

## **Sexperts and Sexpertise: The Demands of the Cold War Era Professionals in the Bedroom**

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*“In part, sex instruction is ignored because of a false confidence in the instinctive nature of sex. It is assumed that sex can take care of itself. It is found, however, from experience that even so basic a human appetite as that of hunger needs understanding and guidance.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the 1950s, postwar couples were “Homeward-Bound”<sup>2</sup> to the ideals of a utopian nuclear family. Part of a perfect family life was a perfect sex life, and the average American couple looked for instructions on how to achieve it. A group of self-appointed sexual experts, or “sexperts,” as many historians have called them, stepped in to fill this need. Professionals of various disciplines published articles and books intended to help married couples obtain the perfect sex life. The American public bought, read, and tried to act on them. “This was the first chance many people had to try to live out the romanticized dream of a private family, happily ensconced in its own nest... They devoured articles and books on how to get the most out of marriage and their sex lives.”<sup>3</sup> The recommendations of the sexperts, phrased in terms of “science,” primarily functioned to articulate sexual and gender norms rather than providing actual instruction on how to engage in sexual activity. Through these recommendations, the sexperts both reflected and reinforced public ideals of conformity and domesticity in the 1950s.

Domestic ideology changed the lives of American families and American women in the 1950s, sending the Rosie the Riveter back to the kitchen, and her husband to the corporation. One component of domestic ideology was sex. Domesticity and conformity went past the kitchen, and into the bedroom, dictating and prying into the sex lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest R. Groves, *Sex in Marriage* (New York, Emerson books, inc., 1953), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (Perseus Books, 1999), xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 231.

married heterosexuals as had never been done before. The recommendations of the sexperts, and the attempts of married couples to follow them continuously reproduced the ideals of domesticity—conformity and gender difference—on an intensely personal level. Failing to achieve the perfect sex life was also failing to achieve the perfect home life. Failing to achieve the perfect home life, a difficult task in itself, was failing to meet the overwhelmingly popular ideal of what Americans and families should be—thus, it was un-American.

An irony of 1950s “sexpertise” was that the experts attempting to set normative behavior for all Americans were not a unified group. They were a mixture of professionals, including marriage counselors, advice columnists, sociologists, biologists/taxonomists like Alfred Kinsey, authors of textbooks, and physicians.<sup>4</sup> Some counseled, some wrote articles for women’s magazines, and some wrote entire books—marriage manuals. Most of these publications lacked scientific support in the modern sense, Kinsey’s work being the notable exception, because he used the research methods of a taxonomist. Although Kinsey’s groundbreaking sex research emphasized the similarities between men and women, the vast majority of expert publications ignored similarities and continued to emphasize sex and gender differences.<sup>5</sup> There were no distinct grounds for claiming expertise; any scientist, doctor, or social scientist interested in sex could claim it. Although sexperts demanded conformity, every individual expert might define sexual conformity differently, complicating and adding difficulty to their demands on couples attempting to conform.

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<sup>4</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 234.

Jessica Weiss, *To have and to hold : marriage, the baby boom, and social change* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2000), 144-8.

<sup>5</sup> Weiss, 150.

This essay will closely examine three widely circulated sex advice publications. These three authors that asked Americans to conform had three different qualifications to “sexpertise,” and three different sets of instructions on how to conform. Because of the differences, these sources can serve as a microcosm of sexpert publications, which tended to contradict each other and make conformity to the perfect sex life impossible for couples. These three sources approach sex from different viewpoints, but are rooted in the same domestic ideology of conformity and gender difference, which assumed that marriage was the only appropriate place for sex. I examine Dr. Marion Hillard’s 1958 article “Why Premarital Sex is Always Wrong,” written for *Ladies Home Journal* because a vast amount of marital and women’s advice was espoused and read in *Ladies Home Journal* in the 1950s by “experts.” I look at a 1953 edition of the manual “Sex in Marriage” written by Ernest R. Groves—a professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina—and his wife Gladys, because the couple was an institution of marital expertise. They published multiple marriage and childcare manuals. *Sex in Marriage* also has an additional element of expertise; a past president of the American Gynecological Society illustrated it. The third publication I look at was extremely popular. Eustace Chesser, an M.D., wrote the marriage manual *Love Without Fear* in 1947. The hardcover edition of *Love Without Fear* “was in its fourth printing by 1952 and had sold three quarter of a million copies. A paperback edition did even better.”<sup>6</sup>

The scientific claims of the sexperts were often dubious by modern standards, but it is important to understand that these professional opinions were respected as expert and scientific in the 1950s. In *The Romance of American Psychology*, Ellen Herman describes

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Edward Melody, *Teaching America about sex: marriage guides and sex manuals from the late Victorians to Dr. Ruth* (New York : New York University Press, 1999), 126.

the importance of the experts, mainly psychologists, to the federal government. They were an integral part of the American Cold War effort, as the war was often fought with words—philosophies of the ideal “national characters,”—and fraught with speculation about the other side. “Between 1954 and the mid-1960s, the U.S. military was...the country’s major institutional sponsor of psychological research.”<sup>7</sup> By modern standards, there was very little “scientific evidence” for many of the conclusions experts drew:

While psychologists were the first to admit, to one another at least, that they actually knew appallingly little about their areas of supposed competence, they made promises to the military as a way of killing two birds with one stone: demonstrating psychology’s social responsibility and advancing their own professional interests.<sup>8</sup>

Although this practice sounds opportunistic, Herman also asserts that these experts really did believe in their brand of science, and intended to help the Government. Sexpert advice ran parallel to that of governmental experts: although the sexperts’ knowledge was often incomplete or lacked the evidence necessary to support modern scientific claims, they intended to help married couples. Expertise was monetarily supported and respected both by the American government and married couples. The American public took sexpert advice very seriously. The success of Eustace Chesser’s marriage manual is a testament to the devotion of married couples to sexpertise.

Although this essay will primarily discuss the negative and confusing impacts of sexpert publications, it is important to recognize the positive impacts of these writings. Sexpert discourse articulated the new idea that the pleasure of wives mattered in sex: “The job description of the [50s] housewife included being a willing and enthusiastic sexual partner. This represented a quantum leap from earlier attitudes and beliefs that

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<sup>7</sup> Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 126, 136.

<sup>8</sup> Herman, 133.

suggested that good women did not experience sexual desire...”<sup>9</sup> Both Ernest Groves and Eustace Chesser severely criticized the man who did not bring his wife to orgasm, and/or left her immediately after he was finished. Chesser devoted a whole chapter in *Love Without Fear* to “Woman’s claim to Sexual Equality,” espousing the belief that “The essential point to bear in mind is that the wife requires satisfaction equally with the husband. That is the ‘love right’ of every married woman. Every wife ought to take steps to secure it. Every husband ought to ensure that his wife secures it.”<sup>10</sup> Like most others, Chesser’s manual was mainly devoted to what he believed were inherent gender differences between men and women, but acknowledged that women, specifically wives, had the right to pleasure. This new idea of female sexual desire in the 1950s was a departure from previous eras. It gave permission to women to enjoying their sexuality—even if only within marriage—without fear of slander.

***Sex Instructions: What Was “Right,” and What Was “Wrong”***

Even though the writers of marriage manuals recommended variety in marital sexual relationships, they explicitly prescribed some actions for all couples. The cardinal commandment to a successful sexual relationship in marriage, that had relatively little to do with the act of intercourse itself, was communication about sex. In *Sex In Marriage*, Ernest Groves expressed the belief that the awkwardness of first intercourse could easily be overcome if the couple communicated; “It is a good thing for the engaged, just before they are married, to have a frank talk regarding sex...”<sup>11</sup> The couple could talk through any traumatizing sexually-related experiences from the past, and not be surprised on their

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<sup>9</sup> Melody, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Eustace Chesser, *Love without fear: how to achieve sex happiness in marriage* (New York : Roy Publishers, 1947), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Groves, 28.

wedding night. In *Love Without Fear*, Eustace Chesser expressed the same belief: “but where man and girl<sup>12</sup> have talked over matters of sexual technique, each will know what to expect, and that is a great gain.”<sup>13</sup>

In theory, communication could banish any doubts a couple had, but in practice, couples found it hard to communicate. In *To Have and To Hold*, Jessica Weiss describes how communicating about sex was difficult for 1950s couples. She cites the University of California, Berkeley Institute of Human Development (IHD) study, which followed a group of individuals through their entire life, starting with their childhoods in the 1930s. The IHD study allows a close look into 1950s family life, which in this case reveals that, “A few spouses did attempt to bring expert advice into the bedroom and start conversations about desire and dissatisfaction. Once they had, however, they found their mates unready for these unfamiliar interactions.”<sup>14</sup> This was the first generation that had been encouraged to talk about sex. Some couples were successful, but many encountered difficulties. One interviewee, Kevin Jenkins, found that his wife got defensive and things only got worse. Another, Marie Weber, hurt her husband by speaking honestly to him about her issues with sex. Their sexual relationship was destroyed.<sup>15</sup> Although communication was the primary commandment of sexperts, couples found it difficult to conform to this order. When they did conform, often they found themselves facing an angry or insecure spouse.

Another necessary action the sexperts prescribed was consulting the sexperts. Regina Kunzel offers an explanation for what was at stake for those who took on the role

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<sup>12</sup> See page 15 reference Groves’s “credo of the sexually well-adjusted bride” for more examination of the specific language of “man and *girl*.”

<sup>13</sup> Chesser, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Weiss, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Weiss, 168-9.

of expert in *White Neurosis, Black Pathology*. In the WWII and Cold War eras, social workers began to pick up sociological and psychological terms to explain the increase in illegitimate pregnancy among middle class white women. Social workers could “analyze pathologies,” with a language “filled with medical terms and cloaked in the legitimizing mantle of science.”<sup>16</sup> This lent them an air of believability, and legitimacy, since “expert” answers always offered solutions. Similarly, the businesses, reputations, and legitimacy of the sexperts depended on providing answers. Under the highly respected umbrella of psychology, sociology, and other professions, sexperts could provide these believable, pseudo-scientific answers. Of course, they had to be consulted first. They urged consultation by suggesting that experts had all the answers, and it could in fact be detrimental to not consult them.

Chesser stipulated that all marital problems could be solved by seeing a doctor/sexpert or opening a sexpert book: “But it is as well to remember that faulty upbringing, the root of so much trouble, can largely be corrected by husband, doctor, or a sound sex book.”<sup>17</sup> Groves went further than Chesser, suggesting that every couple needed sexual consultation, or they might unknowingly fall into illness because they were being “incorrectly” sexual. As an example he tells an anecdote of the marriage of a college professor and his wife who had also graduated from college. Although they were both brilliant, “During several years of married life they had neither had a single experience of successful coitus nor any inkling that the sex union was unsuccessful. It

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<sup>16</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, “White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States,” *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 310-311.

<sup>17</sup> Chesser, 207.

was not until eventually the wife developed [an unspecified,] serious mental illness, that the true situation came to light.”<sup>18</sup>

The sexperts strongly recommended, to the point of threatening, that all couples see a doctor. But even those who conformed to this expectation did not always reap the rewards. Using data from the IHD study, Weiss asserts that, “even those who had premarital consultations with physicians or read books, manuals, and magazines found themselves confused by expectations, technique, or anatomy.”<sup>19</sup> The marriage manual and the marriage counselor promised a pathway to fixing all problems and avoiding all neuroses. While some couples embraced the new information, many were overwhelmed and confused. One woman asserted that the emphasis on doctors and psychology in sex actually destroyed her sexual relationship in her marriage; she “felt as if clinicians had invaded her bedroom.”<sup>20</sup> Sometimes it helped couples to consult the sexperts, but often the sexperts imposed goals that destroyed the sex lives and altered the marriages of the couples that tried to reach them. As Weiss asserts, many couples believed that they had failed in their sex lives when unable to live up to the technical demands of the sexperts. This failure in the sexual facet of domesticity was also a failure to achieve the full vision of domesticity.

The sexperts topped their demands of communication and consultation by mandating the difficult goal of the simultaneous orgasm in intercourse. Marriage manuals made it clear to couples that there was only one goal for foreplay and intercourse; “Both partners should, in coitus, concentrate their full attention upon one thing: the attainment

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<sup>18</sup> Groves, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Weiss, 153.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss, 163.



of simultaneous orgasm.”<sup>21</sup> Although sexperts preached the mutual orgasm as the goal of all sexual experiences, they were sometimes asking for more than was physically possible. The act of simultaneous orgasm is a difficult, and in some cases impossible physical feat for couples. If it was not achieved, it could hurt the couples’ self-esteem and thus their future performance: “By championing the ‘earthshaking simultaneous orgasm’ the experts only enhanced the possibility that couples would feel inadequate...”<sup>22</sup> Due to modern sex research, we now know that it is impossible for some women to have vaginal orgasms. But, marriage manuals condemned the clitoral orgasm as inferior to the vaginal orgasm. Groves claimed that when a wife was irritable or restless after sex, “Either she did not have an orgasm, or it was only a superficial, clitoris orgasm and not a deep, vaginal one...”<sup>23</sup> If a wife only had a clitoral orgasm, that orgasm was not legitimate, and the couple had failed. Chesser went so far as to suggest that couples who were not having mutual orgasms were endangering their health; “That where the partners are unable to achieve orgasm simultaneously...sterility may result, has been the view of some sexologists. Certainly marked frigidity in the woman frequently results.”<sup>24</sup> Chesser provided no evidence to back this claim. Couples who attempted to achieve simultaneous orgasm and failed had to face their inadequacies and fear for their health.

Marriage manuals also told couples that certain sexual behaviors were incorrect, but often contradicted each other when describing these behaviors, setting confusing standards for couples to follow. One of the areas that sexperts discussed explicitly was the consummation of the marriage. It was “wrong” for the couple to simply consummate

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<sup>21</sup> Chesser, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Weiss, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Groves, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Chesser, 137.

the marriage without putting considerable thought into the act—“Marriages [could be] largely made or marred on the honeymoon.”<sup>25</sup> Chesser recommended that the couple have a frank talk before their first intercourse, and that the husband must not be too excitable or penetrate too deep, and if his wife were at all shy, he needed to wait. His support for this argument, which lacked any evidence, was that women were so emotionally attached to their wedding night that if anything went wrong it would haunt the marriage forever.<sup>26</sup>

Groves’s stance on consummating a marriage differed slightly from Chesser’s. He agreed that the couple must not jump blindly into sex, yet disagreed that the experience had to be perfect or it would cast a shadow over the rest of the marriage. His emphasis was on the *educated* couple who made the “...right start, which means that whatever its proportion of physical success it must prove to be a genuine effort on the part of both to share an intimacy which, once they become skillful in the use of their resources, will bring them increasing pleasure and a fun of common interest.”<sup>27</sup> Groves agreed with Chesser that sometimes consummation should be postponed, but stated that it was dangerous to the marriage if postponed too long. Marriage manuals dictated normative behavior for consummation; they informed newlyweds that they must take certain steps before consummating a marriage, or that it would be unpleasant, and possibly destroy their marriage. There is not much evidence of how couples handled such confusing instructions, but one can imagine that a couple would have difficulty achieving correct consummation of their marriage, when different authors were dictating different ideas about what was correct and what the consequences of incorrect behavior would be. Once

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<sup>25</sup> Chesser, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Chesser, 173-8.

<sup>27</sup> Groves, 112.

again, failure at first intercourse was failing at marital sex, thus failing to conform to domestic ideology. In this case, where sexperts gave different descriptions of the perfect first intercourse and how to achieve it, failure was imminent.

Marriage manuals also condemned a vast series of sexual behaviors that could happen after the wedding night as “wrong.” Anything that detracted from, distracted from, or interrupted the natural progression to vaginal intercourse was incorrect behavior. Groves and Chesser outlined many ways a couple could make mistakes. Fetishism, having sex when a partner was tired, coitus interruptus (withdrawal), and having either too much of or not enough sexual intercourse are some examples. Ideas of the correct frequency of intercourse illustrate how confusing it was to discern “right” and “wrong” from these manuals. Groves explained how a couple could make mistakes in terms of frequency of sexual intercourse. He stated that couples had to figure out their optimal amount of intercourse, or they could hurt their health: “There is sexual excess and it is harmful; there is also, as some forget, sex deficiency, which likewise brings its bad consequences.”<sup>28</sup> He said husband and wife could figure out what the right amount was based on the amount of desire each had, and compromise. Groves immediately followed that instruction with the contradictory statement, “The desire for intercourse is not itself a guarantee that coitus is beneficial, for it may be for one or the other an excess and contrary to his physical and mental welfare.”<sup>29</sup> Couples were supposed to judge how much sex they ought to have from how much desire they felt, and conform themselves to the perfect amount, yet they could not necessarily trust that their desire was guiding them correctly. None of this information was supported by scientific evidence. Sexperts set up

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<sup>28</sup> Groves, 158-9.

<sup>29</sup> Groves, 161.

difficult standards to follow when it came to what was sexually wrong. How was a couple supposed to compromise on how much sex they should have when they were told they may not correctly perceive their own desires?

Perhaps the most clearly articulated sexual “wrongs” were the actions that sexperts were most brief in mentioning, or were completely silent about. The sexperts were eager to impose heterosexual norms, but not eager to instruct on how precisely one could stray from the norm. Groves did not discuss the topic of homosexuality or homosexual acts at all, but what he did say spoke rather loudly; his book was directed to those who desired a “wholesome” sex experience, and “...The most wholesome situation, even from a physical viewpoint, is that which permits the young man and woman with the proper development of body to enter upon sex relations in marriage.”<sup>30</sup> The most “wholesome,” sex, and the only sex worth mentioning, was between a man and his wife. There is no mention of anal sex in all of *Sex in Marriage*, and only passing mention of homosexuality as a consequence of other actions—like masturbating too much or being molested in childhood. Chesser discussed homosexuality briefly in a chapter entitled *Byways of Sex*. He even stated that he “liked,” but pitied homosexuals, who were emotionally disturbed and would never know the joy of marital coitus.<sup>31</sup> Chesser did not describe the sexual behavior married heterosexuals were never to do—anal intercourse—but outlined it well enough. As previously mentioned, all foreplay was expected to lead to *vaginal intercourse*, and not anywhere else: “...It has been suggested that anything is permissible provided that one’s partner enjoys it. Very little consideration soon reveals

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<sup>30</sup> Groves, 20, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Chesser, 257.

that this will not do at all...One must draw the line somewhere.”<sup>32</sup> Homosexuality was mentioned briefly in these two marriage manuals, and anal sex was not even mentioned—it was a sexual act so “wrong” that these authors did not want to suggest it to the average married couple. Oral sex, on the other hand, was permissible as long as it did not result in orgasm, which would distract the focus of sexual action from the mutual orgasm. These are reflections of broader social and cultural expectation of heterosexual conformity in the family context. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz describes how, “Some men and women entered loveless marriages in order to forestall attacks about real or suspected homosexuality or lesbianism.”<sup>33</sup> As Coontz details, homosexuals could hide behind domesticity, but certainly never fully achieve it. They automatically failed to meet the demands of the sexual aspects of domesticity as prescribed by the sexperts. As communication was the cardinal commandment of “correct” marital sexuality, homosexual acts were the cardinal sin. By outlining and emphasizing heterosexual coitus as the norm, marriage manuals implicitly forbade homosexuality from the bedroom, thus setting it in opposition to the vision of domesticity.

### ***Sex and Gender***

Some of the most contradictory sexual norms prescribed by the sexperts were gender norms for women. In the terminology of this essay, “sexual norms” refers to norms imposed on couples as units, while “gender norms” refers to sexual norms applied specifically to men or women. Women faced a confusing sexual containment standard that they were often unable to meet. During courtship, women were instructed to contain sexuality—protect their virginity—while men received no such instructions. It was the

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<sup>32</sup> Chesser, 244.

<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap* (New York : BasicBooks, 1992), 33.

duty of both the individual girl and their mother to see that a teenage girl's sexuality was contained. In her 1958 article "Why Premarital Sex is Always Wrong" for *Ladies Home Journal* Dr. Marion Hillard instructed mothers to set up dating schedules with their daughters that ensured that there would be no sex: "...the evening must be filled; there must be no empty spaces with nothing going on, no opportunity for petting, for the possibility of uncontrolled passion..."<sup>34</sup> Hillard also instructed mothers not to allow their 15 year old daughters to go out with 18 and 19 year old boys—"She cannot be expected to adhere to the type of behavior and moral code which she may have set for herself when she started out to a party involving older, more experienced boys."<sup>35</sup> This statement is interesting in that it implies that teenage girls were already expected to set a "behavior and moral code," which their mothers would reinforce, but no such codes were expected for boys. Teen girls were in charge of holding the reins, but were clearly still considered to be susceptible to seduction by older boys. Hillard asked, "For what can we expect of an 18 year old boy...who feels he must prove his manhood; must demonstrate to his girl that he is virile and strong?"<sup>36</sup> Although she suggested that parents ought to "help their sons to find an acceptable method of proving themselves," this is merely one casual suggestion in an article that sets out a multitude of rules for women.

Carrying out this norm of sexual containment was difficult for women, and they could face negative consequences whether or not they succeeded. Stephanie Coontz outlines the failures of premarital sexual containment: " 'Heavy petting' became a norm of dating in this period, while the proportion of white brides who were pregnant at

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<sup>34</sup> Marion Hillard, "Why Premarital Sex is Always Wrong," *Ladies Home Journal*, Sept, 1958, 56, 160.

<sup>35</sup> Hillard, 160.

<sup>36</sup> Hillard, 161.

marriage more than doubled.”<sup>37</sup> Clearly it was difficult for women alone to contain premarital passions, but many escaped stigma simply by marrying their first sexual partner. Coontz asserts that this was a time when most couples were willing to marry in the event of pregnancy. If the couple did not marry, they would have been publicly acknowledging their failure to live up to sexual and domestic conformity. Through marriage, they could escape the stigma. Women who did not marry the father of their child were coerced to give the child up for adoption. Both the mother and child would face severe social stigma for the mother’s mistake. At this time, children born out of wedlock had “illegitimate” stamped on their birth certificates and school records.<sup>38</sup> Even if a woman succeeded in premarital sexual containment, it could still affect her marital sex life; “When women succeeded in ‘holding out’ ...they sometimes experienced problems ‘letting go,’ even after marriage; when they failed, they were often reproached later by their husbands for having ‘given in’.”<sup>39</sup> Whether women succeeded or failed in premarital sexual containment, they faced difficulties, while there were no such consequences for men.

Once women were married they faced a type of sexual containment that contradicted premarital expectations. Unlike premarital relations, where women were expected to hold back, they were now expected to let go completely—but only within the context of marriage. Even the idea of being a sex goddess within marriage held contradictions; “The women who got men to settle down had to promise enough sex to compete with ‘bad’ women, but ultimately they provided it only in the marital

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<sup>37</sup> Coontz, *Way We Never Were*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 239.

<sup>39</sup> Coontz, *Way We Never Were*, 40.

bedroom...<sup>40</sup> Marriage manuals assumed that women needed coaching, and put the task of leading the relationship on the assumedly more sexually aggressive husband. Groves instructed the husband to lead the relationship, never be too gentle or rough in sexual relations, and to cater to his wife's temperament; "It helps the husband to keep in mind that his love life should be an art."<sup>41</sup> Wives were supposed to forget the ways of premarital sexual containment and give their ignorant, sexually immature selves over to their husbands. In *Sex in Marriage*, Groves wrote a credo for newly married brides that he recommended they read and internalize—it is written in the first person to facilitate the process of internalization. This credo was a set of guidelines telling the woman how to free herself from inhibition and let her husband lead. The credo reprimanded brides who still held on to their contradictory premarital expectations:

I realize that in the world of sex I am like a child before great works of art. My powers of appreciation have not been awakened. As a three-year-old looks unmoved on a masterpiece of plastic art and names it 'doll,' so I may fail to respond adequately to the new stimuli my husband offers me. But at least I will not smugly flatter myself on my superiority of delicacy when this occurs, but will face the truth—that I am as stupidly inert in this realm as I might expect savages or children or uncultured adults to be when confronted by a soul-stirring work of art whose significance lies outside their experience.<sup>42</sup>

The norm that sexpert publications established—men as marital leaders and women as marital followers—created difficulties for both genders, just as the roles of breadwinner and homemaker did outside the bedroom. Sexperts expected a lot from husbands. To be sensitive, creative in bed, and a Casanova all at once was a lot to ask of men, especially those entering marriage as virgins. Jessica Weiss suggests that men internalized this expectation, and when they failed to meet it, "Their sexual ignorance left

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<sup>40</sup> Coontz, *Way We Never Were*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Groves, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Groves, 147.



men disappointed in themselves.”<sup>43</sup> The early sexual encounters of couples who were virgins at marriage left much to be desired, and attempts at communication about sex may have only shattered the male ego more. The sex lives of women were contained by their husbands, and this containment was not always as ideal as the sexperts made it out to be. At the time, there was no concept of marital rape—it was not illegal in North America for a man to force his wife to have sex, and legal institutions did not take wife beating seriously.<sup>44</sup> Sexpert discourse told men to lead, and some men took that advice too far. There is no way to know how many husbands did this or how many wives suffered, but we know some did, because they came forward later. “Not until the 1970s, heartened by a supportive women’s movement, were many women able to speak out about the sexual abuse they had suffered in silent agony during the 1950s...”<sup>45</sup> Coontz gives the example of Coya Knutson, a female member of the US House of Representatives in 1954. When she went to DC, Coya wore sunglasses to conceal the beatings she had received from her husband.<sup>46</sup> Men who failed to achieve their half of the “husband as leader—wife as follower,” marital sexual vision faced their own inadequacies. Women who succeeded in filling their half of this norm sometimes risked physical harm. The husbands causing the harm were simply taking their role as “leader” too far.

Sexperts articulated sexual and gender norms to couples in the 1950s through magazines and marriage manuals, but the results, if possible to achieve, were often wrought with difficulties and ironies. These publications taught American couples about

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<sup>43</sup> Weiss, 152.

<sup>44</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 238.

<sup>45</sup> Coontz, *Way We Never Were*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 241.

domestic sex and gender norms rather than sexual techniques. In their separate publications, Ernest Groves and Eustace Chesser both articulated the sexual norms they felt every couple should follow—communication about sex, consultation of the experts, and the physical acrobatics of simultaneous orgasm. Couples who attempted communication often found themselves in a worse spot than before, and those who consulted the experts often found themselves more confused. It is impossible to know how successful they were in the attempt to reach simultaneous orgasm, but we can surmise that for many, this was impossible. Sexperts also articulated a confusing array of things couples should not do, such as mishandling first intercourse and having too much or too little sex. Sexperts made it clear that homosexuality was wrong by emphasizing heterosexual coitus as the only wholesome outcome of sexual activity. Even though sexpert instructions *were* meant to help, they were confusing. We can speculate that many couples probably failed in the attempt to follow them. Sexperts like Hillard also set up gender norms, articulating the roles of women as gatekeepers and men as sexual aggressors. The sexual containment philosophies for women in courtship and marriage contradicted each other, and women could face repercussions whether or not they succeeded at either. Men, on the other hand, faced no contradictions, but were crushed under the expectations of the sexperts. If the couple failed to achieve these norms, they failed to achieve a part of the overall vision of domesticity, the important and life-altering familial vision of the day.

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