

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sexual Polysemy: The Discursive Ground of Talk about Sex and Education in U.S. History

Robin E. Jensen

Department of Communication, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907

Communication researchers from a range of methodological backgrounds are studying the relationship between communication and sexual health. The present study contributes to this line of research, offering a rhetorical history of the earliest conversations about public sexual education in the United States. By analyzing highly circulated texts from figures representing three of the major ideological positions on public sexual education in the late 19th century (i.e., supporters of vice reformer Anthony Comstock, social purists, and free-love advocates), this study identifies the discursive ground for these early conversations. More specifically, the present article demonstrates how polysemous language (i.e., language containing multiple meanings as intended by authors or interpreted by audiences) often functioned to confuse the debate about public sexual education and disguise race, class, and gender biases in legal and educational policies. This analysis offers communication scholars information about the historical antecedents to contemporary debates about public sexual education content.

doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2008.00032.x

One important communication question of the day is how educators, health advocates, and governmental leaders should talk with the public about sexual health. Communication scholars have worked to provide answers to this inquiry, studying the channels people use to get information about sexually transmitted diseases and contraception (Afifi & Weiner, 2006; Kennedy, O'Leary, Beck, Pollard, & Simpson, 2004; Krishnan, 1996), the efficacy and content of specific modes of public sexual education (Anderton & Valdiserri, 2005; Keller, Labelle, Karimi, & Gupta, 2002; Mattson, 2000; Noar, Clark, Cole, & Lustria, 2006; Perse, Nathanson, & McLeod, 1996; Sood, Shefner-Rogers, & Sengupta, 2006), the factors that encourage interpersonal transactions about safe sex (Dilorio et al., 2000; Mattson & Roberts, 2001; Powell & Segrin, 2004), and the ability of variables such as media exposure, emotional appeals, and cognitive factors to predict sexual attitudes and behaviors (Green & Witte, 2006; Noar, Zimmerman, et al., 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006).

Corresponding author: Robin E. Jensen; e-mail: rejensen@purdue.edu

One group of communication scholars that has yet to contribute to this line of inquiry is rhetorical historians, those who are uniquely qualified to explore how topics have been communicated at particular historical moments and over time (Turner, 1998). This article is designed to initiate a program of research dedicated to identifying the rhetorical patterns that citizens have used to talk about sex and education in U.S. history and how those patterns may have affected public health and culture. The logical place to instigate such an exploration is at the beginning, and so this article explores the earliest U.S. rhetoric about public sexual education. By analyzing highly circulated texts from figures representing three of the major ideological positions on sex and sexual education in the mid-to-late 19th century (i.e., supporters of vice reformer Anthony Comstock, social purists, and free-love advocates), I demonstrate that polysemy (i.e., language with multiple meanings as intended by authors or interpreted by audiences) served as the ground for these earliest debates about public sexual education.

As many Americans moved to cities during the 19th century and became subject to “urban vices,” community leaders and public health officials publicized plans for protecting citizens from venereal diseases and familial disintegration. These plans would implement the first public sexual education programs in the United States. Individuals who discussed this topic tried to protect themselves from criticism and avoid legal condemnation by using polysemous language to refer to their initiatives. In the process, terms such as sexual and social, purity and hygiene were equivocated in ways that made it difficult to differentiate among the positions that rhetors endorsed. Often rhetors employed ambiguity strategically to appeal to different audiences with the same words. As cognitive linguist Lakoff (2001) would say, these rhetors used ambiguous semantic “frames” that evoked disparate world views and associations (p. 222).¹ In this way, they exploited the gap between what they meant and what some audiences thought they meant to create a more tolerant rhetorical space for their discourse.

I begin this rhetorical history by reviewing literature on polysemy and considering polysemy as the ground, rather than an isolated figure, of a larger discourse. Then, I analyze highly circulated texts by representatives of the three major ideological positions on sex during the mid-to-late 19th century, a historical moment that constituted the birth of public sexual education in the United States. I find that polysemy often functioned to confuse the conversation about sexual education and disguise race, class, and gender biases in legal and educational policies.

Polysemy: Figure and ground

Communication scholars have long noted the polysemic nature of language, even if they did not always use that terminology. For example, in *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke (1945) claimed that all words are polysemous to some extent because:

To tell what a thing is, you put it in terms of something else which proves to be, an *inevitable* [italics added] paradox of definition, an antinomy that must endow the concept of substance with unresolvable ambiguity, and that will be discovered lurking beneath any vocabulary designed to treat of motivation by the deliberate outlawing of the *word* [italics added] for substance. (p. 24)

Burke argued that the disparity between word (signifier) and substance (signified) requires that the word be infused with multiple meanings. The word is not equivalent to the substance and therefore all language is indeterminate. Similarly, in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Frye (1959) claimed that “the principle of manifold or ‘polysemous’ meaning” is “an established fact” (pp. 72–73).

Despite these early acknowledgments of language’s “manifold” principle, scholarship on polysemy really emerged in opposition to neo-Marxism, which communication scholars like Fiske (1986) believed positioned audiences as dupes (see also Hall, 1980). Fiske argued that discourse is polysemous when audiences look beyond a text’s dominant reading to develop alternative, and therefore liberatory, readings. According to Fiske, audience members benefit from reading texts polysemously because they can move beyond (i.e., rebel against) dominant meaning constructs to think about the world in ways that resonate with their own experiences. In this sense, audiences harness polysemy and use it to free themselves from the discursive tyranny of those in power.

Beginning in the late 1980s, rhetorical scholars picked up on the concept, defining and redefining it in various ways. Solomon (1993), for instance, framed polysemy as a rhetorical strategy that rhetors, rather than audience members, bring to fruition (p. 63). Condit (1989) identified several different forms of polysemy (e.g., polysemy created by audiences and polysemy created by rhetors), although she did not clearly differentiate between them. Instead, she distinguished between polysemy, a discourse with multiple denotative meanings, and polyvalence, a discourse to which audience members respond with different attitudes. Ceccarelli (1998), building from work by Campbell (1990) and Gaonkar (1989), differentiated among several types of polysemy: (a) strategic ambiguity, which is planned by the author and designed to please more than one audience with the same language; (b) resistive reading, which occurs when audiences interpret the message in a way that subverts the rhetor’s intended meaning; and (c) hermeneutic depth, which is a mode of critical analysis that accounts for the multiple meanings that audiences “should” read in a text. Although Ceccarelli’s typology of polysemy is not comprehensive (e.g., it does not account for popular readings of texts that are more “reconstructive” than they are “resistive” as readers inadvertently interpret texts in ways the author did not intend) and may privilege the readings of elite audiences (i.e., experienced authors and rhetors, discerning audiences, and cultural critics) over those of mass publics, her work dismantles the myth that all polysemous language functions similarly. She uses these distinctions to argue that no type of polysemy is inherently liberatory because polysemy in any form can work in favor of those in power.²

Often when communication scholars discuss specific cases of polysemy, they ignore broader claims by Burke (1945), Frye (1959), and others that all language has polysemous qualities. They tend to frame polysemy as a figure of speech, an idiosyncratic linguistic strategy that stands out against the ground of “normal” discourse. For instance, Solomon and McMullen (1991) account for the power of the film *Places in the Heart* by celebrating its unique “ability to sustain divergent interpretations” (p. 342). Even Fiske (1986) suggests that the most popular television shows are polysemous, which implies that regular shows are more singular and straightforward. Scholars construct polysemy, at least implicitly, as an unusual choice that works to accomplish specific goals, even if they also explicitly theorize all language as polysemous. This logic exists because critics tend to focus on polysemy’s constitutive function in single texts. Those texts then almost inevitably stand out as discursive aberrations. In this article, however, I examine a dispute in which that ratio is reversed; the ground of the dispute is constituted by polysemous terms against which those who wish to speak in a more defined, straightforward way must struggle. In this sense, the historical controversy over public sexual education in the United States pushes the theoretical conversation about polysemy in new directions and includes information about rhetorical patterns in history.

Anthony Comstock, social purity, and free love

Beginning in the mid-19th century, the United States experienced an increase in citizen mobility, an influx of immigrants, and a rise in urban development. To escape their families’ close watch and find employment, young adults moved to cities where men and women fraternized freely, unmarried women became pregnant and sought abortions, and cases of venereal diseases rose dramatically (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997, pp. 56, 60, 181; Moran, 1996, p. 492; Bailey, 1988, p. 78). A rapid increase in prostitution allowed men to take advantage of the era’s sexual double standards. Although women were expected to remain “pure” until marriage, men were generally unhindered in their attempts to visit brothels and release their “sexual energy” prior to marriage. All these cultural changes, particularly the increases in prostitution and venereal diseases, taxed the Victorian tradition of dealing with sex by not discussing it at all. Despite the active trade in pornography, contraceptives, and erotica during much of the 19th century, mainstream U.S. society generally refused to acknowledge sexual issues in the public sphere (Horowitz, 2002, pp. 369–370). Citizens’ sexual silence was often grounded in the belief that children, especially girls and young women, were naturally innocent and modest (Moran, 2000, p. 63). People tended to view the young as blank slates that become interested in sex only when exposed to outside influences. In this light, keeping young people and women uninformed about sex was also to keep them safe from “self-harms” such as masturbation and sexual experimentation.

Although it may not seem surprising that historical discourses about sexual education were gendered, polysemous language in these discourses functioned to

conceal the extent to which they were also raced and classed. Often, conversing about sexual education assumed that members of different races and classes should have access to different types and amounts of sexual training according to their social status. Such differentiation fits into the scholarly assessment of Victorian and Progressive Era politics in general. Some scholars of the Progressive Era (1890–1917) note that race relations generally did not improve during this time (Link & McCormick, 1983, p. 33; McGee, 2003). Instead, the late 19th and early 20th centuries are exceptional for the lack of racial “progress” that unfolded. Many progressives marginalized African Americans and other minorities by introducing Jim Crow laws in the south and claiming that immigrants and minorities were innately inferior to Whites.³ In discussions about sex, racist views tended to reveal themselves in programs such as the White Cross Campaign, phrases such as “white slavery,” and appeals to improving the “race,” a polysemous term that could refer to either the human race or the White race. As the following analysis demonstrates, talk about sex and public sexual education at this time was ambiguous in general, and it was especially so with respect to members of traditionally marginalized groups.

Three of the major positions on sex and public sexual education in the mid-to-late 19th-century United States were represented by: (a) Anthony Comstock’s vice reformers, who framed sex as an immoral temptation; (b) social purity advocates, who framed sex as equivalent to danger, death, and disease; and (c) free lovers, who framed sex between two consenting, connected adults as an expression of love and a potential source of pleasure and health. Comstock used strategically ambiguous language to justify his tendency to apply words such as obscenity inconsistently. Social purists employed strategically ambiguous discourse to speak to and satisfy distinct audiences at the same time. Free lovers used straightforward language to represent their philosophy, but people from outside the movement introduced polysemy into the discourses of free love by reading them in ways resistive to what the authors originally intended. All these discourses were implicated in patterns of multiple meanings, and those who tried to reject that rhetorical ground often lost the platform to speak either through legal or popular censure.

Obscenity and Comstock’s double standard

Anthony Comstock, the infamous New York vice reformer, was perhaps the most outspoken proponent of the idea that children are naturally innocent. He argued that giving children information about sex corrupted them and led them toward a life of sin. In his book *Traps for the Young*, Comstock (1883/1967) revealed his dedication to sexual silence. Of public discourse about sex, he wrote, “I unhesitatingly declare, there is at present no more active agent employed by Satan in civilized communities to ruin the human family and subject the nations to himself than EVIL READING” (p. 240). Comstock argued that any public discourse about sex corrupted the nation’s young people and would ultimately lead to the downfall of civilized society. He went on to make the following analogy:

Fill a clean, clear glass with distilled water and hold it to the light, and you cannot perceive a single discoloration. It will sparkle like a gem, seeming to rejoice in its purity, and dance in the sunlight, because of its freedom from pollution. So with a child. Its innocence bubbles all over with glee. What is more sweet, fascinating, and beautiful than a pure, innocent child? But put a drop of ink into the glass of water, and at once it is discolored. Its purity cannot be restored. So drop into the fountain of moral purity in our youth the poison of much of the literature of the day, and you place in their lives an all-pervading power for evil. (p. 240)

On one level, Comstock's language in this passage provides evidence that he approached the world from an all-or-nothing, good-versus-evil perspective. He seemed to divide people into two distinct groups. On the side of all things good were those people who resembled sparkling, pure gems, untouched by sexual temptation. On the side of all things evil were those people who resembled poison or pollution, those who had been tainted by immorality.

On another level, a level that becomes apparent only in lieu of Comstock's history of race and class discrimination (Bates, 1995; Beisel, 1997; Bennett, 1971), Comstock was building support for his vice reformation by appealing to existing understandings of racial hierarchies. He communicates that to be pure is to be "light" and uncontaminated by the darkness of sin. "Evil literature," that is, literature about sex, forever marks what is pure and "discolors" it so that it is never the same. One drop of poison is enough to erase the sparkle from an innocent gem, just as one drop of nonwhite blood was believed to ruin a person's moral and physical make-up. The ink that authors use to write about sex contaminates children (and society) in the way that tainted blood contaminates the body. In this passage, Comstock provides his readers with a loosely disguised message about the dangers of any person, place, or idea that does not originate in the middle- to upper-class White community. He frames White children as the transparent, untainted vessels of their parents' genes, and he implicitly argues that it is his duty to protect those vessels from the indecent society in which they "flow" because they can so easily become poisoned by sin.⁴ His strategically ambiguous language allows him to make such appeals without immediately incensing those people that he is, in fact, criticizing.

In 1873, Comstock convinced Congress to pass what came to be known as the federal Comstock Law (Horowitz, 2002, p. 382). Formally entitled the "Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles for Immoral Use," it made illegal the sending of "obscene" materials such as pornography, contraceptives, and abortifacients through the U.S. mail and gave the government the power to search and seize those suspected of doing so. Twenty-four states soon passed "mini-Comstock laws," which deemed the mere possession of obscene materials a crime. Together with the federal law, these state laws made it difficult for most citizens to acquire information about sex. Books, pamphlets, pictures, articles, dime novels, and even medical tracts discussing sex were regarded

as direct action against the state and therefore illegal. Violators could find themselves facing large fines and spending upward of 6 months in prison doing hard labor.

At this time, obscenity was defined by a British court precedent as anything with the tendency to “deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall” (*Queen v. Hicklin*, 1868). This definition was elusive enough to allow Comstock to apply the law sparingly in the cases of his elite supporters. Although he had arrested over 3,800 people by the time of his death in 1915, Comstock rarely arrested so-called “regular” doctors for providing their middle- to upper-class patients with abortions, contraceptives, and sexual education materials and/or sending those materials through the mail. In an interview with *Harper's Weekly*, Comstock pointed out that “no reputable physician has ever been prosecuted under these laws” (Hopkins, 1915, para. 30). In lieu of arrest records from this time, “reputable” physicians, for Comstock, must have been synonymous with members of the American Medical Association. That is, they were largely male, White, upper-class, and born in the United States. In this case, strategically ambiguous language allowed Comstock to use a double standard so that he could protect influential citizens and, at the same time, arrest so-called quack doctors and midwives, most of whom were immigrants; and it left working-class women who could not afford to visit a doctor with little information about sex and sparse access to contraceptives or abortifacients (Gordon, 2002, p. 36).

But Comstock's double standard did not go unnoticed by those who disagreed with his politics. Communication scholars Logue and Patton (1982) find that “without a sensitivity to changing conditions ambiguity initially favoring the user may turn feverishly against him” (p. 315). Indeed, during the last few decades of his life, numerous editorials, articles, and political cartoons highlighted the gap between what Comstock preached and what he actually did. For instance, in one political cartoon by Minor (1915), featured in an issue of the socialist journal *The Masses*, Comstock stands atop a naked woman smashing her breast and preparing to cut it off with a sword (see Figure 1). The woman, depicted as twice the size of Comstock, lies provocatively beneath him. Her dark, loose hair suggests, perhaps, that she is an immigrant or a prostitute, and the caption reads, “O Wicked Flesh.” Although there are numerous elements of this cartoon that deserve attention, I cite it here because it illustrates the backlash that Comstock experienced later in his career. Although he claimed to be protecting society as a whole by censoring and arresting numerous individuals, cartoons like this one point out that he was hardly blind in brandishing his sword of righteousness. He tried to remove sexuality from the public sphere by sacrificing the bodies of working-class people, cutting their “wicked flesh” so that the upper classes could atone for their sins. But despite this realization among many citizens, Comstock's sword continued to generate power long after his demise. Until the Comstock laws were overturned in 1936, working-class citizens were forced to balance their need to communicate and learn about topics such as venereal disease, contraception, and human sexuality with their need to avoid legal prosecution.



O Wicked Flesh

Figure 1 Minor (1915) Illustrates Anthony Comstock's Violent Efforts to Free the Nation of Sexual Vice in *The Masses*

Social purity: Bridging Comstock and sexual education

Social purity advocates, like Comstock, aimed to protect children from obscenity and preserve the traditional American family from corruption and dissolution. Yet while Comstock believed that censoring all information about sex from the public was the only way to attend to these issues, social purists believed that some degree of what amounted to public sexual education was necessary to accomplish their goals. Essentially, Comstock and the social purists agreed on what was wrong with society, but they disagreed about how to go about righting those wrongs. Much of social purists' rhetoric was designed to satisfy Comstockian sensibilities and at the same time educate the public about sex, a task that required rhetorical sensitivity and strategic ambiguity. Evidence of social purists' attempt to satisfy diverse audiences with the same language exists within their movement's title. Indeed, pairing "social," a euphemism for sex, with "purity," a word that was commonly associated with sexual innocence, allowed audiences to conceive of the movement in several different ways. Those in favor of public sexual education could read the movement as supportive of their goals, and those against public sexual education could read the movement as

supportive of protecting citizens' sexual innocence. In this respect, strategic ambiguity helped social purists to build a wider range of support and endorse a new and controversial initiative, public sexual education, with a minimum of censure. At the same time, however, strategic ambiguity obscured the social purity movement's educational goals (and biases).

For the most part, social purists agreed on several key goals for their movement: eliminating the sexual double standard between the sexes, abolishing prostitution, and providing "purity education" to the public (Rosen, 1982, p. 11). Purity education targeted at women was designed to teach them about their bodies, reproduction, and voluntary motherhood, information that Comstock deemed publicly inappropriate and obscene. But although social purists were willing to discuss sex in public, they usually did so exclusively by equating sex with danger, disease, and death, a choice with which Comstock was more comfortable. Historian Linda Gordon (2002) notes that the social purity movement did not endorse sexual pleasure. Advocates framed sex as an activity that even married couples should limit so that they could conserve their energy (p. 73). Comstock (1883/1967) shared the view that sexual activity robbed a person of energy, ambition, and drive and made "real life a drudge and burden" (p. 25). He also joined social purists as they praised women for their ability to tap into their inherent morality and set a positive example for men. Purity educators, like Comstock and most of the general public, assumed that males were constantly driven by their sexual urges, but they were distinct in their views that those urges were socially constructed and could be subdued with the proper sexual education training.

In 1885, the Women's Christian Temperance Union sponsored a social purity program called the White Cross Campaign, which was designed to help men resist sexual temptation. The White Cross Campaign originated in the Church of England and encouraged young people to uphold a single sexual standard and create a "white life for two" (Pivar, 2002, pp. 3, 48). Purity, in this sense, was implicitly equated with Protestantism and "whiteness" as opposed to religious or racial diversity. According to Willard (1890), a social purity leader and president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, "the common talk of street and playground" could wrench sheltered, innocent children "away from the white line of purity and truth" (p. 176). In a speech before the National Education Association, she wondered why:

We send missionaries to the Fijis, but we leave the play-ground of our common schools practically in the hands of a pagan influence, and doom little children out of sheltered homes to the malaria of associations as harmful to them spiritually and physically as the small-pox would be. (p. 177)

In this passage, which was surrounded by Willard's repeated references to "whiteness" and "purity," Willard veiled her critique of non-White, working-class immigrants by referring to them indirectly as "pagan" and "diseased." She attempted to frighten White parents by reminding them that sin spread through "association" with the impure just as disease spread through contact with the diseased. White

children could “catch” depravity at school and therefore must learn “broad, generous and noble ideas concerning the relations of men and women” so they would be immunized against the diversity of people and ideas that they encountered in the world (p. 167). Although social purists disagreed with Comstock about providing children with sexual education, they tended to correlate sexual indulgence with immigrants and members of the working classes. In this sense, they highlighted their agreements with Comstock and his tendency to associate obscenity with those same groups of people.

At the end of the 1800s, the American Purity Association sponsored “mothers’ meetings” where White women would gather to learn about childrearing techniques and physiology (Pivar, 2002, p. 48). With the “Mothers’ Crusade” program, the predecessor to the National Parent Teacher Association, social purists hoped to teach mothers how to raise their children in ways that allowed them to retain their innocence as long as possible and to avoid temptation from the evils of society as young adults. Although the Mothers’ Crusade program included discussions about sex, the social purity movement saved itself from Comstock’s censure by focusing on the central role that morally pure, selfless mothers played in those discussions and the role that the program itself played in protecting sheltered children from immorality. In the end, social purists used strategically ambiguous language about topics such as purity, innocence, whiteness, and motherhood to have public discussions about sex without overtly upsetting those who did not approve of public sexual education initiatives.

A resistive reading of free love

Although social purity advocates’ ultimate goal was to maintain the existing societal structure and protect heterosexual marriage and nuclear families, free-love advocates’ goal was to upset the existing societal structure and eliminate state-sponsored marriage entirely. Ezra Heywood, an American anarchist and free-love movement leader, contended in his free-love tract *Cupid’s Yokes* (1876) (a work that Comstock found “too foul for description”; Horowitz, 2002, p. 412) that the state should have no role in the creation and maintenance of individual relationships. Free-love advocates of the 1800s held that meaningful sexual relationships only occurred when both partners fell in love with each other’s soul, not when partners felt bound by marriage to have sex. Heywood argued that marriage, in this sense, damned citizens by giving them the “legal license and power to invade, pollute, and destroy each other” (p. 19). Heywood was not arguing that sex was inherently immoral, just that having sex without total commitment to and love for a partner was a form of self-pollution. In fact, free lovers tended to maintain that a lack of sex could harm a person’s health. In Ezra and Angela Heywood’s free-love journal *The Word*, they argued that celibacy for anyone was harmful to his or her health and that, in order to be fulfilled, women, like men, needed the agency to make their own sexual choices (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997, p. 163). In an effort to provide citizens with the information they needed to make sexual decisions both inside and outside of marriage, free-love advocates

endorsed public sexual education. Unlike their social purity counterparts, free lovers seemed to worry little about appeasing Comstock and the general public when they talked about sexual education. According to Heywood, sex “is mystified by ignorance and superstition,” and therefore he believed that social problems such as prostitution and venereal diseases would markedly decrease if members of the public had access to frank information about sex (p. 16).

Free-love advocate Victoria Woodhull also supported public sexual education, and she upped the stakes of the free love argument even further than did the Heywoods by claiming that marriage was a form of slavery for women.⁵ She offered readers a new terminology for discussing relationships: Love was marriage regardless of what the state decreed, sex without love was adultery, and sex with hatred was prostitution (Horowitz, 2002, p. 348). In her speeches and writings, Woodhull connected love and emotional commitment to sexual experience and defined sex according to those variables. She explained, “I can see no moral difference between a woman who marries and lives with a man because he can provide for her wants and the woman who is not married but is provided for at the same price” (Woodhull, 1871, para. 20). By this logic, any person who had sex without genuine love was acting immorally. Sex, in this sense, was not inherently moral or immoral, healthy or unhealthy; rather, sex was to be evaluated by its corresponding levels of emotional commitment.

Despite how clearly Woodhull outlined her understanding of the free-love movement’s position on sex, neither she nor her fellow free-love compatriots could convince the general public that free love was incompatible with promiscuity. Articles in the *New York Times* expressed the opinion of many citizens by deeming free love an “ulcerous abomination of unrestrained lust” and a system “where passion and personal inclination shall be the sole bond, and the sole restriction, of union between the sexes” (“Free Love,” 1860, p. 5; “Free Love System,” 1855, p. 2). Similarly, the renowned pastor Thomas S. Munnell (1872) argued in the *Christian Quarterly* that free-lovers emerged from “those sewers in the system of moral reform” (p. 31). The popular framing of the free-love community as licentious constituted an instance in which those outside a prosexual education movement developed a resistive reading of the movement’s aims. In this case, the free-love advocates themselves actively fostered an unambiguous reading of their philosophy, but outsider interpretations of free-love discourse did not correspond with the free-lovers’ intended message.

In a speech on the meaning of free love, Woodhull (1871) clearly rejected the tenets of strategic ambiguity by arguing, “To speak thus plainly and pointedly is a duty I owe to myself” (para. 86). She and other free lovers wanted people to understand their position that love, like speech, should be “free” of interference from the church and the state. Therefore, they strove to present their arguments in a clear manner. For example, in the same speech, Woodhull argued:

I have an inalienable, constitutional and natural right to love whom I may,
to love as long or as short a period as I can; to change that lover everyday if

I please, and with that right neither you nor any law you can frame have any right to interfere. . . . I trust that I am fully understood, for I mean just that and nothing less. (para. 86)

Woodhull was explicitly trying to demarcate her rights as an American citizen. She was not laying out the tenets of free love so much as she was emphasizing what she and her fellow free-love advocates had the right to do without interference. Yet many audience members, including her sister Mrs. Utie Brooker,⁶ took this statement and others like it to mean that the free-love philosophy supported “unrestricted” sex with random and/or multiple partners who lacked emotional or spiritual connection. This interpretation is, to invoke the words of Ceccarelli (1998), “grounded in the text itself,” even though the author did not intend it to be so (p. 402).

The audiences’ resistive reading of Woodhull’s (1871) words led them to believe that free-love advocates were free to have unencumbered love (i.e., sex) whenever the opportunity presented itself, an assumption that people like Comstock repeatedly exploited to discredit so-called “free lusters.” In Comstock’s (1883/1967) *Traps for the Young*, he argued:

With [free-lovers], marriage is bondage; love is lust; celibacy is suicide; while fidelity to marriage vows is a relic of barbarism. All restraints which keep boys and girls, young men and maidens pure and chaste, which prevent our homes from being turned into voluntary brothels are not to be tolerated by them. (p. 158)

Although Comstock may not have believed that this was the meaning behind free-lovers’ doctrines, he used free-lovers’ words against them, and, by doing so, encouraged others to read free-lovers’ rhetoric resistively. Heywood (1879) described the situation in *Cupid’s Yokes*:

In the distorted popular view, free-love tends to unrestrained licentiousness, to open the flood-gates of passion and remove all barriers in its desolating course; but it means just the opposite; it means the expulsion of animalism and the entrance of reason, knowledge, and continence. (p. 19)

Indeed, regardless of the “distorted popular view,” many free-love advocates maintained long-term monogamous relationships and argued that sexual intercourse should take place in only the most ideal circumstances. Woodhull (1871) explained, “To more specifically define free-love I would say that I prefer to use the word love with lust as its antithesis, love representing the spiritual and lust the animal” (para. 133). “Love,” in this sense, referred to emotional connection and commitment more than it did to sexual activity, a stance that, if they had understood it, many Americans might have supported.

But regardless of free-lovers’ efforts to be forthcoming about the movement’s philosophy and goals, resistive readings of free-love discourses worked to widen the gap between what free lovers meant and what audiences believed that they meant.

On a legal front, Ezra Heywood, Victoria Woodhull, and many other free-love advocates were arrested, often multiple times, for violating the Comstock laws with their rhetoric, and their writings on free love were repeatedly censored and destroyed before they could reach the larger public (Stoehr, 1979). The free-lovers' discursive situation illustrates Ceccarelli's (1998) point that not all polysemic discourse is liberatory for minority groups, even as it demonstrates how pervasive was the framework of polysemic language in this conversation about sex and education. Even individuals who were dedicated to using straightforward language to talk about sex were eventually implicated in the polysemic foundation of the larger conversation.

Discussion

This analysis considers questions about sexual health communication from the lens of rhetorical history and sets out the historical antecedents to contemporary debates about public sexual education. In particular, this article illuminates the central role that polysemy played in the first debates about public sexual education in the United States. I find that individual instances of strategic ambiguity and resistive reading were part of an overarching conversation about sexual education that was grounded in polysemic language. This polysemic discursive foundation shaped how people communicated about sexual education (not at all or by conflating sex with danger, death, and disease), who had the most access to information about sex (primarily middle- to upper-class, White men, and sometimes middle- to upper-class, White women), and whose ideas about sexual education were legitimated through legal and educational policies (Comstock's and social purists' ideas but not free-lovers' ideas).

Almost anyone who talked about sex or sexual education at this time had to account for the patterns of multiple meanings that discursively framed those issues. Those who tried to reject those patterns (e.g., free lovers) ultimately seemed to lose the platform to speak either through legal or popular censure. By contrast, those who embraced polysemic discourse (e.g., social purists) were generally the most successful at navigating the Comstock laws and still bringing sexual education initiatives to specific publics. However, what may have initially helped them to enter the conversation about sex and introduce ideas about public sexual education into that conversation made for debates that were difficult to follow and educational programs that were discriminatory on a number of levels. In this respect, the discursive framework of polysemy seemed to serve the interests of race, class, and sex discrimination by keeping minority and working-class groups confused about issues pertaining to sex. Even those individuals who were not in these groups had trouble obtaining straightforward information about sex because so-called regular doctors and social purists (those who were providing them with information about sex) could not risk losing sight of Comstock's values and obscenity laws. Thus, their discourse remained firmly ingrained within the patterns of strategic ambiguity that ultimately protected them from Comstock's censure.

Although much has transpired in the United States since these early discussions about public sexual education, much also seems to have stayed the same. Contemporary rhetoric about public sexual education includes numerous examples of polysemy. This may come as no surprise in that many variables still exist that made it necessary for 19th-century rhetors to use polysemous language to communicate about sexual education (e.g., societal taboos about discussing sex and children; laws censoring materials deemed obscene). In an era of HIV/AIDS, restrictions on the availability of contraception and abortion, and increasingly expensive health care, people still tend to discuss sex by conflating it with danger, death, and disease; middle- to upper class, White men (and sometimes women) often have the best access to information about sex and thus are less likely to suffer from venereal diseases; and abstinence-only-until-marriage advocates are the people whose ideas tend to be legitimated by legal and educational policies.

One need look only as far as the titles of contemporary sexual education curricula for examples of strategic ambiguity. What is, after all, an “abstinence-only” sexual education program? One might argue that teaching only about abstinence is the opposite of providing a sexual education, in the same way that one might have argued in the late 19th century that “social purity” programs, programs with titles seemingly promoting both sex and chastity, were nonsensical. Far from being nonsensical, however, abstinence-only sexual education programs, like social purity programs of yore, seem to be so-named to provide different audiences with distinct senses of their goals and meanings. On one hand, the appeal to abstinence-only education resonates with the purveyors of government funds who require grantees to teach students to abstain from sex until they are married.⁷ On the other hand, the “sexual education” aspect of the title assures concerned parents and educators that, although the program emphasizes abstinence, students are still learning what they need to know about sex to safely navigate their environments.

So-called “abstinence-plus” sexual education programs function in very similar ways. Given that the “plus” in the title can brand a program as less deserving of certain kinds of federal support, one might wonder why these programs continue to include “abstinence” in their monikers. The answer, most likely, is that a focus on abstinence assures anxious parents, representatives of religious groups, and right-wing politicians that these programs are working, first and foremost, to encourage young people to abstain from sex outside of marriage. The plus functions, for those in favor of “comprehensive” sexual education curricula, to assure them that the programs provide students with decidedly more than a “just say no” message about sex.

To provide a more specific example of polysemy at work in contemporary debates about public sexual education, I turn to transcripts from the 2002 U.S. House of Representatives’ hearing on abstinence-only education. During these hearings, Jacqueline Jones del Rosario, executive director of the abstinence-only advocacy group Recapturing the Vision International, testified in support of renewing Title V of the Social Security Act. At one point, Rosario claimed that she supported

“a comprehensive program” (United States House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2002, p. 87). When asked to clarify what she meant, she said:

I was saying comprehensive in terms of holistic education. I just want to make that clear. . . . To make it clear [programs that discuss more than abstinence and the dangers of sex outside of marriage] are called abstinence plus or comprehensive sex education. And I think we need to clarify our terms. (United States House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2002, p. 88)

Rosario was implying that, because she had said “comprehensive” program and not “comprehensive sex education” program, she was obviously referring to abstinence-only education. A more likely story, however, was that Rosario was using the term comprehensive to refer to abstinence-only curricula in an attempt to appeal to abstinence-only advocates and critics alike, which would mean that her emphasis on clarity was probably an attempt to obscure her strategically ambiguous language.

But abstinence-only advocates are hardly the only ones using polysemous language to talk about sexual education. As Leslie Kantor, the education director of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, explains, increasing numbers of comprehensive sexual education advocates are using the language of their abstinence-only counterparts to describe their curricula, a rhetorical move implying that they offer students no more than an abstinence-plus educational program (Levine, 2002). Just as the broader historical debate over public sexual education was constituted, by and large, by polysemous language, the same seems to be the case for the contemporary debate over public sexual education. Thus, those who are most straightforward when talking about sexual education may suffer the most censure and have the least success in getting their programs into the classroom. But curricula packed with polysemous phrases about, for instance, what it means to be sexually active, will most likely serve to confuse students more than to educate them. The rhetorical patterns that worked to get certain programs approved by multiple audiences may then work against the programs’ intended goal: education. From this perspective, one of the reasons behind the country’s continued high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and other sexual health problems may be the foundation of polysemy that public sexual education discourses continue to use after all these years.

In order to change the present situation, rhetors may need to uproot this language surrounding sexual education, forgoing the rhetorical foundation of polysemy that emerged in the 19th century for a new discursive foundation, a foundation that would help citizens to move from confusion and discrimination toward clarity and equality. The next step in such a process would involve further research on whether a discursive foundation of polysemy still frames sexual education discourse today. In the meantime, this article pulls together a picture of the first conversations about public sexual education in the United States and argues that the numerous single instances of polysemy in those conversations were implicated within a broad web of

polysemic language. It demonstrates the value in analyzing polysemy using a wide, critical lens and illustrates how a framework of discursive polysemy can, for better or worse, shape an entire historical dialogue.

Notes

- 1 Sociolinguist Goffman (1974) was one of the first to introduce the concept of the “frame” and “frame analysis” in his book by the same name published in 1974. Since then, the idea of the semantic frame has been used extensively by political, media, and health communication scholars to discuss how words, ideas, images, and values can focus people’s attention and help them to interpret the world around them (See, e.g., Ball-Rokeach, Power, Guthrie, & Waring, 1990; Lakoff, 2004; Scheufele, 1999; Tannen & Wallat, 1993).
- 2 Since the publication of Ceccarelli’s article, other scholars have used her terminology to differentiate among different types of polysemous language (See, e.g., Hasian, 2001a; Hasian, 2001b; Houck & Nocasian, 2002; Shugart, 2003).
- 3 I use the term “White” to denote what, at this time, was considered the norm or the status quo. The “white identity,” according to historian Roediger (2002, 2005) and others involved in the critical study of whiteness, is a constructed and constantly changing concept that depends less on race or ethnicity than it does on historically situated cultural hierarchies. For several examples of scholars who frame “whiteness” in this way, see Hale, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995; and Jacobson, 1998.
- 4 Comstock’s sense of children as precious and innocent was not unusual for the time period (see Zelizer, 1985).
- 5 Although Woodhull was unique in her attempt to equate a loveless marriage with prostitution, she was not the first to equate marriage with slavery (see, e.g., Stanton, 1854, para. 8–14).
- 6 Following Woodhull’s speech, her sister gave a lecture before the Cooper Institute claiming that Woodhull’s free-love rhetoric outraged her sense of “virtue, honor, and decency” (“Opposition,” 1872, p. 8).
- 7 Since 1996, the U.S. government has provided federal support exclusively to schools that offer students “abstinence-only” education, which frames abstinence from sex until marriage as the only way to build a healthy life and discusses condoms and birth control only in terms of failure rates (Irvine, 2002, p. 191; United States House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 1996, p. 76).

References

- Afifi, W. A., & Weiner, J. L. (2006). Seeing information about sexual health: Applying the theory of motivated information management. *Human Communication Research*, *32*, 35–57.
- Anderton, J. P., & Valdiserri, R. O. (2005). Combating syphilis and HIV among users of Internet chatrooms. *Journal of Health Communication*, *10*, 665–671.
- Bailey, B. L. (1988). *From front porch to back seat: Courtship in twentieth-century America*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

- Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Power, G. J., Guthrie, K. K., & Waring, H. R. (1990). Value-framing abortion in the United States: An application of media system dependency theory. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2, 249–273.
- Bates, A. L. (1995). *Weeder in the garden of the Lord: Anthony Comstock's life and career*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Beisel, N. (1997). *Imperiled innocents: Anthony Comstock and family reproduction in Victorian America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, D. M. (1971). *Anthony Comstock: His career of cruelty and crime*. New York: Da Capo Press. (Original work published in 1883)
- Burke, K. (1945). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Campbell, J. A. (1990). Between the fragment and the icon: Prospect for a rhetorical house of the middle way. *Western Journal of Communication*, 54, 346–376.
- Ceccarelli, L. (1998). Polysemy: Multiple meanings in rhetorical criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84, 395–415.
- Comstock, A. (1967). *Traps for the young*. (R. Bremner, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published in 1883)
- Condit, C. M. (1989). The rhetorical limits of polysemy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6, 103–122.
- D'Emilio, J., & Freedman, E. B. (1997). *Intimate matters: A history of sexuality in America* (2nd ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dilorio, C. K., Resnico, K., Dudley, W., Thomas, S., Wang, D. T., Van Marter, D. F., et al. (2000). Social cognitive factors associated with mother-adolescent communication about sex. *Journal of Health Communication*, 5, 41–51.
- Fiske, J. (1986). Television: Polysemy and popularity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 391–408.
- Free Love (1860, September 21). Exposé of the affairs of the late “unitary household.” *New York Times*, p. 5.
- Free Love System (1855, September 8). Origin, progress, and position of the anti-marriage movement. *New York Times*, p. 2.
- Frye, N. (1959). *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gaonkar, D. P. (1989). The oratorical text: The enigma of arrival. In M. C. Leff & F. J. Kauffeld (Eds.), *Texts in context: Critical dialogues on significant episodes in American political rhetoric* (pp. 255–275). Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gordon, L. (2002). *The moral property of women: A history of birth control politics in America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Green, E. C., & Witte, K. (2006). Can fear arousal in public health campaigns contribute to the decline of HIV prevalence? *Journal of Health Communication*, 11, 245–259.
- Hale, G. E. (1998). *Making whiteness: The culture of segregation in the south, 1890-1940*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding and decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). London: Hutchinson.
- Hasian, M. A. (2001a). Anne Frank, Bergen-Belsen, and the polysemic nature of Holocaust memories. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 4, 349–374.

- Hasian, M. A. (2001b). Nostalgic longings, memories of the “good war,” and cinematic representations in Saving Private Ryan. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18, 338–358.
- Heywood, E. H. (1879). *Cupid's yokes; or the binding forces of conjugal life: An essay to consider some moral and physiological phases of love and marriage*. Princeton, MA: Co-operative Publishing.
- Hopkins, M. A. (1915, May 22). *Birth control and public morals: An interview with Anthony Comstock*. *Harper's Weekly*. Retrieved January 16, 2006, from <http://www.expo98.msu.edu/people/Comstock.htm>
- Horowitz, H. L. (2002). *Rereading sex: Battles over sexual knowledge and suppression in nineteenth-century America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Houck, D. W., & Nocasian, M. (2002). FDR's First Inaugural Address: Text, context, and reception. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 5, 649–678.
- Ignatiev, N. (1995). *How the Irish became white*. New York: Routledge.
- Irvine, J. M. (2002). *Talk about sex: The battles over sex education in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jacobson, M. (1998). *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Keller, S. N., Labelle, H., Karimi, N., & Gupta, S. (2002). STD/HIV prevention for teenagers: A look at the Internet universe. *Journal of Health Communication*, 7, 341–353.
- Kennedy, M. G., O'Leary, A., Beck, V., Pollard, K., & Simpson, P. (2004). Increases in calls to the CDC National STD and AIDS hotline following AIDS-related episodes in a soap opera. *Journal of Communication*, 54, 287–301.
- Krishnan, S. P. (1996). Health education at family planning clinics: Strategies for improving information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases for low-income women. *Health Communication*, 84, 353–366.
- Lakoff, G. (2001). The neurocognitive self: Conceptual system research in the twenty-first century and the rethinking of what a person is. In R. I. Solso & D. W. Massaro (Eds.), *The science of the mind: 2001 and beyond* (pp. 221–244). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant: Know your values and frame the debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Levine, J. (2002). *Harmful to minors: The perils of protecting children from sex*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
- Link, A. S., & McCormick, R. L. (1983). *Progressivism*. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson.
- Logue, C. M., & Patton, J. H. (1982). From ambiguity to dogma: The rhetorical symbols of Lyndon B. Johnson on Vietnam. *The Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47, 310–329.
- Mattson, M. (2000). Empowerment through agency-promoting dialogue: An explicit application of harm reduction theory to reframe HIV test counseling. *Journal of Health Communication*, 5, 333–347.
- Mattson, M., & Roberts, F. (2001). Overcoming truth telling as an obstacle to initiating safer sex: Clients and health practitioners planning deception during HIV test counseling. *Health Communication*, 13, 343–362.
- McGee, B. R. (2003). Rhetoric and race in the Progressive Era: Imperialism, reform, and the Ku Klux Klan. In J. M. Hogan (Ed.), *Rhetoric and reform in the Progressive Era* (pp. 311–338). East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

- Minor, R. (1915, October/November). O wicked flesh. *The Masses*. Retrieved February 19, 2006, from http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/visual_arts/satire/minor/minor4.htm
- Moran, J. P. (1996). "Modernism gone mad": Sex education comes to Chicago, 1913. *Journal of American History*, *83*, 481–513.
- Moran, J. P. (2000). *Teaching sex: The shaping of adolescence in the 20th century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Munnell, T. S. (1872). Beecherism and legalism. *Christian Quarterly*, *4*, 31.
- Noar, S. M., Clark, A., Cole, C., & Lustria, M. L. A. (2006). Review of interactive safer sex web sites: Practice and potential. *Health Communication*, *20*, 233–241.
- Noar, S. M., Zimmerman, R. S., Palmgreen, P., Lustria, M., & Horosewski, M. L. (2006). Integrating personality and psychosocial theoretical approaches to understanding safer sexual behavior: Implications for message design. *Health Communication*, *19*, 165–174.
- Opposition to Free Love. (1872, March 8). Lecture by Mrs. Brooker. *New York Times*, p. 8.
- Perse, E. M., Nathanson, A. I., & McLeod, D. M. (1996). Effects of spokesperson sex, public service announcement appeal, and involvement on evaluations of safe-sex PSAs. *Health Communication*, *80*, 171–189.
- Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2006). Adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit online material and recreational attitudes toward sex. *Journal of Communication*, *56*, 639–660.
- Pivar, D. J. (2002). *Purity and hygiene: Women, prostitution, and the "American Plan," 1900-1930*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Powell, H. L., & Segrin, C. (2004). The effect of family and peer communication on college students' communication with dating partners about HIV and AIDS. *Health Communication*, *16*, 427–449.
- Queen v. Hicklin, L.R. 3 Q.B. 360 (1868).
- Roediger, D. R. (2002). *Colored white: Transcending the racial past*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roediger, D. R. (2005). *Working toward whiteness: How America's immigrants became white*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rosen, R. (1982). *The lost sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, *49*, 103–122.
- Shugart, H. A. (2003). Performing ambiguity: The passing of Ellen DeGeneres. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *23*, 30–54.
- Solomon, M. (1993). The things we study: Texts and their interactions. *Communication Monographs*, *60*, 62–68.
- Solomon, M., & McMullen, W. (1991). Places in the heart: The rhetorical force of an open text. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, *55*, 339–353.
- Sood, S., Shefner-Rogers, C. L., & Sengupta, M. (2006). The impact of a mass media campaign on HIV/AIDS knowledge and behavior change in North India: Results from a longitudinal study. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *16*, 231–250.
- Stanton, E. C. (1854). *Address to the legislature of New York*. Retrieved June 9, 2006, from http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/stanton_ny_legislature.html
- Stoehr, T. (1979). *Free love in America: A documentary history*. New York: AMS Press.

- Tannen, D., & Wallat, C. (1993). Interactive frames and knowledge schemas in interaction: Examples from a medical examination/interview. In Tannen, D. (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 57–76). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Turner, K. J. (Ed.). (1998). *Doing rhetorical history: Concepts and cases*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- United States House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce. (2002). *Welfare reform: A review of abstinence education and transitional medical assistance*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- United States House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means. (1996). *Summary of welfare reforms made by Public Law 104-196: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and associated legislation*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Willard, F. E. (1890). The White Cross Movement in education. In *National Education Association Journal of Proceedings and Addresses* (pp. 159–178). Saint Paul, MN: National Education Association.
- Woodhull, V. (1871, November 20). *And the truth shall make you free: A speech on the principles of social freedom*. Retrieved February 17, 2006, from <http://praxeology.net/SPA-VCW-PSF.htm>
- Zelizer, V. A. (1985). *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.