

# Case Studies in Communication about Sex



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Edited by

Carey Noland, Jimmie Manning  
and Janet MacLennan

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Case Studies in Communication about Sex,  
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## INTRODUCTION

*JANET MACLENNAN, JIMMIE MANNING,  
AND CAREY NOLAND*

What is missing in sex education? DiCenso and colleagues asked just that in an extensive study conducted in 2001 – and their answer eludes the typical ‘abstinence only’ or ‘comprehensive approach’ responses generated by most critics of sex education. Instead, they concluded that the *personal* elements of sex are greatly underexplored, and that understandings of relationship issues, how to communicate with partners, and how gender differences play into sex are much needed in sex education. Moreover, it is not only youths that are lacking such education, but ultimately most everyone.

Understanding interpersonal communication elements of sexual relationships is an indispensable component of any model of an overall healthy human sexual development. Moreover, being able to transform such understandings into practice in relationships is a leap toward being able to have the kind of meaningful communication with sexual partners that can potentially improve relationships, encourage safer sex practices, highlight responsible family planning, and work against limits of gendered and cultured expectations related to sex and sexuality.

In response to the missing elements of interpersonal communication in sex education, we have compiled a textbook of communication case studies that identify the most salient issues regarding communication about sex in relationships and that explore these issues in a format ideal for improving both the understandings and practices of interpersonal communication for readers. Specifically, we seek to provide a basis for developing tangible communication skills, clearer understandings of how interpersonal concepts and theories play into practice, and a consideration of ideas not often considered by students. By encouraging readers to engage in meaningful communication about sex—and, by extension, communication about safer sex—we seek to raise awareness of salient issues related to sex and communication about sex. We seek to do so interpersonally, physiologically, socially, and culturally in order to create awareness that communication studies are pivotal in contributing to

societal discussions about sex and sexuality, particularly outside of a strictly academic research arena.

The fictive case study format is an ideal vehicle for learning about and enhancing communication about sex. Case studies are a teaching tool that we and other professors of communication have used in communication courses to great success. For practical purposes, we define a case study as a narrative that teaches—in both content and form—about communication and that also encourages discussion of important relevant issues. The case studies used in our text and other interpersonal communication texts follow a different format from those used in business practice. Instead of confidentially detailing a real-life incident, this type of case study is a story created from many stories and bodies of knowledge; and they rely on the expertise of the writers to make them seem true to life.

Why is it important to study communication about sex? The quality of our lives is inextricably linked to the quality of our communication and the quality of our personal relationships. Sex is an important dynamic of personal relationships. The quality of sexual relationships has a significant bearing on our wellness, too. As Charles Marwick notes, “As human beings our sexuality is inextricably linked to our overall health, happiness, and sense of wellness.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the study of human sexuality and sexual practices—and communicative elements in particular—are increasingly important areas in social science research. For many decades, sex was thought of as a realm of society that was too personal and too private to be investigated in the public domain of research, but then many negative social consequences of this so-called private realm became painfully public:

the sexual choices that one makes can have important consequences for both personal and social welfare. Moreover, several of the difficult social policy issues currently facing our society are related to sexual choice. Thus, this domain is neither frivolous nor inconsequential, although it is often trivialized, exploited, and accorded little respect.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, both political and medical entities have taken a great interest in the consequences of private sexual relationships. However, political and medical entities are not best-positioned to study the mediating environment involved: human communication. Much of the research that has been done to understand, mediate, and control the consequences of human sexual relationships has been focused on information and education, not communication per se, and not on the relational aspects of sex.

One might imagine that sex education programs in school are addressing the issue of how to communicate about sex, yet a review of academic research reveals that this is not the case. In a study of high school students in Canada—all of whom had received extensive sex education throughout their formal schooling—respondents reported that their friends, family, and forms of popular culture were their main sources of information about sexual health, and that “the type of information received from these sources (feelings, decisions and experiences) was not available through formal channels. Students thought that sex education classes offered the technical information and informal sources filled in the gaps or ‘the important stuff’.”<sup>3</sup> The students suggested that sex education classes did not provide them with useful information. In essence, students felt that their *education* about sex was adequate, whereas their education about *communication and sex* was not.

It is little wonder that students crave such knowledge since the reality is that *most* people find it difficult to talk about sex in relationships: “Talking about safer sex should be easy. It doesn’t require an advanced degree to bring up the topic. Most people know what they are supposed to say and why saying it is so important” but, “It turns out that communicating about these issues is no simple matter”.<sup>4</sup> Whereas much of the public health education about sex focuses on developing practices of safer sex, this information often disregards the reality of our personal relationships, of how they are developed and maintained. As one example:

Safer sex appears to be an off-limits subject in many romantic relationships. Consider that there are a number of taboo topics in close relationships, including the state of the relationship, extrarelationship activity, relationship norms, prior relationships, conflict-generating topics, and self-disclosures perceived as unpleasant to discuss.<sup>5</sup>

Besides bringing increased understanding of how the nature of relationships and the contextual issues involved influence and create our communication around sex, the communication perspective also brings something more that public health education does not or often has not. To their credit, there is considerable research that shows that while some public health interventions have increased knowledge and increased some safer sex practices, the fact remains that many people have the knowledge about safer sex practices but not the behavior to go with it. Research has shown that “lack of knowledge, however, does not seem to be the main issue” and “that information alone is rarely enough to reduce risky sexual behavior”.<sup>6</sup> From a communication perspective, the view of humans and

sex encompasses the idea that much more than knowledge is involved in resolving these issues:

Interpersonal communication scholars view sexual communication as a complex, dynamic process, in which “sexual partners are *active participants*, who each have their own set of *goals* and the ability to choose *strategies* to maximize goal achievement” (Miller et al., 1993, p. 87). Furthermore, people have diverse, sometimes conflicting goals during sex—fulfilling sexual desire, maintaining a positive self-image, pleasing their partner, strengthening the relationship, relieving tension, and preserving health.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, studying sexual behavior and sexual relationships from a communication framework allows us to understand this area of humanity in general, whereas much of the research that has been done about sex has been done in the face of negative consequences, problematizing sexual consequences instead of striving to understand the possibilities of our sexual relationships. The tone of our book is exploratory, in that the communicative quality of our sexual lives is presented, and that is a tone that needs to be taken more often in social sexual education. Otherwise, it often happens that “sexuality is negatively viewed as the source of problems and disease rather than an integral part of human development and health”.<sup>8</sup> To rectify this situation, it is argued that “the usefulness of this research should not be limited to a problem-solving approach”.<sup>9</sup> Thus we need research and readings that explore communication around sex in relationships that occurs within those relationships without presuming any negative consequences of sex itself. By treating sex as a communicative form, we will delve into the interpersonal dynamics that significantly influence and determine the kinds of sexual relationships possible.

## Features and Benefits

This book is unique and beneficial to both professors and students in several ways, because this book:

1. Takes a *communication approach* whereas a lot of educational materials about sex offer only a medical or more technical information-based approach to the topic.
2. Encourages a more *engaged learning process*: This book does not follow the standard textbook format of transmitting information on which students will be tested; rather, students will gain knowledge through an engagement with the material that will facilitate their ability to derive their

own new understandings of the topics. Through the case study format, students will be encouraged to *think* about and *talk* about important issues related to communication about sex; in this way, we hope to provide a very useful tool to teachers of health who may not always feel comfortable or skilled to address important issues related to sex in our relationships.

3. Is *useful* in the classroom. The format of the book is inviting, opening communication (for both students *and* instructors) rather than constraining it. Each case study begins with a title that generates interest and includes key words to give a reader a sense of the content of that chapter. Then each case study ends with a series of possible discussion questions and a reference list of the resources that were used as a knowledge-base for composing that case study. Once students have independently read the case study, teachers in the classroom can then discuss the case study using a variety of pedagogical approaches such as facilitating a discussion, sharing research results on which the case study was based, organizing a related activity, inviting a knowledgeable guest speaker, devising skills practice related to the content of that case study, and so on.

4. Is extremely *timely*. In the arena of academic research and teaching, communication about sex and sexuality have become a popular and significant area of study and interest in communication pedagogy, evidenced in the trend of universities to add entire classes in communication about sex to their curriculum—at the very least as special topics classes. This interest in sex and sexuality is a reflection of a larger trend in which health communication programs (or interdisciplinary health programs that include communication) are being developed within universities across the country. As a result, both academics and practitioners are beginning to realize that communication about sex is an area that can and should be explored in the instructional context, and thus are seeking published research to use and to learn more. Within the secondary school system, sexual education programs have proliferated without any such teaching tool as a case studies book about communication being available to educators to teach salient issues related to communication about sex.

5. Is entirely readable, interesting, and provocative, due to the case study format. Readers will be able to *identify with the narratives*, connecting to the experiences of the case study characters through their own experiences. This kind of relating opens up possibilities for new thinking and behavioral change.

## Contents

Part One of the text focuses on sex in relationships. Chapter One by Jimmie Manning explores definitions of sex. How do we define sex? Today we use so many vague terms to describe our sexual encounters, adding so much confusion to our sexual lives, sometimes intentionally and sometimes without even thinking about it. In Chapter Two, sex is then considered as a form of social exchange within a relationship. Jennifer Dunn discusses dating relationships in college and what it means to call someone a ‘prostitute’ – exploring not only colloquial uses of the word, but exploring what it means to sex workers as well. Chapter Three, by Brian Ogolsky, looks at the role of sex in long-term relationships and how sex affects men’s views of relational commitment. It offers a masculine voice often missing from the ‘relational’ side of sexual conversations.

Part Two takes a hard look at some of the topics that are difficult to talk about in relationships and therefore often left unsaid. In Chapter Four, Mike Anderson demonstrates how difficult it is for young couples to talk about past sexual relationships and offers some thought-provoking scenarios of what may happen when this Pandora’s box is opened. In Chapter Five, Larry Frey takes this a step further, exploring what happens when a man’s ultimate (and secret) sexual fantasy is discovered by his lover. How will she respond, and how will this affect their relationship? Finally, Ragan Hensley in Chapter Six explores a common phenomenon (and fear for many): when women fake an orgasm or pleasure during sex.

Part Three incorporates more cultural perspectives to broaden the range of case studies presented in this book. Gust Yep offers a delightful and insightful view into the lives of Rolando and Tatiana, two characters rife with relational understandings, in Chapter Seven. Then, in Chapter Eight, Sandra Faulkner describes the difficulties of a young Latina woman after contracting HPV and while also facing pressures from home to be in a more traditional relationship. Finally, Carey Noland explores the role of alcohol in the hook up culture. She challenges current notions that people hook up because they drink, what if people drink so they can hook up?

Part Four examines how the media has influenced how we think, feel and talk about sex with each other. In Chapter Eleven, Vincent Rocchio describes his struggle as a father to bring up girls with healthy views of sexuality given that they are constantly being recruited by the media to embrace an unhealthy, premature view of sexy as dictated by the media. Chapter Twelve, by Amir Hestroni, looks at a mother’s struggle with her daughter’s sexuality. This story explores what may happen when a parent is convinced that the media has influenced her child’s sexual orientation.

Finally, Danielle Stern explores a buzz word of the moment: *sexting*. Is it really all that the media makes it out to be? The considerations offered in the chapter may surprise you.

Part Five acknowledges the role of medicine and health care providers in communication about sex. In Chapter Fourteen, Carey Noland and Hans Peter Schlecht discuss why both doctors and patients are reluctant to talk about sex with each other. They offer a realistic encounter of a medical doctor taking a medical history and teaching a medical resident how to take a medical history. In Chapter Fifteen, Jason Wrench, Shannon Brogan, and Andrea McClanahan explore one man's addiction to sex – moving beyond the simple effects of the addiction and looking more into the personality and pathos of those who may face sexual insatiation. Finally, Dayna Henry, a relationships counselor, offers a candid look into a couple's life as they explore the idea of counseling. Going beyond the couple's story, Dayna also shows readers what couples counseling looks like and helps to explain that seeking outside help isn't that unusual.

And in the final section, Part Six, we explore date rape, sexual harassment, and other darker aspects to communication about sex. In Chapter Eighteen, Michaela Meyer and Linda Baughman dive into the all-too-often unexplored idea of acquaintance rape. They also offer heartbreaking insight into the lack of social support that often accompanies a woman who has experienced sexual assault or rape. Then in Chapter Nineteen, Christine North and Mary Devitt take the reader through two different perspectives—male and female—of a date that ended in sex. The differences in perception offer serious consideration of how disjunctive communication may affect dating relationships. In Chapter Twenty, Delyse Center, Jimmie Manning, Emily Fette, Chelsea Graham, and Emily Teaford explore a sexual harassment claim at a local restaurant. Each of the seven characters in the story offer their own version of what happened. Why aren't their stories all the same? What are some of them hiding? And why is it so easy for us to imagine we could be in a similar situation? This thought-provoking case study helps to explore the various reconstructions that may occur about sex. And in the twenty-first chapter of the book, an examination of weight and body issues comes into play as Steve Sohn, Kandi Walker, and Joy Hart look at a husband and wife who are struggling with esteem issues. How does body image play into a relationship? And how might popular diets hinder or help a relationship? The case study seeks answers.

## About the Editors

Carey Noland and Janet MacLennan graduated together with their doctoral degrees in human communication from the College of Communication, School of Interpersonal Communication (now School of Communication Studies) at Ohio University. Throughout their doctoral studies, they shared interests in feminism and women's studies, as well as pedagogy, but diverged in their primary research focus: Carey pursued an interest in health communication while Janet explored relational communication. Over time, Janet altered her research focus with the experience of living and teaching in the new-to-her culture of Puerto Rico. It was not long before Carey's health communication research and Janet's relational communication research in a cultural context fused around the very real need for an increased understanding of a particular health crisis in Puerto Rico related to sex. Both qualitative researchers—although Carey also has a substantive background in quantitative approaches—they were able to devise and conduct an in-depth investigation in the cultural environment of Puerto Rico. Based on this research project, the authors have several journal articles and book chapters. It was through the process of conducting the extensive interpretive research project in Puerto Rico that they devised the idea for a reader of case studies of communication about sex and became convinced of the utility and importance of such a volume.

Jimmie Manning was invited to enter the project after he submitted the lead case study for this edition. A prolific scholar in relational sexuality studies, he is an active member of groups such as the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender as well as the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality that embrace and celebrate understandings of human sexuality. He also founded the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Caucus of the Central States Communication Association and has served as chair of the LGBTQ Caucus of the National Communication Association. Beyond that, his research on such diverse topics as coming out, sexual harassment, virginity contracts between parents and their children, sexual turning points in relationships, and sexual identification with media characters and concepts makes him a strong fit to edit a collection of case studies such as this one.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Marwick, "Survey Says Patients Expect Little Physician Help on Sex," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 281 (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Michael, "Private Sex and Public Policy," in *Sex, love, and health in America: Private choices and public policies*, ed. Edward Laumann and Robert Michael (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 465.

<sup>3</sup> A. DiCenso, V. W. Borthwick, C. A. Busca, C. Creatura, J. A. Holmes, W. F. Kalagian, and B. M. Partington, "Completing the Picture: Adolescents Talk about What's Missing in Sexual Health Services," *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 1 (2001): 36.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Perloff, *Persuading people to have safer sex: Applications of social science to the AIDS crisis* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 37.

<sup>5</sup> (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) quoted in Ibid, 38.

<sup>6</sup> M. Hogben and D. Dyne, "Using social learning theory to explain individual differences in human sexuality," *Journal of Sex Research* 35 (1998): 65.

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<sup>7</sup> Perloff, 2001, 39

<sup>8</sup> Diane diMauro, *Sexuality research in the United States: An assessment of the social and behavioral sciences* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1995), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid



**PART ONE:**  
**SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SLEEP TOGETHER?

*JIMMIE MANNING*

**Keywords:** definitions of sex, sexual conversation, relationship turning points, heteronormativity

Jenny ran into the diner, extremely worried about being late to meet her friends. Sunday brunch at Milton's was a weekly ritual with her two best friends, and the last one there was always teased and taunted. Jenny wasn't ready to answer questions today.

"Well look who's here!" said Angie. Angie and Jenny had been buds for 13 years, ever since they were in the second grade. The two looked and acted a lot alike, with many people confusing them as sisters.

"It's about time!" said Kate. Kate met Jenny in speech class their freshman year. They were assigned to a project together, and initially the two did not hit it off. Jenny was too reserved for Kate's taste, and Jenny thought Kate was too crass. That is exactly what the two of them ended up liking about each other in the long run.

"Sorry I'm late," Jenny apologized. "I had a hard time getting out of bed this morning."

"It looks like it," Kate teased. "You didn't even have time to fix your hair. Or even pick out a different outfit than the one you wore to the bar last night."

Jenny blushed. "Well, I was in a hurry, and..."

"And nothing!" Kate interrupted. "Walk of shame! Walk of shame!"

Jenny looked to Angie for support, but instead saw her laughing. "What?" Jenny asked. "You're going to go along with this?"

"Yup," Angie said. "We called it last night when you left with him."

"I told you, we were going to his place to watch a movie. We were tired of the noise. We just wanted to have a nice chat," Jenny explained.

“A nice chat? Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Kate joked. “Well, let me tell you, after you left last night I found a guy of my own and he had quite the chatty little mouth!”

The women all laughed at that. Jenny hoped Kate would continue with her story so she wouldn’t have to talk, but there was no such luck.

“So what happened?” Angie asked.

“I fell asleep,” Jenny said. “And then I woke up late. It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal? Jenny, you never go home with anyone. How can this be no big deal?” Kate exclaimed, practically lifting herself off of the edge of her seat.

“No, really. We just talked a bit,” Jenny mumbled. “Wow, have they always had a mushroom and herb omelet on the menu here?”

“Um, we’ve eaten here every Sunday for the past three years. You know what they have on the menu,” Angie said to Kate. She wanted to hear the details.

“Yeah!” Kate joined in. “Spill the beans!”

“Okay, okay,” Jenny gave in to her friends. She knew she was going to have to tell sooner or later anyhow—she was just hoping for later. “So we went to his place, and then he showed me his DVDs, and we started looking through them and talking.”

“Were they in his bedroom?” Kate asked.

“Yeah, they were,” Jenny continued. “And so I noticed that he had *Terms of Endearment*, and I thought that was weird since most people don’t seem to know that movie, especially guys.”

“Don’t tell me you just watched some movie,” Kate said, looking disappointed.

“Well, no. We didn’t watch it at all. I asked him if he liked it, and he told me that he did. He said he could relate to it because his mom died from breast cancer when he was very young.”

Angie’s eyes widened at this. She knew that Jenny’s dad had also battled cancer when Jenny was in junior high, and that even though he survived Jenny experienced some difficulties during that time.

“So he told me about his mom, and I told him about my dad, and before I knew it we were cuddled up and—I don’t know. We just connected.”

“Wow,” Kate said. “Not what I was picturing.”

“So did you at least kiss?” Angie asked.

“Yeah,” Jenny said. “It was nice.” She then quickly picked up her menu again.

“Wait a second,” Kate said. “You’re hiding behind the menu. I know what this means.”

“What? Don’t be silly.”

“You’re hiding something, Jenny. Look at your face! Listen, I know that you two may have bonded and connected and all of that other sweet stuff last night and you’re trying to sell it as this romantic episode, but I know something else happened last night. Jenny, you sly devil. This is so unlike you!”

“Come on, Kate,” Angie defended Jenny. “If something else happened she would have told us.”

“Would she?” Kate asked. “Remember how when she lost her virginity she hid it from us for months!”

“It was only for three weeks!” Jenny defended herself.

“That’s not the way I remember it,” Kate said. “But, hey, if you tell me here and now that you didn’t sleep with him last night, I’ll drop the whole thing. Seriously. I just need you to answer me now. Did you have sex with him last night?”

“No, I did not,” Jenny said. “Not technically.”

Angie almost choked on her coffee. Kate howled with laughter.

“I knew it!” Kate yelled. “I could tell by the way you were acting!”

“Wow,” Angie said. “I mean, just—wow!” She and Kate both knew that Jenny was reserved when it came to sexual activity. Usually she wouldn’t consider engaging in sexual relations with a man until she had known him for quite some time.

“Come on, you two,” Jenny said. “This isn’t that shocking.”

“Yes, it is,” Angie replied. “I mean, when Kate started this whole thing I had no idea that you really did what she was implying you did!”

“We don’t even know what she did,” Kate said. “Just that she ‘technically’ didn’t have sex with him.”

“Yeah,” Angie joined in. “What do you mean by ‘technically’?”

“You know,” Jenny replied. “We didn’t really do it all the way, but we messed around some.”

“So you were naked?” Kate asked.

“Well, yeah,” Jenny replied.

“But you didn’t do it?”

“No, not at all.”

“Well, if you were naked, then in my mind that means you had sex,” Angie said.

“What?” Kate asked. “You’re being ridiculous. And judgmental!”

“No—I’m not judging at all. In fact, I think you needed to get laid,” Angie countered.

“Great, now you’re sounding like Kate.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Kate asked. The women laughed.

“Seriously, though, just being naked with someone doesn’t mean that you’re having sex with them,” Jenny said. “Otherwise I’ve had sex with everyone on the volleyball team.”

“Come again?” Angie was genuinely confused.

“After practice and after games we shower. We are naked together, but no one in their right mind would assert that we had sex.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Angie said. “You know what I mean. Not in a group situation like school or sports, nor in a changing room or around family members or whatever. But when you’re naked with another person and alone and—you know what I mean.”

“Jenny does have a point, though,” Kate interjected. “Just being naked with someone does not mean that you have had sex with them. There has to at least be some kind of touching that occurs.”

“So if I take a shower with someone and we wash each other, you would count that as having sex?” Jenny asked.

“It depends. Where are you washing?” Kate asked.

“Why is that important?”

“Because if you are washing each others’ genitals, then yes, I would say you were closer to sex. But if you’re washing each others’ backs, then I don’t think that would qualify.”

“You said closer to sex,” Angie said. “So you don’t think getting naked with someone and touching their genitals is sex?”

“No, I don’t,” Kate replied.

“See!” Jenny leaned forward. “That’s crazy to think that being naked with someone is sex!”

“In Angie’s defense, I know people who think that open mouthed kissing is sex,” Kate said. “In a discussion in my sexuality class, we even read a survey where 1.5% of the participants saw it this way.”

“That is messed up,” Angie said.

“How can *you* say that?” Jenny asked. “I mean, I think it is a little messed up that you think you’ve had sex with a guy because you were naked with him.”

“Here’s what is really crazy,” Kate changed the direction of the conversation a bit. “We gave our counts to each other a couple of months ago. You know, when we told each other how many guys we’ve slept with. So you mean to tell me that in your numbers you included every single guy with which you’ve been naked?”

“Yeah,” Angie replied. “I have been naked with twelve guys.”

“See, I didn’t count mine that way,” Jenny said. “Mine would’ve been four instead of three.”

“I didn’t count that way, either!” Kate exclaimed. “Mine would be higher. Much much much higher.” Laughter ensued.

“So what do you see as sex?” Jenny asked Kate.

“If the penis doesn’t go in the vagina, then it doesn’t equal sex to me,” Kate answered. “All of the other stuff is sexual activity, but to really have sex you need that penetration there.”

“Hey ladies, what are you talking about?” The women were all startled to have someone drop by in the middle of their conversation, but then laughed when they saw that it was their good friend Mike.

“You might not want to know,” Jenny said, turning a little red.

“Sure he does,” Kate said. “We can maybe even have him tell us what he thinks.”

“Shoot,” Mike said.

“Well,” Angie said. “These two think I’m crazy because I believe that anytime two people get naked together then it is having sex, and—”

“And I say,” Kate interrupted, “That you need to have the penis go into the vagina or else there really is no sex.”

“Interesting,” Mike said. “So if we buy into your theory, Kate, then are you saying that I am and probably always will be a virgin?”

Angie jumped at the opportunity to prove her point. “See! This goes back to what I was saying. If you limit sex to the penis penetrating the vagina, then you cut a lot of things out that would have to be sex. Are you saying the stuff that Mike does with his boyfriend, whatever that may be, isn’t ever sex because there isn’t a vagina?”

All eyes were on Kate. “Okay, okay. So maybe I need to amend. I will now say that any time penetration occurs then that equals sex.”

“What about lesbians?” Jenny asked. “Wouldn’t that leave them out?” “Trust me, they find ways,” Mike smiled. “Well, it looks like we have a table—my boyfriend is waving me over. It was nice to see you ladies.”

The women smiled and waved good-bye to Mike. Then, after their server took their order, the discussion began again.

“So it is mind boggling to me,” Jenny began, “How we can all be talking about sex, and think we mean the same thing, but really we can all mean different things.”

“I don’t know,” Kate said. “I know you all think that I’m going a little overboard with insisting that there has to be penetration involved, but really isn’t that what we all mean when we say we’ve had sex?”

“I don’t take it that way,” Angie said.

“I do,” Jenny said. “That’s why earlier I said that me and Nick—his name is Nick—technically didn’t have sex last night.”

“But you did get naked with him?” Angie asked.

“Yeah, we took our clothes off.”

“So to Angie you have had sex, but to me you haven’t.”

“I guess,” Jenny replied.

“Wait a second,” Angie said. “You amended your definition to include any kind of penetration. So what about oral sex?”

“Nope, not sex,” Kate instantly replied. “In my mind, oral sex is what you do with a guy when you don’t want to have sex.”

“Wow!” Jenny was surprised. “And, see, I would call that sex. Just not technically sex.”

“Finally!” Kate smiled. “We get to what she did last night.”

“Not so fast,” Jenny replied. “I didn’t say that oral sex was the only thing that counted as technically not being sex.”

“This is all giving me a headache,” Angie said. “I will never think about sex the same way again. At least, I won’t think about what people mean when they say they have had sex in the same way again.”

Just then, a look of panic flashed across Jenny’s face. Angie and Kate quickly noticed and turned in the direction of where Jenny was looking. Standing in the doorway, just having entered the restaurant, were three guys—one of them Nick.

“He’s here!” Jenny let out with a slight yelp. A smile stretched across Kate’s face.

“Oh boys!” she yelled to the men who had just entered. “We’re having a little conversation over here—come tell us what you think!”

## For Further Reflection and Discussion

1. In this story, each of the friends offers a definition for the word *sex*. Do any of the definitions provided seem more reasonable than the others? Which of the friends is closest to being right? Can we truly define the word *sex*?
2. In this story, many different phrases were used to describe sexual activity (e.g., get laid, do it, sleep together). What other words or phrases may be used to talk about sexual activity that have an unclear meaning? Think about this question both in terms of sexual acts and the conversation that occurs in negotiating sexual relationships.
3. Does the way that the women in this story talk about sex seem to be an accurate representation of how college women talk about

sex? If not, what changes need to be made in order for this story to appear more genuine?

4. How do people typically talk about sex in friendships? How does this differ from the way people typically talk about sex in a romantic relationship?
5. Jenny reveals that she made an intimate connection with Nick based upon both of their parents having battled cancer. Do you believe this impacted her decision to have sexual relations with Nick? Do you believe this revelation impacted Nick's decision to have sexual relations with Jenny? Is this type of connection typical among people who engage in sexual activity?
6. Were you surprised to learn that the character Mike is gay? Why or why not?

### **For Further Reading and Reference**

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