen as another contribution of these programs to the construction of moral discourse.

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Janet M. Cramer (PhD, University of Minnesota) is an Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her research and teaching interests focus on media discourse and its relationship to social constructions of gender, race, class, the environment, and other ideologies in historical and contemporary contexts.

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