Competent Sexual Agency and Feminine Subjectivity: How Young Women Negotiate Discourses of Sexuality

by

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Abstract

Building upon feminist and sexual health research, this dissertation shows how the positioning of women in various discourses as somehow ‘lacking’ actually constrains what researchers are able to hear in their sexual stories. Using interviews with 26 heterosexually active young women, I seek to upset traditional approaches to understanding young women’s sexual stories and theorizing heterosexuality. To analyze the interviews, I first employ a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis that focuses on the power that circulates through discourses and our positioning within them. Our positioning in various discourses both enables and limits various courses of action, understandings and experiences. This power of discourse is illustrated by an emergent hybrid discourse that is apparent in young women’s sexual narratives. I discuss what I call the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse and show how this discourse smoothes over contradictions between liberal and gendered discourses. Secondly, I show how psychoanalytic insights allow us to explore the processes of subjectification by which young women constitute themselves as (hetero)sexual women. Specifically, this dissertation explores processes of abjection, disavowal and ambivalence in participants’ narratives. In conclusion, the dissertation outlines the practical implications for sexual health education in Canada.
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Dedication

Thank you to my dear family, Sean, Ramona, Paul, Terrrance, and Adriana, and my dear friends for being there to support me and laugh with me through the joys and the periodic tears that occurred over the many years of my PhD. Like all things in life, you have made this process an adventure. I dedicate this dissertation to you.
Chapter One: Bringing the Agent into Young Women’s (Hetero)Sexual Negotiations
- Meeting the Researcher and Participants

What do young, heterosexually active women have to say about their sexuality? How do they see understand themselves as sexual subjects? What do they see as sexually possible for themselves? What is not possible sexually? In light of my own experiences, I have concluded that current theoretical understandings of women’s heterosexual experiences fail to grasp the complexity of sexuality, rarely accounting for feelings of excitement, passion and joy alongside the potential pitfalls and dangers of these experiences. This feeling motivated me to speak with twenty six heterosexually-active young women. We talked about sex, relationships, the contradictions young women face, and how they learn(ed) about sex and sexual relationships. In this chapter I begin with a brief overview of my research and the structure of this dissertation, I then discuss my own positioning as a researcher, how and why I came to do this research, my political orientations towards the research, and introduce the young women who participated. My theoretical orientations will be outlined in the next two chapters.

While I will go into greater detail about my methodology, theoretical framework, analysis, and findings throughout this dissertation, a brief introductory overview of this project will help orientate the reader. This dissertation is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty six heterosexually-active young women. In both my methodology and my analysis I focus on discourse and language. Using the interview transcripts as narratives, I explore how the young women understand themselves as sexual beings, how they negotiate everyday sexual interactions, and what issues and concerns are most salient in their decisions around sexuality. The central theme in the narratives is the participants’ desire to establish their discursive authority by articulating themselves as
‘competent’ (intelligent, autonomous, ‘successful’) sexual subjects. In my analysis I explore how various discourses are drawn on such that women can position themselves as competent sexual agents who are skillfully able to negotiate the sexual contradictions they often experience. I also go on to problematize participants’ understanding of themselves as sexual beings and explore moments when their narratives are riddled with contradictions and complexities. Here psychoanalytic concepts emerged as useful tools to explore social processes of young women’s subjectification within discourse. I show how the psychoanalytic processes of abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence offer sociologists novel insight into understanding the reiteration and disruption of systems of gendered inequality and sexual subjectivity. In the final chapter of this dissertation I attempt to use the theoretical insights I highlight in the participants’ narratives to illuminate and critically engage with the issue of how sexual health education is provided in Canadian public schools. My use of Foucauldian poststructural and psychoanalytic theoretical insights make the transition to attempting to outline some ‘best practice’ implications for sexual health educators in Canada is fraught with tension. Although I acknowledge this basic tension, and will discuss it in more detail in Chapter Eight, I attempt to make this transition as a conscious choice and purely out of my own political commitments. While it seems impossible to translate theoretical insights that assume a fragmented and incoherent subject, as a psychoanalytically-informed poststructural approach does, to an educational and cultural context that bases its pedagogy on the Cartesian liberal subject, I do so because to be paralyzed by this daunting task is not an option. As a critical feminist sociologist, I hope to establish the relevance of my research to people’s everyday lives and to contribute positively to them. Because of this basic tension, my efforts to discuss
education in Chapter Eight remain tentative but I feel that this effort, no matter how problematic, is important.

My personal negotiation of sexuality led me to research young women’s negotiations of (hetero)sex. As an undergraduate in university when feminism became a privileged discourse in my life (in that I understood everything in my world through this perspective), it became increasingly challenging to remain uncritical of heterosexuality as an institution. I also questioned my own sexual identity. Over time I came to understand myself as a primarily heterosexually-identified woman, though I remain attracted to and periodically sexually active with women as well. To this day, regardless of my range of sexual partners, I remain hesitant to identify as queer (to a lesser degree) or bisexual (to a greater degree) because, ostensibly, I have never experienced homophobia and am generally assumed to be heterosexual. This is a highly ambivalent identification, however, because I remain aware of the necessity of celebrating a range of queer identities and questioning the homo/hetero dichotomy.

After taking an introductory women’s studies course and a sociology of gender course, I knew that sexuality would be the area of expertise I wanted to develop in my academic life. At the same time, taking these courses also brought up some unproductive guilt around being primarily attracted to men and my heterosexual privilege. I remember being embarrassed about an engagement ring I wore, at a time when gay marriage was still illegal. Although much of the turmoil was self-produced, there was something specific to a feminist classroom that challenged me and what I had assumed to be assumed about life. Interestingly, my privilege as an ostensibly hetero woman has been

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1 My knowledge of lesbian feminist critique of the ‘discourse of queer heterosexuality’ (Schlichter, 2007) further complicates any potential queer identification, along with the fact that I have not personally experienced homophobia directed against me.
much more apparent and challenging to me than my privilege as a highly educated White woman in Canada. Ultimately, my own negotiation of heterosexual pleasure and feminist politics, a political orientation that at the time seemed to reject the very notion of hetero pleasure (Koedt, 1970; Hite, 1976), was all part of the process necessary to get me to where I was going personally, academically, and professionally.

In the sociology of gender course, I was also exposed to a sexual assault education workshop which eventually led to my volunteering as a sexual assault support peer counselor for more than four years. This experience further increased my knowledge of and interest in sexuality. The tensions I experienced between my early feminist views, knowledge of sexualized violence, and my own experiences of pleasure and empowerment as a woman having sex with men continued to characterize my life. Nearing the end of my time at university sexual assault support centres (at the Universities of Alberta and British Columbia), I became increasingly interested in other areas of sexuality education, knowing that (hetero)sexuality could be more than simply a site of exploitation and pain. I took my anti-oppression feminist orientations, developed academically and in the sexual assault arena, to the field of sexual health education. In the summer of 2006 I took an intensive sexual health educators’ certification course with ‘Options for Sexual Health B.C.’ (previously ‘Planned Parenthood B.C.’). I am currently working on my practicum, teaching youth in kindergarten to grade 12 and helping parents to talk with their children. My time with other sexual health educators, particularly those in their twenties who seemed to connect most directly with youth, has increasingly challenged my views of sexuality. Often these educators exposed the feminist

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2 An anti-oppression feminist perspective seeks to understand, account for and ameliorate the everyday inequalities people experience at the intersections of sexuality, gender, racialization and class, among others.
assumptions I made about young women’s sexual exploitation, challenging me to think about sexuality in more complex and sophisticated ways, allowing for contradiction, pleasure and agency to co-exist in women’s lives. Through my experiences of teaching sexual health and talking with youth, alongside my academic focus on sexuality, I became interested in exploring how young women negotiate their own sexual pleasure and agency, which they are very obviously doing, amid dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality that often silence and erase these very experiences.

As mentioned above, I interviewed twenty six women. For both pragmatic and purposive reasons, I decided to talk to (hetero)sexually active women between age 19 and 25 who are currently attending university. Pragmatically, being a PhD student and a teaching assistant on a university campus, I had access to this population. Interviewing women over the age of 19, I would not have to deal with parental or guardian consent and other ethical issues around interviewing under-aged people. At the same time, I felt that this age group, having been educated in a post-HIV sexual context, would have a clear memory of how and where they learned about sexuality and sexual health, as much as any of us ever do. The same population was likely to have had at least one male sexual partner and potentially a few partners over some years and to have had a range of sexual experiences and opportunities for sexual negotiation.

I recruited women through posters on the University of British Columbia campus and solicited participants in sociology courses of various levels, which offered highly

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3 It is important to note here that given the specific complexities of young, disabled women’s sexuality, including the history of forced sterilization and in particular their vulnerability to sexualized violence, I will not be including these women in my sample. Clearly, similar research that positions women with disabilities as sexual agents is an important area of investigation but I feel that a different project, focused exclusively on this topic, would be more appropriate. However, I will mention that diabetes and chronic depression were brought up by a couple of the participants. Only depression was understood as affecting the participant’s sexuality and I have addressed this issue in this dissertation in relation to her self-characterized amount of desire, or lack thereof.
productive recruitment pools. I also advertised on Craig’s List, an online posting site, which ended up yielding only one participant. Most of the women who responded to my call for participants did so out of personal interest, and, commonly, out of a sense of what I would call “karmic duty”\(^4\) in the academic world, perhaps seeing themselves as researchers, whether currently or later. All of the women I interviewed had post-secondary education and many were completing Bachelor of Arts degrees, most often in sociology\(^5\). There were also a few women from science and teaching backgrounds, and from graduate studies. Given these demographics, which I problematize and explore below, the research participants were overwhelmingly middle-class, though there was also a high proportion of participants from upper class backgrounds. Only a few of the participants self-identified as having come from a lower or working class background, usually as the result of divorce. Specifically, when I asked the participants how they would identify their class background, 13 said middle-class, 8 said upper middle-class or lower upper-class, 2 said upper class, and 3 said working middle-class or lower middle-class. It is interesting to note that no one specifically identified with the working or lower-class. These self-identifications foreshadowed the distance placed between themselves and the lower or working class throughout the interviews. This distancing occurred despite the range of class experiences the participants related to me over the

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\(^4\) By karmic duty, I mean that a number of the women mentioned that participating in research projects, and contributing to someone else’s research, would in some karmic sense cause participants to do the same for them if they ever decided to go on to do graduate work. “What goes around, comes around” seemed to be a guiding metaphor for these women.

\(^5\) Since many of the participants have taken a number of sociology courses, it is arguable that they may have had much more access to discourses that are critical of social norms and assumptions. As will be seen in Chapter Five however, even when they are critical of societal assumptions (in this case, the sexual double standard) explicitly, they still implicitly rely on such assumptions in their understanding of themselves as sexual beings. It could also be argued that people who are already critical of society may self-select into the study of sociology.
course of the interviews. This distancing is a phenomenon we will explore below and more specifically in Chapters Four and Five, as we see how salient class positioning is in participants’ understandings of themselves as sexual subjects. It is also important to note that the class categories discussed here are not social categories that I employ analytically but reflect instead participants’ understandings. Given the vast range of experiences the women talked about, we cannot assume what it means to the majority of participants when they say they are ‘middle-class.’

**Class, Ethnicity and Racialization**

While there was a range of experiences within the participants’ lives, I must be clear that middle-class positioning, values and privilege were present in nearly all of the interviews, making this exploration of (hetero)sexuality in many ways very specific. One particular factor came up in many of the interviews that seems to be a result of the participants’ class positions and eventual educational achievement. The participants often seemed to be positioned as ‘always already’ headed for university by their parents. Similarly, many of them were involved in accelerated, university-bound streams in high school. Some of the women’s high school peers were not sexually active, which could perhaps be connected to their involvement in accelerated academic programs. The parents often propelled the women to excel academically. Miriam (who identifies as being ‘Persian’) remembers her mother saying to her, “I want you to have the right friends, the right influence, I want you to do well in school, I want you to go to university […] these

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6 See Appendix A for a few brief comments on how diverse participants’ class identifications and understandings were.
7 All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms chosen by the participants or myself.
8 I use quotes to indicate when I am relying on the participants’ own words regarding their self-identifications.
should be your focus.” For some of the participants their parents’ desires felt like pressure, as it was by Rosie (‘Japanese’) and Emma (‘Vietnamese’). As Gonick would point out, the women I interviewed exist in a context where education is viewed as “a personal achievement important for shaping a promising individual future” (2004:196). At the same time however there is also additional stress put on education within families from immigrant backgrounds. This immigrant-specific stress arguably occurs in ‘recent’ (in the sense of recent generations or temporally recent) immigrant families, as was seen in Rosie’s and Emma’s experiences. In the migrant context Gonick argues “grades are invested with a very special significance in that they are viewed as stages of enacting an inter-generational responsibility” (2004:196). I argue a similar stress also occurs in economically-migrant families, who are working their way into the middle and upper classes.

Indeed, education was privileged by the parents above most other values, as evidenced by Emma’s belief that, despite their strong Catholic faith, her parents would support her having an abortion “because they think education is so important.” Even while in university, parents continue to highlight the women’s academic achievements over other achievements. For Jill it is apparent that her mother “just wants me to have a life before I have children,” which includes finishing her degree and getting a good, financially-sound job. Lily’s parents are also protective of her education in the face of new sexual and romantic partners. She reflects, “I think they’re thinking more about career in the future and ‘what are you going to do after university?’ and all that stuff. And they just want to make sure that I’m not in like, um, infatuation, almost with this boy.”
Given this emphasis on education it seemed to me that most of the women had a very pragmatic view about sexuality and their choices of sexual partners. These views and choices notably facilitated sexual practices, particularly around birth control, that would not in any way hinder their educational successes and progression. Pregnancy during their time as students simply was not an option, let alone a feasible one, for any of the women I had interviewed. At least three participants had had an abortion prior to the interview. Sexuality was something that needed to fit functionally in their lives, rather than having their lives change to adapt to their sexuality. In this sense, because of their drive for academic achievement and their access to financial and cultural resources, the young women I interviewed are not representative of similarly-aged women in Canada generally. For a number of reasons, including their privileged positioning, I decided not to write about birth control specifically, though understandably it was an important theme throughout the interviews. While issues around birth control were discussed in nearly all the interviews, I excluded a discussion of birth control because I did not see any particularly novel findings. In other words, nothing about our discussions of birth control ‘begged for analysis.’ Instead, I have chosen to focus on how the women understand themselves as sexual agents and position themselves as sexual women. Throughout this dissertation I argue that despite these limits these women’s stories have some things to tell us about the experiences of (hetero)sexually active young women from a range of backgrounds in Canada.

At this point, it is useful to include a note on how I conducted the interviews. The participants and I usually met in my office on campus, though sometimes we met in participants’ homes. We chatted briefly before the interviews over tea or water about how
we had both come to be where we were, that is, chatting about sex as the topic for a PhD dissertation. We started the interview by discussing how participants identify their class background, racial or ethnic identity, sexual identity and anything else they believed was relevant to their identities (diabetes and chronic depression were the only issues that participants brought up here). The interviews were generally fun and relaxed, taking the character of a ‘girls chatting about sex’ conversation. At the same time however, the interviews were surprisingly one-sided, in that questions about me and my own experiences only came up a few times, despite my mentioning early on in the interviews that I was open to their questions (personal and otherwise) and that I may at times mention my own experiences if it was appropriate. Indeed, my few interjections, as opposed to questions, usually involved sharing some type of ‘sexual health educator’ knowledge. Perhaps my general silence resulted from the fact that we began the interview with a very general ‘tell me anything at all/everything about your sexual history.’ I found that, with few exceptions, the participants spoke to this question at length. Their sexual history narratives were often so detailed and lengthy, encouraged by my clarifying and probing questions throughout, that we usually covered most of the topics I set out to. After the participant-guided overview we talked about things that they had not brought up themselves but that I still wanted to cover. (See Appendix B for a complete interview schedule.) With every participant I did not ask every question included in the schedule because we were often close to the hour and a half time limit I had promised to abide by. The interview questions were rarely asked sequentially, but were asked as related issues were brought up in participants’ narratives. When time was running short after the participant had completed her sexual history narrative, I chose an appropriate number of
questions suited to their narratives and the topics I was most interested in discussing. Given that the topic we discussed was sexuality, I tried to be as non-judgmental as possible, enabling women to feel comfortable in speaking about things that they had sometimes shared with very few others.

Related to the logic of how I conducted the interviews, I tried to privilege the issues and topics participants felt most motivated to discuss and to focus on how they discussed them. When transcribing the interviews, I included the participants’ and my own repetitions, hesitancies and moments of inarticulateness. I did this because I wanted the reader to be aware of moments when the participants hesitated, struggled to clarify their thoughts and were not sure what to say.\(^9\) I have tried to remain committed to accurately and authentically representing the participants’ words, struggles and meanings.

For this study, ten of the twenty six women identified themselves as having non-White racial or ethnic backgrounds. With only a couple of exceptions, none identified with the more negative connotations associated with “racialization,” such as feelings of devaluation, dehumanization, and expulsion, that might be expected in a highly racialized society such as Canada. However, given the multicultural context of Canada and of Vancouver in particular, where 'race' has become a site of public celebration, this may not be surprising\(^10\). In the group that did not identify as White, I included women who identified as Jewish, who are also excluded from the ‘White’ category in Canada, as Persephone (‘Jewish’) so articulately remarks. I must also note here that while one of the

\(^9\) In the interview excerpts included in this dissertation when I have included ‘…’ it is part of the participants’ dialogue and signals moments when they hesitated and took time between statements. Otherwise, when I have included ‘[..]’, this signals the exclusion of statements I edited out of the excerpt because they do not expediently support the analytical argument being made.

\(^10\) Thank you to Shelly Ketchell and Bonar Buffam for sharing their expertise in critical race theory and clarifying this idea with me.
participants identified as Aboriginal, I generally have not addressed the myriad complexities of sexuality found in the context of Aboriginal people’s lives which are ensconced in colonialist and racialized discourse and economic exploitation within Canada (Cannon, 2006). The specificities of and the elevated impact of sexually transmitted infections, most importantly HIV, on Aboriginal women in Canada demands sexual health and sexuality research that focuses exclusively on voicing their concerns, triumphs and challenges. (For an important overview of these issues and developments see Ship and Norton, 2001). Alongside work that documents the specific sexual health risks that Aboriginal women face, there is also a burgeoning literature that celebrates the specificity of Aboriginal sexuality, which has been systematically distorted and erased in dominant discourse (Taylor, 2008).

Sixteen women identified themselves as ‘White’ or ‘Caucasian.’\textsuperscript{11} Generally the interviewees said little that explicitly connected their experiences of sexuality to issues around racialization. In particular, White participants never said anything explicitly about White privilege nor did they comment on race after self-identifying as White at the beginning of the interview. This is not surprising within a context that erases privilege based on skin colour. This omission may also have occurred because we did not talk about the media per se, a topic which would have likely addressed issues around dominant imagery and representations of beauty and sexuality. In retrospect, I recognize that I also made the assumption that racialization did not affect White women’s sexuality, as I failed to develop questions to explore this topic with them. Conversely, I tried to ask questions that would allow me to explore how racialization might affect the lives of

\textsuperscript{11} Here, I included women who specified their racial and/or ethnic background as ‘Slovakian,’ ‘Scandinavian,’ and ‘Lithuanian.’ During the interviews, I clarified with these women that they would indeed include these specific ethnic identifications within the dominant White category.
women who did not self-identify as White or Caucasian. I must note here that it is important to remember that issues of religion, among other issues, may have been subsumed by discussions of ‘race’ or ethnicity. In the few cases were women did articulate experiencing what they referred to as ‘cultural’ differences (presumably from mainstream White Canada) there was no mention of religious differences, which may have been brushed over by the term ‘cultural.’ Only two Catholic participants remarked on moments when their parents’ religious views affected their sexuality.

Interestingly, except for when I brought it up, only a few of women said anything about the colour of their skin or their ethnic/religious background during the interviews. Issues of racialization never came up in connection with individual partners or experiences. It is surprising given the historical context of miscegenation, that the controversial topic of interracial dating and sexuality was only brought up once in the interviews, by a woman who was campaigning for her mother to accept her boyfriend who is of a different ethnicity. When these issues were discussed during the interviews participants focused on the experience of cultural pressure to be a ‘good girl’ who does not have sexual partners before marriage.

Where racialization did intervene in the lives of the participants, at least in what they articulated to me12, my limited findings on the topic reiterated what has already been established by authors whose focus is racialized sexuality. In Canada, White (hetero)sexuality is privileged as the desired norm over and above racialized bodies that are constructed as ‘foreign’ and potentially threatening to Canadian cohesion and identity. As Nagel summarizes:

12 It is certainly arguable that as a White woman and neophyte researcher I was insufficiently attuned to the experience of racialized inequality to tease this out in the interviews.
[The] pattern of contrasting valorized dominant group sexuality with devalued nondominant group sexualities can be found in descriptions of ethnic relations around the world. Sexual stereotypes commonly depict ‘us’ as sexually vigorous (usually our men) and pure (usually our women), and depict ‘them’ as sexually depraved (usually their men) and promiscuous (usually their women). (2003:10)

For the dominant White perspective in Canada, devaluing nondominant groups’ sexualities can be seen most vividly in the stereotyping and devaluing of the ‘squaw’ as a ‘loose,’ immoral, Aboriginal woman (Cannon, 2006). Similarly, devaluing nondominant group sexualities is apparent in the construction of Black sexuality as animalistic and voracious in the ‘Black Promiscuity’ discourse (Hill Collins, 2004). Within the context of the ‘Black Promiscuity’ discourse, Black women became unrapable and the Black men assumed rapists in North American culture (Hammonds, 1997). Alternatively, this process is also seen in the asexualization of South Asian bodies as ‘model minorities’ (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 1996). As Negal argues, “[racialized] depictions of sexual purity, dangerousness, appetites, desirability, perversion are all part of the performative construction of sexual respectability and disrespectability, normalcy and deviance” (Nagel, 2003:55).

Contesting the power of dominant constructions of the sexualities of nondominant racialized bodies are counterhegemonic “sexual claims and attributions (that) challenge [minority] stereotypes with unflattering sexual images of whites” (Nagel, 2003:56).

Espiritu's (2001) work with Filipina American women unpacks this resistance and places it within the context of migration to North America. Espiritu argues that “gender is key to immigrant identity and a vehicle for racialized immigrants to assert cultural superiority over the dominant group” (2001:415). While not all of the non-White identified women communicated that they were first or second generation immigrants, many did and it is to
these experiences that I speak to here. Interestingly, this form of resistance came up directly in my interview with Alex, who identifies as ‘Punjabi/Indo-Canadian,’ when she remembered an interaction she had with her current partner, who is also South Asian:

Alex: He asked me, ‘Well since you’ve been in a relationship that lasted so long, I’m assuming that you’re not a virgin?’ and I’m like, ‘Why would you assume that?’ And I asked him if I hadn’t have been would it have been a problem and would he still have pursued the relationship? And he said, ‘No, I still would have pursued it, it’s just that it wouldn’t have been easy to accept.’ So I think that really has something to be with, maybe not racialized in Canada, but maybe culture has something to do with it.

Brandy: As in a White girl wouldn’t have had the same…

Alex: I think that honestly, he would have expected that

Brandy: a White girl wasn’t a virgin

Alex: expected and accepted it, if it was, you know, someone, like a White girl that he was meeting and definitely, people have different expectations, I think that, um, Punjabi people, like guys and girls will have different expectations about who’s gonna be, who’s gonna be more sexually active and who should and shouldn’t be. ‘She’s a White girl, of course she’s had more partners, who cares.’ Associating certain things with like, like associating drinking beer with slutty behaviour, like White girls drink beer.

Here Alex goes on to tell me about stereotypes that circulated around ‘slutty White girls that drink beer.’ I call this the ‘dirty White girl’ discourse. We could laugh about the ‘dirty White girl’ stereotype, acknowledging it as a common one we had heard, though we were both surprised by the beer drinking addition. However she is also signaling an important intersection of racialization and sexuality that emerged in these interviews.

Espiritu (2001) and other authors (DasGupta and DasGupta, 1996) have documented strict parental control on racialized daughters’ sexuality and movements. As we will see, Espiritu’s work is useful because she connects the control of American
Filipina girls’ and women’s sexuality, distinguishing and distancing it from mainstream White girls’ sexuality, to the context of immigrant experience in discursively hostile host countries. Gonzalez-Lopez’s work (2004) further complicates our understandings of parental control of racialized women’s sexuality and racialized stereotypes of macho fathers, arguing that Mexican fathers’ investments in their daughters’ virginity vary by where they grew up and is related to their desire to protect their daughters within a culture they see as dangerous. I feel it is important not to impose the assumption of intergenerational conflict and restriction on the narratives of racialized women. While issues of racialized sexuality did occur, as seen in Alex’s narrative, participants did not usually highlight intergenerational conflict or parental restriction as part of their negotiation of their sexuality. This finding may also be explained by the fact that, as we will see in later chapters, the participants fundamentally understood, or at least tried to understand, themselves as being in sole control of their own sexuality. This orientation would limit the discursive space available to explore cultural patterns of adaptation in new countries.

This being said, a few of the women from immigrant backgrounds did mention that they came from ‘traditional’ cultural backgrounds and felt that this affected their sexuality. Alex was most vocal about the constraint she felt in her community. She felt a great pressure to maintain her chastity as a young Punjabi woman. Nevertheless she also resisted this pressure. As Espiritu found, emphasizing chastity, particularly of young women, “has the effect of reinforcing masculinist and patriarchal power in the name of a greater ideal of national/ethnic self-respect” (2001:416). Alex went on to clarify:

I come from a super traditional culture and maybe that’s why, because my culture is really, really traditional and very patriarchal, um, that um my
beliefs have sort of opposed it [...] or like I’ve rebelled against it [...] But I think it’s getting better in terms of girls speaking up and, ‘Who are you [young men] having sex with?!’ You know, um, but I think it’s a major concern for girls, if I’m sexually active with more than one partner, ‘Who’s going to want me when it comes to getting married?’ Whereas with guys, it’s not a huge concern, ‘I can do what I want now and then I want to marry a virgin…’ [...] [But] I wouldn’t call myself completely liberal and confident in that it’s just going to be like, [having already had a sexual partner] won’t be a problem with someone else, because it really wouldn’t be, but I’m not completely comfortable saying this is my sexual history, this is what happened, accept it.

Mother and daughter, Shamita Das Dasgupta and Sayantani Dasgupta, find a similar dynamic in the North American South Asian population where “the rubric of ‘cultural preservation,’ is actually about the control of women’s sexuality” (1996:231). Errant sexual behaviour is linked with ‘cultural betrayal’ (232), such that patriarchal structures within the community become hard for women to criticize without ‘rebelling’ (as Alex terms it) against their community. Importantly, Dasgupta and Dasgupta as well as Espiritu argue that such gendered sexual limitations are “neither traditional nor culturally indigenous” (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 1996:236), but often arise within migration contexts where racialized bodies are devalued within the host community. Interestingly, when cultural values around virginity came up with South Asian participants, the women did not internalize the demonization of their ‘unchaste’ behaviour (having had sex before marriage), nor did they think of themselves as ‘bad women.’ Rather, they questioned their value as sexual partners to future potential boyfriends/husbands. Most of these women, however, felt confident that they would not have to negotiate the contradictions inherent in the racialized sexual double standard, feeling that they and their current (and first) partners would eventually marry.

As I have mentioned, where racialization was referenced in the interviews, it generally confirmed Espiritu’s (2001) and Dasgupta and Dasgupta’s (1996) assertions
that minority cultural resistance is manifested in a racialized sexual double standard. However, while I found evidence of a ‘dirty White girl’ counter discourse, alongside this discursive disruption was the continued privileging of White skin in understandings of desire and sexuality in Canada. In Gina’s recollection of her early crushes on boys she remembers feeling quite anxious and fearful of being rejected as a result of her Aboriginal background:

Gina: I do remember thinking because my best friend [Kimmie] in elementary school, she was, would flirt with all the boys and they would flirt back and I remember being the background person, or the background girl, and thinking that I was different or that they wouldn’t like me and I would guess that has to do with um race just being different like I thought maybe it had to do with me being shy and not comfortable talking to boys but I think what made me really shy was thinking they wouldn’t want to talk to me.

Brandy: And for you that was based on racialization?13

Gina: Yeah, like if I think of specific memories I experienced I can remember feeling that was, like they wouldn’t want to talk to me and that’s understandable because I’m different and not White like [Kimmie] is, I would always compare myself to her and thinking that the boys that liked her were White.

Gina’s perceives her ‘non-White’ status as directly related to her (sexual) desirability to the White boys that surrounded her on the playground. Her anxiety and fear of rejection is premised on her undesirable status in relation to White Kimmie. This is not surprising within a cultural context that devalues Aboriginal women’s sexual desirability (Taylor, 2008).

Generally because of the overwhelmingly middle- and upper-class background of nearly all of the participants, and the attendant emphasis on education discussed above, like Higgins (2007), I “found repeatedly that social class seemed to trump race” (75). I

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13 In the interview with Gina I used the word ‘racialization’ because Gina had been exposed to and used critical theoretical words, including ‘racialization,’ herself.
will explore how and perhaps why class ‘trumped’ race below. This is not to undermine the value of an intersectional analysis of sexuality that focuses on racialization, whose importance Alex (‘Punjabi/Indo-Canadian’) highlights: “It’s really different and especially living in Canada, where we don’t all share the same values.” In my work I focus on commonalities, exploring how a select group of university-educated young women, upwardly mobile and/or securely middle-class, understand themselves as sexual subjects, rather than on how they are racialized within Canada. I have also highlighted where experiences of women of colour and White women diverge. I acknowledge that my own orientations towards sexuality and my own positioning as a White woman delimit this dissertation’s boundaries.

Also important to how racialization was mediated within the women’s narratives was the overarching ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse that pervaded the interviews. I will expand significantly on this discourse in later chapters, but here it is important to note that the participants went to great lengths to communicate their competency as sexual actors. They presented themselves as in control, able to handle complication and contradictions with ease, and masterful at negotiating mentally and physically ‘healthy’ sexual interactions. I argue that the default category of the competent woman discourse is one who is ‘unencumbered’ by her skin colour or class, in other words, one who is White and middle-class in the Canadian context. The White middle-class female subject is the unspoken but pervasive subject haunting the narratives. In this sense, I believe that many of the women spoke ‘as if’ they did not constantly negotiate racialized and classed social structures in Canada, despite their vast diversity of experience. This is not to say that the women’s experiences were by any means
hegemonic but that the overarching attempt to justify one’s position as a competent female speaker and actor limited the discursive space available for women to articulate experiences that diverged from the White, middle-class norm.

The participants’ generalized middle class status and access to education position them as always already sexually “respectable” (Skeggs, 1997)\(^{14}\), which facilitates their claims of sexual competency. Their privilege as middle-class young women, as we will see in narratives of their competency in later chapters, remains unspoken, though is always present. The participants are entitled to engage their sexuality as play because they are unlikely to be forced to engage in sex as a form of labour to ensure their economic survival. Access to the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse is in many ways inherently classed because participants’ sexuality is rarely questioned and pathologized to the same degrees that working class women’s is (Sangster, 1996; Peiss, 1989). In a similar way, as was mentioned, the subject who is speaking in these narratives rarely articulates negotiating racialized inequality and privilege.

**Sexual Diversity**

In my call for participants, I advertised for ‘heterosexually active’ women. I used the words ‘heterosexually active’ rather than heterosexual in hopes that a range of women would respond. I planned to interview heterosexually active women in order to examine their sexual subjectivity and understandings of themselves as sexual agents by exploring how they negotiate heterosexual encounters. An important premise to note here is that I do not necessarily conflate the term ‘heterosexually active’ women with the assumption

\(^{14}\) I discuss Skeggs’ (1997) arguments about middle class sexual respectability in more detail in Chapter Five.
of a heterosexual identity, nor do I conflate heterosexual activity with penile-vaginal penetration. Thus I hoped to interview women who saw themselves as being heterosexually active (in self-defined ways) as well as women who may also be homosexually active as well. The only basic criterion for participation was that volunteers had had sexual contact with men at some point in their life. My hope was fulfilled, as women who had had sex exclusively with men and with both men and women responded to my ad.

I use the term heterosexually active and throughout this dissertation write about (hetero)sexuality for very specific reasons. First, I was interested in sexual interactions that took place within the context of explicit gendered norms of sexuality. While I recognize that gendered norms of sexuality are always contested and complex, I wanted to eliminate the further complexities that would occur within same-sex partner sexual interactions. In other words, my main concern is not in theorizing heterosexuality as an identity per se but rather in exploring how sexuality occurs within gendered dominant discourses and how young women understand themselves as sexual beings within these discourses. Throughout this dissertation I use the word (hetero)sexuality to signal how sexuality always occurs and is understood within larger gendered, heterosexist structures, as well as to disrupt naturalized assumptions about sexuality as normatively heterosexual. Also, I use (hetero)sexuality in order to remain cognizant of the need to disrupt the homogenization of heterosexual experience. The parentheses denote that sexuality should

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15 Queer sexualities will not be directly addressed in the interests of focusing the study, avoiding the potential to conflate issues around gender and sexuality, and in order to reach a deeper level of theoretical engagement with and problematization of heterosexuality as a coherent, essential and stable identity. My problematization of heterosexuality will contribute to previous work in this area such as Katz (1995), Segal (1994) and Groneman (2000), as well as to non-essentialist scholarship on youth heterosexuality, similar to Adams’ (1997) work in the Canadian context. I expand further on the issue of participants’ same-sex sexual experiences below.
be understood as involving a variety of experiences, identifications, orientations and relationships with others and with oneself.

In acknowledging that all sexuality is understood to take place through gendered dominant discourse, I hope that this dissertation will contribute to the denaturalization and deconstruction of heterosexuality as an identity. I do not assume that heterosexuality is a given or default identity for the participants; rather, I explore the processes that occur in their understandings of themselves as sexual actors within gendered discourses of (hetero)sexuality. I hope to add to theoretical work that problematizes heterosexuality (Katz, 1995; Segal, 1994) by viewing sexuality (however it is expressed) as the product of constant negotiation and embodied engagement rather than as a naturalized or stable state. Laumann and Gagnon remind us that “in sociology the word sexual usually appears only as an adjectival modifier to the noun deviance” (1995:184). I see this dissertation as part of the burgeoning literature that critically engages ‘heterosexual’16 encounters. Richardson also argues that assuming the naturalness of heterosexuality has severely limited sociology such that we “delimit interpretations of both heterosexuality (as stable, necessary, universal) and the social (as naturalized heterosexuality)” (2000:23). While I do focus on the heterosexual context, it is in order to understand better how heterosexual identities are negotiated and understood discursively, rather than to reiterate its supremacy. Only this critical exposure can undermine heterosexuality as “a taken for granted subject position that is not even articulated” (Ussher, 2005: 30). In a similar vein as Adams’ important book, The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of

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16 I use the term ‘heterosexual,’ here and throughout, to denote heterosexual sexual activity, as opposed to ‘opposite’ gender, and not necessarily sexual, interactions. In other words, when using ‘heterosexual’ I am referring to specifically opposite-gender sexualized interactions, though not necessarily opposite-gender sexual contact or activity.
Heterosexuality (1997), my work is part of a larger exploration of “the sexual centre that gives the margins their shape” (4). Hence, I aim to contribute to the overall destabilization of gendered dominant discourses that naturalize and privilege heterosexuality and position women as passive objects.

A decentering of heterosexuality is important given the context of heterosexual hegemony that occurs in North America. The premise of heterosexual hegemony, the privileging and glorification of heterosexuality in all areas of public and private life, is heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuals are “normal” and “natural” while same-sex desire is “deviant” or “sick” (Kinsmen, 1996). Heterosexuality as an identity emerges in relation to and response to “deviant” sexuality that does not contribute to the perpetuation of the species and in turn capitalist political and economic orders (Kinsmen, 1996). Kinsmen notes that “respectable” and “proper” sexual, read heterosexual, relations are hegemonic because they “unite force and consent in the social organization of ruling” (2007:169). He is careful, however, to clarify that hegemony is “always actively accomplished, never self-securing” (187), reminding us that while heterosexual hegemony is entrenched in North American society, sociologists must always be exploring how this hegemony is maintained and resisted. Exploring the maintenance of heterosexual hegemony is crucial in exploring sexual regulation, which is “the complex of relations of the various institutions and practices that define, manage, and limit our sexual lives” (168). We will see throughout this dissertation how our current understanding of heterosexuality as a gendered, classed and racialized phenomenon both limits participants’ experiences and is resisted by them. We will see how the women are both subjected to and resist the sexual regulation of heterosexual hegemony, always
remembering that “heterosexuality [is not] merely one sexual identity among many; it is, in many societies, the norm and ideal” (Seidman, 2003:44). Weeks argues that the gendered and sexualized dichotomies that premise heterosexual hegemony “position sexual subjects, and organize sexual desires, in contemporary societies, in ways which subordinate women and marginalize transgressors” (2003:37). I explore how this occurs in the women’s narratives. Critically exploring women’s narratives of heterosexual experience allows me to ask the following questions, among others: “How are complex, often internally contradictory, and ambiguous systems of sexual meaning constructed and challenged?” “What is the relation between ‘macro’ patterns of social organization and ‘micro’ negotiations of sexual definition?” (Epstein, 1994:198).

As I draw on psychoanalytic theory in my analysis of participants’ narratives, Ingham’s (2006, 2008) interpretation of Jacque Lacan’s understanding of the “imaginary,” the “imagined or illusory relationship between an individual and their social world” (2006:198), is helpful in understanding heterosexual hegemony. Drawing on Althusser’s social theoretical reading of Lacan, Ingham argues that the “heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being and oneness” (2006:198). This basic orientation to sexual relating works to obfuscate how heterosexual hegemony acts to preserve racial, gendered and sexual hierarchies. The heterosexual imaginary is premised on the heterosexist assumption of heterosexuality’s “normality” and homosexuality’s “deviance.” I seek to expose how women’s understandings of their “well-being and oneness” as sexual actors illustrate how heterosexual hegemony is perpetuated and experienced in their lives. Following Ingham’s example, I “investigate
the ways various practices, arrangements, relations and rituals work to conceal the operation of [the institution of heterosexuality]” (2008:28). Upsetting sociological theory’s tendency to “think straight,” I explore “the power and the promise of heterosexuality [while] examining and addressing its paradoxes” (Ingraham, 2005:4).

Stevi Jackson (2006) uses the word ‘institutionalized heterosexuality’ to denote the structural power of heterosexuality in the West, clarifying that “as an institution heterosexuality, while exclusionary, also governs the lives of those included within its boundaries” (108, emphasis in original). She distinguishes ‘institutionalized heterosexuality,’ which I see as being similar to heterosexual hegemony as defined above, from ‘heteronormativity’, which is “shorthand for the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence” (108). In this sense, research such as my own explores the governance of the ‘inside,’ which in turn contributes to sociological understandings of social orderings that privilege some identities and practices over others in myriad ways. Exploring heterosexual interactions helps us to see the possible variability in these relationships and that “agency is a factor even in conformity” (116).

I use the term “heterosex” when discussing heterosexual sexual activities in this dissertation. I use this term, as Higgins does, “to refer to sexual activity between women and men (as opposed to autoeroticism, or sex between women or between men),” finding “the term useful not only in its specificity, but also because it denaturalizes that idea that all sex occurs between a man and woman” (2007:79). I also use the term heterosex to attune myself and the reader to the fluidity of sexuality and sexual practices, having found that the use of sexual identity categories (heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual)
often produces assumptions around people’s activities, which I do not wish to reiterate. Remaining attuned to fluidity is particularly important in the context of this dissertation, as within mainstream sexual health education. Currently “educational strategies and policies appear predicated upon notions of who does what with whom” such that fluidity is often marginalized (Stewart et al., 2000:410). I hope to challenge these assumptions and premises.

As anticipated, participants disclosed a range of sexual experiences. A number of the women had had sexual interactions ranging from kissing to oral sex and penetration with both men and women. Despite the presence of same sex encounters for a number of women, only one women, Lily, identified as bisexual. This is perhaps not surprising since my posters and classroom announcements advertised for ‘heterosexually active’ women. A number of the women disrupted the naturalization of heterosexuality themselves when I asked them how they identified sexually. Sue identified as ‘hetero with a splash of bi,’ Shawnequa as ‘80 (men)/20 (women), but relationships only with men,’ Maria and Maia both identified as a ‘Kinsey 1 or 2’ (meaning heterosexually leaning but not exclusively). Ten of the other women problematized their heterosexual identification, citing bi desire and experience, while eleven identified as ‘exclusively hetero.’

While there was much evidence of sexual diversity I found that the women generally downplayed and minimized their desire for and sexual engagement with other women. Like Sheena’s experience, for many of these young women sex with other women “was just an encounter” (‘Hetero but bi experience’). When I pointed out to Lily, who was the only participant to identify specifically as bisexual, that her first ‘full on’ sexual experience was with a woman, she was surprised: “It’s interesting cause in my
mind I don’t really think of it like that. I guess it is?!” Lily’s sexual relationship with this woman differed from the experiences of the other participants’ same-sex encounters because it continued for a number of weeks. On this relationship she reflects: “We would say things like, you know, ‘I really like you’ and all that stuff but I think maybe looking back on it that we were just using each other [to get rid of] sexual frustration and stuff.”

Alongside the emotional intimacy that is assumed to be typical of longer-term romantic sexual relationship there is a concurrent rejection of this same-sex encounter as a significant romantic sexual relationship. While this minimization is not a central finding of my research it seems to warrant mention here, even though it is arguably not surprising, given that I was not specifically advertising to women that identified as non-heterosexual. This finding does however seem to be further evidence of the cultural context of heterosexual hegemony that devalues homosexual activity. The emphasis on hetero sexual relations may also speak to the fact that our practices are always much more fluid than the traditional hetero/homo identity dichotomy allows us to acknowledge, as Kinsey showed us in the mid twentieth century (1948; 1953); therefore I may have been advertising for ‘heterosexually active’ women but, despite a diversity of sexual experience, the women who responded overwhelmingly privileged their hetero desire and practices as far as their understandings of themselves were concerned.17 I learned that there is a great deal of tension and diversity in terms of women’s identities, desires and practices. The women’s sexualities were at times malleable and context specific, similar to Diamond’s (2008) findings that fluidity is central to women’s experiences of sexuality.

17 The privileging of hetero desires and practices in the women’s narratives may not only be explained by the context of heterosexual hegemony within which they occur. Culturally in North America we value a ‘stable,’ coherent sense of self (rather than fluidity), which may also account for their privileging of one main ‘storyline.’ In turn, the context of heterosexual hegemony ensures that the heterosexual ‘storyline’ is not privileged at randomly but in line with dominant discourses.
I originally analyzed the interviews as a ‘sexually coherent’ whole, in that I did not analytically separate exclusively hetero identified women from those that disrupted monosexual\textsuperscript{18} (Ault, 1996) identity. I did this so that whatever data emerged could be analyzed on its own terms, rather than through predetermined analytical categories. After finding little difference in how women discussed their sexuality, I decided to re-view Lily’s interview transcript to see if, as the only explicitly bisexual-identified woman, differences were retroactively evident. Interestingly, I still found overwhelming similarity between her narratives and the others. Ultimately, I cannot determine how the silencing of female-female sexual desire and activity was based on the recruits my advertisements targeted and produced\textsuperscript{19} and how it is related to larger societal homophobia. What was clear, however, was that nearly all the participants, like Lily, “automatically thought heterosexual experiences” when we discussed their sexual experiences within the interviews. Very few mentioned their same-sex encounters, and when they were discussed at my behest they were, as we saw above, usually minimized or set apart as somehow different.

It is important to acknowledge that despite my efforts to “not think ‘straight’” while designing and conducting my research, there will inevitably be “heteronormalizing processes at work” during the interviews (Allen, 2006:163). The women’s narratives, at least in part, emerged as a function of how I organized and approached the interviews. Rather than try to account for what did not “show up” because of the context of heterosexual hegemony within which the interviews occurred, it is useful to attempt to

\textsuperscript{18} Ault (1996) distinguishes monosexual, desiring only one sex (hetero or homo) from bisexual identities, wherein both sexes are desired.

\textsuperscript{19} I should note here that Lily decided to participate after a classroom announcement I made, wherein I could stress ‘heterosexually active’ as distinct from ‘heterosexually identified,’ which would be an entry point different than for participants that called me after only seeing my poster.
understand why same-sex experiences were usually minimized or set apart as somehow different in the women’s narratives. As will be seen in later chapters, three psychoanalytic concepts emerged as tools that could facilitate my analysis of the women’s narratives: abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence. When reading the transcripts I was struck by the homogeneity of the women’s narratives, despite the diversity of their sexual experiences. Judith Butler’s argument that same-sex desire stands as that which is rejected or abjected from the category of “proper” (heterosexual) subjecthood (1999) is important when accounting for this silence around same-sex experiences. I argue that the “oddity” of the silences around same-sex experience was not exclusively the result of what I “missed” in the interviews or failed to draw out, but often speak to the productivity of attending to psychoanalytic processes when analyzing the narratives. Insofar as the possibility of experiencing and articulating same-sex desire is expelled via the process of abjection, as Butler argues, then the silences that pervade the narratives of women who had same-sex experience is not surprising. The rejection of same-sex experiences in the process of abjection ensures that such experiences are not or are rarely spoken. Hence the process of abjection is apparent not only in the areas of their narratives discusses in Chapter Five but also in the silences around same-sex experience.

Limitations

In discussing this dissertation with various people one central question kept coming up: who volunteered to participate in this research? People pondered if there was something unique about these people (that is, those who are willing to discuss their sexuality with a stranger) that make this research somehow specific to a limited group.
Thinking about this myself and in conversation with others\textsuperscript{20} I realize that the cultural silences that surround sexuality limit the range of people comfortable speaking about their experiences and, in turn, limit all sexuality research. In some ways all we have to rely on as sexuality researchers is the intrepid voices of a few. This does not negate the theoretical value of such explorations however, nor does it mean that I can say nothing about social values and forces more generally. Schwartz and Rutter (1998) help us think through this conundrum. In regard to the under-explored context of heterosexuality, and arguably sexuality more generally (excluding ‘deviance’ focused studies) Schwartz and Rutter remind us that “[researchers] must rely on what people say they want and do sexually, and these reports, as much as the desire and behaviour itself, are influenced by what people believe they are supposed to feel and say” (1998:3). In this sense, my focus on sexual subjectivity and how women understand themselves as sexual agents engaging in sex with men is particularly productive. I have very little interest in the ‘truth’ their sexual activities per se (what exactly or ‘real-ly’ did or did not occur), to which I have limited access anyways, as Schwartz and Rutter remind us. Rather, I am interested in gaining access to the beliefs, normative influences, and competencies Schwartz and Rutter are signaling. They caution researchers:

\begin{quote}
to recognize the challenge of collecting and interpreting self-report data, particularly on the enigmatic topic of sexuality. Respondents may not tell the truth or remember the truth or even be sure that what they thought happened really did happen. For the healthy skeptic of sexual self-reporting... survey data remain records of norms or values, if not precise accounts of deeds. (36)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} Thank you to those that participated in a brainstorming session about my research and this question, including Dawn Currie, Rachael Sullivan, Jackie Shoemaker-Holmes, Bonar Buffam, Shelly Ketchell and Elizabeth Bruch.
The ‘truth’ of participants’ claims is not a question I ask. Rather, I explore how they position and understand themselves within variously available streams of discourse. Among other things, I am exploring what discourses young women generally have access to in understanding themselves as sexual beings. Their degree of access to variously privileged discourses is, in turn, varyingly ‘easy.’ In other words, young women have easier or more common access to different discourses (for example, anti-capitalist feminism discourse as opposed to discourses of liberal responsibility). Therefore, how these young women are able to understand themselves has insight to offer into what discourses generally are available and in the process of being contested. The specific historical context of the women’s lives must be acknowledged as well. We will see in Chapter Four the range of sexually constraining and empowering discourses to which the women I interviewed have access. These women have access to a wide range of discourses not only because they are young women attending university but also because they were born into a post-rights movement historical context wherein feminism and other rights-based discourses have produced significant changes in society. By virtue of their birth cohort they have access to a pool of discourses that is different from what would be available to, for example, the people Kinsey interviewed in the 1940s and 50s. The public commodification of sex in the context of late capitalist consumerism and access to learning and entertainment technologies like the internet also make these women’s historical positioning important. I will further explore this range of historically specific discourses in detail in Chapter Four.
An iceberg analogogy is useful in thinking about the ‘validity’ of the participants’ experiences, as in having something to say for larger segments of society. This analogy works in two ways. In one way, above the water line is a small section of the iceberg/population that we can see (or access in other ways). This would be the relatively limited number of people who are willing to openly discuss their sexual experiences with a researcher. Below the surface is the potentially more significant part of the population/iceberg that is unwilling to speak. In this sense, I have access to only the ‘tip of the iceberg’ because recruitment can only ever be voluntary. We have nothing else to base our research on as long as there are cultural tensions around discussing sexuality. On a second, more important, level, from a poststructural psychoanalytic perspective which informs this work, the ‘tip of the iceberg’ is arguably all that researchers of sexual subjectivity are able to access in participants’ narratives. From this perspective, what is interesting is how we all understand and articulate ourselves as coherent and competent subjects. This would be our experience ‘above the water line,’ as it were. From a poststructural and psychoanalytic perspective, however, the experience of competent coherence is only illusory, an eternal process of covering up the inherent instability and threat of subject dissolution (below the water line). I delve more deeply into these ‘below the water line’ processes in the subsequent chapters. From a more general social constructionist perspective, Schwartz and Rutter remind us that:

people are always kidding themselves; in other words, people acquire the desires and behaviours that are available and appealing. These choices will be based on personal history as well as social norms and will emerge in idiosyncratic and diverse ways across the continuum of sexuality. They will also be based on the costs and benefits in a given social system. (1996:30)

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21 Thank you Rachael Sullivan for your articulation of this analogy.
22 I will distinguish and elaborate on this perspective in Chapter Three.
We are always ‘kidding ourselves’ about our sexual selves not because we are ‘dupes’ of a capitalist patriarchy but because we are fundamentally invested in understanding and presenting ourselves as competent, coherent subjects in late modern capitalist society.

Considering the complex issues around interviewing and self-selection also evokes for me the Foucauldian parallel between the modern day ‘interview’ with the expert, in this case me, and Catholic confessional practices with priests (Foucault, 1990:19). Here the participants are seen as confessing their ‘sins’ to me, and through this process exposing their sexual subjectivity to governance. Inevitably this is an invaluable insight. Following Attwood (2006) I would question any direct parallel between these two processes, however, and instead focus on “the particular sexual sensibilities which characterize late modern culture” (84). Attwood asserts that while an incitement to discourse about sexuality, particularly by medico-scientific experts, persists, “the contemporary tone of these confessions may modify their cultural significance and impact” (84). That is, as Attwood reminds us, “the remaking of confession as entertainment” is, of course, symptomatic of a culture in which sex signifies both the truth of the self and its performance; authenticity and artifice” (84, emphasis in original). It might be asked how these interviews act as performances themselves, with participants ‘performing’ their sexual competency for me as ‘expert’ (and in turn judge). This is an important question; however I would not distinguish the narratives participants wove from our everyday enactments of self-articulation and performance. This is not to say the we are consciously performing specific roles every day (South Asian woman, lesbian, a member of the working class, for example), but that our every piece of clothing,

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23 This is a particularly relevant view since a number of the women expressed after the interview that they had had fun doing it.
utterance, and movement is part of, both reiterating and shoring up, our various discursive and embodied positions.

Acknowledging the limitations in my ability or desire to make ‘truth claims’ based on these interviews, I am nevertheless convinced of their value as signposts in understanding (hetero)sexual subjectivity and the discursive constitution of (hetero)sexuality. That being said, I must acknowledge that while I have made sure that I include in this dissertation all the women who agreed to contribute to this research with their time and effort, some interviews invariable appear more often than others, based on, among other things, my own assessment of their readability and applicability. In each case, I have tried to be true to the experiences of these young women individually and as a group generally, rather than privileging some stories over others. I argue throughout this work that despite the specific demographic characteristics of the women I interviewed, these women’s experiences offer significant insight into sociological understandings of (hetero)sexual subjectivity and, in turn, into how we frame and present sexual health education in Canadian classrooms. The limitations I have outlined here include the respondents’ class commonalities, education, a limited articulation of how racialization affects the participants’ lives and a heterosexual focus. I also want to acknowledge that my similar positioning as a (relatively young\textsuperscript{24}) university student with similar educational and class privileges, though not the same racialized privilege or lack thereof as some, allowed the interviews to have the “chatting between girlfriends” feel that facilitated the intimacy, playfulness, disclosure and trust that yielded such textured transcripts.

\textsuperscript{24} I was 29 when I conducted the interviews and, not shockingly, still believe myself to “connect” with “twenty-somethings”.
At the beginning of this chapter, I spoke about why I was motivated to do this research. In the next chapter, I outline three specific discourses through which we currently understand young women’s sexuality: dominant, feminist and sexual health education discourses. I show why they are to some degree useful in understanding young women’s sexuality, but, more importantly, I show why current approaches limit our ability to productively theorize young women’s sexuality. In Chapter Three I outline the theoretical tools I found useful in accounting for participants’ experiences. The theoretical perspectives I outline are useful because they exceed the limits of current theoretical approaches.
Chapter Two: Are Women Always and Everywhere Lacking?

Since at least the nineteenth century, a variety of people have been interested in understanding the “nature” of women’s sexuality. No matter who was speaking for or about women’s sexuality, a common thread is that little discursive room has been made available for women’s sexual agency. Today there is still an overwhelming silence around women’s active sexual desire and sexual agency. This dissertation attempts to further theoretical understandings of young women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity and, in turn, our understanding of sexual health education in Canada. I position this dissertation within three differentiated, yet inextricably interwoven, discourses around female heterosexuality: dominant, feminist and sexual health discourses. These are the three central frameworks we currently have for understanding young women’s sexuality. In these discursive streams women seem to be defined primarily by what they lack: namely active desire and sexual agency; the ability to engage in fulfilling, empowering sexual relationships with men; and the ability to ‘say no’ to unwanted sexual contact. Certainly there has been much productive work produced by critical feminist and sexual health researchers, as we will see. Within the context of feminist and sexual health research, I approach the topic of young women’s sexual subjectivity from a novel perspective that attempts to show how the positioning of women in various discourses as somehow ‘lacking’ actually constrains what we as researchers are able to hear in their sexual stories. In this chapter, I argue that our current frameworks are inadequate. If we do not

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25 I will clarify how I define subjectivity in Chapter Three.

26 I define dominant discourse as discourses that are most privileged in our everyday lives in North America. They are discourses that are activated and relied on in understanding the world almost unconsciously, in that they are accorded such authority that they are often assumed to be the basis of our reality.

27 Though I use the term ‘feminist,’ I must note that this is not a monolithic or homogenous category. There are many streams of feminists thought and I will be exploring tendencies that occur in only some feminist work, as we will see.
assume that women are always already lacking and at risk of sexual harm we can better account for the complexities, ambivalences and contradictions that are present in young women’s sexual stories, yet have been smoothed over and covered up in dominant, feminist and sexual health discourses. This dissertation opens up to what women have to say, rather than reiterating theoretical assumptions of how they are at risk. In order to do so, it is important to explore how I see current theoretical approaches to young women’s (hetero)sexuality as limited. I spend considerable space here discussing dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality. I do this intentionally because, as will be seen, both feminist and sexual health discourses, unsurprisingly, at times activate streams of dominant discourses and also manifest similar contradictions.

When discussing how sexuality is constructed in dominant discourse over time, it is important to acknowledge the early absence of discussions of female-female desire, which was rarely discussed until it became demonized and infantilized by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sexologists, culminating in Freudian theories of lesbianism. Sexuality, specifically heterosexuality, has long been central to dominant discourses of femininity and womanhood. In the West, Christianity provides two of the most archetypical symbols of female (hetero)sexuality: the virgin Mary and the fallen woman Eve (Valverde, 1985). Mary renounces all personal desire and devotes herself to one specific male, Jesus. Conversely, Eve’s desire is not completely absent as she is seduced by the serpent. Eve’s desire causes the downfall of humanity and our expulsion from Eden. Eve’s secular parallel is ‘the whore’ or ‘the bad girl’ (Valverde, 1985). The good girl/bad girl division has suffused dominant discourses of women’s sexuality. Who is characterized on either side of the divide has always been connected to experiences of
class (Sangster, 1996; Peiss, 1989), race (Hammonds, 1997), and sexuality, where same-sex desire tends to be denied and demonized.

Historians have documented the rise of the ideal of ‘passionless femininity’ during the nineteenth century; within this discourse White, middle and upper class women were seen as best protected from their sexuality by completely denying their desire (Carpenter, 2005). This ideal replaced the earlier view that women, carrying on Eve’s ‘curse,’ were sexually dangerous creatures who could not control their sexuality. Complete denial became the appropriate response. Conversely, Black (Hammonds, 1997), Aboriginal (Carpenter, 2005) and working class women (Sangster, 1996; Peiss, 1989) were endowed in dominant discourse with a lascivious hypersexuality that had no hopes of being contained. The White middle and upper class ‘angels in the homes’ (Skeggs, 1997), by conforming to the ‘good girl’ ideals, could expect men’s protection from sexual risks such as unwed pregnancy, abandonment and rape (Vance, 1984). The women excluded from this category were offered no such protection and indeed were often at great sexual risk (Vance, 1984; Hammonds, 1997).

With the rise of sexology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, developed by people like Krafft-Ebbing, Havelock Ellis and Freud, whose work seems to reinforce and perpetuate the assumption of women’s ‘lack,’ dominant discourses of women’s (hetero)sexuality began to shift. In the twentieth century women have been constructed in dominant discourse as lacking, and thus as the passive, receptive counterpart to active male desire. In Freudian discourse women’s desire for other women was understood to be lacking ‘authenticity’ or validity, and was characterized as

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28 It was also believed that men should be protected from women’s sexuality but the responsibility for controlling sexuality fell almost exclusively on women’s shoulders.
immature and infantile. For Freud and many others, in the overarching context of women’s assumed sexual passivity and receptivity, same-sex female sexuality becomes not-sex. The construction of men’s desire as active and of women’s desire as passive are founding features of our current dominant understandings of sexuality (Segal, 1994). The passive/active assumption has been reiterated and supported in scientific and everyday discourse throughout the twentieth century.

Also in the twentieth century we saw the rise of the ‘companionate marriage’ ideal where new sexual values seem to allow for women’s desire but continue to construct it as solely relational to and responsive to men, especially husbands. At the same time, assumptions about women’s sexual nature and responsibilities were related to race and class, as early eugenic discourses provided the logic for encouraging White middle and upper class couples to have more sex and thus more children in order to ‘maintain the nation.’ Pivotal in the rise of the companionate marriage ideal were the key mid-century sexologists Kinsey (1948; 1953) and, later, Masters and Johnson (1966). Increasingly, women came to be defined as sexually similar to men, as being equally able to enjoy sex and orgasm. Sameness, in regard to one’s potential for sexual pleasure and gratification, rather than the earlier view of sexual difference, became increasingly dominant in these discourses (Segal, 1994; Potts, 2002). Despite these shifts, women’s desire still tended to be defined as responsive only to their male partners’ sexual drives (Carpenter, 2005; Potts, 2002; Segal, 1994), and men were constructed as teachers and guides, coaxing out women’s hesitant (hetero)sexuality. As we will see, in some ways the young women I spoke with understand their sexuality within this traditional framework. However, they also draw on other discourses to articulate themselves as sexual agents.
While men and women’s ability to provide and receive sexual pleasure was constructed in similar ways by mid-century sexologists, women’s ‘more characteristic’ sexual passivity (a logical compliment to ‘aggressive’ male sexuality) was increasingly highlighted, reiterated and reinforced. The way men and women sought pleasure and manifested their sexuality was caught up in the active/passive dichotomy. Sexology, from the late nineteenth to mid/late twentieth century, has been central to the development of dominant discourses in the increasingly medicalized, rationalized and scientific West. Inevitably, counter-discourses and resistance emerged in response to sexological discourses (Foucault, 1990). Generally however, as Segal argues, the sexologists “[re-affirmed] male domination as biological inevitability, [and portrayed] the ‘sex act,’ understood as heterosexual genital engagement, as its exemplary moment. A woman’s sexuality, although given a more autonomous existence, still required a man to initiate it and release it. In the bedroom, as in life, women remained subordinated to the needs and desires of men” (Segal, 1994: 79). As we will see, sexology and the development of our predominant understandings of heterosexuality within the frame of masculine activity and feminine passivity have left their mark on feminist and sexual health discourses as well. The liberal sexual discourses, which assume women’s right to sexual pleasure, apparent in the narratives of the women I interviewed, took root during this mid-twentieth century period.

As I noted above, another historically important period is the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s and 70s. This movement was made possible by the earlier shift which favoured companionate marriages and then more directly by other social movements that occurred in the 1960s, such as the civil rights movements and a more general rejection of
earlier moral values. During this period, the increasingly widespread use of ‘the pill,’ as hormonal contraception came to be known, facilitated the connection between sex and women’s bodily autonomy, as it offered a new way to prevent unintended pregnancy. The pill was seen as freeing women to engage in sex with fewer risks (Segal, 1994). The ‘free love’ facilitated by the pill was constructed as ‘freedom’ within a range of social movements, but women involved in the various movements became increasingly disenchanted with their subservient, supportive roles as ‘secretaries’ to male leaders. Many feminists see women’s subordination within the civil rights movements as the impetus for the rise of the second wave of feminism (Segal, 1994). Women of this generation, Segal argues, “moved on from seeing sex as liberation to seeking liberated sex” (30). In any case, shifts in moral discourse that supported the rights movements and the sexual revolution had a major impact on dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality and increasingly created discursive room for homosexuality as well.

In the 1980’s Wendy Hollway (1984, 1989) identified three overarching discourses of (hetero)sexuality circulating in Western society. Today her framework is still found to be useful and is used explicitly by many researchers (Braun et al, 2003; Potts, 2002) and implicitly by most. Although I shall develop Hollway’s ideas more fully in Chapter Four, a brief overview will help to introduce her ideas. Hollway sees three discourses as central to accounts of heterosexual relationships: the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive discourse. Within the male sexual drive discourse, men are constructed as active, if not aggressive, sexual agents who are biologically driven by their sexuality and are in need of sexual satisfaction – this discourse is related to the ‘coital imperative’ in which heterosexual coitus and male
orgasm are privileged expressions of sexuality (Segal, 1994; Potts, 2002; Braun et al., 2003). Within the have/hold discourse sex is part of a larger monogamous relational context and women are seen as gatekeepers of their sexuality and enforcers of the romantic ideals attached to ‘good’ sex. Within the permissive discourse sex between two consenting partners is encouraged and both women and men are assumed to be sexual agents. Right away contradictory aspects of the first two in relation to the last discourse are apparent. Three questions emerge from this contradiction: In what circumstances are women expected to be gatekeepers responsible for both satisfying men’s biological needs and maintaining their own claim for access to respectability? How are women subjected to male protection and resources in permanent relationships? And finally, in what circumstances are women allowed to engage freely as sexual agents? The “messy” complexity of the narratives analyzed in later chapters highlights the sexual contradictions young women are forced to negotiate.

More recent research on sexuality has come to focus on the contradictions present in dominant discourse (Phillips, 2000; Gonick, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Abel and Fitzgerald, 2006; Braun et al., 2003; Hollway, 1998). One of the most important contradictions experienced by young women today is between discourses of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality, which retain a focus on Hollway’s first two discourses, such that male sexuality and agency are privileged, and (apparently gender-neutral) liberal discourses that uphold sexual autonomy and self-determination (Gonick, 2004), and is supported by permissive discourses of sexuality. As Phillips (2000) and many other authors have pointed out, in the last thirty or forty years traditional gender and sexual roles in North American society have changed considerably, allowing for many more freedoms of
sexual expression. At the same time however, many of the sexual risks young women face, such as sexualized violence and sexually transmitted infections (hereafter STI’s), remain apparent (12). As well, there is the sensationalization and omnipresence of sex in general culture (in music videos, advertising, TV and movies, among other venues), which many view as the ‘sexualization of culture’ (Attwood, 2006), but which still conveys the common message that sex is still somehow ‘bad’ for girls and women. As Kipnis (2007) writes, “a mainstay of [writing on heterosexuality] is the cautionary tale aimed at dissuading women from having sex, or sex of the wrong kind, or with wrong people. The arguments vary, the politics may very, but the message keeps coming around again” (87). Specifically, we see these warnings around the potential expression of women’s active desire, as is perhaps evident in a ‘hooking up’ culture that various authors have lamented (Kipnis, 2007; Flack et al., 2007). Even if members of this younger generation are rampant hedonists, as Kipnis shows many mainstream writers are quick to assure us that “it’s hedonism minus the pleasure” (for women at least) (90). Sexual risk and passivity continue to be reiterated through dominant discourse. Even though young women’s passivity is assumed, in this context of sexual contradictions, they are concurrently positioned “as responsible for the sexual relationship and any problems occurring within it,” as Jackson (2005) found in her study of letters published and responded to in teen magazines (296).

Alongside tales of sexual doom and terror for women, the permissive discourse linked to liberal autonomy and freedom is often evident in popular culture, epitomized, for example in Cosmopolitan magazine. At the heart of ‘Cosmo ideology’ there is a

29 Here I note that a Foucauldian perspective reminds us that pro-sex feminist discourse circulating in popular culture, while challenging and reworking traditional gendered discourses, also creates its own anxieties and regulatory regimes of truth, often in the name of ‘emancipation.’
central contradiction wherein “women’s right to have affairs and even be aggressive both in and out of bed [is proclaimed] – never facing up to the fact that at some point both the boyfriends and [the experts] are going to find their authority directly challenged” (Valverde, 1985: 164). Within the Cosmo approach to sexuality, women are schooled in how to please their male lovers. At the same time, however, they are constructed as being responsible for their own pleasure as well, chided if everything is not perfect for both themselves and their partner. Desire is apparent but activated in ‘proper’ female ways that reiterate and validate passivity.

‘Pro-sex’ feminism avoids these particular contradictions and plays an important role in making women’s sexual rights and agency common sense to many young women today. From popular books to pornography, pro-sex feminists such as the Boston Women’s Collective (Our Bodies, Ourselves), Susie Bright, Carol Queen and Annie Sprinkle and popular culture figures such as Madonna, Kim Cattrall and Ani DiFranco have had a major impact on the possibilities women see as part of their sexual worlds. When discussing discursive constructions of women’s sexuality such counter-hegemonic influences must be acknowledged: in Chapter Four we will see how the young women I interviewed draw upon and incorporate sexually empowering discourses.

Books by journalists on women’s sexuality, such as Paula Kamen’s Her Way: Young Women Remake the Sexual Revolution, offer a similar approach to Cosmo, by celebrating this recent ‘individualist generation’ (2000:1) and the sexual freedoms available. Kamen argues that young women “feel entitled to conduct their sex lives on their own terms” (2000:2). Young women today are juxtaposed against the ‘sexually ignorant’ baby boomers that preceded them. Like Monica Lewinsky, they are free to have
sex ‘like a man,’ in the sense that young women are able to embrace certain cultural
codes of masculine sexuality, such as aggression, independence, and (supposed)
autonomy. Like Paglia (1992) and Roiphe (1993), Kamen tries to reinstate women as
sexual agents. However, here sexuality is completely exempt from the possibility of
cultural constraint. There is arguably some disruptive potential in such celebratory texts.
Nevertheless, as Hollway and Jefferson (1998) point out, their weakness lies in assuming
that both women and men are rational unitary subjects who engage in sex. My own
theoretical work, as will be outlined in Chapter Three, contributes to the critique of this
assumption of the sexual subject as rational and unified.

Looking back on her pivotal 1988 paper outlining ‘the missing discourse of
desire’ in sexual health education, Michelle Fine writes:

Calls for [women’s active] desire have, indeed, [been] decoupled from what
some of us thought was the object. The trajectories of desire have been mediated
and colonized by global capital, medicalization, privatization and the imperial
presence of the state, particularly in poor communities (2005: 56-57).

Fine wryly acknowledges that people must ‘be careful what they ask for.’ Even in the
1980s Valverde already saw how desire was taken up by consumerism and constructed as
limitless in popular culture and dominant discourse (1985: 152). This ‘sexualization of
culture,’ which Attwood argues is a ‘rather clumsy phrase,’ denotes a range of values,
identities and practices, including more permissive sexual mores, the proliferation of
sexual images and texts in popular culture; and the media’s fondness for sexual
controversies and panics (2006: 78-79) All in all, it signals a context wherein sex has
become ‘the Big Story’ (Plummer, 1995: 4). Relying on Foucault’s insights in The
History of Sexuality (1990), Attwood critically draws our attention to how increasing the
discursive articulation of sexuality in dominant discourse “[makes] our sexual practices and identities more available for regulation” (2006:82).

Critics of late modern culture are ambivalent about the sexualization of culture. Some see it as potentially subversive and others as a reiteration of traditional forms of discursive regulation. Within the context of the third wave of feminism, under the impact of Cosmo ideology, late modern capitalism, and the sexualization of culture, Hollway (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998) later argued that it is now possible “to talk of a (post)feminist discourse [wherein women position themselves as ‘the subject of sexual desire rather than its objects’] as distinct from a permissive one” (412). In this article however, Hollway and Jefferson do make it clear that “in the historical absence of positions which construct women as active sexual subjects, practices attempting to forge such a position - furthest developed in…a (post)feminist discourse - are constantly in conflict with dominant discursive constructions of female (and therefore also of male) sexuality” (1998:418). Like the arguments of Hollway and many others, my discussion focuses on these contradictions inherent in dominant discourse, and examines the discursive space that is opening up for an understanding of women’s sexual agency that is not simply passive and responsive to men’s active desire. Assuming women’s agency and ability to actively negotiate their sexual lives within constraints allows us to explore and offer legitimacy to ‘new’ discursive positions for women’s sexuality, however women choose to express it. The voices of the women I interviewed demanded that I acknowledge their agency and inventiveness.

Having explored many dominant discourses around women’s (hetero)sexuality and before I move on to explore various feminist discourses of women’s sexuality, it is
important to note how the young women I interviewed are culturally and historically positioned in specific ways. As was mentioned, pro-sex feminism has had a considerable impact on the popular culture the surround the young women I interviewed. There is also a considerable legacy of the broader feminist movement in popular culture. In many ways the women I interviewed live in a so-called ‘post-feminist’ context where it is often assumed that women have access to the same political, economic, and social privileges as men. Evidence of feminist ideals of sexual and economic equality is readily apparent on television shows such as *Sex and the City* and *The ‘L’ Word*. DIY (Do It Yourself) feminist websites and Girl Power cultural artifacts abound. In this context, the women I interviewed have relatively easy access to discourses that support their sexual autonomy, discourses which previous generations of women would have found much more challenging to access. As we will see however, in some ways the post-feminist context has empowered women and in others it has made the challenges and contradictions women face more invisible.

While discussing the historical and cultural context that this research occurs within, I will take a moment to discuss the specific context with which the women I interviewed live. All of the women I interviewed were residing in Vancouver, a coastal city and major seaport in southwestern British Columbia, Canada. Vancouver is one of North America’s most expensive cities and is regularly voted one of the world’s most livable cities, but it also is has one of Canada’s poorest neighbourhoods, the Downtown Eastside, which is home to a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people. Many of the participant’s experiences as urban, educated, middle class women are likely very different than perhaps rural women’s experiences or women’s experiences in the
Downtown Eastside, an area that over the last decade has had the highest HIV infection rate among injection drug users in the Western world.

Vancouver is the executive city for British Columbia’s many resource-based industries while also being a centre for cultural media productions such as film, television, video games, and pornography\textsuperscript{30}. Vancouver is very culturally and racially diverse with 51\% of the population being categorized as “visible minorities” (Statistics Canada 2007) and, according to the 2006 census, 32\% of its residents speaking a language other than English or French (Canada’s official languages) at home.

Given this specific historical and geographical context, the participants’ experiences may be significantly different that those of rural women’s in New Brunswick for example and women’s in previous generations. This being said, some of the women I interviewed grew up in different parts of Canada and a few in other countries. I do not wish to over generalize my population, as in the many ways discussed this is a very specific population, but I find it interesting that despite differences there are also a number of commonalities in participants’ narratives. Certainly future research will have to explore the extent to which my findings apply to other women’s experiences.

**Feminist Discourses**

In addition to acknowledging the radical pro-sex influences mentioned above, it is also important to explore how women’s sexuality has been constructed in current

\textsuperscript{30} Vancouver is often referred to as Silicon Valley North in acknowledgement of its extensive porn industry.
mainstream feminism. While there are parallels between some strands of feminist discourse and dominant discourse as discussed above, in that they both take up the assumption of women’s sexual passivity in some way, feminist discourse is distinctive in looking explicitly and critically at (hetero)sexuality. Since the emergence of feminism in the nineteenth century as a political orientation, Vance argues, “feminist theorists have disagreed on how to improve women’s sexual situation and, even more basically, on what women want sexually” (1984: 1). She identifies two streams of thought within feminist discourse, in general terms: either a ‘protectionist’ or ‘expansionist’ view of women’s sexuality (Vance, 1984). Protectionist arguments have sought to protect women from men’s aggressive lust, “assuming either that women’s sexuality is intrinsically muted or at least that it cannot flower until greater safety is established” (1). Conversely, expansionist discourse, increasingly seen in the twentieth century, asserts “that women could venture to be sexual in more visible and daring ways, especially as material changes which favored women’s autonomy in general (wage labour, urbanization, contraception, abortion) also supported sexual autonomy” (1-2). My research supports the argument that protectionist discourse has been maintained in mainstream feminism, as defined in Footnote Thirty One, and that expansionist discourse is privileged by pro-sex feminism.

A brief historical overview of feminism is useful to understand the context within which feminist constructions of women’s sexuality have developed. The first wave of feminism, which most publicly focused on gaining the vote for women and is often referred to as maternal feminism, emphasized the need for women to exercise moral

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31 I distinguish ‘mainstream feminism’ as the research and theory that is most privileged and visible within feminism, such streams often include the works of White, Western, middle and upper class, heterosexual feminist academics.
restraint over themselves. Despite dissenting voices among first wave feminism, such as Emma Goldman, the most privileged view stressed women’s sexual purity and moral superiority while highlighting these ‘strengths’ as the premise for why women should be given the vote (Segal, 1994, 80-81). In the early twentieth century, feminists like Christabel Pankhurst struggled for ‘Votes for Women and Chastity for Men,’ thereby activating two hopes, one for women’s political inclusion and for the end of the ‘scourge’ of venereal disease.

It was in the second wave of feminism, arising out of and with the social movements of the 1960s, that sexuality became a more fiercely contested public issue among feminists and that heterosexuality as an institution specifically came under public scrutiny. Out of the feminist-consciousness raising groups of the 1970s, a discourse of sexuality emerged as a central issue in women’s lives (Segal, 1994: 33). Women’s sexuality came to be understood as something that was defined and controlled by men. Feminists sought to redefine sexuality, emphasizing women’s sexual autonomy and the right to control their own bodies, asserting a positive sexuality within “a society at best ambivalent, and more often antagonistic, toward any such notion” (33). Some feminists then tried to seek a somehow ‘essential’ or ‘natural’ female sexuality that had hitherto been repressed, manipulated, and perverted by patriarchal society. “This means that women’s sexuality – often unthinkingly presumed heterosexual – could be thought of in the singular, and that distinctions between heterosexuality and lesbianism did not at first come to the fore” (34). Here Segal argues that we see a significant stress on developing new ‘feminist’ proscriptions around women’s sexuality to replace old patriarchal ones, a milieu in which Anne Koedt’s *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* (1970) was able to gain
supremacy. The possibility of women’s ‘legitimate or authentic’ heterosexual pleasure became increasingly questionable. As Segal claims, “the tendency simply to blame men, which was soon to overtake the passion to reform them, has always been present in feminist thinking and culture – at least, within the white feminist perspectives which have dominated women’s liberation movements in both Britain and the US” (49). It is necessary to note that many Black feminists, lesbian and heterosexual, are aware of the racist manipulation of rape charges and have challenged the alienation of men that was evident in mainstream middle-class, White feminism (59).

The first public split within feminism occurred in the 1970s and was between lesbian and heterosexual feminists. Stevi Jackson refers to this as ‘the challenge of political lesbianism’ (1999). During this period it was argued that regardless of one’s physical desires, women could and should focus all their resources, desires and support only on other women, hence ‘political’ lesbianism. Adrienne Rich’s influential essay, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience’ (1980), was key to this period of feminism because, rather than demonizing heterosexual women as dupes of patriarchy, as did some streams of political lesbianism, she focused her critique on the institution of heterosexuality. Rich’s voice to some degree disrupted the essentialist assumptions of the lesbian/heterosexual debates. Elsewhere in this skirmish it was thought that women “who had sex with men were colluding in their own oppression and any pleasure so gained a form of masochism,” to which “heterosexual feminists responded with a mixture of outrage and guilty defensiveness” (Jackson, 1999:14). The reverberation of these debates is still being felt today. As we will see, the implicit assumption that heterosexuality is somehow bad for women persists in feminist sexual health research.
Out of the hetero/lesbian conflict arose the ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s. Jackson argues that the sex wars focused on, though cannot be reduced to, issues concerning sexualized violence and pornography, and on exploring how sexuality had been constructed and defined from a masculine perspective (1999:16). Two areas of debate were central: first, the debate around pornography, censorship and legitimacy of ‘kinky sex,’ most often sadomasochistic sex in the lesbian community, as sexual expression, and second, the pleasure/danger debate. Carole Vance’s collection of essays, *Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality* (1984), is one of the key texts of this debate and remains influential today. Vance opens the text with the following statement, “The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women’s lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency” (1). Here, developing pro-sex feminist arguments, Vance disrupts the overemphasis on danger in much feminist theory which, she argues, “runs the risk of making speech about sexual pleasure taboo” with the result that “sexual pleasure in whatever form [becomes] a great guilty secret among feminists” (7). This text was influential in reminding its readers, then and today, that feminism “cannot create a body of knowledge that is true to women’s lives, if sexual pleasure cannot be spoken about safely, honestly, and completely” (7). This collection does not seek in any way to “weaken the critique of danger.” It acknowledges the hugely important impact that radical feminism, which understands men’s oppression of women as the first oppression of any group over another, has made in addressing domestic and

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32 Ironically, this feminist campaign for the censorship of pornography was supported by the religious right and became the most publicized, dominating perceptions of feminism in the 1980s.
33 This book came out of a conference at Barnard College in April 1982 called ‘Towards a Politics of Sexuality.’
sexualized violence, and in mobilizing resources for women’s shelters and rape crisis centres. Nevertheless, the contributors to *Pleasure and Danger* “wished to expand the analysis of pleasure, and to draw on women’s energy to create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger” (3). From my perspective, the importance of this collection’s contribution cannot be overstated. The second wave of feminism had shown that “gross and public departures from ‘good’ woman status, such as lesbianism, promiscuity, or non-traditional heterosexuality, still invite – and are thought to justify – violation” (4). If fear led to inaction and constrictions in women’s personal lives, Vance et al. were invaluable in showing that fear also constricted our theoretical engagement with sexuality. If left to fear in feminist theory, as elsewhere, “everything is attributed to men, thereby inflating male power and impoverishing ourselves” (5). Our silences “leave the irrationality and volatility of sex open to manipulation by others, easily mobilized in campaigns against sexual deviance, degeneration, and pollution” (5). Vance posits questions that still need to be asked of feminist research and theory today:

If sexual desire is coded as male, women begin to wonder if they are ever really sexual. Do we distrust our passion, thinking it perhaps not our own, but the construction of patriarchal culture? Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims, whose efforts must be directed at resisting male deprecations in a patriarchal culture? Must our passion await expression for a safer time? When will that time come? Will any of us remember what her passion was? *Does exceeding the bounds of femininity – passivity, helplessness, and victimization – make us deeply uncomfortable? Do we fear that if we act on our most deeply felt sexual passion that we will no longer be women? Do we wish to bind ourselves together into a sisterhood which seeks to curb male lust but does little to promote female pleasure? (1984:7, emphasis added).*

Vance’s questions raise the important issue of how *basic* understandings about gender and how/who people are in the world permeate, and indeed found, even the most critical
stances available. Does building a theoretical body of literature that does not assume women’s passivity somehow threaten the very notion of what is ‘woman’? By failing to consider the possibility of active female desire, in its myriad practices, some feminist theory is limited in its ability to disrupt and resist the overarching (masculine) perspective. Following Vance, an increasing number of authors (Valverde, 1985; Segal, 1994) have considered these questions and shown how feminist theory continues to be limited by phallocentric thinking. Again, it is important to note that I argue that the tendency to focus on danger is most prevalent in the mainstream of feminism and I distinguish this from the radical (expansionist) orientations of pro-sex feminist discourse. Interestingly, few of the women I interviewed verbally identified themselves as feminists, usually instead activating individualist “gender-neutral” discourses of sexual rights that are only partially informed by pro-sex third wave feminism. Perhaps this is illustrative of the split between women’s everyday lives and feminist discourse that Segal (1994) has argued has occurred.

In response to the theoretical inadequacies she saw, in 1985 Valverde proposed seeing sexual activity and passivity as two moments of a dialectic in order to move beyond the feminist impasse that (re)positions women as passive sexual victims of men’s inherent aggressiveness. Later, in 1994, Segal sought to reclaim sexual agency, specifically for heterosexual women, which she felt would “revive a richer and more inspiring feminist culture and politics” (xi). Her response was to deconstruct the notion of female sexual passivity and receptivity and male aggression and activity. Segal reminded us, again, that “the difficulties of overturning phallocentric ways of thinking about sex are so pervasive that it is not really surprising that in attempting to avoid them we often,
unwittingly, seem to add to their legitimacy” (41). In addition to disrupting dichotomous thinking about sexual passivity and agency, Segal also questioned the unity, rationality and coherence of the liberal (sexual) subject. The liberal (sexual) subject is assumed in dominant discourse, feminist theory and sexual health research. Important contributions can be made to theorizing young women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity if we no longer assume the liberal (sexual) subject. I elaborate on this argument in Chapter Three, choosing to focus on a poststructural and psychoanalytical view of subjectivity.

In 1984, as part of Vance’s collection of essays, Hollibaugh vehemently asserted, “[feminism] must be an angry, uncompromising movement that is just as insistent about our right to fuck, our right to the beauty of our individual female desires, as it is concerned with the images and structures that distort it” (409). This claim is as important today as it was over 20 years ago. Some feminist theorists are still trying to “move toward something: toward pleasure, agency and self-definition” (Vance, 1984: 24). I will show that a reliance on male and liberal-centric assumptions about sexuality, and women’s passivity specifically, and about the coherent, rational subject, delimits and circumvents efforts to theorize women’s (hetero)sexual agency.

**Discourses of Sexual Health**

Sexual health has long been an important issue in dominant discourses around sexuality more broadly. Valverde argues:

In Western capitalist societies since the eighteenth century there has been a tendency to equate sexual health with general social health, with ‘culture’ and ‘civilization,’ while sexual ‘degeneracy’ has been equated with the decline of empires and the breakdown of civilization (1985: 147).
The connections between sexual and social health can be seen in the eugenics movement and in first wave feminism’s call for women’s ‘moral (sexual) restraint’ during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as much as it is evident in later panics about and demonization of unwed Black teenaged mothers in the U.S. (Fine, 1988:42).

The sexual health literature I position myself in is connected to dominant discourse and feminist theory in a number of ways. Like feminist theory, in the attempt to understand young women’s sexuality feminist-informed sexual health research attempts to challenge dominant understandings of sexuality by identifying how dominant discourse delimits young women’s ability to be sexually self-determining. Also, like feminist theory, it gets caught up in sometimes reiterating and reinforcing the very discourses it seeks to disrupt. Above I have shown how mid-twentieth century sexological researchers, like Kinsey and Masters and Johnson, contributed to dominant understandings of sexuality. In research by Masters and Johnson, and later in feminist-informed sexual health research, there was an increasing emphasis on women’s sexual independence, often even outside of the marital unit, and on their responsibility for their sexual pleasure and health (Segal, 1994:103). Invariably, the presence of this popularized stream of research, promoting egalitarian heterosexual relationships and women’s sexual agency, did empower some women to assert themselves sexually (103). However, women also became increasingly responsible not only for both their partner’s and their own pleasure, but also for limiting negative aspects of heterosexuality, such as unplanned/unwanted pregnancy and, particularly after the discovery of HIV/AIDS in the
1980s, the spread of STIs. As I show in this thesis, the multiplication of female responsibility is a common theme in dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality.

Shere Hite was one of the most influential early feminist-informed sexology researchers. Many have praised the 1976 *Hite Report: A Nationwide Survey of Female Sexuality* as a pivotal exploration of women’s sexuality, a subject long shrouded in silence. While its value is significant, the *Hite Report* also embodies many of the problems present in feminist theorizing of female (hetero)sexuality. Segal (1994) claims that Hite’s work, like that of other sexologists, is orgasm-centric, and that, more importantly, it denies and brushes over women’s accounts of (hetero)sexual pleasure, specifically around penetration (106). It is telling that, under a section titled “Sexual Slavery,” Hite informs us that 87% of the women she studied do enjoy coital sex. Clitoral stimulation was privileged as the ‘proper’ site of female pleasure and “Hite’s all too blatant bias has served as a model for almost all subsequent feminist research on heterosexuality, which continues to take for granted women’s negative experiences of vaginal penetration” (Segal, 1994:109). My focus is not on the types of pleasure women find in their (hetero)sexual experiences per se. Rather, I hope to point out that assumptions of risk and lack in relation to men continue to found and permeate research on and theorizing about heterosexuality. From this perspective it becomes apparent that women’s stories of pleasure, their understandings of their desire, and their agency are often glossed over and unaccounted for in much sexual health research. Segal sums up much feminist-informed research in claiming “[the] conspicuous absence in all sexological writing—its inability to theorize desire-weakens the work” (113).

34 Interestingly in a later study with men (1981) Hite found a similar eroticization of being penetrated but, as Segal points out, she dismisses the possibility the perhaps (hetero)sexual pleasure is more complicated than the orgasmic focus of sexological research.
If the denial of women’s active sexual agency and desire is apparent in feminist sexual health research, so too is this ‘absence’ apparent in sexual health discourses as they are reiterated in sexual education in the classroom. Indeed, one of the key works on young women’s sexual health education is Michelle Fine’s (1988) *Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire*. I have outlined the assumption of the impossibility of women’s active, ‘healthy’ desire in dominant discourse and in much feminist discourse as well. In this context Fine’s findings are perhaps not surprising. Fine’s work is pivotal in articulating this silence, as it relates to sexual health education, and in opening it up to a critical gaze. Fine shows that in “an unacknowledged social ambivalence about female sexuality,” young women are “[educated] primarily as the potential victim of male sexuality, she represents no subject in her own right” (30). Specifically, Fine identifies four streams of discourse within the classroom. The first, ‘sexuality as violence,’ is most conservative and draws a direct connection between youth sexuality, violence and young women’s exploitation. The second, ‘sexuality as victimization,’ does not depict sexuality as inherently violent, but teaches young women, and increasingly young men, about “their vulnerability to potential male predators” (31). In this stream of thought, young people, predominantly young women, need to be schooled in protecting themselves from diseases, pregnancy and “being used.” The focus here is on “Saying no.” As we will see, this theme is the goal of much sexual health education today. Maia remembers being told “have guy friends, it’s ok, just be careful” in school, and many of the other women I interviewed were emphatic about how “useless” their formalized sexual health education had been. In sexual health discourses generally, as in dominant and feminist discourses, women are
again positioned as lacking in relation to men and assumed to be at risk from them and without their own active desire.

Fine goes on to identify a third discourse, ‘sexuality as individual morality.’ Here, there is a slight allowance for young women’s sexual subjectivity because their decisions are valued and supported, but only “as long as the decisions made are for premarital abstinence” (32). The language of self-control and self-respect predominates. Lastly, “a discourse of desire,” is present only as a “whisper” within institutionalized sites of sexual learning, and “[when] spoken, it is tagged with reminders of ‘consequences’-emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, and/or financial” (33). Often a discourse of desire appears “only as an interruption [and has] faded rapidly into the discourse of disease-warning about the dangers of sexuality” (38). While she finds a discourse of desire to be missing in institutional settings, Fine identifies a discourse of desire circulating in less formalized situations and in the girls’ understandings of themselves. Again, it seems that women are trying to speak something that dominant discourse, and to a lesser degree feminist and sexual health discourse, is unwilling to account for and engage with in significant ways. Women are again positioned primarily as gatekeepers who “say ‘yes’ or ‘no’” to male sexual agency rather than acknowledged as sexual agents who enact their own agency amidst constraint. Fine argues that unlike official school discourse, “sexual meanings voiced by female adolescents defy such classification” (35). She found that the young women she spoke with, predominantly low-income high school aged Black and Latina women, considered fears and passions “in the same breath.” Their “struggle to untangle issues of gender, power and sexuality underscores that, for them, notions of sexual negotiation cannot be separated from sacrifice and nurturance” (35). Fine offers an
increasingly complex view of the desiring female subject, which opened the door for later
critical work. As Fine cogently argues:

Few voices of female sexual agency can be heard. The language of victim-
ization and its underlying concerns – ‘Say No,’ put a brake on his sexuality,
don’t encourage – ultimately deny young women the right to control their
own sexuality by providing no access to a legitimated position of sexual

Despite Fine’s invaluable insights into the discursive limitation of young
women’s sexual subjectivity, both in dominant discourse and within sexual health
education - not to mention within feminist-informed research - we continue to see that
women are positioned as lacking and at risk of male sexuality. The WRAP (Women, Risk
and AIDS) project, undertaken by Holland et al. between 1988 and 1990, illustrates a
currently prevalent tendency in mainstream feminist sexual health research. The WRAP
project is by far the most influential work on young women’s (hetero)sexual activity and
their understandings of themselves as sexual beings. This massive British study comes
out of feminist-influenced sexual health researchers’ concern with young women’s
continued ‘inability’ to translate their sexuality education35, which occurs within broader
discourses of gender ‘equality,’ into concrete sexual health and safety increases.
Specifically, they situate their work with a context in which “the incidence of HIV
infection and AIDS among non drug injecting heterosexuals is currently low in the UK,
[but] epidemiological evidence suggests that this may be short lived” (1990:336).
Women’s bodies are constructed as the crux of this potential increase in the non-drug-
injecting heterosexual population. This highly influential study comes out of the feminist-
inspired focus on the question of how young women are delimited in their efforts to

35 Holland et al. document the limited extent to which this type of formal education occurs, finding it to be
“too little, too late, too technical” (1994b: 65). They claim that this lack of education is one of the factors
contributing to young women’s sexual disempowerment.
protect themselves from STIs/HIV and unplanned pregnancy, as well as in their efforts to exert their own agency. Holland et al. explore “what makes it difficult for women to practice safer sex” (1994a: 23). They “argue that if we are to understand young people’s sexual relationships we must attend to the power relations within which sexual identities, beliefs and practices are embedded” (1990: 336). As part of broader feminist efforts to empower young women, this study seeks to document the limits women face in asserting their sexual health and safety within patriarchal society in order to begin to overcome these obstacles.

It would be surprising to find a related work that did not directly quote and cite one of Holland et al.’s many articles on the project. In praise, Stevi Jackson writes:

This study…is probably the most thorough and sophisticated research to have been carried out on young women’s sexuality to date, based on in-depth interviews with 148 British women aged 16-21 from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds, and followed up with similar interviews with 46 young men. The findings have been reported in over 40 publications, culminating in the book Male in the Head, which draws together many of their findings and ideas. (1999:28)

While I do not in any way question the validity of the WRAP project, either methodologically or theoretically, I do feel that it is important to compliment such research with additional research that focuses on how women are also discursively positioned in ways that do not merely reiterate gendered inequality. The titles Male in the Head and the Women, Risk and AIDS project suggest that limited attention was given to young women’s sexual agency. Holland et al.’s argument that young women internalize patriarchal culture (1990, 1994b, 1998, 2003), crippling their ability to care for their sexual health and their pleasure, is an important one in a supposedly post-feminist context where such inequality is assumed to have disappeared. The WRAP project is invaluable,
but there needs to be space for not only exploring the dangers and risks that young women face, but also for their active desire and negotiations of sexual agency within structures of inequality. While there is some evidence of young women’s own desire and agency in their research, the themes of risk, constraint, and servility toward men are central, while resistance is usually relegated to the conclusion (Holland et al. 1994b). The general uptake of the WRAP project findings by the feminist sexual health community often emphasizes and highlights their negative findings.

In Holland et al’s myriad publications on the WRAP project they argue, in various ways, “that young women’s limited sexual knowledge, their alienation from their own desires, and the concomitant lack of control in sexual encounters places them at particular risk in relation to HIV infection” (1994b:62). I would not question that women experience disproportionate risk of HIV, but feel we need to problematize the assertion that young women are always alienated from their own desire. If we are trying to build feminist-inspired, empowering sexual health education policies and approaches which are relevant to young women’s lives and which will make an impact on their behaviour and understandings, we must engage young women not only as sexual objects within patriarchal relations but as sexual agents actively negotiating the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, class, racialization, and ability. In my interviews, Persephone was particularly derisive of sexual health teachers who refused to acknowledge her right to be sexual and remembered herself as a youth wondering about their “gall” to do so.

It is not surprising that WRAP’s findings are privileged, given the larger dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality (particularly those around women’s sexual passivity and men’s sexual aggressiveness) that circulate in society. There is also a
reiteration of the assumption that women are at risk within heterosex because they are often, according to Holland et al., “constrained by the confusion of their notions of sexuality with their expectations of romance, love and caring” (1990:340). The discursively naturalized connection between women and their emotions in dominant discourse is common. Given the positioning of women as caring nurturers within dominant discourse it is important to explore how ideas of love and romance situate hetero sex; however, we must not be limited to assuming that women’s behaviours and self-understandings are dictated by their emotions and desire to foster lifetime relationships with men. Exploring what is not working in women’s sexual lives because their desire is often orientated to men’s sexual needs and pleasures in patriarchal society, as Holland et al. do, is productive, but we must also pursue research that highlights and explores women’s active desire.

The WRAP project also perpetuates the belief that men’s sexual interests are diametrically opposed and antagonistic to women’s, with the authors claiming that “it appears that often the main thing standing between young women and safe sex is the men they are with” (1990:347). Privileging antagonistic heterosexual assumptions and women’s vulnerability in our research is not the only way to account for young women’s experiences of sex with men. If researchers and educators are trying to make sexuality education relevant to young women’s lives, they must reflect all aspects of women’s desire and experience, not only experiences of constraint. I acknowledge the value of research efforts such as the WRAP project but in this dissertation, which builds on others’ work (Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002; Allen, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Abel and Fitzgerald, 2006; Higgins, 2007), I move beyond and compliment mainstream feminist
sexual health research that at times reiterates and legitimates the dominant discourse of (hetero)sexuality.

Only in listening to how young women speak about the complexities and contradictions that they experience can feminist researchers build relevant theories of (hetero)sexual subjectivity, theories that speak to young women and their experiences rather than alienate and discredit young women’s stories. In the mid 1990s Michelle Fine (with Pat Macpherson) continued to talk to young women with diverse backgrounds to delve deeper into their personal ‘discourses of desire.’ This research causes Fine and Macpherson to acknowledge “how dated the academic literatures were, how powerful feminism had been in shaping [young women’s] lives and the meanings they made of them, and yet how inadequately their feminism dealt with key issues of identity and peer relations” (1994:219). They find that “the concerns of white elite women are represented as the concerns of [adolescent girls]” (220, emphasis in original). By accounting for our own assumptions as feminist researchers we can be more attentive to young women’s sexual stories in order to revitalize a relevant body of feminist literature.

Where I Stand

The discourses available to us both enable and constrain what we can articulate, experience and understand. I have outlined three distinct but interconnected discourses on (hetero)sexuality: dominant, feminist and sexual health education. These discourses inevitably enable and constricbth both what young women can know and say about their sexuality as well as what researchers ask and how they understand young women’s sexual subjectivity. Reviewing what feminist sexual health researchers have learned in

36 I will return to a more detailed discussion of sexual health education in Chapter Eight.
the last two decades, Fine (2005) asserts that we now have much evidence for the constraints entailed in gendered discourses of (hetero)sex. Nevertheless, Fine argues, “desire denied insists; it carves underground irrigation systems of radical possibility” (Fine, 2005:55, emphasis in original). I will build on Fine’s and others injunction to develop, support, and legitimate a discourse of desire in young women’s lives and in their sexual experiences so that this discourse can inform and produce alternative theories of subjectivity that do not focus exclusively on young women’s sexual passivity and risk. At the same time, I question and deconstruct the assumption of a liberal subject that directs and rationally engages in sexual activity. Following Butler, I maintain: 

The fact that desire is not fully determined corresponds with the psychoanalytic understanding that sexuality is never fully captured by any regulation. Rather, it is characterized by displacement, it can exceed regulation, take on new forms in response to regulation, even turn around and make it sexy. In this sense, sexuality is never fully reducible to an ‘effect’ of this or that operation of regulatory power. This is not the same as saying sexuality is, by nature, free and wild. On the contrary, it emerges precisely as an improvemental possibility within a field of constraint (2004:15).

In Chapter Three I develop further how dominant, feminist and sexual health discourses are upset by poststructural and psychoanalytic insights concerning sexual subjectivity and sexual health. Above I have positioned this dissertation within three key discourses which have produced and constrained our current understandings of young women’s sexual subjectivity.

By accounting for desire in women’s narratives and including psychoanalytic and poststructural insights into subjectivity, I move beyond the assumption that young women’s ‘brains turn to mush’ as they attempt to navigate their sexual desires and “reconcile enjoying [hetero sex] under the current conditions” (Kipnis, 2007:89). As Kipnis scathingly and insightfully notes:
There are many conflicting stories circulating about what women are getting up to in bed, and how much they’re really enjoying it, and whether proclaiming enjoyment is even a reliable indicator of anything when it’s a woman doing the proclaiming; we are the sex after all, notorious for faking enjoyment (2007: 87).

Listening to what women want rather than telling them what their sexuality should look like is a productive way to understand how young women negotiate pleasure, desire, and connection with an intimate partner within gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed structures. Thaweesit argues, “[ambivalence] and tensions predominate in women’s verbal expressions and silences whenever their actual sexual behaviour is incongruent with certain authoritative… discourses” (2004: 206). She believes that these ambivalences, tensions and silences are central to theorizing sexual subjectivity. In a similar way, I explore ambivalence and contradiction in young women’s narratives and silences, addressing the complexities of how we understand ourselves and engage as sexual agents. In a period that sees increasing rates of HIV and other STIs among young women (Potts, 2002; Health Canada, www.hc-sc.gc.ca), it seems pressingly important to develop “research and political strategies that illuminate the textures of women’s lived experiences, rather than smoothing them over, [which] may help fuel efforts to critique and transform existing problematic discourses” (Phillips, 2000:210, emphasis in original).

When addressing the complex, often contradictory, textures of women’s lived experiences, our research and political strategies must at the same time account for young women’s sexual agency and pleasure. In the next chapter, I outline the theoretical approaches I feel extend beyond the understandings of young women’s sexuality currently available in dominant, mainstream feminist and sexual health education discourses.
Chapter Three: Theory and Methodology - Questioning the Subject and the Interview Process

As noted above, I approached the interviews I conducted with serious reservations about the ability of much of current dominant, feminist, and sexual health education discourses to adequately account for young women’s sexuality. On seeing the complex and at times contradictory character of the narratives, I knew I would have to look outside of the mainstream feminist sociological (tool)box in order to develop a richer understanding of what the women were saying. I could not simply highlight the coherence of their narratives and ignore the moments when narratives fell in on themselves. In this chapter, I outline the theoretical and methodological approaches I found useful in conducting interviews and analyzing the narratives.

In this dissertation I explore young women’s negotiation of dominant discourses of gendered (hetero)sexuality and their understandings of themselves as sexual beings and actors, which constitutes their sexual subjectivity. Following Currie et al. (2007:393) I use the word ‘negotiate (ing) (tion)’ in a way similar to how they use the word positioning to capture the complexities of subjectivity and to acknowledge our engagement with discourse and subject formation as an ongoing accomplishment. Methodologically, I approach these issues by conducting semi-structured open ended-interviews covering a variety of topics, while allowing the interview to flow as the participants saw fit. From a theoretical perspective I perform a poststructurally- and psychoanalytically-informed discursive analysis of these 26 interviews. Following Weedon’s outline of feminist poststructuralism, I focus on discursive practices, “analyzing how they are structured, what power relations they produce and reproduce, where there are resistances and where we might look for weak points open to challenge
and transformation” (1987:136). I see everyday (hetero)sexual encounters as “taking place within a social context shaped by competing discourses of heterosexuality. [These] discourses are seen to enable, and limit the possibilities of, [such] material-discursive practices” (Braun et al, 2003:238).

My use of the concept subjectivity takes Adams’ (1997) definition as its point of departure:

subjectivity is to be understood as both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the individual. It refers to the way we understand who we are in the world and how we take our place in it. We make this knowledge ‘ours,’ not through the revelations of our ‘true selves,’ but via our negotiations through and within discourse – regulated systems of what can be expressed and said. Our discursive attachments let us bring meaning to the world around us and to our place within it. They offer us subject positions through which we come to understand who and what we are. Our location at the confluence of a variety of discourses makes possible the range of ways we have of expressing ourselves, as well as meanings we assign to our expressions (15-16).

Once subjectivity is defined there still remains the task of deciding how to best ‘get at’ subjectivity analytically. As mentioned, when I began to analyze the interview narratives, I felt that many of my mainstream feminist sociological tools, perhaps focusing on how young women’s sexuality is constructed within current capitalist relations of ruling, or focusing exclusively on gendered sexual inequality, failed to fully account for the complexity I saw in the narratives. I needed an alternative analytical vocabulary. Many theorists have been drawn to psychoanalytic theory when struggling to understand subjectivity (Sondergaard, 2002). I became increasingly drawn to a psychoanalytic framework for thinking through subjectivity. While some theorists question the ‘compatibility’ of using psychoanalytic and poststructural analytic approaches to sociological explorations of subjectivity (Sondergaard, 2002), important theoretical work such as Judith Butler’s (1993, 1997, 1999, 2004), Iris Marion Young’s (1990), and
Jacqueline Rose’s (1986) shows the productive and illuminating possibilities of using psychoanalytic insights to explore sociological issues of power, inequality, and subjectivity.

In this chapter I outline how I have combined a Foucauldian-informed poststructuralism, following McLaren’s (2002) exploration of subjectivity, with psychoanalytic insights into subjectivity (Hollway, 1989) in order to explore how the sexual subject ‘comes to be.’ I use a discourse analysis that illuminates the discourses emergent in young women’s sexual narratives alongside psychoanalytic concepts to theorize young women’s sexual subjectivity in new ways. In this chapter I outline the theoretical orientations that guide my analysis, which in turn affected my use of interviewing as a methodological tool. From a political perspective, behind both my methodological and theoretical approaches, my orientation is (poststructurally informed) anti-oppression feminism.

In taking up poststructural and feminist insights, I remain hopeful that structures of inequality can be reworked. Thus I approach young women as active, innovative sexual and gendered agents who are negotiating gendered norms. My task is to analyze the inherent instability of gendered norms and the resulting possibilities for transgression and subversion created by the negotiation of these norms. I explore moments when young women’s voices interrupt dominant, feminist and sexual health discourses, highlighting the complexities that already exist in experiences of sexuality but that are discursively silenced in a context that denies women’s desire.

Both in my method and theoretical approach, I focus on language use. I asked the participants questions about their sexual experiences. I do not apply an unwarrented label
of ‘truth’ to their words but rather see their words as manifestations of the available and competing discourses of (hetero)sexuality that they are negotiating. I unpack how the women articulate and understand their selves and their experiences, their sexual subjectivity, in order to explore the processes constituting this subjectivity (Hollway, 1989). Following Weedon, I remain cognizant of the fact that “language, in the form of socially and historically specific discourses, cannot have any social and political effectivity except in and through the actions of individuals who become its bearers by taking up the forms of subjectivity and the meanings and values which it proposes and acting upon them” (1987:34). In this way, I see the language of my participants as a window into how various discourses delimit and enable different courses of action, choices, understandings, and experiences. While poststructural and psychoanalytic insights show us how “the individual subject’s misrecognition of herself as the true author of her thoughts, speech and writing gives the articulation of subjectivity in language the temporary appearance of fixity”, I maintain that “the temporary fixing of meaning is always precarious” (Weedon, 1987:105). Understood this way, discursively articulated meaning is a great ally to feminist efforts to rework gendered discourses of (hetero)sexuality. From a psychoanalytic perspective we will also see how the imagined unity of subjectivity is betrayed in language (Grosz, 1990:59). Once again, the semi-structured interview is a productive methodological tool to address the theoretical issues I discuss in this dissertation. While the women invariably experience and attempt to articulate themselves (their subjectivity) as coherent and stable, a common feature of late modern Western subjectivity (Hollway, 1989; Davies et al., 2006), a process I explore in

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37 I will illustrate below how I distinguish poststructural insights into language and discourse from psychoanalytical insights into (social) psychic processes.
Chapter Four, there is a concurrent betrayal of this coherence in language, which I will examine from a psychoanalytic perspective in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. In exploring both experiences and language in my methodological and theoretical approaches I seek to address the two sites wherein change can and must be realized.

**Theoretical Upsets**

As McLaren (2002) argues, Michel Foucault’s theoretical work offers a useful starting point for theorizing the connection between discourse and subjectivity. Foucault’s reconceptualization of power in *The History of Sexuality* (1990) has become important for feminist examinations of women’s sexuality that both acknowledge women’s agency and avoid structural determinism. Rather than theorizing social power as a function of sovereignty or as resulting from monarchical rule over others, Foucault argues that we must reconceptualize power ‘without the king,’ and thus as a multiplicity of forces immanent in a variety of spheres. Since power is always contested, there are multiple, though differently authorized, discourses through which power circulates. Different forms of power are interlinked within contradictory and fragmented strategies, but often form comprehensive systems. Power is constantly reproduced and reiterated at every moment but also constantly contested, which is Foucault’s central insight. He clarifies that power should be seen “as a dispersion of centers from which discourses [emanate], a diversification of their [discursive] forms, and the complex deployment of the networks connecting them” (1990: 34). Exploring discourses within networks of power becomes important in understanding the strategic role of sexuality and our participation within these networks.
With regard to sexuality specifically, Foucault argues that since the Victorian period we have experienced an increasing inventiveness and “multiplication of discourses” surrounding sexuality. His argument challenges the belief that during and since the Victorian period Western society has been characterized by sexual repression, a belief which he terms the Repressive Hypothesis. This multiplication of discourses has been supported by the increasing examination of the conscience via confessions of various forms and the advent of medical technologies of sex. Foucault argues that since the Victorian era sexuality has been subject to an “incitement to discourse.” The number of discourses used to discuss sexuality has increased exponentially, resulting in a ‘speechifying of sexuality’ in everyday life, while authorized speech has been relegated largely to judico-medical ‘experts’ and their discourses. Thus for Foucault the history of sexuality is really a history of the proliferation of discourses, which hold so much power precisely because they are construed as ‘speaking the truth of’ the subject.

Poststructural feminist Chris Weedon elaborates on Foucault’s argument by exploring how discourses “are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They also constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (1987, 108). Weedon’s work is useful in developing a Foucaudian discursive analysis that illuminates our understanding of sexual subjectivity. Examining which discourses women activate to understand themselves as sexual agents and how they negotiate and manipulate dominant discourses of women’s passivity acknowledges them as active, desiring agents in the context of power that often masks much of its effects. The interviews show how various types of discourses inform participants’ sexual subjectivity and how discourses are differentially drawn on and
authorized in the interviewees’ understandings of themselves as sexual beings, resulting in being both enabled and delimited by myriad discourses. Sexuality then is an excellent site to explore power because “discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise” (Weedon, 1987: 32).

In the introduction to this chapter, I outlined Adams’ (1997) understanding of subjectivity. I now move beyond this definition with a critique informed by Foucault’s concept of ‘subjectification’ (assujetissement), which offers an understanding of how our subjectivity is structured. Using Foucault’s concept of ‘subjectification,’ I explore how various discourses have the effect of both limiting and enabling various ways that women understand and thus experience their sexuality. Subjectification, then, is one of the processes through which theorists can understand sexual subjectivity (insofar as the young women understand themselves and their actions in the world, their ‘me,’ within the context of subjectification). I also examine how the discourses young women have access to, and the social structures they are surrounded by, also provide frameworks (or valid ‘storylines’) for how they can act and understand themselves as sexual agents. Foucault (2003) writes that much of his work focuses on how a human being becomes a Subject. This is the process of subjectification. Subjectification is a form of power, a power that is immanent to the person precisely because it is part of how one understands oneself (‘who I am’). He writes, “this form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him” (2003: 130). Via subjectification we are thus both “tied to [our] own identit[ies] by a conscience or self-knowledge” and subject to others by control and
dependence (130). ‘Truth’ and the truth of a subject (‘who I am,’ our subjectivity) “[are] only produced by virtue of multiple forms of constraint” (316). Thus the truth of one’s self is “achieved” as we are subjected by multiple discursive restraints. This process is referred to as subjection. Via subjection we are both “tied to [our] own identit[ies] by a conscience or self-knowledge” and subject to others by control and dependence (130). The power of subjectification is such that “the one over whom power is exercised is recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible interventions may open up” (138). Thus “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only in so far as they are ‘free’”; in other words “freedom must exist for power to be exerted” (139). The subject must have “some possible mobility, even a chance of escape,” unlike a chained slave (an example that Foucault uses) (139). People must experience themselves as free. The ‘me’ of subjectivity, via the process of subjectification, is understood as how I make my choices and how I am free to define who I am within constraints that we are subject to but which, at the same time, offer points of resistance and transgression.

Adding some psychoanalytic insights to Foucault’s work, Butler further clarifies that:

subjection is neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction in production, a restriction without which the production of the subject cannot take place, a restriction through which that production takes place. (1997:84, emphasis in original)

In other words, the discourses we have access to may limit our understandings of ourselves – for example, that women are sexually passive, that gender is purely dichotomous and oppositional, and so on - but they also provide a subject position to
speak from, without which we would not be intelligible or authoritative (to varying
degrees). Such subjects have the potential in turn to rework the very discourses that limit
them precisely because the process of subjectification produces a ‘me.’ As Judith Butler
writes, the concept of subjectification allows us to account for gendered and sexed
performances that “swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize
possibilities of ‘subjects’ that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility,
but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible”

A common critique of Foucault is that his view of subjectification privileges a
negative understanding of subject formation insofar as it stresses the moment of
‘subjectification as subjection’ at the expense of a closer consideration of agency and
resistance. This critique seems undertheorized as Foucault, as well as Butler who
influentially builds on his work on subjection, have both emphasized the mutually
constitutive aspects of delimitation and enablement. Foucault develops the notion of
subjectification specifically to argue that “the notion of repression is quite inadequate for
capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power” (2003:307). Similarly, Butler
further clarifies that:

The paradox of subjectification (assujetissement) is precisely that the
subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced,
by such norms. Although constitutive restraint does not foreclose the
possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory
practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to
power. (1993:15, emphasis in original)

The subject ‘who would resist such norms’ is the ‘me’ or the subjectivity produced, and
delimited, via subjectification. Here I would say that it is the productive moments of
subjectification that are theoretically most useful and novel, in the sense of ‘enabling, if
not producing’ the resisting subject. Foucault’s and Butler’s articulations of subjectification are premised on Hegel’s proposition that “desire is always a desire for recognition”, such that “to persist in one’s own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition” (Butler, 2004: 31). Thus discourse is a form of power which produces subjects insofar as it allows us to position ourselves within it and be recognized. This recognition is also inevitably delimiting. Our positioning of our selves within discourse constitutes our subjectivity. Butler reminds us that “subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (1997:2). Thus we see how the concept of subjection is not a choice because “the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence” (20). As we will further see below in my discussion of Lacan’s ‘mirror stage,’ the misrecognition of ourselves as coherent, ‘choosing’ subjects, though very real to us as our subjectivity, is based on an illusion of freedom without limits, constraints or restrictions.

In my interviews I explore these moments when young women recognize themselves and seek the recognition of their partners, society and myself as an interviewer as competent, intelligible (hetero)sexual subjects. These moments are also accompanied by and entail the constant reworking and enabled disruption of these very same norms and discourses. Butler claims that subjection is the trajectory of our most fundamental desire to be recognized as subjects generally. However, I also explore the desire to be recognized as competent (hetero)sexual female sexual agents, which necessitates young women’s negotiation of patriarchal dominant discourses of autonomous liberal subjecthood and (hetero)sexuality in ways that both delimit and
enable myriad choices, behaviours and experiences. Both Butler and Foucault remind us that there is not a subject external to power who is resisting, but rather a subject enabled and constrained by subjectification. As Weedon summarizes “[to] speak is to assume a subject position within discourse and to be subjected to the power and regulation of the discourse” (1987:119, emphasis in original); at the same time she reminds us that “the interpellation of individuals as subjects within particular discourses is never final. It is always open to challenge. The individual is constantly subjected to discourse” (97), which enables transformation of discursive and material relations.

Foucault’s historical studies of power and discourse also allow us to imagine new ways of articulating a ‘reverse discourse’ or of ‘talking back.’ As Weedon clarifies, “[reverse] discourse enables the subjected subject of a discourse (really multiple discourses) to speak in her own right” (1987:109). My research explores how young women both disrupt and reiterate patriarchal constructions of their sexuality as passive. Since discourses are suffused with power, they also have the potential to expose and undermine it. In the interviews I conducted we will see that “new knowledges that begin from bodies and pleasure can serve as counterdiscourses…[that] help to interrupt the process of normalization that is part and parcel of the deployment of sexuality” (McLaren, 2002:113). While these are termed ‘reverse or counter discourses’ it is important to remember that these are never ‘outside’ of power or discourse and, via the process of subjection, are always enabled, produced and constrained by variously privileged discourses.

Power and discourse are inextricably linked. Weedon writes:

Power is a relation. It inheres in difference and is a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by
discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects (1987:113).

Weedon’s relational concept of power is useful in understanding young women’s sexual subjectivity and thus their available and likely courses of action. Building on Foucault I hope to theorize sexuality in a way that addresses both “power and resistance in ways which locate them socially and historically, and which point to how resistance is produced and new discursive positions developed” (Weedon, 1987: 123). In doing so, I explore how dominant discourses of sexuality are modified by their very exercise (123). Exposing discourses and their differential, fluid activation provides insight into how power operates in young women’s understandings of themselves as sexual agents and the feasible courses of action they see for themselves. Being both constrained and enabled by various competing and differentially privileged discourses, following Probyn, I view the sexual self as “a combination of acetate transparencies: layers and layers of lines and directions that we fix together and in depth, only then to be rearranged again” (1993:1). At the same time, I remember that this constant rearranging is never a ‘free play’ where anything is possible because it is a process immanent to discourse and power.

While seeing the utility of Foucauldian insights, I also remain cognizant of Butler’s cautions about relying solely on Foucauldian discourse analysis. As she writes regarding the discursive productivity of the subject:

the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power. Although Foucault identifies the ambivalence in this formulation, he does not elaborate on the specific mechanisms of how the subject is formed in submission. Not only does the entire domain of psyche remain largely unmarked in his theory, but power in this double valence of subordinating and producing remains unexplored. Thus, if submission is a condition of subjection, it makes sense to ask: What is the psychic form that power takes? Such a project requires thinking that theory of power together with a theory of psyche, a task that has been eschewed by writers in both Foucauldian and psychoanalytic orthodoxies.
For this reason I find it productive to include psychoanalytic concepts that help us understand the processes through which we understand ourselves as (sexual) subjects. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I use three psychoanalytic concepts (abjection, disavowal and ambivalence) to read participants’ narratives. I see these psychoanalytic concepts as a specific form of discourse analysis but also as a way to move beyond assumptions of women’s sexual passivity that pervades the three discourses within which I position my work (dominant, feminist and sexual health discourses), and as a way to understand how power via discourses circulates through young women’s lives and self-understandings. Specifically, I rely on non-clinical, non-pathologizing aspects of psychoanalysis as a method of interpretation of both the articulated and unarticulated aspects of women’s narratives. The psychoanalytic concepts that I use are analytical, not diagnostic tools. The concepts allow me to account for processes in the narrative and at no time do I attempt to pathologize or make claims about an individual’s psychic state. Psychoanalytic insights can be used to expose processes of subject formation that are latent in narratives, those that the speaker often does not acknowledge. Specifically, Lacanian psychoanalytic insights will allow me to begin to approach processes of subject formation in these narratives.

**Subjective Upsets**

One of Jacques Lacan’s primary psychoanalytic contributions to this project is his understanding of the subject as fundamentally fragmented, contradictory and unstable (Lacan, 1995); in essence he shows the illusory nature of subjectivity. Although we
sometimes experience ourselves as coherent, choosing subjects, Lacan shows this to be only a shell precariously covering up and compensating for the underlying disunity and incoherence (1995). This understanding disrupts a multitude of modernist, humanist perspectives that assume the subject to have a stable, internal, and pre-discursive core that enables autonomous subjects to act apart from societal structures that limit our actions. Humanism assumes that our subjectivity speaks the truth of the subject itself, an assumption which Lacan contests. The Lacanian subject is the obverse of the humanist one. Grosz praises Lacan for helping to free feminist theory from the constraints of humanism, which she argues is “a largely metaphysical and implicitly masculine notion of subjectivity” (1990:148). Lacan argues that the ‘I,’ the subject, is created via the Mirror Stage, which evokes the splitting of the ego, in contrast to the modernist belief in a conscious and autonomous subject governed by the *cogito* (Descartes’ “I think therefore I am”) (1995:135). This theory of the self assumes a fundamentally fractured rather than coherent subject. The (mis)recognition of our selves in ‘mirrors’ (objects and subjects that surround and reflect us) situates the agency of the ego in a fictional and imaginary direction. As Weedon notes, the Mirror Stage:

> creates in the individual a structure of subjectivity which ensures that the individual, as a speaking subject, will be caught in a misrecognition of itself as the *Other*. The *Other* is the position of control of desire, power and meaning…In identifying with the position of the Other, the subject misrecognizes itself as the source of meaning and the power that structures it and of which it is an effect. (1987:51, emphasis in original)

> We assume or strive for the perfected coherence in the mirror but do not achieve it (Lacan, 1995). We act ‘as if’ the ‘I’ is internal and coherent though it remains disunited and permanently incomplete through the course of the lifespan. The mirror serves an ‘exemplary function,’ in the sense of an ideal, because it does not accurately represent the
infant’s experience, which in many ways is still fragmented, incomplete, and without total control. The image remains purely an ideal throughout our lives, as our actual physical/emotional well being and competent mastery of our world will fail to correspond completely to our ideal image of it. Thus the ‘I’ is not ‘resolved’ in any sense during infancy but rather remains disunited and incomplete throughout life (1995). Lacan writes that the “mental permanence of the I” is necessarily “pregnant with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue in which man projects himself [and] with the phantoms that dominate him” (1995:136-137). For Lacan, there is only symbolic construction and ontological history, a constant ‘coming into being’ and retroactive construction of the past for the rest of our lives. The Lacanian ‘I’ or self is fictional in that it is a way of overcoming fragmentation and powerlessness. In this sense the ‘I’ is an ‘orthopaedic’ device (like a leg brace), which ‘binds’ disunity into a stable subject position. Lacan characterizes this ‘binding’ as fundamentally rigid and constraining, though it gives us a place from which to claim a valid (necessarily subjected) subject position (1995). Judith Butler further argues (1993, 1997, 1999) that while the fundamentally discordant and fractured self potentially undermines gender and sexual essentialism, each of us must also accept the current constraints placed upon our sexuality (such as gender and sexual dichotomies) in order to claim a speaking position and to be acknowledged by others, and ourselves, as valid, intelligible subjects who have the right to claim a subject status and social belonging. Since Butler’s focus is on the heterosexual matrix, for her a valid, authoritative subject position is juxtaposed to the abjection of queer displays.

Lacan shows us that, because the subject is not an essentialized, coherent whole, all self-narratives will be filled with tensions, contradictions and fissures. Psychoanalysis
assumes that our speech provides evidence of our fragmented state and thereby undermines the notion of the modernist subject. I approach this project using Lacanian insights on the subject to explore subjectivity as a fluid, on-going and constant process. From a Lacanian- and poststructural-informed perspective that highlights the troubled and contradictory nature of the subject, it is possible to see how dominant discourses of women’s sexual passivity and lack of desire are both disrupted and reiterated in their narrative accounts of their experience, in addition to offering insight into the more complex and ambivalent aspects of sexual behaviours.

Hollway argues that Lacan identified two specific moments, or developmental splits, through which the subject is formed: first, the Mirror Stage and second, when we enter into language (1989:82). Entering into language allows us to articulate an ‘I’ but it necessitates our positioning ourselves, and losing ourselves, like an object (the spilt between I and me). Lacan offers insights into the ‘I’ (1995) which I use to explore the ‘me’ of subjectivity. In other words, I explore how we understand ourselves (as an object) in the world. Thus both the mirror stage and our entry into language are ‘splittings,’ that “produce the human subject,” which for Lacan together constitute the basic ‘subject effect’ (Hollway, 1989:83). Thus, while there is no singular subject that undergoes these splits, the splits are productive of an illusory subject, which we, in turn, subjectively understand. The second moment when subjection is consolidated occurs when we enter the symbolic world of language. The symbolic order for Lacan “is the social and cultural order in which we live our lives as conscious, gendered subjects…[which is] structured by language and the laws and social institutions which language guarantees” (Weedon, 1987:51-52). To extend Lacan’s theorization of these ‘moments,’ where the Mirror Stage
“establish[es] a relation between the organism and its reality” (1995:137), our subjectivity is negotiated in the Symbolic Order as ‘conscious gendered subjects.’

In the symbolic order, gendered subjects, which we all are, are positioned in relation to the primary signifier, the phallus, which Segal argues:

is not a biological attribute, but a discursive position which constitutes women in terms of lack and men in terms of the threat of lack. It creates a sense of difference from a power which is illusory – the fantasized possession, or lack, of the phallus. (1994:131-132, emphasis in original)

Later feminist work building on Lacanian insights is productive in exploring how people become discursively positioned in relation to the power attributed to the primary signifier, which Lacan describes as either (female) being or (male) having the phallus (1982). The phallus is, for Lacan, a primary, transcendental signifier; the signifier of sexual difference, “which guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order…[It] signifies power and control in the symbolic order through control of the satisfaction of desire, the primary source of power within psychoanalytic theory” (Weedon, 1987:53).

Mitchell and Rose (1982) acknowledge that systems prohibiting incest and imposing social regulation are symbolized in the phallus and are thus culturally important, but also show that patriarchal society has only retroactively given meaning to women’s (and specifically the mother’s) lack of the phallus. Gallup (1985) builds on our understanding of the phallus by arguing that the phallus, as Lacan conceptualized it, is an inherently neutral signifier and symbolic of both the constant weight of patriarchal systems of inequality and the constant failure and precariousness of such systems. Kristeva (1982) was among the first feminist writers to critique and expand on Lacan in order to remain cognizant of the social historical specificity of subjectivity. The works of various post-Freudian and Lacanian theorists, in particular Irigaray (1985) and Franz Fanon (1967),
show that the symbolic and the structures that Lacan argued organize society, though useful, must also be acknowledged and problematized as White, male, heterosexual imaginaries masquerading in place of a universal symbolic. Thus, while I will be using Lacanian insights, these latter authors are invaluable in producing a more nuanced, embodied engagement with psychoanalysis. I take up a specifically feminist, poststructural, psychoanalytic perspective in this project, which does not assume that society’s structures have an essential nature. At the very least, no matter how the meaning of the phallus is debated (Mitchell and Rose, 1982; Gallup, 1985; Segal, 1994), we are free to build on and go beyond Lacan’s work because it alerts feminist theorists to the ambiguous and uneasy nature of sexuality and desire, as well as the illusory nature of the subject.

Many feminists contest the political and theoretical utility of Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts. While this is an important critique to be aware of, we have also seen the important work done by feminists (such as Gallup, Rose, Irigaray, and Kristeva) that does not simply ‘build on’ or ‘go beyond’ Lacan but often offers a vigorous critique, reformulation, and redeployment of his concepts for purposes which are often quite different from (and even at odds with) Lacan’s. This being said, it is important to note that I am not concerned with either following or departing from Lacanian orthodoxy per se, or with the direct or ‘correct’ use of Lacanian concepts, which I intentionally employ in restrictive and minimal ways in this dissertation, but rather with feminist appropriations of and engagements with Lacan. Specifically, I rely on Lacan primarily for his view of the subject as fragmented and incoherent. My use of basic Lacanian
assumptions about the subject in turn informs what analytical categories and concepts will emerge as beneficial to my sociological analysis of subjectivity.

While drawing heavily on a Lacanian disruption of the humanist subject, I must make a note here about how I define desire and sexuality within this dissertation. I must clarify that I do not generally rely on a Lacanian understanding of desire, but rather I activate a more colloquial notion of desire and sexuality. For Lacan (1982) desire is always by definition elusive and displaced. Part of the nature of being a speaking conscious subject is the process of only ever circling around a desired object or Other. Desire can never be fully achieved and must be constantly displaced. Lacan refers to this as ‘the homelessness of desire’ (1982). Desire is central to subjectivity for Lacan, as he “saw satisfaction as a necessarily alluring impossibility critical to the crystallization of subjectivity, sanity and culture” (Dimen, 2005:7). By contrast, I find Schwartz and Rutter’s definition of desire more useful in this dissertation. Very simply, sexual desire “is the motivation to engage in sexual acts. It relates to what turns people on” (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998:2). Sexuality per se consists of behaviours, the sexual acts we participate in for pleasure and stimulation, not only physical, like petting and intercourse, but also courtship and seduction, either alone or with another/others, and desire38 (2).

Following Jackson (2006), I take sexuality broadly to be a “term referring to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices, relationships and identities. This definition assumes fluidity, since what is sexual (erotic) is not fixed but depends on what is socially defined as such and these definitions are contextually and historically variable” (106). Like Jackson, I understand that heterosexuality:

38 There are myriad dimensions of sexuality that could be focused on, such as spirituality, culture, age, etc, but I focus primarily on desire and behaviour in this dissertation.
should not be thought of as simply a form of sexual expression. It is not only a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, but also one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life. Heterosexuality is, by definition, a gender relationship, ordering not only sexual life but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources...Thus heterosexuality, while depending on the exclusion or marginalization of other sexualities for its legitimacy, is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality. (2006:107)

As mentioned above, in analyzing the interviews I use psychoanalysis as a form of discourse analysis. I reiterate that these conceptual categories are used here in analytic, not clinical or diagnostic, ways. I use the psychoanalytic concepts of abjection (in Chapter Five), disavowal (in Chapter Six) and ambivalence (in Chapter Seven) to explore young women’s narratives; in doing so, I address how women's subjectivity can be understood within the context of these three psychoanalytic terms. I will offer more refined technical versions of these three ideas as specific concepts in due course; however it is useful to note here how the ideas of abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence circulate in everyday speech in ways that are quite similar to the psychoanalytic processes I discuss later in greater detail. For example, many people would be familiar with the distinct but often related usage of the terms ‘denying’ or ‘disavowing’ something, people often claim to be ambivalent about this or that in their life, and sometimes refer to something as being abject, as in a state of abjection, like abject poverty. Abjection is at times even used in relation to sexuality in everyday speech, particularly when used in reference to repulsion. While drawing on the colloquial meanings in this text, I will also be reformulating them with the help of a productive combination of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories.

Approaching this project I theoretically understood the abject as an aspect of women’s (hetero)sexual agency and desire and ‘proofs’ thereof, whereas Butler (1999)
emphasizes how the abject is manifested in non-dichotomized or queer gender and sexual performances (1999). The abject, this active desiring and sexual agency, has been viewed as repellent in theory and society. As mentioned above, later authors (such as Irigaray, Fanon, Gallup and Campbell) have exposed the gendered, sexualized and racialized aspects of Lacan’s work. These critics show that women’s active desire and sexual agency constitute the abject because masculine sexual subjectivity, the most validated, privileged form of sexual subjectivity, is supposed to be constructed against the passive female position; moreover, it is also the divide distancing ‘proper’ from ‘improper’ female sexual subjectivities. Disrupting the assumption of female sexual passivity is often seen as a threat. Women have traditionally been gazed upon as sexual objects, but by using psychoanalysis to explore agency we see how women also sometimes return the gaze (via active desire). Psychoanalysis brings together issues of sexual agency and social limitation and thus offers novel insights into how young women speak as subjects.

Using a poststructural approach, as informed by Foucault, Lacan, and feminist theorists including Butler and Weedon among others, allows me to better theorize the complexity of young women’s (hetero)sexual encounters and their agency as they resist and reiterate traditional notions of women’s sexual passivity and lack.

As a method of discourse analysis, I use psychoanalysis in what I refer to as a ‘surface’ or superficial way. I do this for a number of specific reasons. I remain cognizant of Weedon’s warnings, when she writes:

it is not good enough to assume psychoanalysis accurately describes the structures of femininity and masculinity under patriarchy, since discourse constitutes rather than reflects meaning. To take psychoanalysis as descriptive is to assume basic patriarchal structures which exist prior to their discursive realization. (1987:50-51)
I use both a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis that focuses on the power that circulates through discourses and our positioning within them, in turn limiting and enabling various courses of action, understandings and experiences, and psychoanalytic insights that allow us to explore how processes of subjectification can occur as young women constitute themselves as (hetero)sexual women. It is useful to note that Lacanian psychoanalysis treats the unconscious not simply as ‘pre- or extra-discursive,’ but as being structured like a language. Rose writes that for Lacan the “‘truth’ of the unconscious is only ever that moment of fundamental division through which the subject entered into language and sexuality, and the constant failing of position within both” (1982: 53). Understanding this, we see why unconscious desires, anxieties, and conflicts are analyzable as discursively articulated in a variety of direct and indirect ways. My research methodology and analysis does not assume that the participants’ responses are somehow analyzable as conscious, reflexive processes of self-construction and self-representation. In this reading the unconscious is not barred from the symbolic, but enters, or even forcefully breaks into, the symbolic through a variety of ‘symptomatic’ expressions throughout participants’ narratives. With feminist theoretical and political commitments in mind, I treat these ‘symptomatic expressions’ in non-clinical and non-pathologizing ways.

I say that my use of psychoanalysis remains on the ‘surface’ or is superficial because I rely on it as a tool useful in moving the theorization of women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity beyond lack and passivity, as it is positioned in the three discursive streams I outlined in Chapter Two. Sykes refers to this type of ‘superficial’ usage as ‘a good-enough ethical pluralism’ that “[considers] how subjectivity can be shaped by
unconscious patterns” while acknowledging that “on the basis of life history interviews it is not possible or productive to ask what actual psychic mechanisms might be at play for the narrator – to stray into the territory of clinical analysis” (2001: 12 of 24). My use of psychoanalytic concepts is therefore non-clinical and non-therapeutic. I use psychoanalysis for its insights rather than taking on fully the Freudian, and, in turn, Lacanian models, which risks, as Weedon points out, “implicitly to accept their universalist patriarchal implications and their reduction of subjectivity to sexuality” (1987:71; Campbell, 2000:65, also supports this assertion). Beginning with its “partial but critical displacement of biology” via Freud (Weeks, 1985:128), and particularly the Lacanian (anti-humanist) subject with all its complexities, disruptions, and contradictions, psychoanalysis provides a novel inroad into the stagnancy that the basic assumption of women’s sexual passivity has engendered and perpetuates. A poststructural focus on discourse reminds us that “there is no one universal structure of subjectivity”, but rather that, “[as] an effect of discourses which are heterogeneous and often conflicting, the structures of subjectivity within which the individual is constituted as a conscious subject vary” (Weedon, 1987:90-91). I show how the concepts of abjection, disavowal and ambivalence shed light on processes of subjectification and the will of the subject to appear coherent, stable and liberally agentic. Following Søndergaard’s cogent warnings, I do not consider psychoanalysis “capable of theorizing psychological processes that exist before and independent of conceptualization,” phenomena that are somehow granted “a pre-discursive existence” (2002:446) by this ‘psy-science’ (452).
Following Aoki’s use of Lacan, I see no need “for any engagement with Lacan to be passive or submissive” and position my work within “[some] of the most exciting current feminist theory [that] draws upon such critical ambivalence, especially in the area of subjectivity, sexuality, performativity, identity, desire and the body” (1995: 65). I agree with Segal (1994) that in approaching sexual desire, we must attend to the “troubled and troubling legacies of psychoanalysis” because “desire, in whatever form, is first and foremost a psychic reality” (1994:119). I do not assume the ‘truth’ of psychoanalysis and deny it the hegemony that it at times has been used to claim, but see its productivity in opening up subjectivity and moving beyond the assumption of women’s sexual passivity.

Ultimately I see psychoanalysis as providing a window into sexual subjectivity and how various discourses of gendered (hetero)sexuality are negotiated by the young women I interviewed. Ironically, even though “subjectivity, following the arc from Freud to Lacan and Kristeva, is built on lack” (Waller, 2004:145), I feel that these very insights can move us beyond theories of women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity that assume lack and passivity. I do not look for or assert “truth” in their articulation of experiences, but explore what and how various discourses are drawn on and activated in articulating their sexual subjectivity, their understandings of themselves as sexual agents, and the sexual experiences and understandings that are available to them. Again, the iceberg metaphor is useful in understanding my usage of both Foucauldian discourse analysis and psychoanalytic concepts to imagine what is going on both below and above the water line of subjectivity. I base this approach on the psychoanalytic assumption “that in each of us there is a realm of psychological functioning which is not accessible to ordinary
introspection, but which nevertheless has a determining or at least a motivating influence on the activities, thoughts and emotions of everyday life” (Frosh, 1987:2). I focus on psychoanalytic concepts that help us understand how people act and think in relation to others, as opposed to purely internal psychic dynamics. I hope to access, as much feminist research does, ‘unarticulated experience’ (DeVault, 1999:67) so that I can explore “not only ‘conscious’ dynamics but also ‘unconscious’ processes at play in the way we narrate ourselves into existence” (Sykes, 2001: 5 of 24). My psychoanalytically-informed attention to the silences and incoherent moments in narratives allows me to strengthen my analytic engagement with the interviews. DeVault (1999) argues that within patriarchal language systems, which Lacan would refer to as the symbolic order, women are lacking the language to articulate many of their experiences. This is undoubtedly true of women’s articulations of their active desire. My research contributes to understanding women’s experiences of sexuality and their sexual subjectivity in novel ways because, relying on psychoanalytic conceptual tools, I focus on the unarticulated aspects of subjectivity. Interviews also allow me to explore the moments when we inevitably expose and disrupt assumptions of a humanist coherent subjectivity and agency, in turn inevitably to interrupt the discourses that circulate around gendered (hetero)sexuality and to account for “the uncertainties and threats to identity in contemporary gender relations” (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998:406).

Methodological Upsets

Here I must acknowledge the context within which my interests in sexuality and sexual subjectivity have emerged. Following Foucault’s assertion of an ‘incitement to
discourse’ around sexuality since the Victorian era, Plummer convincingly argues that sex itself “has become the Big Story” (1995:4.) During this late modern period “a grand message keeps being shouted: tell about your sex” (1995:4, emphasis in original). The people you tell, as Foucault argues, are increasingly variously positioned ‘experts’ on the topic, from advice columnists, doctors and psychiatrists to researchers, but also partners and yourself. While I certainly fall within the broad category of ‘expert’, the illusory nature of the humanist subject who speaks and acts in voluntary and coherent ways also disrupts my understanding of the semi-structured interview as a methodological tool. From this perspective, it becomes obvious and important that “sexual stories can be seen as issues to be investigated in their own right” (Plummer, 1995:5, emphasis in original).

In the course of the interviews there is not a coherent, “correct” truth that can be articulated by participants and in turn extracted by me in my analysis, enacting an understanding of the interview process that Franklin calls “the information extraction model” (1997:100). Such a model can not be relied on if one questions the very nature of the speaking subject and situates her constitution within various, often contradictory, discursive streams. The extraction model, as seen in humanistic traditions, maintains:

that it is possible to achieve self-expression of oneself as a woman, man, or ‘ungendered’ individual in language [assuming that] an already existing subjectivity awaits expression. It also assumes that language is a transparent medium which expresses pre-given meaning...[Supposedly language] is a passive tool of communication. (Weedon, 1987: 82-3)

Pitt argues that psychoanalytic understandings of our efforts to articulate ourselves mesh well with poststructural insights into the relationship between experiences and their articulation (1998:536), both of which undermine a humanist approach to interviewing as an analytic process. Scott reminds us that:
It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. (1992: 25-26)

Thus my approach to interviews assumes that the subject herself is constantly in process, specifically via her articulations; as Probyn states, “[the self] is reworked in its enunciations” (1993:2).

Pitt argues that in a poststructurally-, psychoanalytically-understood interview we find “both within the subject and its narrative desires, something that resists itself, something that escapes the consolations of rationality and intentionality” (1998:537). This understanding of the interview allows - indeed demands - that I explore both how young women attempt to articulate themselves as coherent, competent (female heterosexual) subjects, as an inescapable presence in interview narratives (Currie et al., 2007:377), and the constant disruption and contradiction of this illusion. I agree with Pitt (1998) that, ironically, perhaps the only ‘truth’ we can find in narratives “is never quite the truth about ourselves, but a stranger and perhaps intolerable truth: the truth that we cannot be the masters of our self-knowledge” (541). However, following how Currie et al. (2007) hear contradictions and inconsistencies in interviews, we must take these moments not as characteristic of the people who are speaking but as “processes through which they become [‘subjects’]” (378), wherein ‘becoming’ is the constant process of negotiating various discursive streams and subjectivities.

When conducting the interviews for this dissertation, I found that my approach best fit within “the discourse model” of interviewing (Franklin, 1997:104). Franklin outlines the following characteristics (versus prescriptions) of the discourse model:
(1) The interviewer enters into a conversational mode, and responds to interviewees questions, perhaps even talking about her own experience; (2) while a topic or focus generally exists beforehand, exploration of new themes that arise in the exchange is encouraged; (3) cross-connections may develop; one interviewee may say something that can be used productively in subsequent interviews with others; (4) the interviewer attends to and, if desired, rearranges power relations between participants to the ends of establishing equality, or even a collaborative relationship. (104)

As discussed in Chapter One, from the very beginning of the interviews a fairly casual environment was developed. Even though the interviews were a negotiated process of developing mutual understanding within the context of the interview process, in many ways I see them as having some characteristics of what Franklin calls the “shared understanding model” (1997). Often I was focused on understanding “the interviewee’s sense of her life experience from her perspective” (103), even though I did not approach these articulated experiences as ‘truth’ for the purposes of analysis.

Basing my approach on a psychoanalytically- and poststructurally-informed discourse analysis, I examined both coherence and disruption in the interview transcripts. During analysis I relied on what Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2007) call a ‘symptomatic reading.’ Following Gee (2002), like Currie et al., I seek to maintain the ‘embodied presence’ of the participants and see discourse as:

- bringing together mental ‘entities’ and social action. Discourses always involve more than language, they coordinate language with ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling, and with bodies, clothes, non-linguistic symbols, objects, tools, technologies, times and places. (2007:380)

Thus we can see how the discourses the young women I interviewed were constantly negotiating are inextricably tied up with the emotional, physical and psychic experiences of sexuality.
In Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz’s (2007) notion of ‘symptomatic reading’, “moments of rupture were read as ‘symptoms’ of how power works through discourse, [they] signal the contradictory nature of discourse” (381). Symptomatic reading requires two readings of the transcripts. The first reading attends to the ‘accomplishment of Selfhood.’ Specifically, Currie et al. were exploring how adolescent girls experience and articulate their Selfhood as ‘girls.’ In my work this first reading looks at how the young women I interviewed understood themselves as sexual actors. As we will see in Chapter Four, in these moments participants actively reiterate and privilege various dominant discourses of the coherent autonomous liberal subject. During the second reading another “hermeneutic comes into play when incoherence and contradiction threaten to destabilize this Selfhood, as often happened elsewhere in the [interviews]” (381). These contradictions and incoherencies became evident as the women I interviewed negotiate dominant discourses of gendered (hetero)sexuality that, in contrast to gender-neutral liberal humanism, privilege male sexuality and pleasure by positioning ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality as passive and receptive. These contradictions force speakers to navigate the often diametrically opposed subjectivities of the autonomous liberal actor and the passive (hetero)sexual woman.

What is unique about Currie et al.’s ‘symptomatic reading’ is that in this second reading they also “[attend] to ways in which the Speaker maintains a coherent sense of Self in the face of self-contradiction. [They] call this way of working over transcripts ‘symptomatic reading’ because it directs attention to processes beyond the text…[it directs] our attention to unspoken but ever-present discourses that shape [the subjects’] sense of themselves and their worlds” (381). Symptomatic reading enables one to
explore “the logic that operates to stabilize [the subject’s] talk” (391). This logic is provided by what they call a ‘trump discourse’:

the overriding discourse that imparts contextually-specific coherence to a Speaker’s statements, no matter how contradictory these may seem to the researcher. In the context of contradictory meanings, it operates as a foundational discourse that comes into play ‘in the last instance.’ Because a ‘trump discourse’ operates as common sense to the Speaker, it is more often than not ‘latent’ in [the Speaker’s] talk; that is, it remains unspoken. The purpose of ‘symptomatic reading’ of transcripts is to identify these ‘trump discourses’ because they tell us a lot about how power works through discourse (391).

The authors are careful to distinguish ‘trump discourses’ from dominant or hegemonic discourses, as trump discourses may also come ‘from below’ because less powerfully positioned discourses may indeed be foundational for the interviewee.

In my struggle to theorize how young women navigate the contradictions engendered at the intersections of (masculinist) liberal discourses and discourses of proper passive heterosexual femininity I was inspired by Currie et al.’s ‘trump discourse’. Rather than a ‘trump discourse’ that smoothes over contradictions per se, I identify a hybrid discourse that allows young women to negotiate the contradictions they experience in late modern, (neo)liberal society. In contrast to the problematic Currie et al. explore, the women I interviewed rarely made contradictory statements about themselves, but rather were positioned within various discourses which themselves made contradictory statements about women as subjects, for example, concerning liberal autonomy versus proper passive feminine (hetero)sexuality. This discourse, ‘competent feminine sexuality’ is a hybrid form of the liberal actor and passive feminine

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39 I do not ‘trouble’ the word sexuality by appending (hetero) when referring to the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ hybrid discourse because within the narratives the women rarely disrupted the naturalized assumptions of sexuality as heterosexuality. This disruption did not occur despite the fact that, as
(hetero)sexuality. Like Currie (2001), I see competence as being “signaled by a coherent subject who spoke confidently about herself and her…world” (277). Competency needs to be understood within the late modern, (neo)liberal context of a self-help culture, particularly in regard to sexuality and sexual health (books, magazines, television shows, sex education classes themselves). As Foucault (1990) argues, we are compelled to articulate ourselves as sexually and emotionally healthy subjects by a proliferating number of sex experts. Hence we are ‘subjected.’ As we will see however, a psychoanalytic approach reminds us that, although competency or mastery is sought by the speaking subject, incoherence and contradiction will always be manifested in language. As we will see in Chapter Six, part of being a competent actor is the necessity of ‘glossing over’ or anticipating and hence destabilizing critiques of one’s narratives (ex: an expert asking you if ‘x’ rather than ‘y’ might be occurring) and contradiction within one’s narrative. Within the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse the contradictions between an autonomous sexual actor and a passive, heterosexual female can be competently smoothed over so that the overall coherent sense of selfhood is not directly threatened. At the same time, however, this hybrid also allows for both the reiteration and disruption of dominant discourses of women’s passive (hetero)sexuality.

Thus the double hermeneutic of the symptomatic reading “recognizes that while we, as social actors, arrange discursive elements in creative ways, discourses have the power to also arrange us in specific ways” (Currie et al., 2007:392).

In Chapter Four I explore the ‘roots’ of the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, which lie in the companionate marriage ideal reworked in the late twentieth
century in ‘permissive’ discourses of sex, (neo)liberal discourses and what Phillips (2000) calls the ‘together woman’ discourse. I see the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse as an ‘emerging discourse,’ as Foucault would have called it. Sexuality is a discursive field and our subjectivity therein a discursive formation always being reworked, sometimes in unpredictable ways. The reworking of the liberal and gendered discourses within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse cannot be read ‘directly off’ of the discourses that found it. I am exploring the ‘unanticipated’ and ‘unintended’ effects of how liberal and gendered discourses circulate (Foucault, 1990). Interestingly, this hybrid emerges as a discursive formation that brings together aspects of discourses, liberal and gendered, that might otherwise be seen as competing discourses. The ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse weaves together discourses in unanticipated ways that sometimes resist, and at other times reiterate, existing gendered and sexual power relations.

We will see in Chapter Four how the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse enables women to construct themselves as ‘choosing’ to engage in specific behaviours. In their self-understandings, this hybrid discourse often activates discourses that maintain a passive feminine (hetero)sexuality. Women’s agency in these moments is directed towards pleasuring their male partners. Nevertheless, this hybridization also enables a reworking of their experience of desire and their resistance to dominant discourses of feminine (hetero)sexuality. In Chapter Four, exploring how women position themselves within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse and the contradictions that are being smoothed over draws our attention to the aspects of sexual subjectivity where
psychoanalytic insights, beyond Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis, can deepen our theoretical examination of subjectivity.

In my own work I have added a third reading to Currie et al.’s ‘symptomatic reading.’ Here I explore how the psychoanalytic concepts of the abject, disavowal and ambivalence (in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven) offer insight into how coherent subjectivity is maintained amidst the contradictions and complexities seen in women’s narratives. As I have argued above, relying on various non-clinical psychoanalytic theoretical tools allows us to better understand subjectivity and the maintenance of a coherent selfhood. It moves us beyond the limits of imagining only a passive female (hetero)sexuality. When theorizing subjectivity Hollway also saw how psychoanalysis could help us understand the various levels of coherence and contradiction in participants’ narratives. She writes:

Participants usually strive for coherence and consistency in the narratives they produce (for research as for other purposes). This is one effect on subjectivity of the dominant Western assumption of the unitary rational subject; we attempt to construct our experience within its terms. The remainder – what is unacceptable and in contradiction – is repressed. It has effects, by being displaced through the defence mechanisms, and these effects help to reproduce the unitary rational subject. (1989:43)

Interestingly, while not actively engaging psychoanalytic discourses themselves, Currie et al. seem to hint at and invite this extension of their method, as they are focused on how we actively arrange discourses at a level that “remains below the level of ordinary consciousness” (2007:392). Building on their insights, I have included tools that can facilitate our exploration of myriad levels of consciousness and subjectivity.

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40 I reiterate that I use psychoanalytic concepts to understand processes of subjectification and have no desire to pathologize or “psychoanalyze” individual participants.
In addition to the discursive contradiction (liberal/gendered subject positions) that the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse negotiates, a psychoanalytic perspective proposes that there are also two internal contradictions being covered over. The first has been identified by Butler (2004). It is a contradiction that all subjects must negotiate as they are separated from the (M)Other in the Mirror Stage and later become an object in language as they begin to articulate the I, necessitating a split between the subject ‘I’ and object ‘me.’ This contradiction is the rejected knowledge that as human beings we are always in connection to others and always at their mercy for recognition (as thought in the Hegelian tradition). Butler calls our earliest dependency on a caregiver ‘primary dependency’ (1999:7) and argues:

No subject can emerge without this attachment, formed in dependency, but no subject, in the course of its formation, can ever afford fully to ‘see’ it. This attachment in its primary forms must both come to be and be denied, its coming to be must consist in its partial denial, for the subject to emerge. (8, emphasis in original)

Arguably, this process of partial denial, and hence our shoring up and assertion of our competency as autonomous speaking subjects, is constant throughout our lives. The desire for competency that the Lacanian subject is constantly trying to master and embody belies the basic dependency that we try to disavow. Thus psychoanalysis can offer a way of understanding hybridized discourses as “the workings of fantasy construed not as a set of projections on an internal screen but as part of human relationality itself” (Butler, 2004:15). We can see how the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse and the psychoanalytic processes of subjection, the abject, disavowal and ambivalence, work to negate the dependency we so vehemently reject in our individualization and subjectivity.
The second major contradiction, already mentioned above, is that gendered discourses within patriarchal society position women as passive objects of male desire, rather than as autonomous (ungendered) liberal sexual subjects. Thus I argue that the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse is ‘untrue,’ or never truly achievable, on at least two levels for women (as seen in the negotiation of these two contradictions). This insatiability, or un-achievability, speaks to both its latent-ness in narratives and its foundational role in arranging ourselves in discourse and how discourses arrange us, which Currie et al. (2007) found but did not articulate in this specifically psychoanalytic way. In other words, as Hollway points out, this interpretation is a version of ‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much’ exposed precisely because “[people’s] vulnerabilities are often signified through the energy with which they are protected, and the positions people try to occupy can indicate the opposite” (1989:79). As foundational and ‘soothing’ as the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse is, so too is this hybrid the most insatiable, following Lacan’s understanding of all desires. Every time the subject speaks and assumes a position within language and discourse, the mechanisms of the mirror phase are active, “[they] guarantee that the individual’s identification with the position of [the] speaking subject is imaginary and is invested with the massive psychic energy of the desire to control meaning” (Weedon, 1987:52). It will become apparent in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven that ‘discursive authority is paramount’ (Weedon, 1987:98) to the speaking subject. We will see how discursive authority as a competent female sexual agent at times enables young women to position themselves as active, desiring subjects and at others delimits their ability to assert their own desires, pleasures and safety at great cost to the autonomy they have so carefully arranged.
More importantly, from a poststructural and psychoanalytic perspective, exploring how we are subjected as individuals, in both its productive and negative moments, allows us to answer Foucault’s call for research that disrupts the way power currently circulates. He argues:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries. (2003:134)

My project seeks to examine the process of subjectification and to imagine women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivities in ways that are not limited to their passivity and objectification, honouring their active attempts to negotiate various discursive positions. The goal of this project is to facilitate ‘new’ forms of subjectivity and individualization in sexual life and education.

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41 As discussed above, I see psychoanalysis not as the truth of the subject but as a useful tool in understanding the subject as it has come to be articulated within the types of individualization Foucault links with the (neo)liberal state over the last several centuries. Perhaps a psychoanalytic view of the subject will one day indeed become obsolete, as Marcuse (1970) once proposed.
Chapter Four: Women’s Negotiation of Dominant Discourses of Gendered (Hetero)Sexuality

As identified in Chapter Three, one of the central contradictions that young women must negotiate in their sexual lives is between the discursive positionings made available to them as gendered sexual subjects and as (supposedly ungendered) (neo)liberal\textsuperscript{42} humanist subjects more generally. I explore these competing discursive positions more deeply below. The tensions I examine are between the promises offered a (neo)liberal sexual subject in sole control of her pleasure and the constraints experienced by women who are constructed as the passive recipients of men’s sexual desire. This chapter will provide an indepth analysis of the negotiations necessitated by varying and contradictory discursive positions available to contemporary women, showing how Foucault’s notion of subjectification is important for understanding young women’s everyday sexual encounters. We will begin to see how the participants’ subjectivities are conflicted and contradictory, although they are generally constructed and engaged with by them as coherent and straightforward. I explore subjectivity as a tapestry woven of many threads and patterns. The processes of negotiation show that the women are never merely at the mercy of dominant discourses, nor are they fully determined by them. Participants artfully negotiate subject positions that they experience as most empowering for them in myriad sexual situations. The negotiation of the positions that they experience as most empowering is facilitated by a hybrid discourse that smoothes over the contradictions created by their position at the nexus of both gendered sexual and liberal discourses. I refer to this hybrid discourse as the ‘competent feminine sexuality’

\textsuperscript{42} I use the term (neo)liberal because as we will see that (neo)liberalism while having specific political connotations also activates and strategically incorporates aspects of the liberal humanist view of the subject.
discourse, which is relied on in creating a coherent position amidst the contradictions experienced and articulated.

Analyzing the contradictions and dissonances evident within women’s interviews shows that, alongside the narratives and experiences of pleasure, control, and being ‘together’ (Phillips, 2000) young women, the impact of dominant discourses of women’s sexual passivity persists. We will see how the participants negotiate these contradictions, creating a foundational approach to their world that asserts their mastery and competence as both ‘proper’ sexual young women and as empowered, “liberated,” autonomous liberal (sexual) agents. In this chapter we will begin to see how the subjectivity the women negotiate is always ‘troubled.’ Their subjectivities smooth over contradictions in their understandings of their lives, but they also are constantly upset by these contradictions. Inherent to this upset is the transgressive potential that results for the impossibility of ‘nailing down’ meaning and coherence. This examination of the first and second levels of a symptomatic reading (Currie et al., 2007) is valuable in understanding how young women negotiate various discourses of (hetero)sexuality, but we will also begin to see why a purely poststructural discursive analysis of the narratives is inadequate. The chapters that follow in turn employ the psychoanalytic terms - the abject, disavowal and ambivalence - to further examine the contradictions which the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse attempts to erase. Exploring the slips and gaps in women’s narratives also exposes the inadequacy of the pleasure/danger dichotomy to account for the ambivalence and complexity of women’s sexual experiences.

Following Foucault’s reconfigured theory of power, in considering young women’s sexual experiences I did not assume men’s power in sexual encounters is
uniform or omni-present. In the interplay of power and agency in heterosexual relations, “male power by its nature operates so as to always offer spaces for female agency, the potential extent of which is constantly shifting” (Allen, 2003a: 241). The Foucauldian subject is always necessarily subjected because “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only in so far as they as ‘free’” (1990:139). We will see that amid the range of discourses available43 to young women, some are more likely to facilitate resistance amidst constraint; at the same time they enable places for women to stand as speaking subjects, discourses also limit what can be said. As Jackson and Cram argue, “discourses may restrict or regulate but they also offer the potential to liberate, a view consistent with Foucault’s theorization of resistance as a necessary constituent of power” (2003: 114). Similar to Allen’s work with young adults, I found that while many of the young women I interviewed “drew on dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality to constitute their sexual selves, some also spoke in ways that revisited these meanings,” such that they were “multiply positioned in a way that enabled them to simultaneously accommodate and resist taken-for-granted meanings about female” sexuality (2003b: 217). My research shows that questions about the ‘truth’ of sexual encounters (for example, whether they are really empowering, pleasurable and reciprocal, as Braun et al, 2003, query), are not nearly as critical as questions of what actions (and identities) are variously constrained and enabled by particular constructions of heterosex. Interestingly, Gonick illustrates that young women (and in her research, adolescent girls specifically) experience the intersections of dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality and “the effects of (neo)liberal

43 While I use the word ‘available’ here, I do not mean to say that women are free to ‘pick and choose’ whatever discourses they like but that they will come into contact with a range of discourses that are differentially privileged in their relevancy and likelihood of being taken up. The phrase ‘taken up’ signals the moment wherein the subject is positioned as a speaking, coherent subject and therein subjected by the very same discourses.
discourses of individuality in particularly complicated ways” (2004: 190). In the narratives below we see “the dual processes through which we become specific individuals actively taking up as our own the terms of our subjection [both as sexual and (neo)liberal subjects, and] through which we are categorized, totalized and governed” (Davies et al, 2006: 92).

To begin, I investigate young women’s negotiation of discourses of (hetero)sexuality that currently hold popular currency. As we saw in Chapter Two, Hollway’s (1984) classical essay, “Women’s Power in Heterosexual Sex,” is still useful in articulating the most powerful discourses of (hetero)sexuality. She outlines three overarching discourses: the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse, the ‘have/hold’ discourse, and the permissive discourse. While I find Hollway’s categories useful in their clarity and astuteness, rather than using them as a privileged analytical tool I offer them merely as a way to frame my discussion, which focuses on women’s negotiations of discourses that contradictorily position them as passive sexual objects and those that position them as autonomous liberal (sexual) agents. The ‘male sexual drive’ discourse emphasizes that we construct men’s sexuality as active and aggressive and women’s as passive and objectified. Women are the object that arouses men’s needs and, as such, can submissively comply or must resist and control men’s unrelenting advances. Within this space women’s pleasure is secondary, and women “are relatively powerless with regard to the successful negotiation of safer sex practices with a male partner” (Potts, 2002:43). Thus, “[any] exercise of power is regarded as unfeminine and threatening to men” (Holland et al. in Potts, 2002: 43). For our purposes here the active/passive construction of men’s and women’s sexuality in the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse will play a central
role, as we see how women negotiate their sexual encounters from within this foundational framework. Out of this discourse we also see the privileging of male pleasure and sexuality that allows for ‘real’ sex to be defined by (condomless) intercourse (Potts, 2002), an act that is usually initiated by the male partner and is concluded with the male orgasm, almost universally defined as his ejaculation. This discursive positioning of women plays a clearly evident role in participants’ everyday sexual encounters. I find that at the intersection of the idea of ‘women as passive sexual objects not wanting to threaten their male partners’ and the privileging of male pleasure, the issue of lack of desire on either partner’s part became a differentially gendered experience. I expand on this finding, which occurs within the larger context of contradiction and negotiation, later in this chapter. For the moment, I note that a woman’s lack of desire was a constant ‘issue,’ often quite vehemently discussed between partners as ‘a problem.’ Conversely, a man’s lack of desire was rarely discussed. Female partners adjusted to their male partner’s lack of desire and did not consider it a problem.

Hollway’s ‘have/hold’ discourse situates sex as “only a small part of a much larger monogamous relational context” (Braun et al, 2003: 238). Here sex can be constructed as a form of emotional work, a trade off for security and emotional connection; his pleasure is her (almost sole) pleasure. Again, we see a reiteration of the framework of lack, passivity and victimhood for women discussed in Chapter Two. An example of this discourse can be seen when Lisa discussed her first long-term and sexual relationship:

By the end it felt like we had such a huge history and we were even still thinking that this was my major relationship in life and I had to make it work […] In hindsight it was clearly not a good stable kind of relationship that you wanted to continue and so I felt like I had to, sort of, preserve
the relationship and I couldn’t say anything that was too detrimental, or say anything, or be too instructive, kind of, but with the current one when it was friends with benefits […] I really felt I could say anything that I needed to say and it didn’t matter if it freaked him out and if we ended up breaking up.

Here Lisa signals her investment in a primary, ideally life-long, romantic hetero relationship and the limitations experienced as a result. She contrasts this relationship with her experiences with a later partner, a ‘friends with benefits’ (or friends that fuck) relationship which mitigates the expectations of propriety she felt. I have included Lisa’s experience here to illustrate Hollway’s have/hold discourse because this particular discourse was not as salient in the narratives, thus it comes only sporadically in the rest of this chapter.

Much more prevalent than the have/hold discourse in participants’ narratives was Hollway’s third ‘permissive’ discourse. This discourse coalesces in the statement “sexual activity is good and right for both men and women, and anything goes, as long as no one gets hurt” (Braun et al, 2003: 238). However as Potts (2002) argues, the permissive discourse’s granting of female sexual desire and agency is often still subsumed by the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse. In these moments I saw the participants experience themselves as having agency and as desiring (in myriad ways, not only sexual) actors entitled to all the rights of their male partners. In these moments I heard this discourse as a way to articulate why they chose to have sex with their partners when not personally wanting to have sex. During these moments of ‘choosing’ unwanted sex, we see how the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse smoothes over the contradictions between liberal and gendered sexual discourses.

Potts argues that “the permissive discourse retains notions of active male sexuality and compliant female sexuality, with women ‘striving’ to meet men’s sexual
‘needs’” (2002:44). While it is important to address instances of ‘unwanted consensual sex’ (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005:18), wherein ‘choosing’ unwanted sex is justified and made logical within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, it is also necessary to highlight moments when the women activate (neo)liberal discourses to demand their pleasure and safety, both physical and emotional. The many streams of sex-radical feminism and sex positive popular cultural manifestations, such as Sex and the City, Queer as Folk, Bust magazine, and Canadian Sue Johanson’s Sunday Night Sex Show, are central to legitimating and perpetuating the sexually empowering discourses women draw on in demanding taken for granted sexual and reproductive rights. It will become evident throughout this dissertation that the celebration of women’s sexual agency and desire is a result of how they negotiate their experiences within hegemonic (hetero)sexual scripts “that still position women’s desire as a response to men, ‘sex’ as heterosexual intercourse, and practices or desires that deviate from this narrow norm as problematic or perverse” (Ussher, 2005: 27). In spite of the power of these scripts, women’s efforts and successes must not, and cannot, be ignored. Throughout the rest of this chapter I outline a number of discourses evident in the narratives. These include dominant discourses of women’s sexual passivity; liberal individualist discourses which are intertwined with disruptive pro-sex feminist discourses; a discourse Phillips (2000) calls the ‘together woman’ discourse; and the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse which I distinguish as an emergent discourse unique from the other discourses.

44 It is important to note that at times I talk about women negotiating dominant discourse of gendered (hetero)sexuality and at other of times of negotiating various encounters and experiences. I do not do so to equate discourses with experiences but to acknowledge that our everyday material encounters and relationships are negotiated and made sense of discursively.
Negotiating Discourses of Female Sexual Passivity

Characteristic of nearly all of the negotiations I identified in participants’ narratives was the construction of women’s sexuality and desire as passive, a theme that runs throughout discourses of (hetero)sexuality. There is much productive research motivated by Segal’s (1994) and others’ call to move beyond the passive/active dichotomy in theorizing (hetero)sexuality. Moving beyond this dichotomy is essential in theorizing female sexual subjectivity, but it remains present in the lives of young women and must be accounted for as an easily accessible and socially rewarded position. At the same time, we can and must show how women resist and disrupt passivity. In some sense, like Tolman, I found that listening to young women “reveals how entrenched gendered sexuality and the double standard continue to be” (2002: 119). As I argued in Chapter Two, a basic shift in orientation is necessary when theorizing women’s sexuality; however, the findings of numerous studies (summarized in Jackson and Cram, 2003: 114) cannot be completely discounted and remind us of what is not working in some women’s sexual lives. These studies explore, through women’s own talk, how “young women are positioned as passive objects of male sexual desire, want and need” (Jackson and Cram, 2003:114). I draw attention to how women both resist and reiterate such constructions. Like Allen, I take “the view that male power in heterosexual relationships is not simply monolithic nor sufficiently vulnerable to subversion to render it unstable; [rather] while male power is pervasive in some form, it is simultaneously contested and negotiated in ways which afford women a measure of agency” (2003a: 236).

45 Here I mean that passive femininity is socially rewarded in the sense of allowing access to the resources and privileges assumed to be granted to ‘properly’ feminine women, such as a ‘good man’ who will care for her and commit to a marriage contract.
The presence of the ‘passive standard,’ as I call it, in order to signal the often default expectations around hetero (sexual and otherwise) relations, was common in young women’s attempts to create pleasurable experiences with their male partners. Lisa laughs about her first sexual relationship recalling:

Lisa: It’s probably like the standard progression. We started with manual

Brandy: Like mutual masturbation?

Lisa: like I would masturbate him, not at the same time. Yeah, so we sort of did that for a while and then moved on to oral sex and I think in each case it was always him doing it to me first and then I would kind of catch up […] He wouldn’t talk about it, he’d just kind of move really slow and if I didn’t stop him then he’d keep going […] ‘I don’t know what my hand is doing and its in your crotch!’ (laughter) Which is perfect, I didn’t want to talk about it, I didn’t really have the vocabulary to talk about anything, I just wanted to do it.

In accommodating her partners’ seemingly expected advances, and her inability to discuss their activities\textsuperscript{46}, she also upsets the normative assumption of passivity. Lisa just “wanted to do it” and is doing just that within the ‘comfortable’ discursive spaces created by dominant views of (hetero)sexuality; she is actively exploring the contours of her sexual desire and agency within the parameters of discourses of passivity.

We see the male partner initiating and guiding sexual experiences in the case of Jackie and her current long term partner as well. However, as Jackie’s partner attempts to increase their mutual pleasure, we also see him resist the role of initiator. Jackie’s internal dilemmas around speaking as a sexual agent are apparent in the following comment:

Jackie: I actually think he would, yeah, would be excited by anything I suggest, if I suggested anything.

\textsuperscript{46}It is interesting to note that her male partner apparently did not feel comfortable talking about their sexual activities either (‘he wouldn’t talk about it’), perhaps an indication of the limited access either of them had to sexual discourses.
Brandy: what would a hard [issue] to talk about be?

Jackie: Umm, I don’t really know how to tell him how, should he, what should he do when he gives oral sex…I, I think I’m shy…I think I’m being nervous that he would have, he would have negative images if I suggest something but obviously I know it’s not true, but then deep in my heart there’s something, some weird thoughts going on.

Brandy: Like it would hurt his feelings?

Jackie: It’s more like I wouldn’t want him to think of me as a slut maybe? Yeah, but it’s very weird because I know he wouldn’t but somehow I just think this way so

Brandy: I see, so like you’re being aggressive?

Jackie: Or maybe too bossy.

Brandy: …so in some instances he’s not used to you being bossy?

Jackie: No, not at all. It’s just me thinking that. It’s just me thinking of some things that have never happened before…It was, there was no negative experience around this, it’s just more like what I get from the media I think.

Brandy: Like what could happen if you were to bring that up?

Jackie: Umhm. Or maybe, umm, asking too much and, umm, being really aggressive is not what I should do, that kind of feeling.

Brandy: Is it around, ‘that’s not what proper women do’ or..?

Jackie: I think it’s not desirable to males.

Brandy: So it’s not that he’s not open to new ways of performing, let’s say oral sex, but it’s the actual act of asking for it. Is that what he might not like?

Jackie: Yeah. Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking, but at the same time I know it’s not true.

Here we see Jackie struggling with what she’s come to expect from hetero relations from the media, which she specifically mentions, but we might presume that there are other
sources of confirmation for her anxiety. It is possible that her partner’s own behaviours are contradictory in this regard, but she herself articulates the possibility of not being positioned exclusively as a passive sexual object.

Concern for a male partner’s view of what constitutes a ‘good’ female sexual partner (read: ‘passive but accommodating’) is evident in a number of women’s narratives. Nova’s narrative is similar to Jackie’s when asked how comfortable she is communicating what she finds pleasurable to a partner:

I’m pretty good at it. I think, like I think it’s really important to talk about it otherwise […] but you have to be comfortable that they’re going to respond and you have to be, like, you have to know that they’re going to like you after. Like with my high school boyfriend, the guy that [pressured me], I’d be like, ‘this feels good’ because I thought he would breakup with me if I didn’t like it, you know? So you have to be secure, like I have to be secure in my relationship to be honest.

Nova’s hesitation to breech the ‘women as passive sexual subject’ position is directly linked to past experiences, whereas Jackie links hers with more amorphous cultural learning. Transgressing and resisting the passive position risks his ‘not liking you after.’ A few of the participants use phrases like ‘freaking each other out’ (as I note below) or ‘being crazy,’ which signals a fear of transgressing the expected role of passivity. Social censure in the realm of intimate moments can be painful and inhibiting, though since this experience Nova has had a least one partner with whom she felt she could very openly, creatively and joyfully express her desires. Diane reports experiencing a similar hesitancy in actively expressing her desires. Interestingly, and in line with the have/hold discourse that reinforces the passive/active dichotomy, she finds that since breaking up with her boyfriend she feels freer in expressing her desires and asserting her sexual agency:

Brandy: So how comfortable generally are you talking with your partners about sex?
Diane: Not very. It takes me a very, very long time. Even now, my ex and I are much better now, when there’s no risk of losing each other. It’s silly, when we were in a relationship, like, ‘what are my boundaries and what are his?’ And even though we’ve been together for a year I’m still kind of tentative with what I’m willing to talk about. But now he’s not my boyfriend anymore and we’re really close. So we’re more open now, when there’s not a risk of freaking each other out. But it’s hard, I have a hard time with somebody that’s very new, but I also have a hard time with somebody where I feel like there’s a, I don’t know, there’s that, that connection with and therefore I’m a little scared to ask for things, you know what I mean? Whereas now it’s just sex between us, or supposed to be, so if he’s going to get his, then I’m going to get mine. So I’m going to make sure it’s worth it or what am I doing? If we both made the decision to sleep with one another, then we better do it for what it’s for!

Being somewhat freed up within the have/hold discourse, Diane explicitly and vehemently takes up the permissiveness discourse, which facilitates her demand to ‘get hers.’ At the same time it is evident that both in new relationships and continuing long term ones she feels the constraint of discourses around female (hetero)sexuality.

It is noteworthy that, whereas Jackie seems more cognizant of her feelings of constraint as related to the discursive openings available to her as a woman (which she describes as being ‘from the media’), Diane articulates the character of her discomfort as ‘personal.’ This intensive personalization, evident in individualist (neo)liberal subject positions, will be explored further below. It is clear that being subjected by such discourses, in their take up and use, can both constrain and enable women’s access to an active sexuality. Miriam too reports awaiting the sexual advances of an earlier dating partner and attributes her hesitancy to act, despite being ‘into him,’ to her own personality traits:

Brandy: So the [guy you’re dating], umm, you said that he hadn’t kissed you for like five dates and you said that you weren’t going to kiss him. Was it because you weren’t desirous of kissing him?
Miriam: Yes

Brandy: Or were you like that’s just not cool, me kissing him?

Miriam: It was more me being shy to kiss him. I totally thought he was good looking. Yeah, I was into him. I was just like, ‘I can’t do that! I don’t have the guts to do that!’

Later in her interview, Miriam stresses her rights, saying “I need to feel like I’m the one who’s calling the shots.”

Libby positions herself in discourses of passivity so that while expressing desire is certainly feasible and encouraged by her partners, it remains clear that her own articulated desires must not overwhelm or exceed her male partner’s:

Brandy: If you had any [particular] desires, um would you feel comfortable bringing them up with your partners?

Libby: I would yeah […] I think he would be okay with it. Umm, I mean not like, like the hard core, you know, like uh bondage, but experimentation would be something that we’d both be open to.

Her active desire can be asserted, as long as it does not get ‘too crazy.’ It must be something they both are comfortable talking about. It is clear that in a number of different situations, young women do carve out spaces for asserting sexual desire and agency.

We have seen some of the limitations women experienced in being positioned as passive sexual objects. We have also seen how they at the same time disrupt and trouble these very discourses. Miriam humorously sums up the weight and potential disruption of discourses of female sexual passivity when I ask her at the end of our interview if there is anything else about herself as a sexual being she’d like to tell me:

Miriam: Oh, I’m a sexual being - that’s great! (laughs)

Brandy: Is that uncomfortable?

Miriam: No, no! I just never thought of myself as a sexual being, like actually,
anyways, ummm, I am a sexual being, okay!

Brandy: That can be your mantra!

Miriam: I’ll have to remember that in bio chem class, ‘I am a sexual being.’
   Take that! I don’t think so.

Miriam is surprised that she could consider herself a sexual being. Being a sexual being is directly connected with being an *active* sexual being, as expressed by her exclamation, ‘Take that!’ Considering herself a sexual agent is surprising to Miriam. More specifically, considering herself a sexual agent within her biochemistry class is a particular achievement, perhaps because of the masculinist nature of scientific discourse, which has supported the discursive exclusion of women as female sexual agents. At the same time as being surprised, Miriam is pleased with this new thought about herself. Yet she also remains ambivalent about identifying as a sexual agent, which become apparent when she ends the interaction by saying, “I don’t think so.” In a single moment Miriam is both reiterating and disrupting hegemonic discourses.

**Negotiating Discourses that Privilege Male Desire and Pleasure**

Discourses that continue to privilege male sexual desire and pleasure were evident throughout many young women’s narratives, further supporting the overarching discourse of passive/active gendered (hetero)sexuality. For some participants their sense of the discursive positioning of their pleasure as secondary to their partners was vague, and was felt almost as a discomfort when their sexual encounters ‘failed’ to approximate cultural prescriptives around heterosex. For Gray, this dissonance was experienced as anxiety, a concern that the psychological discomfort she felt was potentially the result of a personal sexual inadequacy on her part:
I’d say that especially with [this particular partner], he can last longer if he wants, more so than some of my other boyfriends and I find sometimes that I become sore or can’t have multiple, like, orgasms or wait and have sex again immediately, while he can. And I find that a bit of a source of some kind of anxiety or lack of confidence, I almost felt like, ‘Isn’t the guy suppose to be the one that’s coming quickly?’ and the fact that I feel like I have to keep up with him, it feels a bit, I don’t know, yeah, [I’m] just a bit uncomfortable with that.

For Lisa, this dissonance coalesced on her orgasms:

The odd thing about that relationship was that I could orgasm much more easily than him so there was this weird unbalance like totally opposite of what most societal things are […] it was really bizarre for him, me too. I didn’t know how to deal with that.

In these situations the discourses privileging male sexuality and pleasure remain obfuscated from view such that ‘deviance’ was experienced as personalized anxiety. Women’s anxiety seems to be focused on whether or not they can ‘competently’ and masterfully negotiate their experiences in ways the both empower them as liberal (sexual) subjects and allow them to stay within the normative strictures of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality, that is ensured that their male partner’s pleasure remained privileged.

It is not always clear where the pressures to privilege a partner’s pleasure would come from, which sometimes had a woman engage in sexual practices that she did not really enjoy. Olivia discusses a previous relationship:

Olivia: Like when I had my period, he didn’t want to have sex but I would feel like I would have to go down on him so that he would like still be getting pleasure and near the end of our relationship I didn’t want to have sex at all so I just went down on him a lot cause it was faster, cause he just took such a long time and sometime I just didn’t want it to take that long so I would just do that

Brandy: So you said during your period? Did he feel that same way? Like, ‘Oh, well you should go down on me.’

Olivia: Well he’d never actually say that, but he’d always be like ‘Oh, I’m so horny. Why do you still have your period?’ kind of stuff, like joking
around, and it would make me feel a little bit insecure, like sometimes he’d just masturbate but sometimes I’d feel like it was something I had to do for him […] I guess I just felt that it wasn’t reasonable to ask him if he’d have sex with me or go down there when I had my period even though I didn’t think it was gross but I thought that it was reasonable for him to ask cause there wasn’t anything going on with him, especially when I was having [a long] period!

The justification of ‘reasonableness’ speaks to the pervasive, dispersed and multiplied nature of discourses privileging male pleasure. As in the legal context, what the ‘reasonable person’ would do (i.e. what the masculinist liberal subject would do) is the privileged guiding measure for how sex should look.

Often the women are aware of how discourses privileging male pleasure affect their understandings of their sexual experiences and make active attempts to account for and ‘make sense’ of why they privilege men’s pleasure. As Maria comments:

So like I knew for me [giving oral sex] was like a means of pleasure almost, I was excited to do it and, umm, so I can only hope that when a guy’s going down on me, like it doesn’t have to be exciting necessarily, but I don’t like, I really don’t want, I guess I think of myself and sort of like, the way I have sex with guys it’s sort of like an ‘Ok, let’s just do it sort of thing.’ I don’t want to receive in that way, like I’m fine with giving in that way but it’s just, I don't want, like if he doesn’t want to do it, I don’t want him to.

The different standards she holds for herself and her male partner are clearly evident. Maria accounts for this discrepancy as her ‘choice’ to give in a ‘let’s just do this’ kind of way but not to receive in the same way. For her, ‘satisfying’ the ‘male sexual drive’ is more of a given or an eventuality. Her pleasure is more dependant on his ‘wanting to.’

In Jackie’s case feeling responsible for satisfying her partner’s sexual needs is clearly articulated. At times she actively resists her own feelings of responsibility:

Jackie: I actually, sometimes I feel sorry that I can’t, I can’t like satisfy all his desires and it’s because I think it’s sort of, I’m just sort of sometimes thinking that it should be a part of my responsibility to handle each other’s desires.
Brandy: Did you say it shouldn’t be a part?

Jackie: It should be, it should be but not like totally. A part of it should be my responsibility, so sometimes I feel sorry that sometimes he feels really uncomfortable because I cannot have sex with him and he does not want to masturbate, he does not like to masturbate […] He would then suggest that I masturbate for him.

Brandy: Give him a hand job?

Jackie: Yeah

Brandy: Is that something you’re open to?

Jackie: Yeah, I’ve done it before but sometimes I don’t want to do it anymore and I just want to sleep

Brandy: Do you just say ‘No, we’re done’?

Jackie: Yeah.

A few discourses activated here position Jackie in such a way that, despite her ambivalent discomfort (‘it should be but not totally’), she is able to say something along the lines of ‘No, we’re done’ when she’s no longer enjoying herself. First, she constructs their mutual responsibility for satisfying each other’s needs as a shared one, drawing on discourses about ‘companionate (marriage) relationship’ for example, which, as outlined in Chapter Two, have gained currency over the twentieth century. Second, she is asserting her own rights, presumably as a liberal subject and empowered women born since the second wave of feminism, first, not to do something she is not enjoying and, second, to get a good night’s sleep.

As we can see from the above comments, discourses that privilege male pleasure and sexuality often force young women into the false ‘dilemma’ of negotiating feelings of responsibility for their partners’ pleasure (Tolman, 2002). When coding instances during the interviews where participants addressed times they had faked orgasms or
pleasure during their sexual encounters, I labeled these as instances of ‘performing.’

While I draw on Judith Butler’s theoretical work throughout this dissertation, I must note here that my use of the word ‘performing’ does not correspond with Butler’s (1999) theory of ‘performativity.’ Here it seemed that women consciously chose to perform their own pleasure in order to satisfy a range of partner needs. It soon became apparent that these instances of ‘performing’ pleasure so as to ensure the privileging of male pleasure were much more complex than has been presumed in the past. In this sense the ‘faked orgasm’ or faked pleasure is a powerful signal of how young women can reconstitute bodies and pleasures in ways that subvert and disrupt the meanings that bodies and pleasure have been given within dominant discourse. Allen’s (2003a) work with young people is critical here. Allen too found that women sometimes determined their behaviour within the logic of discourses privileging male pleasure, but at the same time she found that young women “invoke a sense that men’s pleasure and sexual needs take priority because…[they] permit it.” (2003a: 242). From women’s perspectives, their partners’ pleasure is prioritized because they want it to be. The women are able to smooth over the contradictions of ‘performing pleasure’ by latently relying on the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, through which they understand themselves as ‘choosing’ to privilege their male partner’s desire and pleasure, such that they are positioned both within discourses of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality and liberal (sexual) agency. They are thus able to experience themselves as agentic beings who ‘choose’ to privilege their partner’s pleasure, maintaining and conforming to the

47 It is of note that the possibility of having to ‘perform’ pleasure was prevalent and acknowledged enough in North America generally that I often open this discussion with the participants by commenting: “and now for the good old, ‘have you ever faked an orgasm?’”

48 I found that there was an understanding of intentionality behind participants’ ‘performing’ pleasure that is vehemently rejected by Butler in regards to her notion of ‘performativity’ (1993).
discursive constraint of feminine sexual passivity.

With respect to ‘faking orgasm and pleasure,’ male pleasure is privileged in ways that still offer women forms of agency. Like all forms of poststructurally-imagined agency, this is by no means a ‘pure’ idealized form of agency enacted by an oppressed subject progressing towards some state ‘free of restraint.’ Rather, this agency is negotiated within currently available discursive positions and draws on various discourses that enable young women to experience themselves as ‘choosing agents,’ empowering themselves to meet their personal and social needs, in particular, their need to competently perform their femininity.

Dilemmas necessitated by the discursive privileging of their male partner’s pleasure were present for most of the young women with whom I spoke. The assumption that men’s pleasure should be prioritized was never taken on as ‘absolute truth.’ There was often a discomfort with the view, as seen above, and this discomfort usually translated into some type of active resistance on the participant’s part. A number of women simply refused to fake orgasms for their partner’s satisfaction. It is interesting to note that discourses around proper heterosex have shifted over the twentieth century, in that ‘performing’ has shifted from ‘performing wifely duties’ to ‘performing pleasure.’ This shift has much to do with dominant discourses around masculinity, which Potts (2002) shows have come to position men as (s)experts who should be competent at pleasing their women.

Women’s ability to resist discourses of women’s passivity and draw on pro-sex feminist discourses must be understood in the context of their social positioning. As mentioned, the women I interviewed all are immersed in a popular culture context that
allows at least some room for women’s sexual agency. They did not invent empowered, pro-sex practices or discourses, but by virtue of their access to the sex-radical feminist discourses that circulate through the media they are positioned in ways that facilitate their sexual rights. These women grew up having access to feminist discourse, although as we see, there are many other contradictory discursive streams circulating as well.

Many women feel that specifically faking orgasm is a disservice to themselves and their partners. It was common for women to be fine with ‘faking pleasure’ even if they were not fine with faking orgasm per se. Many participants ‘fake pleasure,’ but they do so for a range of reasons, which include finding that the production of pleasure early on in an encounter physically arouses them. As Jo comments, laughing: “I know that doing that gets me more into it […] I don’t really categorize it as fake because I’m conscious that I’m like making more noise or like, I guess it comes down to making more noise, but then making more noise turns me on so, it’s a win win situation!” Mary Jane’s division between faking orgasm and pleasure is quite common:

Brandy: So sometimes there’d be simulated pleasure but not necessarily a faked orgasm?

Mary Jane: Yeah. Yeah, the thing is that things feel good, I just don’t orgasm from it, so it’s not like I’m lying, I’m just not going to fake the actual orgasm, like the climax. Like even when I have sex sometimes I know I’m going to get there but it takes time, so sometimes a guy’ll come before I get to that point, but it’s definitely getting there but I just haven’t orgasmed so I’m not going to like orgasm when I’m not even there yet and I’ll be like ‘That felt good’ cause I want them to know that it felt good, right? But I don’t wanna lie, I don’t think faking it would be very good cause I feel like it just does bad for them and me too, cause it’s telling a guy, ‘This is making me orgasm’ when you’re not and so they think that that’s an okay thing to do, but really you want something else, so I’d rather just tell them, ‘Hey, do something else’ than make them think that what they’re doing is good.

As Nova’s excerpt shows, this distinction between faking pleasure and orgasm is often a
very blurry, but in the end a very definite line can be drawn:

Brandy: So now the good old, have you ever faked an orgasm?

Nova: No! But I haven’t corrected them if they’re like, ‘You?’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah!! Can we change the subject?!’ Like I haven’t intentionally faked it, but like I’ve been really enjoying it and they thought that I did but I actually didn’t. Like it was great, it just wasn’t orgasmically great, and I never say like, ‘Oh no, I didn’t.’ Like I think that would crush them, but I never see the point in faking it [because] then they’ll just learn to do stuff that I don’t really like and there’s no point in rewarding that! I think, like if they’re going to think I’m liking it, I better be liking it. That’s how I think anyway. I felt really bad with this [one guy] cause I couldn’t [orgasm] and I think he got upset about it and I was like, ‘I don’t know why I can’t!’ But I didn’t want to just save his ego and fake it and I told him like ‘I don’t fake it. I’m sorry I’m not going to, like, I like it, it’s great, it’s fine. I just, I’m not gonna pretend for you…’

For Nova there is a firm line between ‘mistaken orgasm’ and intentionally performing orgasm or denying her own experiences.

I found it interesting that for a number of the women ‘performing pleasure’ seemed to be about being able to position themselves and their partners as ‘successful’ sexual actors. This desire for ‘successful’ sexual encounters provides further evidence that a sexual/interpersonal mastery is sought by young women as part of the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse. Holland et al. state explicitly, “male-centred heterosexuality requires that the woman also ought to have an orgasm to make it proper sex and to demonstrate his power. Faking orgasm is one way in which women use their bodies sexually to meet this aspect of social construction” (Holland et al, 1994a: 30).

While sometimes it was primarily a so-called ‘powerful male’ whose ‘success’ was at risk, more often than not issues around successful sex were much more complex. In my research I often encountered the discursive constraint of privileging male sexuality, but there was also the space in which women’s desire becomes part of the conversation.
around heterosex. The particular young women I interviewed were navigating through their sexual encounters in ways that they saw as entitling them to claim ‘success’ as sexual actors as well, hence supporting and validating their competency. Certainly, their success was often established in reference to their male partners’ expectations, but they had reconfigured their ‘success’ as sexual actors not in terms of the current culturally privileged moment of orgasm, but in terms of their ‘managing’ sexual encounters smoothly and expertly:49

Brandy: Umm, ok, so you’ve never faked an orgasm?

Maria: No, I never plan to. (laughs) I hope not.

Brandy: Umm, how about faking your own pleasure, like you’ve said sometimes [that] it should have been very apparent to the guy that you weren’t enjoying yourself, other times?

Maria: Oh, no, it’s yeah, no. I’ll like, I’m noisy, just by virtue, like even when I’m kissing, I moan and stuff. And so sometimes if I haven’t moaned in a little while or if I know, I’ll sometimes throw that out, make everyone feel better. But apart from that, not in a big way.

Maria is clear that it is not only her partner’s pleasure that is at stake. She wants everyone, including herself, to feel better; not only do partners feel better, but the ‘proper’ social roles are reinforced and further legitimated. ‘Making everyone feel better’ is perhaps a signal of Maria’s implicit recognition of the discursive streams in which her interactions occur. She remains committed to ‘not faking it’ but is cognizant of her necessarily active role in ‘feeling good’ about the encounter. The unacknowledged gendered nature of one’s discursive positioning as a ‘good’ sexual partner evidences on one level the presence of the hybrid discourse to cover up these contradictions between liberal and feminine (hetero)sexuality and on another the competency and mastery that is

49 The self-disciplining and governing Foucault argued to be characteristic of modern Western society, and its role in subjecting young women, will be addressed below.
imagined or sought by continual deferral, as will be explored in future chapters.

For Sheena, being a ‘good’ sexual actor in an encounter means communicating her pleasure to her partner, even if this had to be via a performance:

Brandy: So, the good old, have you ever faked an orgasm?
Sheena: […] Many [times].
Brandy: With your current partner?
Sheena: With him, not much, maybe once or twice, it was mostly with other partners. I really enjoy myself and I know I’m not going to have an orgasm but I am really enjoying myself, so I don’t want them to think that I’m not enjoying myself because I’m not having one, so I’d fake an orgasm and that was that and it kept everything good. I don’t know […] all the guys have really wanted me to be um enjoying myself, so yeah.

Given the drive to confirm competency in life generally, and that part of sexual competency is derived from partner choices, as we will see in Chapter Six, current partners may be idealized as ‘most’ suitable by placing previous relationships within a narrative of ‘progressive betterment.’ Given the assumption of ‘progressive betterment,’ it is not surprising that many of the participants report feeling that their current partners are more sexually skilled than previous partners. Sheena feels that she has been forced to perform her pleasure less often with her current partner than with previous ones. She sees her role to reciprocate to her partners’ desires (who have all ‘wanted her to enjoy herself’”) with her own active response (even if performed). Following Roberts’ research on faking orgasm as emotional relationship labour, Potts notes, “[faking] orgasm is a performance by her that rewards and validates his performance. And so a convoluted play ensues, with both actors mindful not only of their own performance, but also of the ‘presentation’ of the other’ (2002: 91, emphasis in original). Given Potts’ (2002)
understanding of women’s performances as ways of rewarding and validating men’s sexual performances, we can see how accounts of partner reciprocity within hetero sexual relationships sometimes translate into experiences of ‘obligation,’ as Braun et al. (2003) found. The authors are careful however to remind us that the question of ‘what’s really going on’ in accounts of reciprocity (i.e.: men and women give equally in hetero sexual relationships) is less important than those exploring discursive opening and constraint within various gendered discourses of (hetero)sexuality.

It is interesting that Sheena, like Maria, makes reference to ‘keeping everything good.’ Emma also says that choosing not to fake pleasure would “ruin the moment.” There is clearly a normative presence central to their experience of ‘choosing’ to ‘smooth things over’ with their performances of pleasure. Here I am not venturing into ‘a cultural dupe’ argument. Latently referencing the background ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, the women who choose to perform pleasure see themselves as actively choosing to manage their sexual encounters to maximize ‘success’ for themselves and their partners within an unacknowledged gendered framework. They are positioning themselves as active agents within the discursive space available to them, which poststructural theory shows us is the only possibility of agency, as there is no possibility of enacting agency outside of discourse as liberal humanists would have us believe (Foucault, 1990; Butler, 1999). Certainly, sex is rarely an either/or experience. Lily is clear about privileging her male partner’s pleasure, while maintaining a demand for her own:

What we’ve found is that the first time we do it, it’s for his pleasure and stuff but afterwards we’ll come back and he’ll do all these things to me and I’m just having orgasm after orgasm and then we’ll have intercourse again and then it’s really good, I think for the both of us.
Persephone chooses to vehemently reject privileging male pleasure if it would compromise her own sexual health and pleasure:

[I] remember there was another recent one, he was like […] ’I don’t like this condom’ and I was like, ‘I’ve got one, want to try mine?’ And [he was] like, ‘I just don’t really like it.’ [Me.] ‘Let’s try mine. Switch!’ Don’t give him time. ‘Ok, guess what? Better?!’ And he was just like, ‘It’s just not really…’ and I’m like, ‘That’s a shame, I was looking forward to having sex!’ […] I’m not one of those people that are like, ‘You wear it or you’re not having sex with me!’ (loudly and petulantly) I’m just like, ‘Well, whatever, I’ve had mine, so if you want to go, that’s fine. I’m going to kick you out in five minutes anyway!’ You know what I mean? (laughs)

Lack of Desire as a Gendered Experience

At the nexus of discourses that position women as passive sexual agents and those that privilege male pleasure and sexuality, the experience of one partner having less or a ‘lack’ of sexual desire becomes a deeply gendered one. When positioned as passive sexual beings, there is limited room for women to articulate a claim for their desire and pleasure though, as we will see throughout this dissertation, the space available is actively mined by the participants. Similarly, as male pleasure is privileged there is arguably more space within which couples can address and discuss male pleasure. Thus, when the young women I interviewed view themselves as being sexually more voracious and desiring more sex than their male partner it is handled very differently than when the male partner wants to be having sex more frequently. Of the women who participated in this research and commented on differences in desire, four identify their long-term male partners as wanting sex more and two identified themselves as wanting sex more. How the couples and the individuals within them dealt with these discrepancies is tellingly similar in both cases. When the male partner has a higher sex drive, this experience is
dealt with in a couple of different ways.

For Jackie, her view of herself as having less of a sex drive seemed to mesh well with dominant constructions of women’s sexual nature. She seemed to find it almost ‘natural’ that her partner would have a higher sex drive. About their differing desires, she says:

Jackie: Every time I don’t feel like I don’t want it, but not every time do I feel like I want it [...] Like when I don’t want it, I will tell him but sometimes when I’m indifferent, but as long as I don’t feel uncomfortable, I’m okay with it [...] Even if I feel indifferent, I wouldn’t feel uncomfortable, so he would feel that, umm, I’m not very aroused, but I’m not disgusted or anything like that. I don’t feel bored or anything. It’s when I’m indifferent, it was more like I, I’m not very interested, but it’s not like I’m not interested, not like I don’t care at all, it’s not that, it’s just in a not very interested [way], ‘Ok, he asked for it, so yeah.’

Brandy: So you’d say he can tell the difference between [when you’re aroused or not]?

Jackie: Yeah

Brandy: So he’s okay to have sex anyways?

Jackie: Because I can’t be terribly interested every time!

At another point in her interview Jackie reflects on an earlier partner who had a much lower sex drive than she. I ask if it was a hard adjustment between her having a higher and now a lower sex drive than her partner. She replies, “No, I just grew up.”

This comment is interesting because her way of dealing with her apparent lack of desire (‘growing up’) is premised on popularized (medicalized) Freudian theory, which places vaginal orgasm resulting from heterosex as the sign of female sexual maturity. She sees herself as having to ‘grow up’ in order to deal with her partner’s desires.

Maia experiences a similar distance between her own and her partner’s sexual desires. It seems telling that, in contrast with Jackie, Maia does not position herself so
Maia: I don’t know if it’s because of the birth control I use, but I feel like the frequency we had sex went down as time passed. Like, umm, yeah, we used to be almost everyday, and now it’s two or three times a week. I have trouble getting interested, which frustrates him. [Since] I’ve been on the pill, half the time I don’t feel like it. Like, ‘I have a headache.’ It’s still enjoyable when we do have it.

Brandy: Umm, so and you said that might be related to birth control?

Maia: Yeah, that’s a common side affect.

Brandy: Certainly. So do you think it’s more likely that than like, ‘We’ve been together for a while now?’

Maia: Probably a combination.

Brandy: Ok. Umm, so you said jokingly that you have a headache. How do you handle it when..?

Maia: I just, ‘I don’t feel like it’ […] well he kind of grumbles and then I get mad and I’m like, ‘Do you really want me to have sex with you because I feel guilty?’ ‘Noooooo…” But […] I’m fine with him masturbating and looking at porn […] I don’t tell him, ‘Do it yourself” but he knows that he can.

Brandy: But would you ever like sit with him while he masturbates or anything?

Maia: Yeah! All the time

Maia makes considerable effort to account for her lack of desire in ways that do not reflect on the nature of female sexuality. She clearly still acknowledges such discourses, ‘I have a headache’ being a common misnomer signaling women’s ‘naturally’ reticent sexuality. It seems that where the differences in sexual desire have the opportunity to be discursively positioned in ways that are not so naturalized and totalizing there is more room to negotiate alternative responses (him masturbating alone or with her sitting with
These alternatives do not necessarily include her having sex when she is not motivated to do so.

For some of the couples, differences in sexual desire led to out-and-out conflict.

When I asked Jill how they handled her lower level of desire, which she attributes to a medical condition, she exclaims:

Jill: *We fight a lot!* I’m kind of serious, we do fight about this. We get really, butt heads when we start to like really talk about it, because he gets really frustrated because, ‘I want you to want it.’ He almost feels like he’s not getting, like it’s him not me, he feels like he’s not pleasing me, doing his job.

Brandy: So in regards to that, um, how comfortable are you generally talking about sex with your partner?

Jill: Oh, very. Except when we start to butt heads, ‘Ok, change the subject.’ Yeah.

Brandy: Is that specifically about him wanting you to want it?

Jill: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s pretty much it, it comes down to me not wanting it enough.

Jill feels comfortable talking about most sexual things openly with her partner, but found that her ‘lack of desire’ was a place their communication always broke down.

Interestingly, throughout the interviews discourses work in tandem to construct ‘normal’ heterosexual encounters. The construction of men as (s)experts (Potts, 2002) who should be arousing and fulfilling their female partner’s needs is, according to Jill, taking a toll on her partner’s confidence.

Libby experiences her and her partner’s differing level of sexual willingness as an issue from the beginning of her first sexual relationship, as she was a virgin and her partner was not:

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50 As an aside, it’s interesting that I thought to ask if she sits with him while he masturbates only because that is a way I’ve dealt with differing levels of desire in my own heterosexual relationships.
I sort of warned him about it from the beginning, cause I didn't want to make him think I was [going to have sex with him], but at the same time I knew he knew but wasn’t going to believe it. So we often had conflicts, cause, I, you know, you’ve been doing things like oral, that wasn’t something that I wanted to do for a little while, so we’d have conflict like, ‘You just don’t understand’ and then that was probably the biggest issue right away [...] at first I was just like, I was like, with anything I felt like it was maybe being a little push and it took a few times for us to argue and I sort of stormed off before I was actually willing to try.

Later on in their relationship, when they were having intercourse, differing levels of desire remained an issue:

Brandy: You said, so sometimes you find yourself not fully into it, does it ever cause any tension, like, is he aware of it?

Libby: Yeah, it causes tension sometimes and I feel bad when I’m just like, ‘No’ and I know he’s disappointed, so that kind of like puts tension because I’m not supporting him […] It comes up lots.

Central to accounts of male desire being higher than women’s, is that the difference is an issue to be made sense of, accounted for, and dealt with by both partners, either by negotiating openly, having recurrent conflict, or by ‘growing up and adjusting’.

In the two instances where the women identified themselves as being more desirous of sex than their male partner, the women’s experiences were defined and dealt with differently. Gina brought up her higher levels of desire in response to a question about how well she and her partner communicate about ‘sexual stuff’:

Gina: Um, it really fluctuates. Some days it’s really easy…whether I feel like discussing it. Um, I’d say generally it’s okay. Communication, um, the only thing is that I feel like, uh like I, I’m not sure if it’s me being more horny than he is, or we’ve had a couple nights when I wanted to have sex and he didn’t and that’s hard to hear. I find that hard to take because I think, I don’t know, he always says he’s too tired, which is understandable and fair enough, but I’m like, ‘What am I suppose to do?’ So communication around that, I don’t feel that comfortable with because so far it’s always been me that wanted it and he doesn’t and it hasn’t been the other way around, so that’s kinda hard to talk about…[My male partner] feels like, ‘Why is she hornier than I am?’ And he
wonders about it, if something’s wrong with him.

Brandy: Have you [asked him about it]?

Gina: Not really.

Brandy: So it’s a sense you have from his reactions?

Gina: He always seems apologetic. Then I feel bad, ‘I’m sorry!’

It is important to note that in all these interviews we are getting only one partner’s view, so it is possible that, like Gina, many of the male partners above feel ‘sorry’ for having higher sexual desire than their female partners. I also do not want to underestimate the impact on the male partner of not ‘successfully’ being able to position himself as a male (s)expert who initiates and guides sexual encounters. Like the women in this study, men are discursively positioned amid multiple discourses that both constrain and enable them in various ways. Poststructural research seeks to explore the gendered, classed, sexualized, nationalized, raced, etc. aspects of various discourses. The most salient point in regard to the gendered experience of ‘lack of desire’ is the degree to which a partner’s ‘lack of desire’ is an issue to be addressed and how that will be done. Gina finds their differing desire ‘hard to talk about.’ She relies on implicit verbal and non-verbal cues in order to infer her partner’s feelings about their sexual differences. This is the only time in her interview that Gina mentions her partner’s ‘lack of desire.’ In contrast, when women self-identified as having lesser desire than their partners, the issue of negotiation or outright conflict was brought up a number of times throughout the interviews. It seems that Gina deals with this issue internally rather than with her partner.

Similarly, Lisa made reference only once to her own greater level of desire, at the end of the interview when we were starting to run out of time:
Brandy: Ok, we’ve kind of, this will likely be quick, how does masturbation figure into your sexuality now or since you started having sex?

Lisa: It’s a main staple in my sexual life.

Brandy: Ok, ok. So like you have a more voracious appetite than your partner?

Lisa: Yeah.

Brandy: So do you masturbate in bed together, or like would you do that by yourself?

Lisa: Sometimes after sex, if it wasn’t enough, um, sometimes I’ll do it with him around, sometimes he’ll go off and do something else and I’ll masturbate

Brandy: Is he aware of it?

Lisa: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Um, and but mostly it’s just I go to bed earlier than him, so I’ll masturbate and go to sleep and then he comes to bed later. So that’s sort of a staple of my masturbating.

Lisa refers to their differences quite casually and does not appear to regard it as a problem at all. Masturbating before bed and sometimes after sex is just ‘a main staple in her sexual life.’ We are given little insight into her partner’s view of this, but later in the interview we are reminded that we must be careful when making assumptions about how gendered discourses of heterosexuality work. We must question the experiences these assumptions cover up, by delimiting the discourses and words we have to draw on - in other words, the ‘sense-making’ schemas we can use in articulating ourselves. Here I ask if Lisa and her partner have ever had sex when he may have been indifferent, to which she responds: “Yeah, probably, especially since he has [a] sort of the lower sexual appetite. It probably happens more with him than with me.” Always already positioning

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51 As I write this I see that earlier with Maia I assumed that she would sit there while her partner masturbated and here I’m barely ‘hearing’ that only Lisa is masturbating in this situation. I assumed that she and her male partner would masturbate together, even though she’s clear that it is her desire that’s higher. I make a basic assumption of the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse.
men within the male sexual drive discourse delimits the likelihood that researchers will address and explore how men also sometimes ‘choose’ to have sex when they do not want to.

(Neo)liberal Subjects Positions as Platform and Limit: ‘Competent, Feminine Sexuality’

Throughout this chapter we have seen young women reiterating and resisting dominant discourses of gendered (hetero)sexuality. This finding raises the question of where the participants position themselves when articulating resistance. Certainly, there is evidence of a number of alternative discourses in their narratives, including various feminist discourses, pro-sex and otherwise, but an often present discourse is one of (neo)liberal humanism. It is at the intersection of gendered discourses of (hetero)sexuality and discourses of (neo)liberal discourses that the hybrid latent ‘competent feminine sexuality’ occurs. I argue that it is within discourses of (neo)liberalism that Hollway’s ‘permissive’ - the ‘anything goes as long as no one gets hurt as both men and women pursue their own pleasure’ - discourse of (hetero)sexuality positions itself. (Neo)liberalism is the foundation that enables the permissive discourse to ‘make sense’ for young women to draw on in articulating themselves as competent, autonomous sexual actors. At the same time, discourses of (hetero)sexuality position woman as gendered actors in ways that undermine their ability to position themselves as sexual agents. It is important to note that above I presented narratives of women negotiating dominant discourse of (hetero)sexuality as though they could stand somehow separate from the moment they take up (neo)liberal discourses of ‘sexual rights,’ which are supported and
informed by various feminist and non-feminist discourses. We saw threads of (neo)liberal discourse throughout many of the narratives. The separation of the above section and this one is simply a way to explore the somewhat distinctive role of the discourses of sexuality prior to exploring how the women position themselves as sexual beings within larger discursive contexts. As we will see, the (neo)liberal discursive position the young women draw on is deeply affected by their gendered position as women and thus needs to be read against the background context of the hybrid discourse that mediates these contradictions.

Most importantly, we will see that the (neo)liberal subject position is both a platform and a limit with regard to how young women demand and negotiate their sexual desire and pleasure. As a number of authors have argued, (neo)liberal discourses of individual choice emerge that tend to obscure structural patterns of inequality (Harris et al, 2000: 374). As a result of contradictions between gendered subjectivities and (neo)liberal humanist ones, young women are positioned such that on “one hand, it is important and desirable to be successful in the heterosexual sphere, and to gain confirmation for one’s feminine identity from men. But according to Western notions of the individual, it is equally important to demonstrate one’s own individuality and independence, and not to give up one’s position of decision making” (Harris et al, 2000: 277). The women negotiate these contradictions by weaving a tapestry of discourses, wherein they can position themselves as being competent (hetero)sexually active women and liberal subjects. Certainly, the pillars of subjectivity, competency and mastery are present in the sexual lives of young women, which results in their being “multiply positioned in a way that [enables] them to simultaneously accommodate and resist taken-
for-granted meanings about female and male sexuality” (Allen, 2003b: 217). Again, we see the centrality of Foucault’s notion of subjectification to an analysis that allows for agency within myriad systems of circulating power. We have been witness to the mediation of discourses and power; this is “not to deny power’s disciplinary effects, but to suggest that the subject produced is more than ‘docile’ or totally determined by [the] power” of dominant discourses of gendered (hetero)sexuality (Allen, 2003a: 238).

An overview of (neo)liberal discourses of the subject is unnecessary here, as this topic was touched on in Chapter Three. I will briefly address Gonick’s (2004) work however to provide a useful summary of how (neo)liberal and gendered discourses intersect in late modern society. Gonick (2004) investigates adolescent girls’ negotiation of gendered and (neo)liberal humanist discourse. The (neo)liberal subject, as Gonick (2004) argues, culminates in what Beck refers to as a ‘social surge of individualization.’ Alongside this surge Beck sees an intensification of self-monitoring, wherein when ‘successfully’ defining ourselves as a subject we are compelled ‘to standardize [our] own existence’ according to “an ethic of autonomous selfhood” (190). The defining feature of (neo)liberal discourses is an emphasis on “making the individual responsible” because (neo)liberalism, as it relates to the subject and “in the context of globalization and economic rationalism, depends upon subjects who are free, rational agents of democracy and capable of ‘bearing the serious burden of liberty’”(Gonick, 2004: 190, emphasis in original). Davies et al. argue that (neo)liberalism “envisages a new hybrid subject - a subject with the flexibility of the poststructural/postmodern subject, but built on a radical reconception of an individualized, competitive, free and responsibilized subject, a subject that understands itself, in liberal humanist terms, as free and in control of itself and
responsible for its own fate” (2006: 88). As we will see, the young women I interviewed clearly understand, experience and articulate themselves as coherent, free decision makers with a core identity that is relatively stable and positive. I also hope to show that while the women understand themselves within the humanist framework, if we are to move beyond our current limits of theorizing female (hetero)sexual subjectivity and to transform sexuality education, it will no longer be feasible to rely on an assumption of the liberal or (neo)liberal subject. We will see both the productive and limiting aspects of how young women are positioned as (neo)liberal subjects.

Within the realm of sexuality, (neo)liberal discourses of sexual subjectivity are manifested in and supported by the rise of two particular discourses of (hetero)sexuality over the twentieth century: discourses of companionate marriage and, as mentioned above, the more recent ‘permissive’ discourses. While I discussed the rise of companionate marriage in Chapter One, here I connect this movement directly to the discursive context within which the young women I interviewed negotiate their sexual relationships and how they are positioned within competing sexual discourses in late modern society. This rise of the companionate marriage ideal, taken to its radical and pro-sex conclusions by some feminists, significantly contributes to the discursive space available for women’s claims to sexual pleasure.

The notion of companionate marriage has held broadening sway since the early twentieth century when Victorian assumptions “about women’s sexual passivity and passionlessness were, increasingly, being questioned by young women and men and by political and sexual radicals” (Adams, 1997: 9). In 1928 over 1 million copies of Dutch gynecologist Theodor Van de Velde’s book, Ideal Marriage, were sold. He is credited
with inventing the modern sex advice manual. Adams argues that by the 1940s, notions of companionate marriage became “the way of organizing erotic, emotional and reproductive life” (Adams, 1997:9, emphasis in original). By the postwar years, companionate marriage was not at all viewed as unusual. Within the discourse of companionate marriage “women’s role became a responsive one. Women were counseled to follow men’s sexual lead; to withdraw from sex was to threaten the marriage, to treat a husband unfairly. Sex was the glue that was to hold these marriages together” (9). Women were still positioned as passive to men’s (their lawfully wedded husband’s) active sexuality, but such discourses opened up the potential space for women’s demand for pleasure and sexual agency. As Segal shows, the sexological research that companionate marriage discourses drew on would “prove to be a double edged sword” when Kinsey’s revolutionary research undermined the ‘naturalness’ of marital relations being privileged over non-marital relations and some forms of sexual contact/gratification over others (1994: 87-88). The unintended ‘excesses’ of companionate discourses left room for the possibility of women’s agency, though women were still positioned as passively “responsive.” Later, second wave feminist sex researchers, such as Shere Hite, based their research on Kinsey and Masters and Johnson’s work. Here we see increasing space granted to the possibility of women’s sexual desire and pleasure. Segal argues that despite the belief that Hite “offers a new theory and research paradigm for studying sexuality, [she] fully shares sexology’s penchant for biological reductionism, and its inability to take seriously either the nature and significance of desire, or the social meanings embedded in bodily experience” (1994:108). With the human rights and sexual revolution context of the 1960s and 1970s, the disruption of traditional values, the
companionate marriage ideals were being reworked such that they could be applied to all heterosexual relationships, rather than only to people who were married. Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries we have seen the companionate marriage ideal being reworked and manifested in ‘permissive’ sexual discourses. The intersections between ‘permissive’ discourses of (hetero)sexuality and (neo)liberal human rights claims are central to how the participants articulated their demand for sexual pleasure.

Classical liberal arguments have been central to many forms of feminism. In the first wave of femininism, classical liberal demands gave White women, and later racialized women, the vote. Similarly, liberal demands around (sexual) rights and freedoms are apparent within the second and third waves of feminism. Since the second wave of feminism, there has been increasing discursive space for women to demand sexual pleasure as liberal subjects. I will show how (neo)liberal demands within feminist discourse have created the platform on which women can base their claim to sexual pleasure. At the same time, this liberal platform places limits on what discursive positions are available to women because it is implicitly gendered. The hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse best illuminates how the contradictions of (neo)liberal and gendered discourses are navigated by young women. Beyond showing (neo)liberal discourse as both platform and limit, I also show how relying on a humanist view of the subject is inadequate when trying to account for young women’s sexual subjectivity. I turn towards a Lacanian-imagined subject, which rejects the humanist stance that silences women’s agency.

Positioning themselves as (neo)liberal subjects entitled to pleasure and complete bodily dignity and autonomy is often experienced as empowering for participants because
it provides them with a legitimate space within which to acknowledge and articulate their ‘sexual rights.’ Over an extended period, Rosie and her first partner discussed losing their virginity together. We see the import of (neo)liberal discourse in the considerations she weighted:

I think just knowing that we’ve spent a lot of time talking about it, like knowing that the time passed and we spent time talking about what we do, what happens and all that. *That let me to think, ‘Oh, I can really trust this person. Like, I, well I’m responsible for my body and I remember that because my father said only I could be responsible for my body and I’m trying my best and he seems to be willing to take the part to and that was quite powerful…You know? But I don’t know, like say if we had met and then if we talked about it in like [the] first couple weeks and then we decided to have sex I don’t know if the same influence.*

For Rosie ‘being ready to have intercourse’ included assurance that her partner had the same respect for her body that she had. Her father taught her that only she had the right and power to protect herself and her health, which helped her to demand this of her partner.

The liberal right to bodily autonomy is central to discussions around abortion. Most of the young women claimed that a decision about what to do with an unwanted pregnancy would flow from conversations between the two people involved. However, Annie and a few other participants feel comfortable in articulating how only they can have a say over their body and reproduction.

*Brandy: Did you communicate to [partners] that you weren’t going to have [a] baby and did you talk about if they were okay with abortion at all?*

*Annie: Umm, it doesn’t really matter to me if they’re ok. It’s my body* (chuckles)
Annie’s claim is predictable when one has access to (neo)liberal subjectivity. We must also acknowledge her position within a social context much changed by feminist reproductive rights campaigns. Certainly the rights Annie articulates may at some point be circumscribed by other competing discourses and material experiences of gender inequality. However, it is absolutely essential to explore how various discourses enable and limit speech and behaviour. The participants are able to demand their bodily autonomy within (neo)liberal discourses and a social context where their right to abortion is protected legally and discursively. Similar claims of rights to bodily pleasure are enabled by the ‘permissive’ discourses of (hetero)sexuality. The liberal subject ‘becomes’ sexual. Women’s claims for bodily autonomy and pleasure are premised on their claim to liberal (sexual) subject status.

There are numerous narratives in which women clearly and directly make demands for their sexual pleasure while still, as we saw above, feeling forced to consider and negotiate discourses that privilege their male partner’s pleasure. Sue’s frankness and confidence stand as an example, as when she remembers talking with her current partner early on in their relationship:

Sue: Yeah, like, ‘You want me to give you head, you have to give me head too.’ It’s not just ‘I’m your little bitch and I’m here to pleasure you’ and ‘Oh Master!’ That’s not how I roll. It’s like, I’ll give you this, but I’m gonna want that at some point…

Brandy: Was that a tough conversation at all?

Sue: No not really.

Maia’s narrative of a time she actively took up the (neo)liberal discursive position
is particularly telling. She remembers a time she experienced sexual harassment:

Maia: I had a co-worker and he was late 30 early 40’s and, like, I don't know, it was kind of like a joke-y thing and asking me out to dinner and I’d go along with it cause he’s a nice guy and like he has, it’s not a wife, they’re not married, but a life partner type thing but I was a little bit uncomfortable with it and I’d like give him hugs or a kiss on the cheek or stuff and I was just never sure if he was joking or not and one day we were in the warehouse talking and he was joking so I just kissed him on the lips and it kind of went away after that!..He kind of stopped.

Brandy: That’s kind of funny. So why do you think he stopped?

Maia: I don’t know. I think it just jolted his senses.

Brandy: Like, maybe I shouldn’t be doing this?

Maia: Yeah.

Brandy: What made you kiss him?

Maia: I don’t know! It was like maybe he’ll leave me alone if I just do that.

It is interesting that Maia intuitively deduces that if she inverts the role of sexual aggressor the man will leave her alone. Here we see the self-reflexive subject Davies et al. (2006) propose we consider. Her choice to kiss him is based on her assessment of what will actually end his ‘joke-y’ sexual advances, even if it means behaving in a way (kissing him) that undermines and contradicts her own discomfort with being sexually harassed.

It is useful to inquire into narratives where young women are enabled as (neo)liberal subjects to navigate the world in ways that benefit their physical and emotional well being. Maia actively chooses to sexually aggressive toward the man who is sexually harassing her in order to end the harassment, asserting her competency as an autonomous subject within a gendered context of inequality. At the same time, the

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52 I refer to this as sexual harassment because Maia tells me about this experience in response to my question of whether she has ever experienced sexual harassment.
ambivalence of Maia’s narrative signals that we must also be aware of the contradictions and instabilities Lacan proposes are inherent to the subject. No matter how firmly contradictions are braced and smoothed over when women position themselves within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, psychoanalytic insights alert us to how we need to attend to ambivalence if we are to engage more fully in theorizing the subject. Jo’s admission of her own insecurities and moments of uncertainty alert us to this possibility. She says: “I want to talk about sex and I’m always the one that’s pushing the uncomfortable taboo things with my friends and peers, [but] I’m not as comfortable and open to it as I project myself to be.” Lacan is useful because he alerts us to the fact that none of us are ‘as we project ourselves to be.’ Here we see the limits of theorizing subjectivity only as a function of subjection in discourse. In other words, we see the limits of conceiving of ‘projection’ as ‘subjection’; we also need to include theoretical insights that account for psychic processes of subjection.

**Unwanted Consensual Sex and the (Neo)liberal Subject**

In the post-civil rights and post-sexual revolution era, where both sexual and political rights are held to be the indelible rights of all citizens regardless of race or gender, as mentioned, we see the ‘excesses’ of the companionate marriage discourses shifting to the ‘permissive’ discourse of (hetero)sexuality. In late modern society sexual autonomy and the right to pleasure is ostensibly extended to all people. As we will see, however, the contradictions that emerge when permissive liberal discourses meet gendered ones have been largely ignored in dominant discourse. The silence that
surrounds these contradictions erases them from the participants’ narratives of sexual pleasure.

If (neo)liberalism is a key discourse, and the ‘permissive’ discourse is a (hetero)sexual distillation of this, then the ‘together woman’ discourse Phillips (2000) identifies seems similarly influential on young women’s discursive positioning of themselves as sexual agents. In other words, (neo)liberal competency, in its ‘permissive’ (hetero)sexual distillation as the illusory psychic competency sought by the Lacanian subject, and Phillips ‘together woman’ culminate in the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse I identify in the participants’ narratives. In making sense of themselves as competent women, participants are able to position themselves as autonomous liberal subjects and ‘properly’ feminine sexual partners. Phillips’ work is useful in thinking through the specifically gendered and sexualized experiences of liberal subject-hood. Phillips shows that in young women’s sexual lives the ‘together woman’ discourse is competing with the ‘pleasing woman’ discourse, or what I have discussed as women’s negotiation of discourses that position them as passive (pleasing) sexual objects; thus there are multiple contradictions that must be accounted for in their narratives. The ‘together woman’ discourse:

promotes the notion that a ‘together’ woman is free, sexually sophisticated, and entitled to accepting nothing less than full equality and satisfaction in her sexual encounters and romantic relationships. Accepting uncritically the liberal, androcentric ‘ideals’ of total autonomy, self-direction, and entitlement to sex and relationships without personal responsibility, this discourse is in some ways an offshoot of liberal feminism. It argues that women can (and must) ‘have it all’ and they can with sufficient determination, refuse to let anything hold them back from their own sense of pleasure and fulfillment. (Phillips, 2000: 47)
As Phillips points out, this discourse is particularly virulent in women’s magazines and mainstream media. *Cosmopolitan* was the only magazine that the participants in my research ever mentioned gaining sexual information from. Segal (1994) is critical of ‘Cosmo-led’ understandings of women’s sexuality, reminding us that “women are presented to us as already the active and equal sexual partners of men and told how to obtain and please their man, as if he were likely to be seeking the same advice.” The *Cosmo* ideology “[ignores] both the symbolic dimensions of language and the existing power relations between men and women” (1994: 239). Research such as my own and that of many others (Allen, 2003a, 2003b; Potts, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Tolman, 2002; Ussher, 2005) explores how it is possible to be critical of such discourses while still acknowledging young women’s active efforts to utilize such discourses in ways that they experience as empowering and supportive of their view of themselves as sexual agents.

Although I draw directly on Phillips’ ‘together women’ discourse, it is important to note how my discussion of the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse can be distinguished from Phillips’ discourse. As mentioned above, the hybrid discourse offers a way for women to understand themselves as competent liberal and feminine subjects. Beyond this important function however, I also bring psychoanalytic insights into my understanding of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse. As discussed in Chapter Three, I follow Lacan in understanding the subject as premised on an illusory and retroactive sense of coherent completion. ‘Competency’ then is, in psychoanalytic terms, an unattainable state that subjects nevertheless constantly seek. The specific processes through which the women attempt to shore up and maintain a sense of coherent,
intelligible subjectivity will be explored in later chapters. The psychoanalytic insights I bring to Phillips’ ‘together woman’ discourse deepen our understandings of the regulatory power of this discourse.

One of the ways that the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, wherein the specific ‘together woman’ strain of (neo)liberal discourse is balanced with gendered discourses, becomes evident in young women’s sexual lives is in experiences of ‘unwanted consensual sex’ (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005:18). Various social psychology researchers (summarized in Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005) have begun to complicate and unpack the notion of consent and are beginning to explore a “continuum from unwanted consensual sex to unwanted coercive sex” (18). ‘Unwanted consensual sex’ is understood as a gendered experience because women are much more likely than men to report this behaviour (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005:18). In the participants’ interviews I note a number of instances in which they ‘choose’ to have sex when they do not really feel like it. The women make this choice for a variety of complex reasons, including, but not limited to, relationship maintenance and pleasuring their partner. They position themselves as ‘consenting’ liberal subjects, who for reasons other than their own arousal or physical desire to have sex, choose to do so. In this way they are able to cover over the contradictions between gendered (hetero)sexual and (neo)liberal humanist discourses. Desire is reconfigured not as personal, physical desire for sexual pleasure but as a desire to attain another goal, which, it is important to note, may not exclude attaining sexual pleasure as well. ‘Choice’ is constructed as totally autonomous and individualized, obfuscating the variety of sexual discourses and power structures that a woman is forced to negotiate. When thinking about a past partner, Gray articulates this as weighing her
own desires with the ‘free and fun’ (sexual) lifestyle of backpacking youth and the desire not to ‘rock the boat’ as it were:

Did I want to have sex with him? Not really. Or if I was here [in Canada] would I have? Probably not. But there’s a certain [traveling] mentality I guess. Um, it was more kind of like, ok, how, you kind of want to keep this situation or the whole thing smooth. So like, it’s, ‘Well, I guess we should just kind of have sex.’ Like yeah and thinking like oh, that’s not, you know what I mean. But, I guess there’s a pull between ‘Hey, like it’s fun, it’s whatever, celebrate your sexuality. Let’s be able to have fun’ and there’s the other side of me that’s like, ‘But no, he doesn’t mean anything to you, did you really want to? Like no.’ So it’s not that I feel bad that I did and we used condoms and stuff but um, it didn’t have any real emotional pull it was more like a situational thing that I kind of went along with what I felt would be smoothest […] So I guess that’s another time that I could say falls into that category.

Gray experiences herself as weighing her views, negotiating between wanting to keep things ‘smooth’ in a ‘fun, celebrate your sexuality’ context, one that I would argue is by no means specific to backpacking, although it may be exacerbated by it, and her knowledge that she ‘didn’t really want to.’ We see her desire being reconstituted as a desire to keep things ‘smooth.’ She is consciously weighing her options and making an agentic choice; however, discourses of the choosing (neo)liberal subject allow the (hetero)sexualized discourses that position women as passive objects of active male sexual drive to remain hidden from view.

Some of the other women’s narratives are fairly straightforward, in that they acknowledge that they consent to having sex even when they do not feel like it and are quite clear about their often ambivalent discomfort with doing so. In response to the question of whether she’s ever had sex when her partner does not want to, Nova proceeds to tell me about the following experience. She says:

Nova: Like I have when I didn’t really want to, like I was really tired and I was like, ‘Oh, I just want to sleep,’ and he was bugging me and I was like, ‘Please, I had a long day,’ and he was like, I was like ‘Oh, do it,
like get it over with so I can go to sleep.’ Like I was half asleep and he
was not sleeping and he was like, ‘Can we? Like please, like you said
earlier we could.’ ‘But I’m really tired and I didn’t realize we’d be up
this late.’ It was all this other stuff and I said earlier I wanted to do it
then but we were busy so he was just like, ‘Oh come on.’ He’s like
kissing me and I was like sleeping and so I was like, ‘Just go ahead’
cause it wakes me up and it makes him sleep and then he goes to sleep
and I’m just laying there. So I’m like, ‘Ok, I’ll wake up now and like now
he’s sleeping. It’s not fair!’ […] It’s funny now, it wasn’t so funny then!

Brandy: So were you kinda pissed about it?

Nova: No, I wasn’t. I guess I was kinda annoyed. I was just like, ‘Try to make
compromises sometimes.’ *Like the fact that that’s all that’s going on,
I’m pretty lucky.*

The choice to have sex even though she does not really want to, and that at the very least
it annoys her, occurs as a choice that is necessitated by the ‘best case scenario’ since ‘a
lot worse things could be happening.’ She may be choosing to have sex when she does
not want to, but this decision is easier than others she may be forced to make within the
context of gender inequality in relationships. We are left wondering what the ‘worse
things that could be happening’ are; perhaps a relationship where her partner does not
desire her a great deal, conflict in the relationship or maybe she choosing to have sex
with a partner she generally desires, though maybe not at that particular moment is better
than experiencing something she defines as ‘sexual violence or assault.’ We cannot know
for sure.

The role of exchange (or ‘reciprocity in sexual accounts’ as Braun et al, 2003,
explore) is also important in understanding ‘unwanted consensual sex.’ In some cases the
‘choosing’ liberal subject decides to exchange certain behaviours, sexual access to her,
for other outcomes, like long-term, happy relationship partners. Here we are connecting
back up with Hollway’s have/hold discourse of heterosex. The choosing position delimits
the likelihood that other, potentially more critical, discourses will be taken up in making sense of sexual experiences. Lola, for example, is clear about her desire to ‘return the pleasure favour to her partner.’ Like some of the women in Braun et al’s (2003) research, Lola understands her own pleasure as being derived from her partner’s pleasure as well. She is reconstituting the traditional meaning of sexual pleasure as being derived primarily from one’s own body. His pleasure is being privileged, as a result of her consenting to unwanted sex, because she chooses to privilege it. She relates:

Sometimes I feel like I, I’m really tired and it’s not that I don’t want to be with the person and I’m really tired and I feel like if he’s really active and awake I should just, he pleases me so much, I should just please him, even though I’m tired and not feeling that sexual, yeah it pulls in both ways.

Exploring how agency is present in accounts of unwanted consensual sex is useful, but assuming that the competent sexual agent, who experiences herself as ‘choosing,’ can be straightforwardly understood within a humanist framework would be misleading. More interesting are the contradictions, inconsistencies and ambivalence that appear in young women’s narratives, which undermine the coherent subjectivity they are attempting to assert. In the next three chapters I undertake a more comprehensive, psychoanalytically-informed, mining of their narratives. Here we begin to see the inadequacies of liberal humanist constructions of sexual subjectivity and attendant understandings of ‘consenting’ (or not) to engage in sexual activity. Mary Jane alerts us to this inadequacy when she remembers a guy with whom she was ‘friends with benefits’:

We could have just spent the night cuddling cause we didn’t always have sex whenever we spent the night together, we both had roommates so we’d just cuddle, but then he was trying to have sex and I really just wanted to sleep but then I kind of got like turned on and so, ‘Oh, ok, we’ll just have it.’ But I didn’t really want to but we did because it ended up being that way.
When accounting for having sex, all she can say is that they ‘did because it ended up being that way.’ This statement is not merely an inability to account for her actions because she is the passive responding object of his active desire. Mary Jane is clear earlier on that she is torn between her desire to sleep and being ‘turned on.’ The complexity of ‘consenting’ has been buried beneath discourses of (hetero)sexuality that fail to account for women’s agency and desire. Realizing these complexities, I specifically asked participants if they ever had a sexual experience about which they had been uncertain or ambivalent (as in pulled equally in both directions). Shawnequa considers this question and responds:

Shawnequa: I think most of the times I had sex, like that was with my second partner, I felt bad, from jumping to having lost my virginity and having it three times to the frequency I was having it with my second partner, so it’s like, ‘No, we shouldn’t have sex’ and then another two weeks or a week and a half or however many days and then I’d say ‘Let’s not do it tonight’ and then he’d sort of get me into wanting to do it and ‘I shouldn’t but I want to and I shouldn’t but I want to or I shouldn’t but I would’

Brandy: So were there actually times when you didn’t want to but you thought you should?

Shawnequa: I’ve never done it just because he wanted to. Like if I don’t want to I’m not going to do it. Like, he would, I guess manipulate me so it was me wanting to also

Brandy: And that’s physically manipulating you, like turning you on basically?

Shawnequa: Yeah.

Shawnequa is not explicit about what she is warring with in her ambivalence about having sex ‘so frequently,’ though she is firm in her view that it was not her partner that pressures her for sex when she did not want to. The blurriness of the line between her arousal and her desire not to have sex (for whatever reasons, perhaps to do with discourses of proper hetero feminine passivity and chastity) cannot be accounted for from
the perspective of the liberal humanist subject. We are forced to realize that perhaps a
turn to psychic processes of desire, ambivalence and conflict are necessary to move
beyond such impasses. Rosie’s words further alert us to the complexities of women’s
desire and agency, which few theoretical accounts of subjectivity are able to address:

*the desire that’s coming from me*, I find it difficult to point out where
it’s coming from, but well, for example when [my partner] engages
in some behaviour and the part that he touched or me knowing that
he’s touching me or he’s wanting to have sex leads me to think that do
I want to have sex? Or do I not want to have sex? But usually that physical
touch and the reaction to that touch, touch is, yeah, it’s something that
triggers my desire so I catch myself in those situations like thinking that ‘Oh,
he’s touching’ and I know, say when he’s getting hard, and then I was, like I
always feel like, ‘Do I want to continue?’ And it’s really funny that I’m caught,
I’m getting myself there often times, like when I read something or I talk to
people, like well especially like reading and movies, *they don’t have those
moments when people are trying to inspect themselves […]* Like I even get caught
myself, like ‘Does it really feel good?’ Like, it’s funny because when I’m feeling
really good I don’t even think about it […] but if I’m unsure, or *sometimes I feel
like I can make myself feel good it’s complicated.*

Holland et al. (1998) claim that young women face the dilemma of inspecting themselves
because of the ‘male in the head’ and the resulting panoptical self-surveillance. In many
ways this may be true, but Rosie’s evocative words alert us to the possibility that there
may be more complex and contradictory processes which structure our psychic
experience of desire and subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that young women are forced to negotiate a range of dominant
discourses of (hetero)sexuality that position them in contradictory ways which often
delimit their ability to confidently assert their desire and protect their physical and
emotional well-being. The emergence of the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’
discourse from various liberal and gendered discourses provides an example of Foucault’s (1990) assertion of the ‘unanticipated’ reworking of discourses. Within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, participants are, at times, able to disrupt dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality, asserting their desire and right to sexual pleasure and equality with their male partners. At other times, women direct their agency towards privileging male pleasure. This form of agency is experienced as empowering but also reiterates dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality. The women utilize the often limited discursive space available to actively carve out positions from which they can assert their competency as liberal and gendered sexual subjects.

I see the value of such purely discursive explorations but feel that they reach the limit of their analytical utility. In the following chapters I shift to psychoanalytic concepts in order to deconstruct stories of the passive sexual subjects constrained by dominant discourse of (hetero)sexuality and of the agentic choosing subject who, at times, can assert her right to sexual pleasure confidently. We know that we cannot underestimate the complexity of negotiating so many, most often contradictory, discourses that position late modern female sexual subjects. Rosie’s reflection foregrounds these complexities:

Rosie: Like even having good sex … we can kind of, I guess, I can suffer thinking about, ‘Oh, was it good?’ It’s because, like, I’m too, you know, like adventurous and is it bad?

Brandy: So like am I a good enough sexual partner?

Rosie: Yeah! Am I good enough? Or am I being too much too sexual? Yeah. So

Brandy: So you’re kind of torn?

Rosie: Right, and then that can kind of affect our self esteem of that day or that day I didn’t come and say if I had a partner who would say, ‘Did you come today?’ And I say ‘No’ then I feel bad but then I [still] had
good sex and that can not only like kind of uh interfere with our communication, also with how I see myself as a sexual being and I think that’s definitely one of the potential risks [of sexuality].

Rosie begins considering the risks of being a sexual being in concert with a partner by speaking about ‘we,’ women’s general possible experience, but shifts quite quickly to acknowledge that it is her own suffering that she is wrestling with.

At the end of the interviews I always asked if there was anything the women wanted to discuss or broach that we had not already covered. At this point Gray opened up about her own conflicts and dilemmas, reminding me that the sometimes painful psychic negotiations of being a sexual being have a daily impact on her life:

I guess one just kind of general thought in my mind, like after talking about all of it, it does, this whole idea, I don’t know, like it does intrigue me that just some people are very much comfortable with their bodies, with sex, with all of it and I don’t know, it’s just, in my mind, having listened to everything I said, it makes me feel like I’m really not. And I know I’m not but I’m not, but it’s not that I’m that extreme, in that I do enjoy it. It’s just like I realized that there’s a lot that comes into play with, just me and how much I enjoy sex and you know and I kind of wish like hey, that I could just go and have like a fling and, not saying that I want that, but I want to be able to sometimes not have so much enter my mind in terms of the other person and what it means for them and just the fears and anxiety about STDs and pregnancy and stuff because I can’t count the number of times, I’ve been like, ‘No, I wouldn’t do so and so, this or that, um, because like I wouldn’t know if they were clean’ and my friends laughing, ‘That’s the last thing I would have thought of!’ Cause I’m very much, very mindful of that stuff, maybe to the point of being too concerned about it. So sometimes I wonder if these sorts of things do hinder my expression of myself or my body or my own comfort levels and everything, if I’m kind of restricted in that. Just yeah.

Few of us ever are ‘all that we are projecting ourselves to be’ as sexual beings.
Chapter Five: Abjection and Gendered (Hetero)Sexuality

We saw in the last chapter that the dominant discourses young women can easily draw on in constructing and understanding their (hetero)sexuality, while useful in some ways, are by no means sufficient for understanding their sexual subjectivity. In order to move beyond current theorizations of female sexual subjectivity we must utilize multiple theoretical perspectives. Relying on a Lacanian (1995) understanding of the subject as fractured and in constant process helps here, as does drawing on psychoanalytic concepts to excavate the nature of subjectivity in novel ways. As we will see in the next three chapters, I found the psychoanalytic concepts of ‘abjection,’ ‘disavowal,’ and ‘ambivalence’ to be central to understanding the processes of subjection in the participants’ narratives, especially their will to appear as coherent and liberal agents. In this chapter I explore how ‘proofs’ of women’s desire, expressed in terms of ‘the abject’ against which ‘proper’ female (hetero)sexuality is constituted, including references to ‘slutty’\(^{53}\) behaviour and the articulation of rumours, and fear of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The silences concerning young women’s active desire effectively reiterate this abjection. This form of abjection then occurs as an aspect of the category of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality.

Most theorists contemplating the abject have drawn on Julia Kristeva’s (1982) book *Powers of Horror*, which builds on Mary Douglas’ work on how boundaries constitute taboos. Judith Butler (1999) articulates the connections between abjection of particular discursive and material possibilities and subjectivity. She argues that Douglas and then Kristeva are instrumental in outlining the construction of a discrete subject through exclusion. Defining the abject Butler writes:

\(^{53}\) I use scare quotes here to signal the complicated usages of the word slut, which will be delineated below.
The ‘abject’ designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered ‘Other.’ This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the ‘not-me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject. (1999: 169)

This process is central to individual subject constitution because, in Kristeva’s work, “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (Kristeva, 1982: 3, emphasis in original). Part of this process can be seen in the Lacanian splitting of oneself into ‘me’ and ‘I’ upon entering into the symbolic world of language; hence, the process of abjection is central to the process of subject formation or subjectification. Dimen succinctly writes, “[separating] through rejecting and abjecting - that is who one is” (2005: 5, emphasis in original). Kristeva further argues that that which is expelled is also what creates structure and social classification (1982:65). The two-level function of abjection is important because it occurs within the processes of subject formation, as well as within the production and reiteration of social structures and divisions. So the same internal and interpersonal abjections we see are in a dialogically, mutually productive relationship with larger structural processes of abjection and structuration.

Iris Marion Young (1990) uses Kristeva’s insights in her discussion of sexism, homophobia and racism, contending that culturally hegemonic identities are consolidated along lines of sexual, racial, and gendered differentiation. These consolidations are the result of the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality and/or colour that are ‘expelled’ and then experienced as ‘repulsive.’ Much later, Leeb builds on this body of work to

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54 My focus in this dissertation is on sexual subjectivity per se but in Chapter Two I mentioned Gina’s experienced of being the abjected, undesirable Aboriginal body, in relation to her White friend. This narrative represents a moment when the abjection of racialized identities that Young and others have
argue that the academic subject position emerges from an abjection of the working class (2004). We see the earliest connections between the abject and social structure in Fanon's pivotal text on racism and the psyche, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967).

Preceding Iris Young’s broader argument, Fanon exposes a similar abjection of the ‘person of colour’ or the Black into an animalistic and non-human other. Fanon also alerts us to the inherently sexualized abjection of the Black body. He writes, “[no] anti-Semite, for example, would ever conceive of the idea of castrating the Jew. He is killed or sterilized. But the Negro is castrated. The penis, the symbol of manhood, is annihilated, which is to say that it is denied” (1967:162). The sexual threat projected onto the Black male body represents the sexual insecurities of the White upper-class male and the abjection of the Black body is hoped to alleviate these insecurities. Similarly, we will see how women’s active sexuality can be a similar threat to institutionalized male sexual power and to ‘proper’ female (hetero)sexuality. Fanon ponders what projection of the ‘Negro as penis’ elicits in the White imaginary: “Horror? Lust? Not indifference in any case.” (170). In a similar way, I argue that a disruption of the projection of passivity onto women’s bodies via active female desire is also likely to elicit horror and lust; in any case, certainly not indifference.

Butler’s work on sexuality asserts that “the operation of repulsion can consolidate ‘identities’ founded on instituting the ‘Other’ or a set of Others through exclusion and domination” (1999:170). If female sexuality is the passive yet responsive ‘Other’ to an assertive, active male sexual ‘drive,’ then it too stands as the abject, the expelled against which the proper subject is constituted. We then see how proofs of young women’s active sexuality explored became apparent in my interviews as well.

55 As we will see, class was central to processes of abjection in the women’s narratives.
sexual desire themselves become the abject, both the expelled and the threatening spectre, in personal narratives and subjectivity. Active female desire threatens both the sexual agency of exclusively the male and the internal category of ‘proper’ female (hetero)sexuality as passive. Iris Marion Young’s as well as Butler’s articulations of Kristeva’s concept of the abject allow us to see how the expulsion of women’s active desire is connected to structural patterns of sexual inequality. In claiming ‘valid’ defendable subject positions as (hetero)sexual young women, we begin to see how evidence of women’s active desire is sometimes expelled and articulated as the ‘not-me.’ Not surprisingly, the process of abjection, like the hegemonic discourses of women’s sexual passivity that frame it, is also useful but never fully adequate in understanding the myriad ways young women experience their sexuality. The participants’ reiterations and rejections or disruptions of ‘the abject’ are evident throughout their interviews. Butler predicts such transgression, stating that while ‘Others become shit,’ in order for inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the [personal and social] body would have to achieve impossible impermeability. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely the excremental filth that it fears. (1999:170).

Below I explore the multiple sites of resistance which constitute the abject in the participants’ narratives alongside the moments of reiteration. The co-existence of resistance and reiteration exposes the metaphorical nature of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ which “remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies, feared and desired…[‘Inner’] and ‘outer’ constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the [mythical] coherent subject” (1999:170). The abject, active female sexual desire, threatens the coherence of the passive sexual female subject (object).
As thoroughly as Butler draws out the connections between abjection and subjectivity in *Gender Trouble* (1989, first edition), she goes into further depth in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) to explore the possibility of disruption of hegemonic orders inherent to the abject. I base my arguments about how young women take up and disrupt their positioning within discourses of passive female (hetero)sexuality on Butler’s deconstruction of ‘the normative phantasm of “sex,”’ which she outlines in *Gender Trouble* and clarifies in *Bodies that Matter*. She states:

> The forming of the subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of ‘sex,’ and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation which creates the valence of ‘abjection’ and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre…[The] identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed. And yet, this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control. The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility. (1993:3)

In the interviews, I see the participants struggling to redefine the terms through which their sexuality will be experienced and articulated; central to this process is the constitutive but never ‘fully controlled’ nature of the abject, which in this case is evidence of their active desire. Butler’s claims centre on the exclusion of non-normatively sexed, gendered and sexualized bodies, but in the fear of and silence around the abject (which I understand as proofs of women’s desire) we see additional ways that the “human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (1993:9). My aim is to further loosen the grip of hegemonic constructions of
women’s (hetero)sexuality that foreclose the articulation of their active desire by drawing on young women’s narratives. I also disrupt the discourses I outline in Chapter Two: dominant discourses of female (hetero)sexuality as passive, feminist theorizing of (hetero)women as victims, and sexual health education discourses which remain overwhelmingly silent about women’s desire.

A number of other authors have supported and reinforced the arguments that are made in Butler’s discussion of abjection, subjectivity and normative structures. In the earliest attempts at using the concept abjection to illuminate the social, Jacqueline Rose drew on Kleinian psychoanalysis, the object relations school, and Kristeva to connect psychoanalytic concepts of the individual to the socio-political realm (Rose, 1986). At the base of Rose’s argument lies the claim that patriarchal society is founded on the structural abjection of the maternal. This occurs as a repudiation of the autonomous masculine subject’s earlier mortal dependence on the mother. Rose argues that the maternal has to be expelled by the infant in order to create space for their identity in the symbolic. We must be wary of a sole reliance on Kristeva when theorizing the abject because for her lesbianism comes to represent the most abject embrace of death and rejection. When abjection is taken in its more complete context of subjection and rearticulation, as outlined by Butler, Campbell sees a productive moment and the “political implications of theorizing the abject, in that the abject does represent the boundary and the constructiveness of identity. The abject - be it the feminine, homosexuality or race [and in my work, active female desire] – is excluded…[such that these] abject exclusions can be mobilized to provide different representations of the subject” (2000:107).
Luce Irigaray’s\(^56\) (1985) understanding of the abject is useful in understanding how women’s active sexual desire becomes the abject. For Irigaray the feminine is abjected from the ‘proper’ male subject. In my own work, evidence of women’s active sexual desire is abjected in relation to ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality and male sexual agency. Irigaray argues that being dependant on the mother in the earliest stages of life, men fear their loss of identity and unconsciously project this lack onto the body of the woman, who then is seen as castrated. The woman comes to symbolize a black hole or death-like abyss outside culture and language. The abjected woman is associated with the death of the male subject. Women threaten men with this loss of identity and death. Mastery of language and identity allows for the projection of death onto the Other. Women come to represent this deathly otherness. I argue that evidence of women’s active desire comes to symbolize a similar threat to the active male (sexual) subject and the companion category of passive female (hetero)sexuality. Thus, the ‘proper’ and most intelligible or defendable female (hetero)sexuality is constituted via the expulsion of the abject ‘slut’ and other evidence of active desire. In so far as Freud’s, and in turn Lacan’s, constructions of ‘human’ subjectivity have been productively criticized by many (Irigaray, Fanon and Campbell among others) as an elitist and exclusionary discourse that pathologizes female sexuality, homosexuality, racialized and class differences, these constructions can also be drawn on critically to move us beyond current theorizations of female sexual subjectivity. Using psychoanalytic concepts as a way to move beyond current theorizations, as does Dimen, I hope to “spark discussion so the unspeakable can enter public discourse” (2005: 2).

\(^56\) While I find Irigaray’s insights into abjection useful, I am also concerned by myriad criticisms claiming (Campbell, 2000) that she actively reiterates women as connected to their biology. This said, I also acknowledge that others (Gallup 1988) have countered this critique.
I was surprised to hear how, at an early age, the participants had a sense of the unspeakable and uncomfortable nature of something that is abject. Jill confides:

I remember in grade six I had a crush on a boy and I had my first sex dream and I actually woke up and felt so strange and I think I remember talking to my mom about it. I felt so dirty, I was like, it was just kind of, I just remember that thing, I always remember the song that used to play on the radio, an Ace of Base song, and it always reminded me of that dream. I always freaked out when I heard that song. [It was one of the] most traumatic things that happened when I was young.

Jill’s intense feelings about this dream and the song that reminds her of it are striking given that the event occurred more than 10 years ago. There is a very strong sense from her comments that something was ‘wrong’ with having her first ‘sex dream.’ It made her feel dirty; perhaps sex is something a ‘good girl shouldn’t/doesn’t do.’ In fact, she mentions it being one of her most traumatic memories from childhood. This may seem disproportionate, unless we consider that this early expression of her desire signals the very thing that proper female sexuality is defined against: the unspeakable, the abject.

Another participant, Olivia, ‘guiltily’ discloses early encounters with her own desire when she chatted online during her ‘tween’ and early teen years:

I read a lot of like fan fiction and erotic stories on line when I was like, I guess maybe like 10, 11, 12, like for 10-14 and at first I wasn’t reading very explicit things but I got my period when I was 9 and I started, I guess I was sort of reading things online when I was like 12-14 and ummm I would like, like have cybersex online and pretend that I was older and I like masturbated for like, with stories on the computer and, yeah, so that kind of like, well when I was living [there] and didn’t have a social life (laughter) I still did a little bit of that not so much the cyber sex but I felt really guilty about it, like I was being unclean because it was with real people and I had phone sex twice when I was a teenager with a lot older guys, but it’s online, so I’d say that I was 18 and they said they were in their 20’s. They were probably older, I don’t know, but yeah, so yeah… I’d use fake photos and kind of I feel really guilty about it. Also I’d come and then close the chat windows […] because I told myself that it’s gross, guys that like having cybersex with teenage girls and they like, really it’s what they deserve. (laughter)
Olivia’s guilt is very apparent, again, given this occurred 10 or more years ago. Interestingly, her guilt seems to be specific to her sense that ‘real people’ were witnessing her desire via cyber and phone sex, rather than from guilt about masturbating to the stories she would read on-line. The evidence of her desire is central because it is seen by another, specifically male person; the risk seems to lie with being seen transgressing the norm. Also interesting is the fact that Olivia demonizes the men with whom she engages in sexual talk, as through projecting and sharing her own guilt about betraying herself as abject in front of another. Diane too is emphatic about not wanting to be seen as a desiring subject by her partner on-line:

Diane: Yeah, we used the webcam a couple times but strictly, we haven’t actually done anything over the webcam. It’s more he can see me and me him that sort of thing

Brandy: Like while you’re masturbating?

Diane: No. Him more, not me.

Brandy: So he’s masturbating?

Diane: Yeah. I don’t want to do that!

Both Diane and her partner, apparently, are comfortable with his masturbating when they communicate via webcam, but for her to do the same is ‘crossing the line’ somehow, at least for her: ‘I don’t want to do that!’

Early on in the interviews I became aware that there was sometimes something specifically repulsive and threatening about young women’s expressed desire. In my third interview, in response to my question of whether she had ever experienced sexualized violation of any type, Shawnequa told a detailed story about a few events she experienced shortly before we met:
…I had an instance about a month ago when I was downtown and I had to wait for a bus and there was sketchy-looking homeless dude walking towards me and he started looking at me and it was kinda dark and no one was around and I was standing in front of the Bay, waiting for my bus and was tired and sick and wanted to go home and as he passed me, he slowed down and was looking at me and looking down at himself and just as he walked by, I noticed that he pulled himself out of his pants and was masturbating and I felt definitely kind of, I would consider that a form of like sexual…And another time once when I had a boyfriend at my house and we’d just finished having sex and I looked out the window and saw someone looking at me and, yeah, and I still can’t sleep without my TV on now…if I don’t have the TV and the volume on in the room or someone else there talking to me then I just have nightmares and I can’t sleep at night. It’s pretty awful.

The very morning after she discovered the guy watching her and her boyfriend have sex, another related incident occurred. She and her boyfriend were watching a movie in her downstairs basement bedroom. Shawnequa’s father periodically knocked on her door to see if they wanted pizza and to check in. “So then [the ‘peeping tom’] happened that night.” Needless to say she woke up the next morning in ‘not a great place.’ Just before leaving for work that morning her father wanted to talk to her about having her boyfriend over the night before. As she remembers:

[My dad] just exploded in anger, ‘You know, when you have a boy or whoever at the house, and you’re in your room the lights are on, the door is open. I told you that last time, I can’t believe you deliberately disobeyed me so you could fool around.’

She argued in response that nothing was going on and that, given the family traffic in and out of the basement, there’s no possible way anything could happen:

I told him we weren’t having sex and he just got like really…like I said, ‘Having sex with someone’ and he just exploded, ‘If you guys want to be doing that stuff, rent a fucking motel room!’ ‘I’m not going to rent a motel room, we’re watching movies.’ ‘I’m not gonna have you doing that in my house when I’m home. If you want to rent a motel, trapse around being a whore with whatever guy you’re with, if you want to move in with him, fine, I’ll support you, move in with him but you’re not playing house here, you can’t pretend you’re the happy married couple having sex in your bed with
your parents’ home.’

Since this incident things cooled down at home. Being so immersed in school,

Shawnequa did not have another boyfriend for about a year. Ultimately she and her father came to the following compromise:

so now my dad doesn’t talk about it, but he said to me, ‘You know, when I’m not in the house,’ like if he’s off for two weeks or off in the …, ‘When I’m not in the house, I guess I can’t stop you from having him sleep over’ and that’s all he’ll say about it….I’ve never lived with him until now cause, well, I was there every second weekend, but he wasn’t there when I was going through puberty when I’d bring boyfriends home all the time and he’s never had that experience. He always thought of me as his daughter but didn’t really know me. Like I have no problem talking about like, ‘Oh my god, did you read [the] story about this girl that got raped?’ Or we went and saw Monster together, and it’s not a big issue, seeing sex or talking about other married people, the fact that sex occurs and stuff like that, but I’ve never talked with him about anything in my sex life at all.

Later I asked Shawnequa to clarify her father’s reaction to the homeless guy and the ‘peeping Tom’ incident. She claimed that he ‘laughed off’ the incident with the homeless guy and did not seem to ‘really care’ about the ‘peeping tom.’ After I heard Shawnequa’s understanding of her father’s contradictory reactions to other ‘strange’ men, the homeless guy and the ‘peeping tom,’ asserting their sexuality towards her and his emotional response to the thought of his daughter having consensual sex in his home, I realized the importance of proofs of women’s active desire in Shawnequa’s perception of her father’s reactions. The men’s sexual aggression seemed to be ‘par for the course’ in Shawnequa’s understanding, something a father can ‘laugh off’ or not be bothered by, but she shares that suspecting that his daughter is actually having sex in his house produces an ‘explosion.’ What is also interesting is that her father’s ‘suspicions’ do indeed seem to be correct because, if not during the movie, later that night she and her boyfriend did have sex because that event occurred on the night she saw the ‘peeping tom’ after having sex.
Shawnequa does not mention in her narrative that her father’s suspicions were likely correct. Shawnequa cannot know what her father did or did not hear or see. In Shawnequa’s mind however there is an elective affinity between the father and the ‘peeping tom,’ as in her account she juxtaposes these two male figures who seem to be surveilling her sexuality. Regardless, it is clear that even the suspicion of Shawnequa having sex and ‘traipsing around like a whore’ enrages him. He can conceive of her having sex, since he’s willing to support her moving in with a guy, but having sex in his house, and as we saw later, particularly when he’s there, seems to send him over the edge. Again it is specifically the ‘proof’ of her active desire that is abjected; nevertheless, it is also evident that active female sexuality cannot be controlled and protected by a woman’s father and later by her husband. Later in this chapter I address the larger structural ‘incest taboo’ that frames fathers’ relationships to their daughters. The fact that fathers traditionally have been assigned the duty of protecting their daughters’ sexual virtue from men, inside and outside the family, contributes to the ‘explosive’ anger that ‘proofs’ of active female sexuality elicits in fathers.

The participants experience the abjection of women’s active desire in a range of contexts. Like Libby and Rosie, I remember the girls in school who were socially suspect and slandered with generalized sexualized attacks on their character. These are the girls who are feared to ‘masturbate with wieners’ or to engage in equally deviant and frightening practices. Rosie remembers:

Rosie: I learned [about masturbation] in junior high, so like, no, like 15, at 12-15, I had a friend who...knew a lot of gossip, and she said that a [girl] one of the [girls] in this classroom even, masturbating with a cucumber and this poor girl was a kind of like, you know, nobody was friends with her, like
Brandy: The outcast?

Rosie: Yeah, like nobody knew if it was true

Brandy: But that was the rumor.

I remember stories that circulated about outcast girls, passed around with equal loathing and intrigue. We could barely speak or not speak about the grotesqueness of the very thought of it. There is a two-fold level of abjection here: the sexualized abjection of ‘socially suspect’ bodies as sexual deviants and the abjection of masturbation as something ‘good girls shouldn’t or don’t do.’ Rosie’s early exposure to the notion of a girl’s masturbation as abject (the not-me) would not have encouraged her own explorations of her sexual body. We also see the gendered, catch-all nature of the sexualized abjection of girls who are socially excluded. From Olivia’s experiences of being the girl on the receiving end of the abject social status, we see the strength of sexual abjection:

Well, when I was in high school and I was getting bullied a lot and it was the most inaccurate thing. I never, I wasn’t sleeping with anyone and I didn’t act like a slut or dress like a slut, like what you’d consider a slut. I had this bully that sat behind me in French class everyday and just like whispered ‘Whore,’ ‘Slut’ and stuff. It was just like really demeaning and I also had like these older guys on the bus […] who would throw pennies at me and be like, ‘You’re a penny whore’ […] People just used it as a bullying tactic and I was not at all and I knew it wasn’t a big thing, but the way it was used.

Here we also see a brief introduction to how ‘slut discourse’ becomes central to the abjection of women’s active desire, as the most ‘obvious’ evidence, whether ‘true’ or not, of a girl’s abjection. It did not come up in the interviews but I note here that such dividing practices are intricately class-bound. No one mentioned the class positioning of the abjected girls, and Olivia identified herself as middle class growing up. However, I

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57 Masturbation is a complex and intriguing issue that will be discussed also in Chapter Eight.
argue that working class girls, unable to buy the ‘right clothes,’ have the ‘right’ friends or access other middle-class privileges, are much more likely to be outcasted with the ‘slut’ label, which as we will see is inherently classed (Peiss, 1989; Sangster, 1996).

Conversely, the most bizarre exception to the ‘rule’ of abjecting the suspicion of active female desire occurs in Sue’s narrative:

When I was growing, from like 13 to 16, all my friends were having sex. They were like ‘You’re a virgin, you need to get laid!’ And I didn’t, so they didn’t really want to hang out with me anymore, so I kinda lost all my friends (laughs) […] I got beat up one time cause I wasn’t having sex with guys, so girls thought I was a lesbian cause I wasn’t having sex […] Ya, they started calling me a lesbian and beating me up […] My school was weird.

Sue recognizes and comments on the oddity of this situation. The reversal of what constitutes the abject for this particular peer group brings into relief the effect the abjection of women’s active desire can have on subjectivity. This event is further complicated by the fact that her friends expelled her from the group because of her apparent lack of hetero desire; this made her suspect of being a lesbian, which Butler (1999) suggests is the primary form of abjection within the heterosexual matrix.

‘Slut Discourse’ as the Abject

One of the central places we see the gendered process of abjection is in the realm of ‘slut discourse.’ The first thing necessary is to explain the term ‘slut discourse.’ I use this term although the actual word slut58 occurred surprisingly little in the women’s narratives; throughout the narratives, however, there is a latent reliance on the agreed upon meaning of ‘slut.’ Many of the women reject the notion ‘slut’ and rarely use it

58 I also use the word ‘slut’ in its nearly exclusively female gendered meaning, as did the participants, despite the fact that it may be that the possibility of negatively characterizing a similarly positioned male is becoming more prevalent.
themselves to describe other women because they were aware of the double sexual
standard that supports and perpetuates the idea. This did not mean, however, that they
were not aware of common notions about something ‘different’ and ‘wrong’ with being
slutty. Another reason the word ‘slut’ may not be used by women who attend university
is that, though unspoken, it is central to the way they distinguish their (middle-class)
sexuality from working-class sexuality. Working-class women are more at risk of the slut
label; middle-class women have more shelter from such constructions (Peiss, 1989;
Sangster, 1996).

Beverley Skeggs’ work (1997; 2004) is useful in understanding how class and
sexual respectability are interconnected. Skeggs argues that “[r]espectibility is one of the
most ubiquitous signifiers of class” (1997:1). Concerning the rise of the middle-class,
who struggled to differentiate themselves from what they saw were the opulent
“excesses” of the aristocracy and the pathological deviance and uncleanliness of the
working and immigrant classes, Skeggs outlines the centrality of “respectability” to class
divisions. She writes, “[r]espectibility contains judgments of class, race, gender and
sexuality and different groups have differential access to the mechanisms for generating,
resisting and displaying respectability” (1997:3). During the nineteenth Century the
working and immigrant classes surged into cities. Sangster (1996) and Peiss (1989),
among others, have shown how since this time these groups, particularly the women
therein, have experienced intense sexual surveillance from the middle and upper-classes.
Then, as today, working class women are constructed as morally and sexually corrupt and
associated with prostitution, crime and pathology. Through their claims to respectability,
White and non-working-class people are given the moral authority to sit in judgment of
others. Skeggs argues that “the heterosexual subject is a particular sort of woman, not working class or Black, but respectable” (1997:122). Though usually unspoken and assumed, class differentiations are being maintained and reiterated today. I highlight how processes of abjection structure young women’s subjectivities, but the narratives we will explore also show how “class is not a given but is a continual production” (Skeggs, 2004:3). Skeggs shows that “class is a discursive, historically specific construction, a production of middle-class consolidation, which includes elements of fantasy and projection” (1997:5). The ‘slut’ is not only a spectre that haunts the outer edges of proper femininity, but is also abjected as the not-me against which middle-class respectable sexuality is constructed. As the women distance themselves from proofs of active female desire they are at the same time shoring up their middle and upper class positions.

For a number of women the slut discourse was most relevant during adolescence. Emma, who identifies as ‘middle-class’ and ‘Vietnamese,’ juxtaposes her virginity in high school against the horrible tales “…we heard of girls going with multiple partners (Brandy: at the same time or in the last year you’ve had 5 partners?) Yeah, the five partners, yeah, and I even heard stories of girls having orgies and going out with guys, and this was a Catholic school so I thought it was really wrong.” In this narrative we see that ‘going out with guys’ is at risk of being conflated with ‘having orgies,’ something a smart or virtuous middle-class girl would hurriedly distance herself from.

In a similar way, Libby’s self image as an adolescent was more explicitly premised on distancing herself from the abject:

The image I had of myself, and like, umm, you know, before, just like, even looking down on people, that sounds bad but being so like, growing up was just like these things were like wrong, and so like becoming, fear of becoming someone that I always thought I never
wanted to become […] I think for me the, a person who gets good grades, a person who is a good student, doesn’t go around sleeping with a bunch of different guys. Like two different people, it can’t be the same person. So I think that plays a big, like you have to be this way or that, I couldn’t be two things.

Libby, who identifies as being ‘upper middle-class’ and ‘Caucasian,’ could be either a ‘good’ girl who gets good grades and is a good student or a person who ‘goes around sleeping with a bunch of different guys.’ It is intriguing that she repeatedly uses the term person throughout when she is likely means ‘girls’ who sleep with a bunch of guys; comparing herself to other guys who have sex with guys seems unlikely. Again, she is firmly positioned within the liberal subject position that I discussed in Chapter Four, in that she uses ‘inappropriate’ nouns in her speech (using person instead of girl). But the main point here is how she establishes her own feminine (hetero)sexual subjectivity over and in relation to the abjection of the slut. The abjection of the slut works in a similar way as does the abjection of queer gender presentations in Butler’s (1993, 1999) work. At the same time, the abject is exactly what she wrestles with throughout the progression of her sexual relationship with her first sexual partner, and eventually results in her relaxing and reworking what she had previously thought of as the not-me, as repugnant. While Libby’s feminine (hetero)sexuality is being constructed against the abjection of the slut, it is also a consolidation of her middle-class respectability. She is also distancing herself from the “not good student,” the uneducated woman, the sexual deviant, who is most believed by the middle-class to be at risk of ending up on the streets of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside drug addicted and “peddling her body.”

The spectre of the abject slut continued to haunt the women as they grew older and accumulated (more) sexual partners. This was most apparent in how they make
reference to the notion of ‘women’s numbers.’ At least by people in Canada, the term ‘one’s number’ is instantly given a sexualized meaning: one’s number of sexual partners. Shawnequa mentions that she and her girlfriends have “the same anxiety…about [their] numbers increasing.” For Diane, the notion of ‘one’s number’ was salient in her decision to sleep with an ex-boyfriend:

It’s tough sleeping with [my ex] now because we really shouldn’t be […] I don’t feel bad sleeping with him cause he’s one of my guys, like I’m not adding to my numbers sleeping with him. It’s almost like I’m doing no extra harm with being with someone I’ve already been with whereas the idea of meeting someone else or having a one night stand. *I chalk it up to that number that affects me.* I don’t want my number to skyrocket or to be, because of a whole bunch of one-night stands, insignificant experiences.

Diane chooses to continue to sleep with her ex, despite that fact that ‘it’s tough,’ so that she can maintain distance from the abjection of having ‘high numbers,’ which would implicitly activate the ‘slut discourse.’ The emotional harm she identifies with sleeping with an ex is chosen over the ‘extra harm’ she perceives her increased numbers would do. The abjection of active female desire, via the slut discourse, gives ‘the number’ a haunting power over her choices.

There was evidence that the young women’s fears were reinforced by their male peers (and likely female peers), though we did not explicitly discuss the topic. As Lola claims:

Lola: I think that [my boyfriend] likes that I’m not all “dirtied up” or Something.

Brandy: The dirtied up, you put in quotations, would that be similar to the slut kind of thing?

Lola: Yeah, I guess it would be. Um, a lot of guys would like

Brandy: Not being dirtied up
Lola: Better even though, like a lot of girls think coming into college they want you to have experience, I’ve just found talking to my friends and guys, they’d rather have a girl with little experience, just because they’re not dirty I guess.

Lola’s scare quotes alert us to her discomfort in implicitly referencing the slut discourse even as she’s doing it; it illustrates her ambivalence in positioning herself as ‘not dirtied up,’ distancing herself from the abject ‘not-me.’ Even when participants had a female mentor that encouraged expression of their active sexual desire – although this was rarely the case - they still had to engage with the larger structural abjection of this desire.

Nova’s mother was quite clear throughout her life that their desire as women was natural and exciting. Recalling her choice to have sex with a man she did not love, Nova said, “[my mom] just kind of normalizes everything but umm yeah, it was more like, ‘Am I going to be slutty?!’ ‘I’m a slut!’ So I don’t know if it’s immoral’ like I was, ‘I don’t know’ but then I decided that it is ok.” Despite the fact that she grew up within a context where pro-sex, arguably feminist, discourse disrupted the abjection of active female desire, she still was positioned socially in such a way that she had to negotiate this abjection.

**Resisting the Abject Slut Discourse**

It is important to remember that expressions of active female sexuality as abject are also part of a process of transgression and recombination. The abjection of the ‘the slut’ is always in dialogical relationship with the category of ‘proper’ feminine sexuality and is useful in understanding the subversive potential of the abject. The abject is the expelled but also the threatening spectre that disrupts the stability of the centre. What is
expelled is in dialogical struggle with the category itself. The subversive potential of abjection is not foreclosed by the cultural hegemony of the abject status of women’s active desire because the abject does not occupy a pre-discursive place outside of language but is immanent to discourse and power relations. As has been mentioned, it is important to remember that the psychoanalytic processes I am discussing in this dissertation may be articulated discursively in various (often indirect, elusive) ways. In Foucault’s (1990: 17-18) discussion of what is ‘silenced’ in discourse, he reminds us that to say there are silences around the unspeakable does not mean that the unspeakable itself is not articulated somehow and rendered into discourse. When positioning themselves as ‘proper’ (hetero)sexually desiring subjects, the women are in a constant dialectic with the abjection of ‘proofs’ of active female desire. Abjection involves ‘consequences it cannot fully control’ (Butler, 1993:3). In these reiterations and reworkings lies the agency of the poststructural, psychoanalytic subject.

At various times in the interviews, many of the women both take up and resist slut discourse. As mentioned above, relatively few women actually related to instances where they disciplined other women with the label slut. Summarizing many of the women’s hesitancy to use the word slut, Maia says, “I don't like the word [slut]. I think it’s pretty insulting. It’s the whole double standard thing. The guy’s a player, the girl’s a slut and that really bothered me. If I really hate a girl I might call her a slut, but I’m so not comfortable with the word.” Interestingly, in her very rejection of it we see the power of the word slut, as it can be called upon if you ‘really hate a girl.’ However, as shown above, even if the term slut is rarely used as an insult, the discourse framing and supporting such notions remains present throughout the women’s narratives.
Sometimes the participants disrupt the abjection of women’s active desire. Some women disrupt the abject with their actions and some by reconstituting the meaning of ‘slutty behaviour.’ Participants who only reject using the term slut seem to do so because they ‘should,’ while at the same time they continued to draw implicitly on the slut discourse.

The abjection of women’s active desire is so prevalent that sometimes when there is evidence of its disruption, the likelihood of it being ‘seen’ is delimited. Jill relates the following story about some friends:

Everybody behind their backs call them sluts. Even through high school, because one of them lost their virginity so young, she’s always been razzed about things like that. But she doesn’t seem to care. She continues with the same way she’s always been, I don’t know what they really feel about what the meaning of slut is to them. Um, they’re, not to insult them, but they’re not very intellectual almost, they’re kind of, I guess, it’s just hard to have a serious conversation, like really serious, to actually ask them what they’re feeling. She’s like, they joke a lot, both of them...so I don’t know what they actually feel about being called a slut. I think one’s more sensitive, one just lets it go, cause she actually gets called slut quite often, like because with her past boyfriend, one of the brothers, um they play lacrosse or something and all the groupies that hang out with them they all hated her when she came along, and saying what a slut she was, she had to change her phone number because they kept doing things. She’s got a lot of harassment about these things from other girls. But she laughs it off, so I don’t really know how it affects her. I think deep down it’s really doing some damage to her, but she seems to, she used to be really tiny, skinny, whatever, she’s put on so much weight and she just doesn’t care, she just feels so confident and wears things she shouldn’t, like really shouldn’t, like bootie shorts and tight, tight white shirts, with her boobs hanging out, and they grew like five times the size but I’m like, it doesn’t look classy. It doesn’t even look sexy, she’ll walk around like that and she just feels like everybody loves it.

What is so interesting about this narrative is the length Jill goes to in order to comprehend her one friend’s ‘confidence’ and ability to ‘laugh it off.’ Early on in the story she constructs her friends’ inability to be restrained by their slut labels as being about their limited intellect. Indeed, she hints that they may not even be able to identify and articulate how their abjection as sluts makes them feel. This claim seems doubtful. She
also ventures to guess that even if they cannot comprehend the damage that is being done to them ‘deep down’ (whether this is the result of their ‘slutty behaviour’ or the abuse of their peers is unclear) the damage occurs nonetheless. Jill crafts a number of ways to ‘make sense’ of why her one friend remains ‘confident,’ ‘the way she’s always been,’ despite the damage Jill believes is occurring. She is explaining away (she does not understand) her friend’s incompetence as a ‘proper’ (disciplined) non-working-class (hetero)sexual woman. Her disgust with the fact that she ‘doesn’t look classy’ is evident. ‘Not looking classy’ is evidence that Jill’s friend cannot make a claim to middle-class respectability and is therefore sexually suspect. All of Jill’s explanations, however, are premised on the assumption that there is something abject itself about the proof of their active desire. This abjection forecloses the likelihood that Jill will ever explore the subversive possibility of her friends’ lives, in that they defy the category of proper middle-class feminine (hetero)sexuality, or imagine alternative explanations for their continued resistance that do not pathologize or diminish them.

It seemed that a number of the women who had disrupted the abjection of their desire via the slut label did so because they had been labeled so themselves. Jo has been forced to negotiate the label slut from a very young age and seems at ease with people’s choice to label her this way:

I was always, like I got my period when I was like the youngest of my social group, so I was eleven, which isn’t super young, so there was something in that, and it validated something in me, and my mom had told me, and was very open that she had sex when she was thirteen, so I was always hit with a lot of stigma for being quite sexually open at such a young age. But I didn’t really take that on in a negative way, even though I may have been called slut and what not, I was still really okay with it and I knew I really enjoyed it, I liked the attention and the physical and emotional aspects.

Jo’s ease seems to come from the fact that she herself does not understand her active
desire in an abject way. Others may apply the stigma to her, but she was confident that she ‘really enjoyed’ her sexuality and was ‘still really ok’ with herself as a sexual being. Her experience differs from the experience Nova (who grew up with women-positive pro-sex discourse) described above, precisely because for her ‘slutty behaviour’ was enjoyable rather than self-stigmatized.

Similarly, Sue is clear about her resistance to her slut label. Her reaction to being labeled as such is quite intense:

I’m like, ‘Who are you to call me a slut? Were you there the last time I got fucked? You know […] I have sex? Do you know what’s going on in my life?…NO! So shut the fuck up.’ Like, ‘You, you’re not me, you don’t know what I do’ and most of the people that like call other people a slut it’s either a) they’re jealous b) that they’re out doing it and feeling guilty and want to take it out on me. It hides the bullshit like that.

Sue is very quick to inform people that they have no right to label her as a slut. She goes on to explore two alternative explanations for why people label others, explanations that do not assume the abject status of female desire. Reformulating the meaning of slut, and hence of the abject in women’s narratives, is also evident among women who had not specifically mentioned being labeled as sluts themselves. As in Sue’s alternative understandings of why people would label women sluts (either they are jealous or guilty and trying to project that feeling onto others), Maria guesses that the term slut was thrown around by her friends during adolescence because “they were upset they didn’t get to come along” to various parties. The commonality here is that neither of these women, and some others as well, accepted the abject meaning attributed to their active desire. Although some of the women here rework their personal understanding of women’s active desire, they are still forced to actively resist and publicly negotiate stigmatizing discourses.
It is intriguing that both Sue and Maria’s reformulations of the label slut alert us to the spectre that abject desire holds for women who premise their subjectivity on it, in that they both believe that those who use the label are upset or jealous; perhaps upset and jealousy signals a disavowed awareness of their subjugation via their abject desire, a point I return to in the following chapter. Sue and Maria imply that other women’s experiences of jealousy and upset are likely due to their own internal subjective processes and struggle with the abject spectre of active desire. They seem to ask if perhaps women are upset because they cannot ‘tame’ their own demonized active sexual desire (like the ‘closeted’ person who lashes out homophobically at ‘out’ gays and lesbians) or are jealous of women who resist the abjection of their desire. From Maria and Sue’s narratives, we see that women’s struggles with maintaining their ‘proper’ (hetero)sexual subjectivity more likely produce their jealousy and discomfort with ‘the slut’ than some imagined slight the slut has perpetrated against them, perhaps ‘offending their sensibilities.’ Nevertheless, the threat the slut poses, or the slight she perpetrates, is in some sense real. The mere existence or presence of the abject - the slut - raises questions about the impermeability of ‘proper’ women’s positioning as the not-slut, even as the process of abjection confirms their ‘proper’ subjectivity. In Sue and Maria’s narratives we see how the slut both threatens and reinforces the permeability of the ‘proper’ female subject’s boundaries.

Participants report that the meaning of slut was also refigured in playful conversations with friends about their sexual escapades. Persephone’s words are exemplary:

Me and my friends call each other slut all the time. I call myself a slut, but I usually say, ‘I’m such a ho!’ People usually say, I think ho
gets used a lot more. And the thing is, I also have several friends who were or are prostitutes, so it’s hard to like distinguish between the slut or the ho or the hooker and the ho or whatever, you know what I mean? It’s the fine line, between like, ‘Maybe I should just charge for that. I’m doing the same thing anyway!’

When joking around with her friends, Persephone is cognizant of people who engage in sex work and questions her own practices (‘maybe I should just charge for that’). In reworking understandings of ‘slutty behaviour’ and in subversive actions, we see the ‘not fully controllable’ nature of the abject spectre. ‘Proper’ (hetero)sexuality and evidence of women’s active desire are in constant dialogical and mutually productive struggle such that women’s sexual subjectivity is always being (re)produced. In playful conversation with her friends, respecting those around her who engage in sex work, and in questioning her own practices, Persephone demonstrates the multiple fronts on which the ‘not fully controllable’ nature of the abject affects dominant normative structures through constant dialogical and mutually productive struggle.

(Dis)ease and the Abject

Another theme that ran throughout the interviews, in relation to the abjection of women’s active desire, was the presence and spectre of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). I consider STIs in relation to women’s active desire because, like unwanted youth pregnancy, they stand as the ultimate punitive ‘proof’ of uncontrolled or active sexual desire in (on) the female body. Like the ‘slut,’ the abject ‘diseased’ body acts as a

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59 I use the term (dis)ease as a way to signal both the physical state of infection or imbalance, physical STIs, and the psychic dis-ease that can be caused by the presence of phenomena that undermine the mastery and impermeability of subject positionings.

60 Pregnancy was a common fear for all the women I interviewed. However, because those who had become pregnant in the past had all gotten abortions, the abjection of unwanted youth pregnancy did not come up at all in the interviews.
negative presence in processes of subjection, as the not-me, the distanced foundation. Richardson (2000), among others, outlines how expelled bodies, such as the bodies of queer men and ‘promiscuous’ women, are targeted as vectors of HIV. By exploring the role of the infected body in the interviews I conducted, and participants’ seemingly disproportionate (dis)ease with it, I begin to draw connections between sexual subjectivity and STIs. I must note here that a number of the participants expressed concern with regulating their ‘unruly’ female bodies. They expressed fears about their odorous and offensive vaginas, menstrual periods and untamed ‘bikini lines.’ Some go to great lengths to ‘sanitize’ their vaginas, and other participants seek to disrupt these normative strictures. A number of authors have documented how concerns about the disgusting or undesirable vagina contribute to the constitution of women’s sexual subjectivity (Holland et al., 2003). I consider these interesting findings, but choose to focus my analysis on the abjection of women’s active desire as seen in the abjection of more discernable or apparent ‘proofs’ of their active desire, as seen in reference to ‘slutty’ and diseased bodies.

It is interesting that none of the women I interviewed claimed knowledge of ever having had an STI. Given the prevalence of STIs in this age range (www.hc-sc.gc.ca), this is surprising. It is important to reiterate that I am not interested in deciphering ‘the truth’ of women’s accounts, so I would not therefore say that the participants are ‘untruthful.’ Certainly, it can be argued that women, who have been

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62 Since this is a small, ‘savvy’ population perhaps this is not surprising. However, at the same time I do not want to assume that these generally middle- and upper-class, university educated women are less likely to become infected because this may implicitly reinforce cultural beliefs that STIs are confined to ‘lower’ sections of society (Sacco, 2002).
diagnosed with an STI in the past, would be less likely to volunteer for an interview due
to the stigma. In light of my comments above on abjection, it is important to examine
how women construct the possibility of becoming infected and how they understand
those they know who have been.

Only one woman had had direct personal experience with STI diagnosis. The
length and emotive nature of her narrative speak to the impact that being falsely
diagnosed with an STI had on her life. The ‘horror’ of the experience illustrates how the
(dis)eased female body, which constitutes ‘proof’ of sexual desire, is expelled by Diane
as the not-me:

Diane: I was misdiagnosed and told that I did have [an STI]. It was in the
summer and I was livid because, you know, I had only been with [my
ex] and I’d only used condoms with everyone except with him, so I was
doing the math, like where did it come from so when I was told I had
genital warts.

Brandy: Like HPV?

Diane: Yeah but visibly [...] I freaked out because how the hell did that happen?!
[...] But I assumed it had to come from [my ex] because he was
the only other person and we’d been broken up one week about a month
prior to and maybe he slept with some one and I told him, ‘I don’t care
if you did but you have to be honest with me’ and he was like, ‘No, no,
no!’ So I was like did you ever not used condoms, and he was like, ‘Well,
there was one time.’ And so that was it, and he said that he had always
used them and then he said, ‘There was one time’?! And he was like ‘I
didn’t think it would ever matter.’[...] So I freaked right out!...That was
really not a good time for me or him [...] It was not a good experience
thinking you had something, especially one that you could never get rid
of!..It wasn’t good. It wasn’t good at all [...] It was so traumatizing and it
totally affected a lot of [...] It screwed me right over.

Brandy: Even though you can live very happily with it?

Diane: I know, that’s what made me acknowledge it, like ‘I have to deal with
this now’ but it was awful!! I felt quite, not good about it and sex and
everything else. I was like, ‘I don’t want any of it!’ I don’t want to deal
with it any more! I’m, it wasn’t good.
Even though Diane intellectually knows that she can live a completely fulfilling, normal live with HPV (human papillomavirus), emotionally it affected ‘everything’ and psychologically it triggered a ‘freak out.’ The intensity of her reaction to possibly contracting an STI speaks to how strongly she positions herself as a ‘healthy’ sexual subject, who has been spared the condemnation of (dis)ease by being good. Abj ecting active sexual desire and being a ‘good’ female sexual subject, one who has not had ‘too many partners’ and uses condoms with partners who are not long term, an issue taken up in the next chapter, should have protected Diane’s status as a healthy subject and distanced her from the abject (dis)eased body. Her experience also shows the STI risk many people are exposed to (“we both used condoms ‘every time’” and then in crisis it came out that “there was this one time” that he thought would “never matter”). The vulnerability to STIs and the possibility of (dis)ease contain the emotional impact, threatening to undermine one’s competency as a sexual subject. A person’s subject status is threatened by the (dis)eased body. The (dis)eased body represents not only the ‘invasion’ of the physical body, in Diane’s case, sexual subject-hood is confronted with the abject, the spectre of (dis)ease, as a result of this misdiagnosis.

A number of participants were clear about how negatively they view the prospect of contracting an STI. Miriam is explicit about the ‘threat’ of specifically incurable STIs. “[To] have something like herpes would be so difficult and I feel for anyone that has it cause it never goes away, like a shadow haunting you, and maybe [others] don’t feel that way but I do.” The ‘shadow’ haunting the person who has contracted herpes seems to haunt the rest of us as well, perhaps the threat the abject (dis)eased body holds is even more haunting than the experience of contracting an STI.
Speaking generally of her knowledge of STIs Shawnequa comments: “I didn’t know too much about STI or STDs except for what I’ve heard from TV or ‘Oh, herpes, gross!’” Shawnequa’s only direct experience with STIs was in grade 12 when she found out that one of her friends had contracted a strain of HPV that produced genital warts:

…we were going in her car to get lunch and joking about people with STDs and she’s like, ‘I actually have genital warts.’ I was like, ‘What?!’…We were just joking around and she’s like, ‘Actually I do…’ It’s not something to laugh about I know, laughter is a defense mechanism (laughter)…she’s not really my friend any more and she got into drugs and everything and I hear now that she has herpes also, so she’s not too well in that area and she also brags about it openly, and tells everyone about it jokingly, cause she sort of got into the wrong crowd and they go to parties and ‘That girl’s such a slut.’ She’s like, ‘You think that girl’s such a slut? I have herpes and HPV!’ Ha ha, isn’t that funny! She just has a really weird way of dealing with it…Everyone just goes quiet and people that know her are just like, yeah she got really weird and she’s a real mood killer at parties when they hear her just break out and say ‘I have STIs’…I think she thinks that her life is pretty much over so she better make a joke out of it until she dies…I mean she’s in rehab right now for coke addiction, so hopefully she’s doing good.

Here we see that when bringing up her STIs at parties, Shawnequa’s friend directly activates slut discourse in understanding her (dis)ease, for both herself and those around her. As Shawnequa is making sense of how her friend is coping with her STIs, similar to Jill’s analysis of her ‘slutty’ friends above, she also makes an implicit connection with other personal flaws (‘not being very intelligent’ above and here ‘getting into drugs and the wrong crowd,’ both of which are stereotypes of the ‘lower’ classes, though Shawnequa does not explicitly make this connection). The abject status is retroactively delegated to those who now seem to have somehow done something to deserve it as a result of their own incompetence. They are held as exemplars of what can happen if one is not careful. In the above narrative Diane was so upset precisely because she was ‘undeserving’ of (dis)ease, she had been ‘good.’ But we see in Shawnequa’s discomfort
that the abject also encroaches on the self. She laughs and acknowledges that laughing about STIs is a ‘defense mechanism’ but never clarifies what exactly she is defending herself against.

It is essential to note that STIs, such as herpes and HPV strains that cause genital warts\(^{63}\) and are seen to have ‘life-long’ consequences, were mentioned with heightened intensity. No one shared horror stories about Chlamydia infections (one of the most common and least diagnosed STIs, see Footnote Sixty One), for which one would simply take a few pills to cure. Again it seems to be specifically the evidence proving women’s active sexual desire that is abjected. The recurring blisters and sores and warts are the ‘smoking gun’ or the scarlet letter of their abjected shame and what threatens their subjectivity as impermeable and masterful. I must also note here that very few of the participants brought up anything about HIV or AIDS. This may possibly be explained by the fact that HIV is still understood to be something that happens to ‘other people’ - to gay men, to street-level prostitutes, to the working-class, and to some racialized groups (Haitians in particular) (Richardson, 2000). In other words, the risk of HIV may not have even been a possibility in these women’s minds because of their middle-class positioning.

The pervasive fear of STIs, even when women self-identify as being at ‘low-risk,’ as does Lola, denotes the omni-presence of the abject:

Lola: **STDs\(^{64}\)** are a huge issue for me. SCARY! *I don’t want anything to do with them.* I’m always afraid that I’ll get one even though I’m

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\(^{63}\) I distinguish the two because HPV genital warts are sometimes dealt with by the immune system such that after five years or so there are sometimes no more wart outbreaks, in contrast to herpes, where outbreaks generally only decrease in frequency if there is any changes at all. However, I cannot know whether the participants themselves make this distinction.

\(^{64}\) Interestingly, a number of the participants use the term sexually transmitted disease, or STD, which may further serve to distance themselves from the possibility of perceiving themselves as at risk of STIs. Disease is associated with visible sickness or being really sick. Not acknowledging STIs as, possibly undetectable, infections facilitates the women’s view of themselves as not at risk. ‘I’ve never been really sick, so I’ve had anything sexually transmitted.’
in a monogamous relationship, that somehow I’ll get it.

Brandy: What are some of your theories?

Lola: Toilet seats. I probably should know, I was taught it but, toilet seats for some reason […] irrational, definitely irrational.

Both Diane and Lola ‘want nothing to do with them,’ as though more than their bodies are at risk. The possibility that being seen as ‘proper’ female sexual subjects, not to mention being healthy, competent liberal subjects, is also threatened by this abjection.

Throughout the interviews, discussions of STIs are subsumed by the unspeakability of their abject status. This idea will be developed in more depth in the next chapter. As Gina discloses about her first sexual experience:

Gina: One more thing that I was concerned about, I never asked him about STIs, so I was concerned, I’ll never forgive myself if I get an STI, just because like umm, because I was too chicken to ask and I didn’t think, it was really an afterthought that scared me but luckily he didn’t.

Brandy: Did you consider asking him after the fact?

Gina: Ummm, no I didn’t but the worrying came like the next day and even I didn’t even ask him the next time we had sex either, you know. No. So I think that was kind of like where I was kind of shameful of what, I hadn’t taken care of for myself.

Gina berates herself for even the possibility of contracting an STI, but was paralyzed in her attempts to address her partner’s STI ‘status’, despite her fear and discomfort. We will see that this behaviour was quite common. Moreover, even though she recounts an event from the past, and she has been tested since, she says ‘I’ll never forgive myself if I get an STI,’ signaling the ongoing nature of her concern. The possibility of an STI disrupts and threatens her positioning as a competent, healthy sexual subject that is able to ‘take care of herself.’ Similarly, the unspeakability of women’s active desire in another sphere reinforces the argument that can be made for its designation as abject.
Parents’ Silence and the Abject

As in previous research exploring sexuality I found that, according to the participants, parents were overwhelmingly silent about their children’s sexual health. Such a finding is by no means novel; however, I will briefly address this silence as it relates to the abjection of women’s active sexual desire. While most parents seem generally to leave their children’s sexual education to the school and the youth themselves, there is something specific about active female desire in its threat to both ‘proper’ (passive) female (hetero)sexuality and male sexual agency that accounts for its absence in both public and familial sexual health discourse.

While many of the women reported rarely speaking with their parents about sexuality, their fathers were particularly unlikely candidates for sexual health information (Gonzalez-Lopez, 2004, had similar findings). Many of the women’s experiences of sex education from their mothers can be summed up in Olivia’s words: “[my mother] explicitly tries to be really open but she doesn’t want to hear about it, like if I mention anything about sex she’s like, ‘I don't want to know!’” A smaller number of the mothers did provide some information and, in some exceptional cases, acted as sex-positive role models for their daughters. Nevertheless, more often than not the shame and insecurities that culminate around the abjection of certain ‘improper’ sexualities are passed from one generation to the next, often due to the silence and unspeakability surrounding excluded topics. Sometimes the abjection of ‘improper’ sexuality is explicit in families. In addition to the ‘usual’ shame that impedes sexual education within the family, I argue that the ‘incest taboo’ delimits who can be a legitimate sexual educator for young women and girls. Mothers might talk to their daughters but fathers definitely ‘should’ not. Drawing
on Levi-Strauss and Freud, Butler (1999) claims that the incest taboo undergirds the heterosexual matrix and organizes acceptable gendered and sexual configurations in Western society. She argues that “the naturalization of heterosexuality and masculine sexual agency are discursive constructions nowhere accounted for but everywhere assumed within [the incest taboo]” because “incestuous heterosexuality [is] constituted as the ostensibly natural and pre-artificial matrix for desire” (1999:54-55). In so far as the incest taboo constructs the father as the sexual guardian of the daughter and the daughter as the property of her father, it provides discursive support for masculine control over and protection of a woman’s sexuality. Constructing the daughter as the (sexual) property of her father is a so-called ‘traditional’ view that remains unspoken but apparent in participants’ narratives.

Often fathers are explicitly rejected as sources of sexuality education. Miriam’s experience is very common: “My mom, she’s the vocal one about these things and my dad’s the one that ignores these things (laughter).” For most participants it seems self-evident that their father would not be involved in their sexual education. Often, when discussing what their parents had taught them about sexual health, it became clear that it was specifically their mother who they were usually talking about. For some of the women, having their father know anything about their sexual development was a horrifying thought. Nova recalled her experience of menarche: “I got my period while I was at my dad’s house and I was phoning my mom, ‘What do I do?! We didn’t talk about it. Please don’t tell him, I don’t want him to know!'” Similarly, Jill was ‘traumatized’ by her dad guessing that she had her period and calling it her ‘menstrual cycle.’ Perhaps the participants fearfully excluded the fathers as non-custodial parents, not ‘the ones they
usually turned to for support.’ These comments support my view that there is also a structural context wherein women are, to some degree, still constructed as the sexual property of their fathers, making it additionally unlikely that girls would talk to them about ‘sexual stuff.’ Talking about sexual things, including menarche as evidence of girls’ sexuality, would seem to expose girls to what their fathers are supposed to be protecting them from.

Much earlier in this chapter we saw Shawnequa’s experience with her father ‘exploding’ about the thought of her having sex in his house when he was present. Again, her father’s upset seems specific to Shawnequa’s desire (the thought of her having consensual sex in his house) as opposed to the desire that men exerted on her, such as the ‘homeless guy’ and the ‘peeping tom.’ The intensity of his reaction suggests an ‘irrational’ attachment to her sexual purity, especially while under ‘his’ roof. Persephone has been careful about what kind of access her father has to knowledge about her sexual life:

I think at the same time, he’s, and he doesn’t want to think about [me] having sex, I’m sure that makes him uncomfortable. He always jokes about breaking my [ex-boyfriend’s] fingers, whatever […] I don’t think my parents would want details. I was [acting] in a show that was very sexy…Um, but, I expressly was like, ‘Don’t come to it’. They’re in Toronto, but…my dad was like, ‘I might surprise you and come out.’ I was like, ‘You better not, I’ll kick your ass.’ I was so scared that he’d come and beat up my co-star, who I was screwing on the side!

Similarly, Emma remembers:

Emma: One time […] my dad had been trying to say something indirectly. My mom doesn’t talk to us about that stuff, my dad wanted to say something but he feels really uncomfortable saying it […] he said something like, ‘Oh, you girls have to stay clean.’ He’s like, oh, like, he gave an example of like a cd, like once you start writing on it, it’s not clean anymore. That’s what he said, so I talked to my sisters about it, I was like, ‘That’s probably what he’s trying to say.’
Brandy: Like don’t lose your virginity?

Emma: Yeah.

Interestingly, one explicit exception to the ‘rule’ of a father’s limited, if not punitive, role in the women’s sexual education was in a family where the father was a doctor involved in HIV/AIDS research. Maria remembers:

My dad’s a doctor and my mom was also a x-ray technician so has a medical background. So they’ve always been very open and very ready to talk about sex and so we started at a really young age […] then also we talked about it because of my dad works with HIV/AIDS and so it comes up at the dinner table all the time, so we’ve come to conceptualize sex in a very like pragmatic sort of way I guess, umm and yeah, when I was growing up, I remember, I don’t even know what it was, but like I, my sisters and I, my parents talked to us about sex sometimes and we were, always felt really cool because we knew our friends didn’t get that and so we acted like adults all the time and we said, ‘Oh yeah, we’re not going to have sex before marriage’ and my dad was like, ‘Yeah right!’ […] I didn’t really talk about sexual acts with my mother. She assumed as much, and just the emotional stuff she always connects about that and my dad.

Maria attributes her father’s openness about sexuality specifically to his work with HIV. Other parents from medical backgrounds did not seem to have the same level of comfort:

Maria comments, “My dad has changed a lot since he’s started working with HIV […] I think they’ve [both] become more liberal with him working with HIV […] [they] have a box in case we ever need them. [Ribbed for] ‘Female Pleasure’!” The availability of alternative discourses of understanding sexuality, in this family’s instance HIV prevention within a non-judgmental, harm reduction model, has the potential to provide the framework for new configurations of familial engagement.

It is important to remember that in highlighting these examples and exceptions, I am exploring the context within which young women’s sexual subjectivity occurs and the discourses they have access to rather than family dynamics. By no means is there any
evidence that participants’ fathers are heinous brutes. Rather, the discourses being drawn on by the various family members in understanding fathers as sexual gatekeepers, and in this way ‘not educators,’ are part of the normative structures that maintain women’s active desire as abject and their sexual passivity as normative. The incest taboo and attendant discourses of ‘healthy’ family relationships are only a few of the possible ways the fathers related to their daughters’ sexuality. Espiritu’s (2001) and Gonzalez-Lopez’s (2004) research with fathers in racialized immigrant groups in the U.S., as mentioned in Chapter One, reminds us of the myriad, often non-traditional, ways fathers may have for making sense of ‘protecting their daughter’s virginity.’

**Conclusion**

Both the presence (via proofs such as ‘slutty behaviour,’ real or imagined, and STIs) and absence (via the silence of parents) of the abjected ‘nature’ of women’s active desire were common throughout the participants’ interviews. I have drawn out moments in the narratives that illustrate how sexual subjectivity is consolidated in distancing itself from the abject - the not-me; I have also highlighted the continual threat that the abject presents to young women’s understandings of themselves. The threat of the abject is evident in the intense emotive reactions elicited by the possibility of contracting STIs and the presence of the ‘slutty’ body. At stake is one’s sense of the impermeable, coherent, competent subject. The subject remains ‘haunted’ because the threat of being contaminated by or becoming the abject undermines its attempts to assert its competency, exposing the vulnerability of the subject.
Chapter Six: Disavowal, the Subject and the Spectre of Violence

Following Lacan and Freud, Butler (1993: 3) argues that the abjections we premise our subjecthood on must at the same time be disavowed. Freud first used the notion of disavowal as a specifically psychoanalytic term that accounted for children’s reactions to discovering the anatomical distinction between the sexes (1986: 349). In this work disavowal refers to the psychological process of perceiving a trauma, which can be real or imagined, and attempting to protect one’s self psychologically against it. In Freud’s work on fetishism, disavowal is more developed; however, it is important to distinguish this specific usage from the pervasive role disavowal plays in all moments when the ego is in need of ‘constructing a defense’ or creating a boundary (1986:349). In his essay ‘Fetischismus’ (Fetishism) (1927), Freud states that the notion of disavowal (or ‘Verleugnung’) is a process that relates specifically to ideas (as opposed to his development of the concept of ‘repression,’ which is related specifically to the realm of affect). More accurately, Freud defines disavowal as “a token triumph over [a perceived trauma] and a protection against it” (1986: 353). Key to his definition is that disavowal is a reaction to a perceived trauma (in Freud’s writing on fetishism, the perceived threat is ultimately castration). In this chapter, I explore how the process of disavowal, which is central to the constant reiteration of subjectification, is apparent in women’s narratives. I use the notion of disavowal to outline how desire itself becomes constituted as a desire for safety in the face of both real and perceived traumas of violation, how the women position themselves as unrapable or unviolatable subjects, and how being ‘trusting’ subjects allows women to position themselves as subjects who are not at risk of STIs or violence.
Out of Freud’s development of the notion of disavowal in regard to fetishism, over time it has taken on a pathologized connotation. In contrast, I am using disavowal not in a psycho-medicalized context but as central to our positioning of ourselves within discourse, in other words as one of the elementary processes of subjection. It is worth reiterating here that I am using psychoanalytic terms in a purely non-clinical or non-pathologizing way. Disavowal is a triumph over and protection from a perceived threat, but Freud also is careful to add that the “attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality [exist] side by side” (1986: 356). In other words, the process of disavowal is evident in the referencing of various perceived sexual threats, such as violence and STIs, while at the same time, as Lacan argues, it involves positioning oneself as a subject that is not vulnerable to such threats. Indeed, as we will see the perceived threats of violence and STIs are such an implicit though persistent presence in the women’s narratives that I refer to them as spectres. Disavowal is the ‘there and the not there,’ according to Freud. Disavowal involves a simultaneous acknowledgement and disclaimer of threat. Drawing on Lacan, I show how our speech betrays these contradictions and makes evident the active, constant processes that accompany subjectification.

In their formulation of Freud’s definition of disavowal, Laplanche and Pontalis claim that it is “a specific mode of defence which consists in the subject’s refusing to recognize the reality of a perceived trauma” (cited in Evans, 1996: 43). I find this definition less useful because it is literally dependant on Freud’s use of disavowal in regard to the castration complex, “when children first discover the absence of the penis in the girl [and] they ‘disavow the fact and believe that they do see a penis all the same’”
(Evans, 1996: 43). I do not draw directly on these particular Freudian claims but rather on the reworking of Freud’s writing for its relevance to the ‘normal’ processes of subjectification that we all experience. Even in Lacan’s clinical work, which argues that disavowal is not only related to fetishism, as Freud supposed, but that it is “the fundamental operation in all forms of perversion,” (in Evans, 1996:43) disavowal remains a psychoanalyst’s tool for diagnosis and treatment. As has been argued throughout this dissertation, I employ these psychoanalytic concepts not for their pathologizing or clinical uses, but rather for understanding various aspects of subjection in which we all necessarily partake. Thus I rely on the insights the term disavowal has for the process in which we, as subjects, need to defensively construct a boundary between that which the subject is and is not. In this sense, disavowal is intimately connected with how the abject has been shown above to be central to the subject’s development as a distinct entity within normative structures. The abject references the not-me of the subject, whereas via disavowal the women attempt to position themselves as invulnerable to perceived sexual threats. Disavowal in the face of perceived threats is necessary in order for young women to maintain the stability of their subjectivity and their positioning within discourses of autonomy.

Žižek offers a useful example of disavowal in regard to environmentalism. He calls this ‘the famous disavowal’ wherein modern subjects say to themselves “‘I know very well (that environmentally things are deadly serious, that what is at stake is our very survival), but just the same…I don’t really believe it, I’m not really prepared to integrate it into my symbolic universe, and that is why I continue to act as if ecology is of no lasting consequence for my everyday life’” (1991: 35). We will see that throughout the
narratives “disavowal is always accompanied by a simultaneous acknowledgement of what is disavowed” (Evans, 1996: 44). The acknowledgement we see is not by any means explicit however; the threats of violence and STIs remain spectres that are not directly acknowledged but rather referenced implicitly in the very crafting of the narratives. The young women rarely explicitly cite the risks they are exposed to, but they do implicitly position themselves as ‘free’ from or invulnerable to such risks. One of the ways disavowal is evident in their narratives is in the ‘disclaimer,’ which Hewitt and Stokes define as “a verbal device which is used to ward off potentially negative attributions, [and which] functions by acknowledging a possible interpretation in order to reject it more effectively” (cited in Willig, 1997: 132). In the disclaimer we can see examples of how Freud understood disavowal as protection against and ‘token’ triumph over a perceived threat or trauma. For example, when comparing her current partner to previous partners, Gina cautiously comments:

Gina: [Previous partners] had already made it clear that I was a priority (orgasm-wise), but I don’t think that [my current partner] thinks that way.

Brandy: Why don’t you feel comfortable bringing it up?

Gina: I’m not sure I know how to say it or verbalize it, (long pause) I don’t know, I almost don’t want to seem like a hassle or something. I don’t like to hear myself say that. (laughter) Um, or I don’t want to make him feel like he’s not good enough.

Gina expresses concern that her current partner was less interested than her previous partners in prioritizing her sexual pleasure. She is hesitant to talk with him about this however. She does not want ‘to seem like a hassle.’ She demotes her sexual pleasure and is concerned that her demands may be ‘a hassle’ for a long term partner who is supposed to be her best friend, lover, and companion. She verbalizes this fear, despite ‘not liking’
hearing herself admitting this. It is interesting that Gina brings up her own critique of her lover, even though it is painful to do so. I argue that this has something to do with my role as listener. It is likely that Gina related to me as an ‘expert on good sex,’ an expert who was perhaps listening and evaluating her experiences of pleasure. This may contribute to her self-reflexive, but painful, critique. The ‘disclaimer,’ the verbal device Gina employees to ward off or proactively counter the ‘expert’s,’ my own, evaluation of her situation as un-egalitarian or lacking, is Gina’s honest but painful admission that there is the possibility of being viewed as ‘a hassle’ by her partner.65 In light of the concept of disavowal, Gina’s discomfort is clear and the ‘token’ triumph she makes in protecting her psyche by preemptively acknowledging the disclaimer but denying the possibility that her current, self-chosen, partner is less invested in her pleasure than had been her previous partners is apparent. She may not like hearing herself say so, but she constructs the risk of making him feel ‘not good enough’ as greater than feeling that her partner does not prioritize her pleasure.

Maia positions herself similarly when talking about chats with her partner after sex. She says that sometimes after sex she asks her partner to evaluate their sexual experience, asking what worked and did not for him. I ask if he asks her the same evaluative questions, to which she responds: “I don’t think he asks me, I think I tell him. And that’s sort of because he doesn’t need to ask or he doesn’t care, I’m sure he cares…” It is interesting that both women seem to be referencing the potentially traumatic possibility that their partners are not especially invested in their pleasure without any prompting. This referencing itself exposes the processes that are possibly going on in

65 While I discuss the ‘disclaimer’ statement here, it is important to note that not all disclaimers are ‘disavowals’ in the psychoanalytic sense that I employ here.
their internal dialogues (including, “What is Brandy, ‘the expert,’ thinking about what I’m telling her?”), thereby necessitating the disavowal and ‘disclaimer’ statements. It is interesting that such ‘disclaimer’ statements, despite their apparent self-contradictory nature, exhibit a logical structure in light of the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse that we discussed in Chapters Three and Four, where slippages in language which betray processes of subjection are covered over by the women. As we will see, disclaimer statements can also be translated into statements such as, ‘I know that it might seem to you like I was at risk but I really wasn’t.’ Despite the appearance of casual acceptance, these statements bear witness to the spectre of sexual risk, like the risks of physical or sexual violence, psychic or emotional risks or the threat of STIs, which frame many of the narratives.

Disavowal is central to the process by which young women sometimes construct desire itself as a desire for safety and respect. These moments of perceived or real threats are not especially surprising given, first, what we know about the occurrence of gendered sexual and physical violence and, second, that the context of sexual health education for young women, as Fine has shown (1988), consists primarily of warnings about their vulnerability as women and passive sexual subjects.

**Desire as Protective**

In the first chapter of her book, *Dilemmas of Desire* (2002), Tolman offers a powerful definition of desire. She writes:

Sexual desire, in and of itself, is not dangerous, essentially masculine, or monstrous. Desire is part of our relational world, a sign and manifestation of our connection with our own bodies and connection with other people… [The] body is the counterpart of the psyche in the ongoing process of
composing and constructing one’s sexual subjectivity. Thus, desire is one form of knowledge, gained through the body: In desiring, I know that I exist… Feeling desire in response to another person is a route to knowing… through the process of [forming] relationships. (20-21)

In her exploration of young women’s experiences of desire, Tolman found that “the social dilemma that societal constructions of female and male sexuality set up for girls [is] a choice between their sexual feelings or their safety” (44). She shows how women ‘brush over’ these contradictions and position themselves as coherent subjects. While Tolman’s insights into the contradictory ways women are positioned as sexual subjects are useful, the notion of disavowal can deepen our understanding of why the young women I interviewed are rarely explicit about the risks they face. I find that the way young women understand their desire embodies the process of disavowal as psychic protection against perceived threats. While the participants actively distance themselves from risks of violence, sexual or otherwise, I argue further to Tolman’s (2002) research that these women constitute their desire as fundamentally about the desire for trust, safety, and respect. In light of DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s (1998) findings that 28% of female university students had experienced sexual violence in the last year, it is significant that very few of the women I interviewed discussed such experiences. Does this tell us something about the women I recruited? Or does this ‘absence’ speak to how within dominant discourses of competency and autonomy women are able to disavow experiences of violence, as will be explored below?

In regard to the construction of their desire, I argue, in line with Tolman, that the dominant discourses young women have access to force an accommodation between contradictions, as women are positioned contradictorily by discourses of (neo)liberal autonomy, personal responsibility and (hetero)sexuality. By examining discourses
emphasizing women’s risk in hetero relations, it is easy to understand how desire can come to be founded on a sense of trust, which is believed to offer safety and protection from sexual harm. “It is likely that [young women’s] resistance to dominant sets of meanings around female sexuality [is] made possible by their social location within their environment” (Allen, 2003b: 222). Evidence of young women’s resistance comes from research such as my own and other studies I have cited which explore the limits and effects that dominant discourses have on the material experience of (hetero)sexuality. Research that explores how women’s desire can be about issues other than trust, safety, and respect helps to reveal and legitimate how women (re)imagine their relationship with themselves and to others. As Ussher correctly asserts, “[interpreting] a feeling, thought or bodily change as ‘sexual desire’ is not a straightforward or automatic process” (2005: 28), but one that is inherently discursively constituted, mediated and negotiated. Because desire is discursively constituted, in this chapter I explore how women’s desire is related to safety, and in Chapter Seven I explore how their desire is concerned with much more than safety.

While it is necessary to explore how desire became defined by trust and safety for many of the women, it is important to remember that there were many moments where the women articulated desire as something over and above their measure of personal safety, as will be shown in the next chapter. It is nevertheless important to explore how the threat or perceived threat of male violence may affect young women’s experiences of desire. As we will see in this chapter, when I am discussing trust and safety there are two levels of trust that are important. It becomes apparent that it is important for women to trust the men they have sex with, which is one level of trust. This trust is assumed to
ensure their safety. Trusting their partners is based on their trust in themselves to choose ‘good’ partners. This additional level of trust, self-trust, is premised on their ability to position themselves as competent female sexual actors.

When I explicitly asked each of the women what they did not like about sex, all but a few were fairly emphatic, saying, ‘nope, I like pretty much everything!’ The common response to the ‘is there anything you dislike about sex’ question included: “…I don’t know. I like it all. I like the feeling that you get, the adrenaline rush, and the closeness that you kinda feel…It’s just fun” (Sue); “No, not really” (Mary Jane); “If you can’t laugh during it” (Annie); “I pretty much like the whole thing” (Olivia). Of course, some of the women articulate a greater range of feelings of complexity, but the overall positive view was similar among them. Diane responds: “I don’t know. Not really. Honestly I have body issues and that sort of thing, so I think there are times when I’d prefer he leave my bra on or that sort of thing, but honestly, it’s not really. There’s sort of a body image thing that holds me back but other than that no, there’s nothing I don’t really enjoy.” Only one woman responded to that question by referencing negative experiences. Jackie first says that there is not anything she dislikes per se, but goes on to say, “No. (laughs) Ummmm, I guess not, sometimes I don’t want to give oral sex, so I would tell him that I don’t but then there are times that, again there are some times when I don’t really mind but again I’m not real excited about it, so yeah that were some of the instances.”

Women’s claims concerning sexual desire and enjoying hetero sex must not be ignored, and will be delved into in the next chapter. Alongside claims that everything about sex was fabulous there is a parallel reading of the narratives around desire. In our
more general and varied discussions of their experiences of desire I began to see that while women’s basic orientation towards sex and their experiences was quite positive, the way they understood their desire belied the structural contexts of inequality within which hetero relations take place. The construction of desire as constituting a sense of trust, safety, and protection in a sexual situation often came up when women discussed the issues they weighed in deciding to have sex with someone. Safety issues, which were based on their perceptions of trust, were often factored into decisions about whether or not to have sex, whether it was the first time they had intercourse, when it was most salient in women’s narratives, or later in life. When considering new partners, Sue tells me she asks herself: “is this person, you know, a good waste of time or a bad waste of time, are they going to get me in trouble? Could I see myself, could I see myself with this person in five years, what could I see myself doing?” Sue does not clarify what kind of ‘trouble’ potential partners may get her into, but we can imagine the threat of pregnancy, violence and STIs may figure in. What is clear, however, is that there is an evaluation of her safety in regard to whom she will sleep with. When the women were deciding to ‘lose their virginity,’ which they define as having vaginal intercourse, trusting their partner seem to be the most central aspect of most of their decisions.

Shawnequa’s articulation of her experience is fairly representative: “I just felt… that I was ready the first time and I trusted him and I know him and we just knew that and he was a very good person and I came to trust him.” Maria’s primary condition for her first time having sexual intercourse was that she “didn’t want it to be traumatic.” The women’s narratives implicitly show that there is something they perceive as being potentially ‘traumatic’ about having sex with men.
How safe and trusting women feel with partners remains a salient factor in starting sexual relationships later in life as well. For Mary Jane, “there’s not really any criteria, I just kind of like can tell by the person and how they treat me.” The quality of the partner is evident in ‘how they treat me’ and, in turn, how safe and trusting the women feel is related to their desire to have sex with any given man. As we will see, it is essential for women to determine whether potential partners are ‘good guys’ or ‘bad guys.’ Even if their desire is physically great, the suspicion that a potential partner may be a ‘bad guy’ forecloses the possibility of sex in some cases. Miriam remembers:

I was in grade eleven or earlier in high school, I was super attracted to this guy and we ended up making out and he was like, ‘Oh, you’re cute’ and I was like, ‘Well, what do you think we could do for the next 15 minutes?’ and he was like, ‘I don’t know, there’s a lot we could do in 15 minutes!’ And I’m like torn between being like, ‘I really like him. Should I? Should I go? Should I? Like, ‘I don’t know, is that ok?’ Even when we were making out I’m like, ‘Oh my god, this is so wrong, it’s not going to work out he’s like a jerk, he’s not the greatest.

Miriam’s certainty that ‘he’s a jerk’ and that ‘it’s not going to work’ outweighs her desire for the man (‘I really like him’) and she decides not to have sex with him. Safety is not just about protection from physical violence and STIs. In Miriam’s narrative, she does not articulate the risk this ‘jerk’ poses. Perhaps he will ‘fuck and tell.’ Thus trust and safety can also be about protecting one’s always already ‘pure’ middle-class reputation.

For many participants, the perceived safety of partners was their foundational consideration, over and above desire as physical attraction or arousal. For Olivia, “the amount that I feel I know them, the amount that I trust them, umm, how I feel about them, yeah, I think those are the main things.” We are beginning to be aware of how the threats young women see as potentially attached to (hetero)sex, even though they are implicit, come to figure centrally in their understandings of the connection of their own
desire to their safety. In Gina’s narrative she begins to struggle more explicitly with the spectres that haunt her desire. She is one of the few participants to explore how gendered inequality, partly related to the implicit threat of violence against women, frames her sexual experiences. She ponders:

…that’s really interesting because [the guy I lost my virginity with] was the one I didn’t like but, was I doing it for him? Or was I having sex with him because he was nice to me and he was the biggest [tallest] one?..I was just thinking about how tall a person is, or the expectations they have, how respectful they are. I’m not sure if I felt almost obligated to [him] because of his physical presence. Maybe? I’m kind of exploring, if maybe it was kind of, his stature as a man was really, really dominant, and uh, so that’s were I felt like it was less my desire, I didn’t really desire him um, but I thought that the other two [previous sexual, but not intercourse, partners] were really cute and really friendly and funny and they really LIKED ME, so that was, so I really desired them, even thought they were kinda shorter…

Gina considers the possibility that feeling ‘almost obligated’ to him because of his ‘physical presence’ (he was also her affluent and politically connected host in a ‘developing’ country she was traveling through) may have been a factor in her decision to sleep with him. She weighs ‘a tall person’s’ ‘expectations,’ ‘how respectful they are.’ Gina juxtaposes her choice to sleep with a partner she ‘didn’t like’ against choosing not to sleep with other, ‘shorter,’ less ‘dominant’ guys who really ‘LIKED HER.’ Here she signals the possibility that economic privilege and being a ‘bigger’ guy contribute to her decision to lose her virginity with the man she did.

Sometimes, but less commonly, the young women’s perceived fears are either explicitly encouraged and emphasized by others or confirmed in their experiences. Miriam’s mother was clear about the risks that attend to sex. Miriam feels her mother’s views result from her mother’s negative experiences with men while living in Iran. In discussing what she was taught about her own desire when growing up, Miriam claims
that from her mother “it was just, ‘men are bad and try to take advantage of you,’ versus ‘you’ll also want to partake in that [too]’. So don’t do that (laughter).”

Sheena specifically sought out safety and comfort in a sexual relationship after being drugged and sexually assaulted her first time having intercourse. Trying to cope with the loss of control she experienced being sexually assaulted, Sheena decided to choose a sexual partner that made her feel safe and comfortable, even though she was not physically attracted to the guy she chose. Sheena shares her experience after being sexually assaulted:

I was kind of confused, I didn’t know what to do and the, what ended up happening was, I really wanted to be in a safe, comfortable relationship and so there was a guy who had really liked me for about two years, and I was never sexually interested in but I decided to start dating him because I wanted to be in a really nice, steady relationship and then eventually I just ended up telling my parents [about the sexual assault] once I was in that relationship and I told him and that’s how I gradually, that’s how I think I dealt with it.

When the perceived threat of sexualized violence was actualized, Sheena took the logical step of actively and explicitly privileging safety and comfort over physical attraction in her sexual relationships. Her explicitness helps to highlight many of the women’s reconstitution of desire as safety as a ‘(token) triumph’ over perceived sexual threats.

In many of the above comments the exact nature of the perceived threats around (hetero)sex is not clear. Certainly, we can make ‘educated guesses,’ but we can also look in other parts of the interviews for evidence of specific concerns. Here, the ‘disclaimer’ statements mentioned above are revealing. Maria remembers a past sexual experience:

At this point I was basically just doing it for experience and I knew I didn’t even like this person and I was like, I knew he wasn’t going to kidnap me cause he’d be screwed cause my family [knows him and where I am] would come and get him and he’d be screwed. Ummmm, so it’s kind of like, you know, in that sense, it was a comfortable atmosphere even
though I wasn’t extremely comfortable with him especially. Ummmm and he was like, ‘What do you like?’ and I was like, ‘Do you know I had sex like once before? Like maybe if you include just now, twice.’ I just pretended I didn’t understand him [he had a different first language] and we just kept going (laughter) and then yeah, so then we stopped having sex and it was like, interesting. Please don’t think for a minute that I felt coerced. Like, I was, ‘I can take this or leave it.’ I didn’t really, really want to have sex with him but I’d go home and watch TV otherwise and ummm he was also really like forward but I’m just so curious about this stuff…

I remember being startled by her comment ‘Please don’t think for a moment that I felt coerced,’ thinking that it had come ‘out of the blue.’ Maria goes into a fair bit of detail explaining that the situation met her minimum standards (of safety) and her logic for deciding why it did (her family knowing him and that she was with him). She goes on to hint that the situation was not fully positive, saying that she was not that comfortable with him. I understood her to mean that she did not really like him as a person, which she had established earlier in the interview. The central point I wish to make here concerns not whether Maria was coerced or not, but the perceived threat she attaches to her evaluation of the situation. With no prompting or apparent trigger, she brings up the possible threat of coercion, only to ‘triumph’ over it by verbally negating its possibility, and thereby covering over the possible contradiction in her narrative.

In a similarly seemingly innocuous narrative, Olivia remembers the end of her previous relationship:

Near the end of our relationship I would fake orgasm to get it over with sooner, cause I didn’t want to have sex with him. Like, I don’t feel I was letting myself get raped or anything, it’s just that it was dull. It’s not that I felt violated, like not wanting to have sex with him even though I was, it just felt like .. it was so blasé and I like yeah, I just didn’t want to be with him.

The connection, or leap she makes, between dull sex and rape seems exaggerated unless one is attuned to how the disavowal of the threat of sexual violence is central to young
women’s sexual subjectivity. The risk of being ‘raped’ in an intimate relationship may be referenced or activated, but here is preemptively activated, only to be denied and triumphed over. ‘Disclaimer’ statements also, as I mentioned, bridge the cognitive dissonance or perceived threat of subject instability and contradiction. These statements make sense within the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse that bridges young women’s understandings of themselves as autonomous liberal (sexual) subjects and their experiences as gendered sexual beings positioned as passive within discourses that privilege male pleasure. In response to my question about whether oral sex ever replaces intercourse if she was not ‘into it,’ Jill responds:

Short answer, sometimes. It used to be, not so much now […] Yeah before, sometimes yeah. It wasn’t so much, I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t want it, even that, if I wasn’t turned on. Actually that’s not true. I do remember doing it a few times when I didn’t want to have sex and I just wanted to please him to get him off my back. Oh just kidding! But it did sometimes for sure

Jill’s response is so riddled with ambivalence and self-contradiction it is hard to follow her logic. But the moment she claims that she is kidding we see the attempt to cover up the dissonance she is feeling and the possibility that she is not the autonomous liberal sexual subject that she and other women so actively position and understand themselves to be. In such attempts, the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse is not effective in smoothing over contradictory psychic processes of subjection, and the incoherence of the subject becomes apparent.

For Libby, the disavowal of being verbally rejected by her partners was something that she ‘triumphed’ over and distanced herself from by remaining silent about the possible threats that seem to be running through her mind. She says, “I feel that the emotional communication and just being comfortable with someone. For me it’s a big
issue of being comfortable with my body with someone else that I don’t know that well or what they’re thinking, I know that they’re not in love with me, I don’t know if they’re gonna turn around and say (pause) like I can’t even talk about it.” Libby cannot ‘even talk about’ the perceived threat of sexual rejection. Again it is important is to see those moments when perceived threats around (hetero)sex are betrayed and exposed, and thus undermine the women’s attempts to disavow such threats.

The Unrapable/Unviolable Subject

If desire is often understood as a desire for safety, then what is the perceived threat that is being disavowed? Two specific threats are most apparent throughout the interviews. The first is the threat of physical or sexualized violence. The second is the threat of STIs. Like Potts (2002), I find that in many cases young women implicitly signal their knowledge of the perceived, and sometimes real, ‘precariousness’ of their safety. At times, they implicitly acknowledge that “there is no assurance that the man will not ‘abuse their trust,’ he may breach the boundaries of heterosex in ways which she can imagine or predict but over which she does not, in the end, have control” (169).

I identify a number of ways that women disavow the possibility of experiencing sexualized violence. Like Sue, many of these women construct sexual assault as something that is necessarily violent. She defines ‘rape’ as a “[guy] like totally forcing to have sex with you, and you’re like ‘No! No! Don’t! Get off!’ And he’s like, ‘I’m gonna get you naked and stick it in you.’ ‘No! No!’ or ‘Mmm, mmm, mmm’ (covering her mouth).” Also, sexual violence is something that is only “a real risk if you don’t know the

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66 As seen in the narrative above, risks of ‘getting a reputation’ (Miriam) and psychic and emotional risks of rejection (Libby) are also an issue, but I have chosen to focus on violence and STIs which are more salient in the interviews.
person, you can be taken advantage of…”; and most generally something that’s “not in my life” (Gina\textsuperscript{67}). Alternatively, if the women had experienced sexualized violence, many sought to minimize the impact and severity of the experience in their narratives. In response to the question of whether they had ever experienced sexual violence, Nova responds, “[the] worst it’s ever been was a high school boyfriend saying, ‘If you don’t do this [have sex], I’m going to break up with you,’ which wasn’t fun and being pressured but I mean, nothing” Some see sexualized violence as having occurred because they were ‘stupid’ or made ‘a huge mistake.’

We know that women’s vulnerability to sexualized violence is great. In 1998 DeKeseredy and Schwartz found that on Canadian university campuses, 28% of the females who participated in their large scale study “stated that they were sexually abused in the past year…with 41% of women stating that they had been abused since leaving high school.” This finding is consistent with U.S. national data (55). Such levels of violence take place within what Fine calls ‘a context of zero-sum guilt’ wherein “if women’s victimization is acknowledged as at all related to their own behaviour, they are vulnerable to being fully assigned responsibility, while the men who hurt them are exonerated” (Phillips, 2000: 10, emphasis in original). We see very clearly and poignantly this ‘context of zero-sum guilt’ in Diane’s understanding of her negative sexual experience. Remembering a time when a male friend, whom she felt she could trust, refused to quit trying to have sex with her as she passed in and out of consciousness, Diane relates:

> What was I going to do? I couldn’t drive, six in the morning, who am I going to call? Honestly I should have called somebody […] That was a bad

\textsuperscript{67} However, Gina did mention the likelihood that her biological mother has probably experienced sexualized violence because she is an Aboriginal woman who ‘drank and partied a lot.’
experience for me, *I know it could have been a lot worse*, and it wasn’t, and *I take some blame for it for sure* but like, not cool, like it was not a good experience, not a good guy in my book […] Like I should have got out of there, right? Honestly *any self–respecting woman* would have gotten out of there, had she been sober! But this was a guy I trusted, he was a guy friend who never would do that and I had no reason to not trust him […] *Part of me feels like I put myself in that position* and I have to take some responsibility for it as well and I could have got out of it somehow. I say I didn’t want to call anybody or I didn’t have anyone to call but there’s always something you can do right? So I have to take some responsibility as well.

Listening to her, I asked her if there was any chance that she had been drugged. She considers this:

Diane: I never thought of it…Could be. *But all the more reason that I shouldn’t have set myself up in that situation.* Right? Shouldn’t have had the drink from him cause it was in the glass. Had I been thinking, ‘You make your own drinks’ right? Or pop your own cap. Yeah, no, drunk’s not good.

Brandy: It’s important to remember that it’s such a pervasive thing in the culture, self-blame around sexualized violence

Diane: *I don’t know if I can chalk it up to violence!*

Brandy: No and that’s totally cool

Diane: *Obviously it is* and a lot of my girlfriends that I told about it were upset and thought I should do more about it *but I felt and still feel that I put myself in that situation, I chose to be alone with him and drinking.* I have a hard time saying I had nothing to do with it.

In blaming herself for not being ‘a self-respecting woman’ who is able to ‘somehow’ get herself out of there, Diane is not sure if he is *really* a bad guy and comes close to assuming a situation of zero-sum guilt. We also see the process of disavowal from another angle. When I brought up the term sexualized violence, she exclaims, “I don’t know if I can chalk it up to violence!” but then immediately says, “obviously it is.” She has disavowed the threat of sexual violence by hanging out only with men she ‘has no
reason not to trust’ and thus is unwilling to define the situation as an actualized threat even in the face of its ‘obviousness.’

In Flirting with Danger (2000), Phillips explores the ‘context of zero-sum guilt’ and the dominant discourses within which young women understand and articulate their experiences of (sexualized) violence. The young women she interviewed had indeed, as she hoped, benefited from second wave feminism’s efforts to bring the issue of gendered violence to light, themselves being “outspoken about violence against women” and “gender, race, class and sexual inequalities” (35). She also found that in making sense of themselves as ‘together women,’ dominant discourses of (neo)liberal subjecthood “[supported] an illusion that young women’s supposed autonomy and entitlement somehow insulated them from the possibility of victimization” (52). Utilizing the notion of disavowal allows me to build on Phillips and delve more deeply into women’s narratives that distance themselves from the possibility of risk. Like Phillips I found that experiences of violence were often minimized. At the same, disavowal shows how there is both the rejection and presence of the threat of violence in women’s narratives.

In Phillips’ examination of how and why young women minimized and negated their experiences of violence, she outlines a number of discourses within which the women positioned themselves, resulting in denial that allowed them to maintain their views of themselves as powerful (sexual) liberal agents making choices in their sexual experiences. One important discourse is the ‘normal/dangerous dichotomy,’ wherein there are ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys,’ whose categorical memberships never overlap (52),

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68 Diane’s beliefs are consistent with the cultural myth that women are more at risk of sexualized violence from strangers, rather than men they know and trust.
69 The young women Phillips interviewed, like the women I interviewed, were privileged enough to be attaining postsecondary education, so their “supposed autonomy and entitlement” is likely very class-bound, as was discussed in Chapter Four.
as we have seen in Diane’s narrative. At the intersection of the ‘together woman’ discourse discussed in Chapter Four and the ‘normal/danger dichotomy,’ Phillips found that young women who had experienced violence at their partner’s hands “would maintain their belief that he would not do such a thing (and therefore she must be at fault), or they would transform their image of him into a ‘dangerous’ type that she should not have trusted in the first place (again, making it her fault)” (55-56).

Phillips proposes that the ‘together woman,’ the ‘normal/danger dichotomy,’ and the ‘male sexual drive discourse’ which naturalizes or even eroticizes male sexual aggression, are distilled by the ‘true victim discourse’ “into an overarching notion that there exist two distinct types of victims - those who deserve social respect and advocacy, and those who are undeserving of sympathy and support, because they are presumed responsible for their own victimization” (65-66). Many of the women Phillips interviewed positioned themselves as the latter. This positioning is not surprising “within a society that valorizes control” (Riggs, 2005:90, emphasis in original). Discourses of control have a direct effect on sexual subjectivity, such that women “enact control over themselves when they strive to achieve freedom on the terms set within a neo-liberal” gender-‘neutral’ society (95). Rather than articulate their experiences as violence, Phillips found that women used the ‘true victim discourse’ to position themselves as always being in control of their sexual encounters and thus at fault when ‘problems’ occurred.

In the context where “the perpetrator is the agent and the victim is a powerless object” (Phillips, 2000:158), “women are allowed no room to be an active agent who has also been victimized” (162). Hence, the women “had a great psychological investment in not labeling their own experiences abuse” (172). Phillips explores the retroactive
construction of one’s self as ‘not a victim.’ I argue the ‘not a victim’ position is legitimated by the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, wherein “their expressed need to feel strong, self-determined, and sexually sophisticated, the participants voiced a powerful motivation to perceive themselves as in control of even their most unwanted circumstances” (125). In her conclusion, Phillips reminds us of the possibility of reworking and subverting the discourses that culminate in silencing experiences of violence. “Lacking access to a discourse of male accountability and a discourse of female pleasure without penalties” (193) erases the possibility of a sexual agent who can also articulate experiences of structural inequality. The retroactive construction of being in control - and therefore to blame for sexualized violence - is also apparent in my interviews. Remembering a high school boyfriend who had pressured her to engage sexually with him, Miriam says:

I still kind of like, like, I was still somewhat comfortable with whatever happened because otherwise I wouldn’t have done it, so I feel comfortable even though I wasn’t completely comfortable, yeah. (pause) So, no, I don’t, like I, I don’t regret anything, I don’t look back, I’m not shameful in regards to my sexual history.

Even though she was not ‘completely comfortable,’ she understands her experience as the result of her deciding to, ‘otherwise she wouldn’t have done it.’ Miriam is completely in control, autonomous and hence at fault if sexual violence occurs, which becomes a limited possibility given her understanding of herself as a ‘together woman’ and of victims as powerless objects.70

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70 I note here that the stories of all the women I interviewed need to be understood within their geographical and historical context. At the time of the interviews, Robert Pickton was on trial for the murder of 27 female survival sex-workers from the Downtown Eastside. This trial took place within the larger context of the disappearance of hundreds of sex workers, often Aboriginal women, in British Columbia in the last twenty years. Arguably, the women’s understandings of themselves as ‘not victims’ is reinforced by their class and educational privilege and juxtaposed against the experiences of the disappeared women.
I further build on Phillips’ work to propose that in the process of disavowal young women also position themselves proactively as invulnerable to threat, as a way to maintain the apparent stability of liberal (sexual) subjectivity. The process of disavowal not only involves understanding experiences of violence, but is also central to the basic, preemptive construction of self as autonomous and competent; thus we see how disavowal is central to the maintenance of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse.

Over and over again the women actively position themselves as being ‘somehow protected’ from sexualized violence; I refer to this positioning as the preemptively ‘unrapable subject.’ For some young women it is their ‘good sense’ that provides ‘triumph’ over their risk to sexualized violence. Regarding desire and her choices of sexual partners, Sue reflects:

There’s a whole feeling of gut feeling, like [if] you’re getting a bad vibe, usually I kinda keep my distance, I like good feelings, you know, it’s just, I’d rather be with someone I think I can trust, rather than be with someone who I’m not sure about…like the physical desire to actually like be ‘You know, I think you’re hot and I want to be with you’ and, you know, what would you feel like around me. Basically just the intuition, kind of gut feeling […] If I don’t get a burning feeling in my stomach, like I have an ulcer, then it’s a good, then whereas if I feel like I’m getting an ulcer, I feel like I shouldn’t be around them.

Sue relies heavily on her intuition to ward off potential threats and feels justified in doing so. For Miriam, similar protection came from her ‘vibes’ and her ‘good sense about people.’ “[The] vibes I give off are hands off, or not hands off, but like the good girl vibes almost.” She feels that she has not experienced any sexualized violence:

cause I’m very, you know like, like I, I don’t drink to the point where I’m not in control of the situation anymore. I don’t hang out with people I’m not comfortable with and I totally have been with certain people and I was just like, I started listening to my internal cues like, ‘Do not hang out with this person, this could go badly.’ Especially around choosing guy friends, I really make sure they’re nice guys, you know they don’t have […] they
don’t drink too much and get violent, that sort of thing. I pick and choose who I hang out with and where I go to just to avoid that, so it’s not an issue.

In some cases, how the women understand themselves as ‘not at risk,’ hence as triumphing over the perceived threat, may seem bizarre. Lola accounts for never having experienced sexualized violence by saying, “I haven’t really put myself in a situation where that would be happening. I don’t look that old. I feel like a lot of women my age, or even younger, that would feel that they look a lot older than they really are so, they experience that, so I don’t really feel I’ve even experienced anything like that.” Lola positions herself in contrast to the ‘older looking woman’ who apparently is placed at risk of sexualized violence. She does not clarify what she means, so I cannot be absolutely sure of her thought process; the main point here concerns the various ways women preemptively disavow the possibility of sexual threat. Overall, the women claim that they could confidently (competently) navigate the (hetero)sexual world without the potential for risk. As Lily eloquently summarizes, “I mean the good thing is just, I know when to be defensive of myself.” As we will see, being ‘defensive of oneself’ can take a number of different forms.

No matter how confidently the women feel they can avoid and protect themselves against sexualized violence, the spectre of threat often runs parallel to their claims of invulnerability. Alex says, “I think I give off the impression well enough that I’m, you know, to sort of, I have boundaries and keep my guard up. I’ve never really experienced something like that and lucky to not have had that experience.” It was not uncommon for the claim of invulnerability to coexist with the acknowledgment that sexualized violence was definitely a possibility, which, as we have seen, is another characteristic of the process of disavowal. Alex says that she’s been ‘lucky.’ She understands herself as lucky
because she knows the statistical possibility of experiencing violence. Positioning herself as lucky, as did many of the women, she implies that she has normalized violence in heterosexual sexual relations. Being ‘lucky’ and not experiencing violence makes one an ‘exception to the rule’ of violence. However, while the discussion of disavowal and sexualized violence is productive in theorizing women’s sexual subjectivity, we must remember that most recollections of virginity loss and later sexual experience that I, and other researchers, hear are “satisfying, even enjoyable” (Carpenter, 2005: 194).

**The Trusting Subject and STIs**

The second sexual threat that is consistently present is STIs. Evidence of the threat of STIs is seen in how the threat is ‘triumphantly’ expelled in women’s narratives. Much research has tried to account for why, despite access to knowledge about STIs, risk and ‘safer sex,’ people rarely practice sustained barrier protection (internal or external condoms) with their partners (Sobo, 1995; Holland et al., 1998; Potts, 2002; Higgins, 2007). Holland et al. have argued that, for women, “[passion], romance, trust and what you should be prepared to do if you really love a man are inconsistent with mistrust of strangers, social subordination to men, fear of unprotected sex, the use of physical force and concern for reputation” (Holland et al., 1990:343). This inconsistency delimits the likelihood that women will demand the sustained use of condoms. The implications of the dilemma that Holland et al. point out seem to be that women will sacrifice their inclinations to mistrust strangers and fears of unprotected sex and gaining a ‘bad

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71 This is a distinction that has replaced the terms male and female condom with external and internal condoms, to acknowledge that internal condoms can be used both vaginally and rectally.
reputation’ in order to achieve the ideals of passion, romance, and trust. From this perspective, women are positioned primarily within the have/hold discourse, such that only specific types of sexual agency are acknowledged, namely, their ability and responsibility to be solely responsible for their sexual safety. As discourses of women’s sexual passivity are at times reiterated, mainstream feminist researchers are limited in their ability to speak about sexual pleasure and active desire. Exploring the role of disavowal in women’s sexual subjectivity refuses to position women solely as either passive or active.

Researchers who do not couch their research exclusively in discourses of women’s sexual risk also find that women sometimes ‘choose’ unsafe sex but argue that this occurs for reasons related to trust, though in not exclusively emotional ways (as occurs in the have/hold discourse). With very few exceptions, the women I interviewed always expected condoms during first and early sexual (intercourse) encounters with a partner. Within the Canadian context researchers have found that, generally, “oral contraception [appears] to increase and condom use to decrease in comparison to method use at first intercourse” (Fisher and Boroditsky, 2000:83). In other words, the longer a couple are having sex, the less likely it is that they will continue to use condoms, “which may well place a sizable portion of young women at risk of STI[s]” (84). While I did see in my interviews how condom use cessation was often related to love and trust, there was much more to the story than the have/hold discourse would allow us to see.

I begin with the premise that sex for women is not just about love and trust.

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72 Interestingly, Holland et al. (1998) argue that for young women the psychological ‘safety’ of upholding ideals of passion, romance, and trust often outweighs the physical ‘safety’ condoms offer. In many ways there are parallels with my own argument that often efforts to maintain their ‘subject-ive’ safety also outweigh young women’s desire for physical ‘safety’ via condom use.
Rather, I seek to account for how women understand themselves and act as active sexual agents. In the 1998 Canadian Contraception Study it was found that people cited many reasons for stopping or decreasing their condom usage in the last six months: “about one in five said that they knew and trusted their partner; the next most common reason was that they had only one partner. Partner refusal to wear condoms and the interference of condoms with sex was cited less often overall” (Fisher and Boroditsky, 2000: 88). Fisher and Boroditsky found that “women who had discontinued or decreased condom use during the past six months indicated that they had done so for reasons – such as only having one partner, or knowing and trusting a partner - which were inconsistent with [their reported] favorable beliefs about condoms” (91). From a perspective that suggests that men are the barrier between women and sexual health, as Holland et al. (1990:347) seem to suggest, it is surprising that partner refusal was not a salient issue in whether women decide to discontinue or decrease condom use. The complexity and contradictory nature of Fisher and Boroditsky’s findings indicate that my exploration of subjectivity may allow for a novel perspective on condom usage. I notice parallel beliefs about sexual threat, here about STIs rather than violence, alongside one’s own personal belief that they had triumphed over the perceived risk; a disavowal necessary to maintain the imagined stability, competency, and invulnerability of their (sexual) subjectivity.

In exploring the decrease or cessation of condom use over time as a function of disavowal, Sobo’s (1995) work with impoverished Black urban women is useful. She reports two major findings in her research. First, “women who hold [idealized] expectations for heterosexual unions actually need to practice unsafe sex in order to support their beliefs that their unions meet these expectations.” Second, “women seem to
have a related tendency to assume that they have themselves been tested for HIV seropositivity...when they have not” (Sobo, 1995: 1, emphasis in original). Sobo argues that both of these findings “stem from wishful thinking engendered by women’s hopes for their relationships and their desire to preserve status and self-esteem” (1). The women Sobo interviewed often defined themselves in relation to the quality of their relationship. Thus wishful thinking about their partner’s ‘faithfulness’ impeded their ability to critically assess their risk of infection. Sobo argues that, despite the specific demographics of the women who participated in her study (impoverished urban Black women), the stories she heard “could well have been told by my students, kindred, colleagues and friends,” (3) who were generally more affluent, better educated and lighter skinned. She relates such beliefs to mainstream ‘gender and conjugal expectations.’ My interviews supported this argument. Sobo’s work is an important shift away from research that detracts from an exploration of women’s sexual agency since she focuses on how women experience themselves as sexual agents.

Sobo asserts that the “strength of the association between condoms and extraconjugal sex means that use denotes failure in a relationship” (111). Similarly, Hillier et al. (1998; like Holland, 1990, 1994a and others) argue that risks such as reputation loom much larger in the everyday lives of young women than do threats of STIs. Thus we see that the protection that condom use can provide may not be valued as much as the protections not using condoms offer the subject psychically. The emphasis these authors place on failure and risk led me to explore how condom use could indeed signal a failure of the subject. I found that the use of condoms could undermine belief in one’s own competency as a sexual (liberal) actor, because it questioned the choice of
one’s partner. Condom use also could undermine the disavowal of the sexual threat of STIs. For Sobo’s participants the issue was that “‘If I can’t trust my man then who can I trust? You know what I’m saying?’” (111) The question from my perspective becomes ‘what if I can’t trust and protect myself (if only through the disavowal of a perceived threat)?’

Partner choice is central to how the women I interviewed disavow the threat of STIs. Maticka-Tyndale (1992) found that sexual trust itself is a gendered phenomenon. For women, “trust meant that they expected their [male] partners to disclose information about prior potentially risky activities” (244). But as we saw in Chapter Five, with respect to Diane’s STI (mis)diagnosis, people sometimes assume that not using condoms in the past ‘wouldn’t matter.’ Conversely, Maticka-Tyndale found that for men, “trust meant that their [female] partners had nothing to disclose” and “had not engaged in prior risky activities or relationships” (245). Thus women trust their male partners to disclose prior risky behaviours, whereas men trust that their female partners have not taken such risks. This gender difference is related to the sexual double standard. However, for the Canadian college students, male and female, that Maticka-Tyndale interviewed, “[though] 73 percent…agreed that ‘Most carriers of the AIDS virus look healthy,’ most study participants felt they could identify a safe partner by appearance” (245). She argues that using condoms “implied they were either questioning the infection status of their partner or of themselves” (247). If one believes one can accurately discern a potential partner’s STI status from physical appearance, questioning a partner would in turn undermine any understanding of oneself as a ‘competent feminine’ sexual agent free from threat. Many other authors have also examined “the attribution of ‘risky’ and ‘non-risky’”
status to potential partners (Richardson, 2000:139; Emmers-Sommer and Allen, 2005; Sobo, 1995; Higgins, 2007) as a process fraught with inconsistencies and failures. In these accounts the researchers have failed to recognize how the attribution of risky or non-risky status to potential partners is often related to and reinforces class differentiation. As discussed in Chapter Five, Skeggs’ (1997) work is useful in understanding the relationship between class and STI risk status. The middle-classes’ claim to respectability has also allowed for their collective claim to ‘cleanliness’ and ‘worthiness.’ In this sense, people who ‘look dirty,’ working-class, or street-entrenched are given a lack of value and assumed to be ‘dirty’ and at risk of having an STI. Positioned as they are, the women I interviewed were able to psychically distance themselves from risk of STI and specifically HIV, which is rarely mentioned by my participants. HIV has been understood as a ‘gay disease’ or a disease of the ‘lower class’ drug addicts and survival sex workers who are rarely a part of these women’s everyday lives. In juxtaposition to those at risk of STIs, as we will see the women are able to position themselves and their boyfriends as already ‘naturally’ clean and hence not at risk.

With respect to issues of class, Emmers-Sommer and Cromwell found that ‘downward comparisons’ allowed people to further disavow the risk of STIs (cited in Emmers-Sommer and Allen, 2005). Here “the person with HIV can be considered ‘stupid’ because that person engaged in indiscriminate sex, used drugs, or practiced some [‘perversion’]” like homosexuality, engendering “a sense of moral superiority” (21) among those who do not engage in such practices. While this research is not surprising, it is interesting for me because I saw the same treatment of women who were labeled ‘sluts’
in the interview narratives. Recall that for Jill’s ‘slutty’ friends, as well as for Shawnequa’s friend, who had ‘gotten in with a bad crowd’ and contracted an STI, their competency as sexual subjects and their intellects were questioned. The subject seems to be shored up via abjection and disavowal, in a way that necessitates the assessment and dismissal of those who embody the margins of ‘proper’ female (hetero)sexual and liberal subjectivity.

Based on their social circles and relative class privilege as university students, many of the women who participated in my study feel confident in asserting, as does Maia, that “I don’t really know people who are risky.” However, at the same time as expelling the threat (‘I don’t know those type of people’), the perception of the threat of STIs is always present. At another point in the interview Maia relates her decision to go on the pill after she, but not her partner, was tested for an STI. She says: “I’m hoping he’s clean. I know he should get tested but…” This is a paradoxical statement for someone who does not even know ‘risky people’ let alone, presumably, sleep with them. Here Maia reveals her uncertainty that the sexual threat of STIs has been completely or ‘successfully’ disavowed. Later in the interview she reiterates her invulnerability, ambivalently, by claiming, “there’s STDs\textsuperscript{73} and such, which I’m not too worried about because I’m clean and even though it’s not guaranteed that he’s clean but I’m pretty sure he’s clean, he’s only been with me, well one partner before…” Her invulnerability to sexual threat is achieved only by assuming her competence as a liberal (sexual) agent, who does not know or choose to have sex with ‘risky’ partners.

Olivia’s protection from STIs also came from her competency in choosing

\textsuperscript{73} I noted above in Chapter Five the significance of some of the participants’ use of the term STD rather than STI.
partners. When questioned about the likelihood of condom use with her partner, she responds:

Olivia: Probably not. Again, just like, he volunteers at [a feminist sexual assault organization] and stuff and he’s a pretty ardent feminist and stuff, so I trusted him not [to] be like infecting me if he knew.

Brandy: At any point in time did you eventually talk about STIs?

Olivia: We didn’t but, I think it was…[that] he had always used condoms […] Ummm, and ummm, no, like, we never talked about it […] I think my current situation is safe, understanding the history of my partner and myself, but no lie, I wouldn’t just go out and use [the pill] with anyone even though it would be better than nothing.

Actively choosing ‘good’ (feminist) men protected Olivia from infection. We see too the gendered inclination for women to trust that men will disclose their prior risky behaviours (Maticka-Tyndale, 1992). In this case, despite the guy’s pro-feminist leanings, no discussion had ever taken place. Like Maia and Olivia, instead of asking, many participants hope, think, or assume that their partners have always used condoms in the past. Olivia claims safety because she knows her partner’s past, but such knowledge is the result of assumptions made in the absence of discussion and is also specific to this partner, whom she has chosen (‘I wouldn’t use only the pill with [just] anyone’). The threat of infection was disavowed by allowing it to remain in the realm of the hypothetical, rather than discussed directly. When threats are navigated only in the hypothetical realm and not verbally addressed as an actual material possibility, hopes, assertions, and assumptions of competency in partner choice are enough protection. Such contradictions and inconsistencies are easy to spot when one is critically assessing narratives. By no means are such contradictions and avoidances the result of limited ‘intelligence’ or a lack of ‘self-regard.’ All the women that participated were well-
educated, being among the portion of the population that has the ability to attend post-secondary institutions and able to access cultural and educational resources. These women struggle to achieve the best possible sexual experiences they can within the gendered, racialized and classed sexual discourses available to them, which is exactly why psychoanalytic processes such as abjection, disavowal and ambivalence are so useful in comprehending young women’s choices, understandings, and sexual subjectivities.

Even when the risk of sexual infection was discussed, many of the young women were very quick to believe their partners’ claims of ‘being clean,’ even if questions remained. Mary Jane remembers a discussion between her and a previous partner about going to get tested together:

Let’s go together! Actually [he says], ‘I’ve already been, my dad made me go when I started having sex and I’ve been doing it like once every time I, like, I don’t know, feel the need to do.’ Like he does it on a regular basis, whatever that means, and I was like ok...[It’s] cause he’s pretty with it and takes care of himself, big-time actually, well I’ll get into that, like he’s very manicured and he plucked his eyebrows, he was very clear, and I think he felt it was a necessity for him. And it was good for me too cause I didn’t have to worry, but to tell you the truth, I wasn’t worried because I had, not [the] idea, or I just thought I, it wouldn’t happen to me or that kinda thing.

In my reading of the interview her partner actually does not provide a complete answer (‘I’ve been doing it like once every time I like, I don’t know, feel the need to’), even though Mary Jane feels he was ‘very clear.’ He does not clarify what ‘when I feel like it’ means, as she acknowledges (‘whatever that means’), nor does he volunteer when his last test had been. What is interesting is that Mary Jane admits that his getting tested (and perhaps her being such a trusting subject) was ‘good for her.’ She feels confident in not having to worry and remains invulnerable, ultimately confirming that it ‘wouldn’t happen to her.’ Even though she has ‘evidence’ that she no longer has to worry about sexual risk,
Mary Jane still connects her safety to her competent partner choice, which is based on her evaluation of his appearance (“he’s pretty with it and takes care of himself”).

Being positioned as reflexive (neo)liberal subjects, some of the participants relied on competent partner choice, thus on their trust in partners to protect them. Some participants retroactively acknowledge the inconsistency and fallibility of this approach. Jo quips: “I used [the pill] through multiple relationships, but I always used condoms in the beginning, until we decided it would be safe, somehow without testing?! (laughter).”

For a few of the participants, as seen in Leah’s interview, the disavowal of sexual risk via STIs was so complete that even when discussing having ‘unprotected’ sex with a partner she knew had a ‘number’ of previous partners, the risk of STIs did not come up for her, though she acknowledged other’s risks. Leah says about her safety:

Leah: I almost always use condoms and I know [my partner’s] background. I feel that STDs is not something that could happen to me, even though it could. So I’m not very aware of how possible it is for me to get any kind of STD […] Like if it happens to someone I know, it could happen to me, but no one I know has STDs, so it’s something that’s further from my reality.

Brandy: That’s the funny part, no one goes around telling people!

Leah: I use protection most of the time. Like I can count the times I don’t use a condom. Also because I don’t sleep with random people. I get to know them, at least I know how many sexual partners they’ve had before me.

Brandy: Ok. So the only one that you didn’t was the last one [the guy she later found out had a ‘number’ of partners]?

Leah: Well yeah, but I know his background. I know where he’s from, what school, and the sort of people he hangs out with

Brandy: So…it seems that STDs would be focused in specific types of groups?

Leah: Or at least people that I have no idea about their environment. I know his friends, so I know that they’re people that take care.
Part of this comment signals a lack of education about STIs (‘I’m not very aware’).

However, it seems that regardless of the amount of STI information Leah has, her understanding of her safety as partner choice, which was revealed to her as fallible in that she found out from others that her last partner had had a ‘number’ of undisclosed partners, would be relied on in decision making. The people she knows, others privileged by class and education, “take care” and thus are always already ‘not at risk.’ The hegemonic discourse of liberal competency and its centrality to our sexual agency delimits our understandings of sexual risk (setting it up as only physical or emotional risk or both) and sexual subjectivity. My work signals the need to explore the subject(tive) risks of ‘protected’ sex. Sometimes, subjectively ‘safe’ choices are not physically safe. This does not mean that ‘all hope is lost’ for sexuality education; rather, it signals (as I will discuss in Chapter Eight) that significant shifts in sexuality education are necessary.

Diane similarly had experienced a time when her competency in partner choice was ‘undermined’:

Diane: With the other guy, I kind of had the idea, like he, it doesn't, I thought he was a certain person and I realized he wasn’t. I thought he was a better guy then he ended up being. I found out later that he’d actually been with a lot of girls. All these things. So I didn’t really realize it then and I found out that he’d done certain drugs that I didn’t know he would, so I didn’t realize the risk that I was taking

Brandy: Like intravenous drugs?

Diane: Potentially […] Yeah, so it’s hearsay from other people, but it was stuff that he never told me and even if I’d have asked, I don’t think he would have told me. So no we never really talked about [past risky behaviour] but I never really realized it could be a concern.

Although Diane had chosen to use condoms with this partner, finding out later that he was not ‘a certain person’ causes her a great deal of anxiety. I cannot account for what
differentiates Diane’s case from others who continue to understand risk as a function of partner choice, but having her ‘competency’ undermined did result in a reconfiguration of how she conceptualizes risk. About the risks around sex she exclaims:

There’s huge risks! And I see it more now then I did when I was younger. There’s huge risk, right. There’s if you, I didn’t realize just how many people people have slept with, and that sort of thing. And the guy I had a one night stand [with] and [the guy] I know hid numbers and I know that any one of the people he slept with could have and therefore, but I never, it never really dawned on me while I was younger but now that I’m older, and this is a part of my sexuality now, and I’ve had the one night stand and potentially I might have more, that I’m opening up a huge, huge risk just in general, you know, like I’m putting myself in a place where I’m more vulnerable, not just to that person, but the people they’ve been with and I just realized that now.

The threat of infection still has the potency of the unspeakable (‘and therefore…’) but Diane’s perception of risk has changed in such a way that she maintains sexual agency. She does not necessarily need to be a ‘victim’ of infection, but allows this acknowledged perception to inform her active choices. While the ‘riskiness’ of one-night stands (as opposed to long-term relationships) remains unquestioned, the important point is that while disavowal is useful in understanding why young women may be motivated not to use condoms, subjectification does not exclude personal choice and a reworking of discourses that do not position women simply as passive sexual subjects. As I noted in Chapter Three, the form our subjectification takes is not ‘natural’ but rather caught up within particular types of individualization Foucault links to the liberal state.

Framing choices about sexual health within the context of the disavowal of risk is not the only possible way to understand how young women understand themselves as sexual agents. As we see in Diane’s narrative, and in those of a few of the women who were consistent in using barrier methods and having both partners tested, it is possible to
reconcile women’s understandings of themselves as female sexual agents and as in need of taking actions to protect themselves. We see that while the ‘trusting subject’ position seems more amenable to maintaining the disavowal of sexual threats, it is not the only position available to women.

**Conclusion**

The most interesting finding in this analysis is the transgression I heard in women’s narratives of disavowing the risk of STIs, as was apparent in Diane’s narrative, which I did not find in the women’s understandings of their vulnerability to sexualized violence. Jo admits that she psychologically minimizes her everyday experiences of street harassment because she has no idea of how to ‘solve the problem’ of sexualized violence. Nowhere did I see a reworking of the notion of who is at risk of sexualized violence. Only the ‘objectified victim’ is at risk of sexualized violence and not actively ‘choosing’ her sexual encounters. Both Phillips (2000) and I saw that this understanding of the ‘victim’ is irreconcilable with young women’s own positioning and reiteration of themselves as ‘competent feminine’ sexual agents. I argue that because both men and women experience the threat of STIs, as opposed to sexualized violence which is more gendered, there is more room for alternative discourses to be negotiated. In other words, rethinking the subject at risk of STIs less directly disrupts current power relations than does questioning how the female subject is at risk of sexualized violence.
Chapter Seven: Ambivalence and the Desiring Subject

There is a constant thread of ambivalence running through the sexual subjectivities of young women. This ambivalence is apparent in moments where dominant discourses fail to account for young women’s experiences of their (hetero)sexuality, in moments when subjectivity is both premised on and threatened by the abject, and in moments where sexual risks are disavowed to varying degrees of success. As we have seen, ambivalence is central to the Lacanian subject. The women I interviewed were at times very clear about their sexual agency, but alongside such clarity was evidence that ambivalence is central to stories of their (hetero) desires. In this chapter I address active desire and issues of ambivalence in sexual stories directly. To begin the chapter I explore moments in interviews where women are very articulate about their experiences of their desire, after which I show how their desire relates to their use of condoms in complex and ambivalent ways. Finally, I complicate my reading of their desires by arguing that the often inherently ambivalent character of their sexual stories is related to the types of discourse they have easy access to in articulating their experiences.

(Re)Positioning Young Women Outside of Discourses of Lack

Two moments in the history of research on young women’s (hetero)sexuality are central to my exploration of their sexual subjectivity. First, Michelle Fine’s (1988) pivotal work exploring ‘the missing discourse of desire’ in sexual health education, which alerted researchers to the exclusion of a discourse within which young women could articulate their active desire, opened up a new perspective on what was perhaps missing or mis-read in young women’s stories. Second, Lynne Segal’s (1994) book,
Straight Sex, published in the mid-90’s, supports Vance’s earlier (1984) seminal text Pleasure and Danger, in outlining the failures of much of feminist theory to account for anything but the potential dangers and exploitation of heterosex. These authors advocated the exploration of women’s powerful and healthy heterosexual desires, changing the trajectory of what was possible within feminist theory. Work that disrupts the ‘missing discourse of desire’ and which advocates the exploration of pleasure inform the current examination of women’s sexual subjectivity as it exists ‘outside of’ dominant discourses of women’s sexual passivity and vulnerability. In the first part of this chapter I outline the myriad ways and times that evidence of women’s active (hetero) desire came up in the interviews.

There is a growing body of work that documents women’s active desire. While I anchor my work here, in recognizing the value of a disruptive discourse of women’s heterosexual desire and pleasure, I also move beyond such work by exploring the ambivalence that is part of this desire. Authors such as Jackson and Cram (2003) alert us to the possibility and availability of narratives that disrupt dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality. Their work accounts for moments “in which [the] contradictions and dilemmas of the gendered sexual double standard are circumvented, subverted or resisted by variously positioning sex within discourses of romance, biological need, and play” (2003:121). Examining moments where young women position themselves as active sexual agents is essential if we seek, as I do, to facilitate the development of ‘new’ discourses of women’s sexual empowerment. Other authors, like Stewart (1999), Allen (2003a and b), and Tolman (2002) who directly expand on Fine’s insights, also document and complicate stories of young women’s (hetero) desires by showing that the “belief that
young women’s] sexuality is focused exclusively on relationships and that their own
sexual feelings are nonexistent or irrelevant did not match [their] descriptions of desire”
(Tolman, 2002:41). As we saw in Chapter Four, I too found that dominant discourses of
women’s passivity by no means capture every aspect of their sexual stories. Similarly,
Higgins’ (2007) work on the relation of young women’s use of condoms to their search
for pleasure, and Hoskins’ (2000) work, which was motivated by the limitations she
argues occur in the WRAP (Women, Risk and AIDS) project (Holland et al. 1990, 1994a,
1994b, 2003) discussed in Chapter Two, further contribute to a discourse that refuses to
assume that women are only passive objects of male (hetero)sexuality and desire.
Ultimately, I see my own work as contributing to literature that seeks to (re)position
women outside of the ‘discourses of lack,’ which I argued in Chapter Two include
dominant discourses of passivity, feminist discourse of vulnerability, and sexual health
education, in which desire is limitedly present. I acknowledge and account for gendered
inequalities and explore how various discourses circumvent the articulation and
experience of women’s active desire. However, here I want to privilege stories of agency,
in order to show the incompleteness of the three overarching (dominant, some feminist,
and sexual health) discourses of lack and vulnerability.

Evidence of the young women’s active sexual agency was apparent in
participants’ stories of their earliest sexual experiences. Laughing, Yazmin remembers
the first time she had intercourse:

I was really awkward, I didn't really know what was going on, I sort of
assumed he’d know more. Uh, I snuck out of my house. He lived in [one
city] and I was in [another city- about a thirty minute drive away] at the time,
so I went there. Bizarre things, like catching the midnight bus, and leaving from
the basement, and locking my door but having a [hair pin] with me so I could,
you know those [doorknobs] with the hole in the knob, so if you locked it, you could still unlock them [with the hair pin]. My parents were asleep. It was pretty extravagant. And knocking on his window and sneaking in, and yeah. It was a big deal cause I had to go pee and his parents were upstairs sleeping! It was so funny.

Yazmin begins the narrative by activating traditional discourses of gendered (hetero)sexuality, such as the ‘male (s)expert’ discourse (Potts, 2002) which privileges male sexual knowledge: she refers to her own ‘awkwardness’ and lack of knowledge and her assumption that ‘he’d know more.’ She immediately undermines this reading by going on to explain the ‘extravagance’ she went through in order to make her first time happen. She defies her parents by sneaking out and goes to some lengths to meet her partner at his house. This story clearly articulates an intentional, self-directed effort to engage in sex with another. Yasmin’s sexual agency is evident in her earliest experience.

Emma similarly made continual efforts to sneak her partner into her own house.

Before having intercourse with her partner Lisa recounts their cautious, exploratory sexual activity, and says “I didn’t want to talk about it, I didn’t really have the vocabulary to talk about anything, I just wanted to do it!” Her desire is evident to her despite the lack of discursive space within which to articulate it. I asked Olivia about her first time having intercourse, saying ‘Were you like, ‘that was a lot of hype’ or was it like, ‘yeah, this is awesome!’?’ She responds:

Olivia: Umm, I think more like, ‘It was awesome!’ Umm, but yeah like, I don’t actually, I think like we must have had oral sex or something first because I don’t remember coming vaginally or through penetration.

Brandy: But after a while you started to [come during intercourse]?

Olivia: Yeah basically after, it did hurt, so that’s what distracted me, so I couldn’t be super, super aroused because, but mostly the muscles weren’t used to it. Like, the next day I felt I had been doing sit-ups all day!
Olivia characterizes her first experience of intercourse as ‘awesome’ despite (for her) the fact that she ‘can’t remember coming through penetration’ and her memory that it ‘hurt.’ She notes that she ‘couldn’t be super, super aroused’ (perhaps she’s comparing to a self-perceived ‘usual’ state of arousal?) since this was the first time her muscles were being exercised in this way. The overall positive nature of her experience seems quite apparent.

Most of the women describe deliberately planning to lose their virginity by choosing their partners carefully, on a variety of grounds: admiration for their partner (Gray), eagerness for the experience (Sheena) and sometimes because they were “curious, plain old curious” (Jackie) and “just wanted to get rid of it!” (Maia). As such, a number of the women experienced themselves as being “the more vocal initiator” (Jo); for them, it signaled their ‘official’ entrée into the world of hetero sex. This belief is evident even when the women struggled ambivalently with their desire, as did Lily:

Lily: I had just been struggling in my head and then suddenly [he’s] trying to show me how to play guitar and then kissing and all that and then in my head I was wavering back and forth and then finally I was just like, ‘Get it over with! I want to see what the big fuss is about’ and all this stuff. So he was really surprised, he kind of fumbled around for a while, ‘Are you sure?’

Brandy: You said to him, ‘I’d like to have sex’?

Lily: I can’t remember my exact words, I think I said something like, ‘I really trust you and uh, yeah and I’d like to stay over’ and then it kind of went [from there.]

Although it is not clear if Lily is ambivalent about her own physical desire, from this narrative we see that she actively decided to initiate sex and thus positioned herself as an active sexual agent, if not a desiring one. Despite her ambivalence, she decided to actively initiate a sexual experience. It is important to remember that many of the
interviews were characterized by participants articulating themselves within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, through which they characterize their sexual experiences. I explored the gendered limitations they experience in Chapter Four, but here I want to honour the times the women felt comfortable articulating themselves as sexual agents in actively initiating their sexual activities and seeking pleasure.

Persephone reminds us that for some women the intention and agency we saw in their first sexual experiences continue to be salient in later experiences as well. In deciding to have sex with someone, she asserts:

> It really depends. Like, um, I don’t drink at all anymore and I don’t do drugs anymore and I haven’t pretty much the whole time I’m been [sexually active], so it’s never been, ‘I fell down drunk and had sex?!’ Ever. So it’s always a conscious decision, and I’ve never really regretted having sex with anyone [...] life’s too short to have sex with ugly people you’re not attracted to. Like really! If you’re not attracted to someone, don’t do it!

In her honesty and adherence to her own criteria of attractiveness, Persephone’s desire seems to guide her choices in sexual partners and encounters. Persephone’s clarity and self-interest is quite rare. Persephone’s understanding of herself as a relatively unique woman came up when she responded to my inquiry of how comfortable she is in talking about sex with her partners:

> Really [comfortable]. Unless it’s like, like a one night stand, who wants to talk about it a lot [then]? You’re just like, ‘You know what?!’ Usually afterwards, you’re like, it’s already like, ‘I’ve never met someone that did that before’… I’m like, ‘I don’t care, I’m not your therapist.’ There’s that. But I’m comfortable talking [about] it. [It’s] just like sometimes, ‘Again?! Why do we have to talk about this?’ A lot of guys are really surprised to find girls who are uninhibited, so they start asking all kinds of questions cause it’s like, ‘Now’s my time to find out about these people.’ And they just go nuts! It’s like, ‘I’m sorry the others have been such douches, but I don’t have time for this!’ It’s just like you want to educate them because they’re taking an interest and it’s one more guy that you can teach that girls aren’t all like embarrassed by sex and girls actually have sex, surprise, surprise contrary to what everyone says. At the same time it’s like, ‘Why do I have to do this again!’ I don’t desire to do this!
For Persephone, her male partners’ curiosity about her unexpected lack of inhibition as a sexual woman is a problem. Persephone found herself being requested to explain her sexual agency ‘again’ with a new partner who has had limited experience with ‘uninhibited girls.’ She is tired of being the ‘spokesperson’ for women who ‘aren’t all embarrassed by sex,’ and who actually articulate their desire and pleasure.

In this way, Persephone is unusually vocal in her resistance to dominant discourses of female passivity that silence and delimit women’s experiences and articulations of their active desire. Other women also communicate how far they would go, and what risks they would chance, in order to fulfill their desire in seeking pleasure. Leah recounts a time she used the ‘morning after pill’ after unprotected sex with an ex-partner:

Leah: He was more nervous than me, ‘How much can we trust the morning after pill?’

Brandy: So who [suggested that you use the morning after pill as contraception]?

Leah: I came up with the option and he was still having hesitancy. I told him I used it before and it worked […] even though I hadn’t used it. (chuckles)

Brandy: So you really wanted to have sex?!

Leah: Yeah. So it worked out.

Brandy: It’s not like you were necessarily intentionally deceiving him, [you thought it would work]?

Leah: I was totally sure it would work. I don’t really know how small [a] percentage it is, but it works.

Brandy: Um, so what I’m struck by is, you must have really wanted to have sex that night, were you really turned on?
Leah: Well, he always made me feel really turned on, and he always had a condom. I don’t really know how to stop that feeling and not have sex when I’m already aroused and he was too, so oral sex. We weren’t having oral sex, so that wouldn’t do.

I remember being surprised (I can see my assumption about the necessarily ‘protective’ nature of female desire) that Leah would actively initiate unprotected sex, relying on the ‘morning after pill’ as contraception. Considering that she was ‘really turned on’ and that she does not know ‘how to stop that feeling’ any other way, her insistence becomes less surprising. Her experience embodies both the potency of her own desire and also the potential risks that can result from the ‘missing discourse of desire.’ If we are denying and not talking about young women’s sexual agency and active desire, how can young women be expected to acknowledge it themselves and factor it into their decisions in powerful ways rather than silently reducing desire to an overwhelming force that cannot be denied. My point here is simply not that women should be empowered to say ‘no,’ but that they could be empowered to make informed decisions that are premised on understanding themselves as sexual agents with a variety of sexual demands that include pleasure and desire.

**Ambivalence, Desire and Pleasure**

Once we assume that young women are not passive sexual objects, a range of new insights into (hetero)sexuality are available. In this dissertation I assume women’s agency and use psychoanalytic concepts to better understand young women’s sexual subjectivity. Ambivalence is the final psychoanalytic concept I found useful in my exploration of

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74 It is important to note that Leah’s self-described ‘upper-class’ positioning and the economic resources therein facilitate her access to the ‘morning after pill’ as a source of contraception, which would be less financially feasible for working class women.
these narratives. Often the young women I interviewed were clear about their desire, as seen above, but at the same time there could be a degree of ambivalence in their understandings of their desire and sexuality. In many ways the psychoanalytic understanding of ambivalence is quite similar to the popular understanding of it as “simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from a person, object, or action” (*The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 1989). Though there is frequent use of disavowal (related to denial) and abjection (related to repulsion) in everyday language, ambivalence has been incorporated into colloquial language to a greater degree than the other psychoanalytic terms used in this dissertation. The technical refinement of these terms in psychoanalysis, as outlined in this dissertation, both draws upon and goes beyond these everyday meanings.

From within the psychoanalytic tradition, Laplanche and Pontalis define ambivalence as “the simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or feelings in the relationship to a single object-especially the coexistence of love and hate” (1974: 26). Drawing on Lacan and later poststructural insights into subjectivity, I understand ambivalence as central to subjectivity. From this perspective, we are constantly in the process of shoring up our subject boundaries and competencies. Thus we remain in a state of trying to embody the mastery we retroactively assume we have achieved yet are always threatened by the realization that we only imagine ourselves as competent and autonomous. Given this, our relation to the many objects, actions, and people who threaten our view of ourselves will necessarily be ambivalent. Poststructuralist theory alerts us to the relationship between our discursive constitution and our ambivalent relationships with discourses that simultaneously enable us by
allowing us to validate our autonomy and competency, and constraining us by threatening to expose the lie. Freud writes that conflicts due “to ambivalence are very frequent and they can have another typical outcome, in which one of the two conflicting feelings (usually that of affection) becomes enormously intensified and the other vanishes. The exaggerated degree and compulsive character of the affection alone betray the fact that it is not the only one present but is continually on the alert to keep the opposite feeling under suppression” (1959: 28). While Freud is referring to specific relationships between people in this context, after Lacan we can read this same assertion onto our relationship with our subjecthood. As Butler shows in relation to gender, sex and sexuality (1999), the ‘exaggerated degree and compulsive nature’ of our attempts to reiterate, communicate and achieve competency as intelligible subjects betray our ‘opposite feeling’ of incompetency, vulnerability and unintelligibility. Butler argues that the processes of subjection, including abjection, must be disavowed in order to maintain the subject’s illusion of stability, autonomy and invulnerability (1994: 3). We see these tensions in the ambivalence of our understandings and linguistic representations of our experiences.

Laplanche and Pontalis emphasize that ambivalence is believed to be found in so called ‘normal subjects,’ distancing the notion of ambivalence from its earlier connections to schizophrenia among pre-Freudian psychiatrists such as Bleuler (1974: 26). The key contribution of the concept of ambivalence is that it, along side abjection and disavowal, allows us to recognize and account for the contradictions and complexities of subjectivity. In young women’s ambivalence we see how they actively negotiate and

75 Interestingly, Freud’s reworking of Bleuler’s notion of ambivalence connects it to the simultaneous occurrences of active and passive urges. In my own research the young women’s negotiations of so-called active and passive sexuality are imbued with ambivalence as well, but it is not a theme I have chosen to highlight specifically though it is referenced implicitly throughout this chapter.
navigate the contradictions they experience being positioned among dominant discourses of autonomous (liberal) sexual agency and sexual passivity.

A number of theorists have taken up the notion of ambivalence as a space in which there is a degree of resistance to dominant discourse. Homi Bhabha’s argument that there is ambivalence ‘at the heart of colonial desire’ helps us to understand how I see the ambivalence in the women’s narratives as potentially subversive. Bhabha (2004) argues that dominant discourses of stability and exploitation between the ‘first and third’ worlds cover up a central ambivalence. This ambivalence is evidence of the anxiety and instability of dominant discourse but also of the possibility of resistance from the ‘third world’ subject. Bhabha’s view of desire within colonial power provides a useful illustration for my own understanding of desire within the women’s narratives. Ambivalent desire suffuses colonial power for Bhabha. This unconscious ambivalence is important because it threatens to destabilize colonial power from the inside. Rather than the coherent, monolithic appearance of dominant discourses of colonial stability and exploitation, Bhabha argues that colonial discourse is actually unstable, its coherence constantly being undone by the return of the repressed, an unconscious ambivalence. While Bhabha’s work has been both praised and criticized, it remains pivotal in how we understand the power of dominant discourse. As Gonick points out, like Bhabha many postcolonial and critical race theorists, alongside postmodern and poststructural theorists, have “expressed interest in ambivalence itself as a political force of sorts (Ahmed, 1999; Ang, 1996; Back, 1996; Bauman, 1991; Bhabha, 1990; Garber, 1992; McClintock, 1995; Trinh, 1991)” (2004:193). Using Bhabha’s view of colonial desire and discourse as an illustration, although I do not make a direct connection between the women’s desire and
colonial desire\textsuperscript{76}, I argue that the ambivalence of women’s desires and sexuality is similarly potentially radical. It is in the space of disrupting dominant discourses of women’s sexual passivity, even if, and necessarily, ambivalently, that the potential for resistance occurs. The strength of Bhabha’s reading, and hence my own, is “its exposition of hidden ambivalence and desire” (Campbell, 2000: 200). Potentially radical moments of ambivalence are usually subsumed and rendered difficult to articulate within dominant discourses, which cover patriarchal anxieties around active female desire and sexual agency. I explore the spaces between the monolithic appearance of discourses that silence women’s articulations of desire and agency and the proposed irrelevance of discourses that privilege male sexuality since we are in a post-gender world of equality. In other words, I explore the narratives that occur in the spaces between the assumption that women do not have active desire and the assumption that they are completely equally sexual with men in a ‘post-feminist’ world.

Utilizing the notion of ambivalence also keeps us cognizant of the fact that, from a poststructural and Lacanian perspective that highlights our discursive, on-going, constitution as subjects, there is no inherent female sexuality waiting to free itself from patriarchal restraints. Rather, a ‘free sexual subject’ is a constitutive mirage in view of how Lacan sees desire as being circled but never attained and that satisfaction is necessarily alluring yet impossible (as discussed in Chapter Three). Lacan’s understanding of desire is useful in insisting that desire and sexuality become the object of inquiry itself. He does not assume that there is a core female sexual subjectivity that

\textsuperscript{76} Although I do not choose to focus on this aspect of women’s sexuality, I could have explored how choices of ‘proper’ partners are always already bound up in colonialist and nationalist discourses of desire.
must be released from patriarchal restraints. This critical perspective undermines the assumption that both women and men are unitary, rational subjects, an assumption that “makes it impossible to be sensitive to the inconsistencies, confusions and anxieties which characterize heterosexual relating” (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998: 406). Hollway first disrupted the assumption of heterosexual exploitation in 1984. In a later article, Hollway and Jefferson (1998) outline the utility of psychoanalytic concepts for understanding subjection over and above theories that focus exclusively on discourse. They write that an exclusively discursive focus:

is quite deterministic since it fails to address how people come to invest in certain discursive positions rather than others, and how they negotiate them in relational practices. Room for agency is reduced effectively to the availability of a variety of discourses which offer different and contradictory positions (Henriques et al., 1998). In our view, discourses do not provide tidy or clear alternatives which guide actions; rather they jostle for space in the multiple meanings, conscious and unconscious, which underpin practices and the emotions that accompany them. Therefore, we try constantly to keep both sexual discourses and sexual subjectivities in view (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998: 411).

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, the primary silence that has resulted from dominant discourses of women’s sexual passivity concerns active female desire. As Tolman poignantly claims, these “organizing cultural stories or ‘master narratives’ are so compelling that most of us come not only to tell them but to live them and feel them to be the ‘truth’ of human experience” (2002: 14). Similarly, Segal argues that the “key absence is the story of desire” (1994: 246), which Fine also found in the ‘missing discourse of desire’ of sexual health education (1988). Fine documents a simultaneous

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77 While I find Lacan’s arguments concerning desire useful, I also refuse to rely exclusively on a fatalistic view of sexuality as always inherently problematic. I see Lacan’s views as both a product of and productive of our current discursive restraint in understanding desire, sexuality, and subjectivity in ‘alternative’ ways. In other words, I see Lacan’s views as both a product of and productive of discourses that emphasize the ‘problem’ of feminine sexuality predominantly in terms of lack. While there is coherence and support among such discourses, at the same time I note that I have drawn the reader’s attention to the many moments in the everyday experiences of my participants when myriad discourses of lack are (re)signified and (re)worked.
discourse of desire in girls’ informal discussions outside the classroom, as do I. Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) argue that Fine’s work opens up the possibility of exploring the various ways dominant discourses and their attendant silences are exposed by ambivalence. I now turn to two specific areas where the ambivalence in women’s experiences and stories is evident: in participants’ use of condoms and in their articulations of desire and their sexual agency.

**Ambivalence and Condom Use**

Assuming sexual agency and being aware of the ambivalence surrounding desire and sexuality bring to light two areas of focus: women’s condom use and their inability to fully articulate certain sexual experiences. I address the latter in the next section. If we do not (re)position women exclusively within a discourse of lack, a number of novel insights into (hetero)sexual subjectivity become available. As discussed in Chapter Two, most research explores how women are inhibited by dominant understandings of (hetero)sexuality and, more specifically, by the requests and denials of their male partners in using condoms after a few sexual encounters, when ‘trust’ and care are assumed in the relationship. As seen in Sobo (1995) and explored in Chapter Six, women are often able to negotiate condom use, but other more complex identity risks and concerns delimit such negotiations. As we have seen, both perspectives offer valuable insights but we must not limit our explorations to assumptions of women’s sexual passivity and risk.

Drawing on, and at times critical of, earlier feminist research on condom use, Higgins positions her research within an emerging body of work that seeks to dispute the notion that women “are rarely motivated by pleasure” (2007:73) in their condom use. She
found that male condoms\textsuperscript{78} “received overwhelmingly negative reviews from respondents. With the exception of a couple of risk-averse respondents who disliked physical contact with a partner’s semen, the overwhelming majority of women strongly disliked male condoms and preferred not to use them… In surprising contrast, most male respondents presented themselves as resigned to the way condoms feel” (75-76). In some ways this finding echoes past research which finds that condoms were seen as a barrier to trust and intimacy, but at the same time this finding “challenged the assumption that women want to use male condoms while men do not” (76) Higgins concludes, “women’s physical resistance to condoms provided yet another reason to underline women’s hetero(sexual) agency and pleasure seeking, and not just their quest for ‘closer’ or more emotional sex” (76). Higgins also documents how women’s search for pleasure is constrained by gender and class\textsuperscript{79} inequality. In rejecting that women seek only ‘closer or more emotional’ sex, Higgins’ work is a valuable example of how some research on female sexual subjectivity is delimited by an unquestioning reiteration of women’s sexual passivity. The point is not to say ‘it’s useless to push condoms,’ but to offer new perspectives on how condom use is understood so that we can adjust preventative sexuality education accordingly and allow people to acknowledge what might be at play in their decisions as they weigh potential risks and pleasures.

In reading my interviews from the perspective of Higgins’ work, I saw that I had initiated the interviews with an assumption that women would want to use condoms while their partners would not. While I did find that some women preferred to use

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\textsuperscript{78} None of Higgins’ participants report ever using internal (‘female’) condoms. Similarly, internal condoms never came up in my interviews.
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\textsuperscript{79} Higgins found that often class seemed a more salient experience than did racialization for her participants, as I noted in Chapter One, I found as well.
\end{flushright}
condoms but decided ‘to give in’ (as I saw it) to their male partners’ requests not to, usually for reasons of pleasure, I also realized that this was not the complete story. Looking back, I found that a number of women agreed with the ‘overwhelming majority’ of female respondents in Higgins’ study in disliking condoms. Along with this physical rejection came an ambivalence, likely based in the various pulls between sexual pleasure (however defined) and risks such as STIs and pregnancy if women were not using hormonal contraception. The focus of narratives of condom use is not liking or disliking condoms, but the ambivalence that enveloped decisions to use them or not.

Unless it was unspoken but assumed that a condom would be used (usually early in a relationship), the decision to use or not use condoms was most often a process of negotiation and discussion between the partners. Some women were clear that for them not using condoms somehow felt better, even if some of them were sheepish about feeling this way in the face of their sexual education growing up. Mary Jane admits, “I’m not going to lie, it feels better without a condom for sure, for both people.” Like Emma, a few women feel that they can ‘not really tell the difference,’ and Persephone is adamant in her preference for condoms (though she foregoes this desire in long-term relationships) regardless of her male partners’ preferences.

Lisa’s decisions about having sex and using condoms result from her previous experience with a partner who could not keep an erection with a condom on and her understandings of herself as a ‘good girl.’ It is interesting that her assumption that men dislike wearing condoms weighs heavily in her decision. It appears that her options were either to wait to have condomless sex or not to have sex at all. She remembers:

We were just kind of lying there all naked and turned on […] so when I finally told him that was my big dilemma and that’s what was keeping us from having
sex, the fact that I couldn’t figure out if he should wear a condom or not, he was like, ‘Oh! I’ll just wear a condom.’ It wasn’t a big deal, he had them. ‘So if I have a condom can we just have sex?’ He’s like, ‘I have condoms, so does that change anything?’ So I was like, ‘I don't know.’ I said, ‘I don’t know,’ in the way that girls say ‘I don’t know,’ when they really mean yes. Kind of yes, but there’s still, you know. I don’t know. I really wanted to but not, I didn’t want to say, ’Yes, let’s go!’ […] So I sort of said ‘I don’t know’ and then an hour later we’re having sex with a condom and it’s fine and just not a big deal!! It really wasn’t a big deal, but in my head.

We can sense her relief in realizing that condoms are ‘not a big deal!’ Once the condom issue was resolved, Lisa has only to contend with her desire, which she deals with by ‘coyly agreeing,’ maintaining her belief that she needs to be seen as being hesitant, a common stereotype of hetero-romantic relating. Whereas Lisa used a condom in this situation, usually when women discussed not using condoms it was also related to desire. It was often because they and their partners were aroused and did not have condoms around that condomless sex occurred. Sue recalls a time when she and a partner chose not to use a condom. She says, “we were just really horny!” For Maia, not using condoms occurred when they were “just really geared up.” When we discussed not using condoms (either with or without hormonal birth control), I always asked about alcohol and/or drugs. Sometimes the women relate their choices to ‘impaired’ decision-making, but more often it is linked with their desire.

Regardless of these responses, the most salient aspect of the stories about condom usage was women’s ambivalence. Nova remembers the ‘on and off’ usage of condoms in a previous relationship:

[We used] pills and condoms. We got off of condoms though. Like one time, one broke and we were like ‘oh!’ And so then sometimes we use them and others we wouldn’t […] and we’d be like, ‘Oh well, next time.’ We were like, ‘If you’re going to be pregnant, you’re going to be pregnant’ and then we’d get better at it and then fall off the wagon. I don’t know.
Nova invokes a sense that their irregular condom use is a ‘bad habit,’ which reduces their personal agency and responsibility. In another relationship there was a similar back and forth:

    Brandy: So what, was there any particular person, like you were both thinking it was a good idea?

    Nova: Yeah […] it wasn’t like either person was, ‘We’re not going to do that!’ […] He’d be like, ‘Should I go and find one?’ and I’d be like ‘No!’ And sometimes he’d be like, oh, sometimes he’d be like, ‘I’ll pull out’ and then, ‘No, I can’t!’ It was so crazy!

Both partners at various times had chosen to forgo condoms. But as we see later in Nova’s interview, the pleasure derived from not using condoms can be related to the reconfiguration of her desire as intricately tied to her male partner’s pleasure, as discussed in Chapter Four. Nova actively reconstitutes her desire for condom use in the following way:

    Nova: I don’t, it doesn’t, I don’t feel the difference [between condom or no condom]. I can’t tell. Ummm, it’s messier without them, like simpler and easier when you use them, um, that’s the only difference I find.

    Brandy: What motivates you then to [not use condoms], since it’s, there’s the increased risk of pregnancy, what makes up for that?

    Nova: They like it better. I, it doesn’t, now that like, it’s been done and I see that it works [the pill but no condom] and I’m not pregnant and not worried about it, like it’s the same, like it doesn’t feel any different, so it’s them. They’re like, ‘I like it so much better!’ I like to see them like it…

Elsewhere in the interview Nova communicates that she prefers to ‘double up’ (use both ‘the pill’ and condoms). Here Nova actively reconstitutes her desire to use ‘the pill’ and a condom (because pregnancy, rather than STIs, is the central concern for most of the
participants as was seen in Chapter Five), in line with her partner’s desire for condomless sex.

Shawnequa comments that her decisions about using condoms are related to both her desire and her ambivalence about risks, but she is unable to fully articulate her process:

I remember the first time [an ex and I] had sex without a condom. He’s kind of like, ‘It’s ok. I’ll pull out before it happens’ and I was like, ‘Ok’ and it turned out to be a whole issue, with pre-come and everything, but when you, in the moment you don’t really, it’s not that you don’t care, but it’s just like, I don’t know (pause)…Sorry I’m not being very articulate.

Shawequa’s narrative seems to flow smoothly while she accounts for how her partner expresses his unwillingness to use a condom, but it falls apart when she begins to discuss being ‘in the moment,’ a cultural narrative that suggests being ‘carried away by passion.’ What she is also speaking about here, however, is her own desire. It is specifically in articulating her desire where she falters. Without access to the discourse to articulate her desire, Shawnequa’s narrative suggests that she can only ‘fall back on’ the Harlequin romance trope of being ‘carried away by passion.’ As we will see in greater depth below, I propose that we need to open up the possibility that ambivalence in young women’s sexual stories is not necessarily or always evidence of coercion, personal or cultural, to privilege male pleasure. Ambivalence in narratives may also occur because there is no easily accessible discourse of women’s active desire. Shawnequa seems to know that she is not only reconstituting her partner’s pleasure as her own but also signals her own role in her decision not to use condoms, however ‘inarticulate’ she feels in expressing the decision.
Articulating Sexual Agency

Ambivalence is most prominent in stories that the young women had a difficult time articulating. In this section, I argue that their difficulty reflects limited discourse around active female desire that would be easily available to them. Young women’s descriptions of their sexual encounters often seem to cluster in myriad ways around the phrase ‘it just happened…’ In Dilemmas of Desire (2002), a book drawing specifically on Fine’s work on the ‘missing discourse of desire,’ Tolman’s first chapter is titled ‘Getting Beyond “It Just happened.”’ Much feminist research on (hetero)sexuality has tried to account for what’s going on when women say ‘it just happened.’ In the predominant interpretation of this statement, as discussed in Chapter Two, the focus is on the structures of gendered inequality that frame sexual relations. Here ‘it just happened’ is either implicitly or explicitly linked to some form of interpersonal or structural coercion or pressure to conform to normative (passive) female (hetero)sexuality. As a sexual health educator, in the classrooms I see this type of research translated into attempts to ‘better’ young women’s ability to negotiate sexual encounters, such that they either ‘learn to say no’ (assuming that they do not desire sexual activity) or can ensure condom use (assuming, as Higgins’ (2007) usefully points out, that women more than men want to use condoms). While these types of explorations are valuable, there is a predominant reliance on two positions: either the phrase ‘it just happened’ signals coercion and inequality, or a lack of skill to negotiate a ‘no’ or the use of a condom. Like the authors I build on, I refuse to make these assumptions, and chose instead to ask, what else might be going on?
Once Fine documented the missing discourse of desire in sexual health education, she laid the ground on which future researchers could expand her work. Building directly on Fine and work since, Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) find that most researchers continue to conceptualize sex in an over-simplistic dichotomized view as either wanted or unwanted. Instead, they propose that in addition to the missing discourse of desire in sexual health education generally, there is a ‘missing discourse of ambivalence’ in our research. They argue that relying on a unidimensional, dichotomous model of sex “is inadequate to represent the nuances of people’s experiences, thus obscuring understanding of these experiences” (16). Again, I see the value of using psychoanalytic concepts in order to move beyond current understandings of sexuality as either an act negotiated between two or more rational, autonomous liberal sexual actors or a framework within which women are ‘lacking’ the power to maintain their autonomy. My interviews support Muehlenhard and Peterson’s call for research that accounts for and addresses ambivalence in sexuality. The ambivalence seen in young women’s accounts of their sexual experiences alert us to the complexities and contradictions inherent to sexuality and its articulation, moving us beyond our current understandings of female (hetero)sexual subjectivity.

Laplanche and Pontalis also claim that ambivalence is evident in situations “in which incompatible motives are involved,” cases where “what is pleasurable for one agency is unpleasurable for another” (1974:28). In my interviews it was evident that sometimes there is a pull between the desire to have sex and the risks women perceive as being attached to it, such as pregnancy, reputation, STIs and their understandings of themselves, wherein the ambivalence occurred. Such ‘dilemmas of desire’ have been
documented by a number of authors, perhaps most comprehensively by Tolman (2002). Building on Tolman, I focus on the limited access young women have to discourses that enable them to articulate their active sexual desire as an explanation of ‘it just happened’.

Tolman argues:

Having sex ‘just happen’ is one of the few acceptable ways available to… girls for making sense of and describing their sexual experiences; and given the power of such stories to shape our experiences of our bodies, it may tell us what their experiences actually are like. In a world where ‘good,’ nice and normal girls do not have sexual feelings of their own, it is one of the few decent stories that a girl can tell. That is, ‘it just happened’ is a story about desire (2002: 2, emphasis added).

Considering the possibility that ‘it just happened’ is a story of desire articulated within a range of limited discursive options, rather than as (assumed) ‘proof’ of exploitation, requires a radical reorientation of our theoretical approaches. As Tolman points out, the denial of women’s sexual agency, resulting in the ‘it just happened’ story, is an ‘unsafe and unhealthy story for girls.’ In adopting it we refuse “to give girls any guidance for acknowledging, negotiating and integrating their own sexual desire” (3).

Ultimately, Tolman argues that what emerged from girls’ discussions of their sexual experiences was “the socially manufactured dilemma of desire, which pits girls’ embodied knowledge and feelings, their sexual pleasure and connection to their own bodies and to others through their desire, against physical, social, material, and psychological dangers associated with their sexuality” (2002:188). Other authors have also explored the dilemmas and contradictions that result from the inaccessibility of discourses of active female desire and the confusion and risk this produces (Jackson and Cram, 2003; Abel and Fitzgerald, 2006). Phillips shows that “lacking access to a discourse of male accountability and a discourse of female pleasure without penalties,
[women] have no culturally acceptable framework in which to critique their stories of pain, humiliation, and confusion without losing themselves as subjects” (2000: 193). I maintain that the use of ‘new’ concepts, specifically psychoanalytic ones, to expand our understandings of women’s sexual stories and open up new possibilities of pleasure and desire can compliment such work.

In positioning themselves within dominant discourses of female passivity, Allen finds that “young women are constituted as the objects of sexual attraction who must be reassured/convinced that intercourse will not have negative repercussions for them” (2003b:220). By tying our exploration of ambivalence to assumptions that coercion is central, as researchers and contributors to sexual discourses, we also reiterate and (re)position women ‘as sexual objects who must be reassured and convinced that (hetero)sex is not all bad.’ Exploring the discursive limitations of articulating and understanding women’s sexual experiences contributes to understanding sexual subjectivity because we need not necessarily reduce sexual ambivalence to something that results from what ‘men’ are doing to ‘women.’

The first area in which ambivalence was evident was in the range of ways the women had to explain and understand their sexual desire. Explicitly referencing the ‘it just happened’ storyline, Emma recalls having sex with her current partner the first time:

[The first time we had sex] it sort of progressed […] and then our emotions sort of just took over […] I was touching him, he was touching me, and then I think my clothes were off and his clothes were off, and I think it just happened.

About more recent encounters she says:

Emma: Sometimes it’s hard to control, cause the emotions.

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80 I remain aware of the fact that individual men (and more generally people) do actively position themselves in such ways so as to exploit others but we must not reduce our analyses to such instances.
Brandy: Would you say that’s on both parts, or that he has a higher sexual drive or?

Emma: I think he has a higher sexual drive too, but he can stop himself… Um, he doesn’t really mind if he doesn’t have sex, he doesn’t mind if we do, kind of thing. But like for me, sometimes I just want to go out and do other things, rather than be at home, at his house, having sex, right.

Brandy: How is it that you end up having sex as opposed to going out? Is that most of the time?

Emma: Um, it’s usually because my emotional or desire or arousal is like high and I don’t want to go out anymore, it gets to the point in my mind, it’s like, ‘You want to have sex, you don’t want to go out,’ but I really want to go out. *I just can’t stop it*

Brandy: So in the middle of being aroused you can’t stop it?

Emma: Yeah.

In this instance the reference to ‘it just happened’ seems related to her own experience of desire more than either coercion or not knowing how to (adequately) say no. In the void left by the lack of a discourse of active desire Emma understands her desire in uncertain, ambiguous ways. Her emotions seem to stand in for her understanding of her desire, such that ‘our emotions just take over,’ ‘it’s hard to control,’ and she ‘just can’t stop it.’

In a reworking of dominant discourses of male desire, Emma’s desire, like her emotions, ‘can’t be helped’; hence sex must happen every time she is aroused. Interestingly, as Emma takes up aspects of the male sexual drive discourse in understanding her own arousal as necessitating sex, she also destabilizes the male sexual drive discourse in relation to her male partner by asserting that ‘he can stop himself.’ As often seems the case, old gendered assumptions at times seem to be losing their grip, but ‘new’ discourses are slow to replace them. Additionally, my attention was drawn to her understanding of
why she ends up choosing to stay at home to have sex despite the fact that she ‘wants to go out.’ Emma herself seems not to understand why this occurs, so her narrative appears muddled. Lacking access to a discourse of her active desire, which would allow Emma to account explicitly for her desire and arousal as contributing to her decision to stay home, she is forced to construct a narrative that ‘doesn’t make sense’ to herself or others. Having sex becomes a reaction to a seemingly ‘unstoppable force’, emotional or otherwise.

Another narrative in which ambivalence is central is Mary Jane’s recollection of a time she gave a stranger a blow job in an isolated bathroom at an outdoor concert. She laughs, saying:

*He didn’t even have to convince me!* I just didn’t really like it, it’s kind of a blur to me, considering it was a long time ago and I was under the influence. *I think I was kind of excited,* just because I was like, ‘Oh, this is so risky,’ but at the same time, it was really, wasn’t that great of a big deal […] like I don’t not want to, it wasn’t something that I was forced into at all, but like, I don’t know if I would have initiated it. So yeah, it wasn’t like, I don’t know, *I didn’t feel bad about myself or anything, it’s just embarrassing.*

Mary Jane’s is such an interesting story because this kind of behaviour was a relatively anomalous experience among this group of women. Mary Jane was clearly back and forth about whether or not she wanted to do it. She argues that he never forced her and even says ‘he didn’t even have to convince me’; the issue is that she does not have access to a discourse that does not assume her exploitation. She acknowledges that she was excited by the riskiness of the activity (which she connects to the place where it happened, as opposed to the oral sex) but has no discourse within which to articulate her desire - or even ambivalent desire - without falling back on discourses of heterosexual exploitation. She says that she ‘didn’t feel bad’ about herself, referencing discourses of exploitation,
but rather was ‘just embarrassed,’ perhaps because she has no authoritative claim on her active desire.

Some of the ambivalence that the women articulate seems less connected to their experience than to how they understand ‘proper’ female sexuality and heterosex. Considering what female sexuality and respectable, middle-class hetero sex should look like, sometimes participants’ ambivalence occurred when women’s experiences defy their understandings of themselves as passive sexual objects of male desire. Therefore, when women’s own desire is hinted at, they are uncomfortable because there is no way to ‘make sense’ of their desire. This kind of ambivalence is evident in women’s earliest experiences of sex, as is seen in Lisa’s narrative about a boyfriend she used to fool around with:

Lisa: It was pretty much that I’d go over on Friday and we’d make out for three hours, on and off watching movies and then I’d go home and masturbate. I’d be totally turned on, but totally no interest in [having intercourse] with him.

Brandy: Mainly would you say out of fear?

Lisa: Yeah, I think so. (long pause) Yeah, it’s hard to say how much was sort of fear of doing something new that I had never done before and how much…the ‘If you have sex, you will get pregnant’ kind of fear, they’re probably mixed. Umm, yeah, so a combination of those two. But it never even really occurred to me that we could sort of have sex then, you know? I would go over and make out, then I leave!

It ‘never even occurred’ to Lisa that they could have sex. However, had she considered it, fear of the unknown and fear of pregnancy would have been her reference points.

While it seems to work out well from Lisa’s perspective, ‘I would go over, make out and then leave!’, what about girls who do choose to have sex? The only easily available discourses are fearful and protective ones centred on ‘proper’ female sexuality and
femininity where ambivalence seems inevitable.

The pervasiveness of discourses of passive female sexuality in framing women’s understandings of themselves and their comfort with, or lack of ambivalence about, having sex is much more apparent in other sexual experiences. Shawenqua expresses ambivalent discomfort a number of times throughout her interview:

[A previous] relationship evolved really quickly and I feel like I do trust [him], even though later I had the guilt. I wouldn’t ever get sexually involved with someone I didn’t trust or pressured me in a relationship that I couldn’t see would get beyond just having sex that one time.

Shawnequa’s ambivalence, the guilt around agreeing to sex, seems focused on the possibility that sex ‘isn’t going anywhere,’ which is uncomfortable for her. This ambivalence occurs in the dominance of the have/hold discourse of heterosexuality, wherein sex is a necessary part of a stable relationship. This discourse maintains the positioning of her as a passive sexual object of male desire. The role of normative sexual discourses is evident in Shawnequa’s narrative here as well:

[There’s] no shame or guilt or any of that [around sex] now, but I [had guilt] in the past with the guys I was with, in terms of society says ‘one night stands,’ society says ‘I should not be,’ [I] kinda feel guilty for going against that, but at the same time it feels fine to me. And that sort of, hanging guilt after every time, ‘I shouldn’t be doing this yet’ or ‘I shouldn’t be doing this with this person or this fast or this often’ or whatever.

Shawnequa’s ambivalence is a result of ‘the socially manufactured dilemma of desire,’ which occurs in the void of lacking discourse. Acknowledging her ambivalence and the pull between normative discourse and her own desire and actions, she speculates:

I guess maybe the relationships that followed were ways of justifying to myself about [random hook ups]. And I enjoyed the relationships, like they were healthy, but all of those relationships were initiated by us getting drunk, by ‘I really like you’ and ‘I like you.’ ‘Oh!!! Let’s make love and have a boyfriend/girlfriend shift.’
Creating a context of ‘relationship’ allows Shawnequa to justify and make sense of her having random sexual contact with friends at parties. At other times she resists such constructions of herself as ‘wrong’ for being sexually active. Here she recounts telling her current partner about her sexual past:

Telling him about my sexual past [was hard] because he was adamant about saving it for someone that you love and he couldn’t understand how I had that one night stand or how could I have slept with, in his words, ‘so many guys’ before him but he’s okay with it now. And I’m, whatever, things I’ve regretted, I’ve learned from them, so I can’t regret them. And I’ve been lucky and smart about, to be safe about my sexual health, so I don’t really feel that bad about it.

We still hear a hint of ambivalence and perhaps (disavowed) regret, but Shawnequa is empowered to resist the abjection of her past sexual experiences and does not ‘really feel bad about it.’ Perhaps this is because ‘he’s okay with it now’ or because she’s been ‘lucky and smart’ about her sexual health such that there is no lasting ‘evidence’ (a ‘reputation’ or STI) of her desire. My main point here is that a discourse of active female desire would undermine the necessity of having to wrestle between making sense of oneself as a passive sexual object and one’s own desire.

For Maria also, the possibility of exploring her sexuality is directly connected to the likelihood of developing a stable relationship with an acceptable partner. Consider her recollection of experiences with a previous partner:

[This one time] we had sex, umm, which was fine too, we had been making out all night and then in the morning it was sort of, we just did, and I had wanted to, like I don’t know. Umm, (pause) yeah. It’s not that I don’t want to, but I was okay with it you know […] but in my eyes if I like a guy but I don’t know if I want to have sex with him, I’d rather wait until I know whether or not I like the guy, so that both emotionally and physically the relationship is like on par. But like I didn’t really have the energy to sort of pursue a relationship like that with [him] so in a perfect world, I wouldn’t have slept with him at that point. I had very low expectations for the relationship and even if the possibility existed, which it might have, I didn’t
feel like I wanted to pursue a relationship like that with him, because he lived [out of town] and we were really different, so it was more of a fun thing.

At issue is not a judgment of whether or not sex should be limited to relationships (or the potential thereof), but rather how young women’s ways of experiencing and understanding their sexuality is delimited by the range of discourses available. That Maria is not willing to pursue a relationship is perhaps what contributes to her sense of ambivalence, which delimits her ability to understand and experience herself as a sexual agent. At the same time, that ‘it was more of a fun thing’ for Maria, shows how she also positions herself in ways that disrupt dominant discourses of women’s (hetero)sexual passivity.

Lily takes a similar view when remembering one of her early sexual experiences abroad:

he was quite creative and had lots of things to do and I was quite shocked because, you know, I had all these internal barriers of what was okay and not okay during sex and I hadn’t even tried oral or anything like that, but basically we did it all in the three days. It was pretty, [a] very quick awakening, but I came out of it with a very, a very good sexual education, I guess […] And just thinking back, it shouldn’t have been that many things at once kind of thing, but at the same time um, I guess now I’m just a lot more comfortable with um, just the things that you can do in bed and stuff, just not really, there aren’t that many like um, I don’t know, like barriers and stuff. And I think I was glad the guy, you know, just did everything basically […] I’m still a little bit ambivalent about whether I should have had sex or taken it that far.

This quote is part of a lengthy narrative, in which at times Lily expresses her gratitude for the ‘sexual education’ and the fun, and at others hints that perhaps she ‘kept up with him sexually’ because she didn’t want to say no and ‘ruin the mood.’ In fact, she is so ambivalent that even in reviewing the transcript I was unable to be clear about what was going on. The last sentence of this quote, ‘I’m still a little ambivalent…,’ comes later in
the interview when she is looking back on her experiences. The summing up of it as her worry about whether or not she ‘should have had sex or taken it that far’ makes it very plausible that the boundaries she crossed in her sexual experiences may bother her rather than her ‘inability to say no’ or being coerced. Lily questioned whether ‘it should have been so many things at once.’ Again, the point for me is not to shut down explorations of gendered inequality but to open up our understandings of what triggers ambivalence and to explore what is currently not available to women. Interesting too is how Lily deals with her ambivalence when engaging with her next sexual partner:

At first I was a little bit, like ‘[This] is just a repetition of what happened when I was abroad,’ so again I didn’t let him go very far at all. It was just like touching, the first time, I didn’t allow him to take my pants off and even then I was kind of, just felt like a little bit shameful almost that I was giving it up so early, you know what I mean? Most girls, I heard of girls⁸¹ that you know, don’t even let a guy touch their hand for the first two months.

Lily is explicit that she sees her actions in this relationship as a result of her experiences abroad. We see an intense (re)positioning of herself as a passive sexual object, wherein she understands herself as ‘letting him’ and ‘giving it up.’ Arguably her ambivalence produces the space wherein the ‘truth’ of dominant discourse of (hetero)sexuality can be confirmed. A rumour ‘I heard of…’ becomes a powerful disciplinary tool as she assesses her action in comparison with other (proper?) women and in light of dominant discourse. It seems that in the uncertainty of ambivalence we turn to what we ‘know best.’

In many ways what we ‘know best’ actively shapes how we understand our own and others’ experiences. Rosie relates her understanding of her sister’s pregnancy and STI scare after having unprotected sex with three different partners in three weeks when

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⁸¹ Lily identifies as ‘Chinese-Canadian’ and it is unclear here if she is referencing a racialized notion of female purity that can develop as a form of resistance in the context of predominantly White culture, such as in Canada or the US, wherein racialized bodies are devalued (Le Espiritu, 2001).
she was fourteen:

It really freaked me out, like also that, the gap between me and her. I clearly remember how I was so careful, and at the same time afraid of engaging in [a sexual] relationship with somebody, here my sister is quite, uh (pause), she’s willing to explore and all that stuff. Ummmm, she said that none of the relationships was forced. She wanted to have [sex], so she did and after the fact, like she feels really scared and all of that. And I also asked her if she’s able to talk to those guys, but apparently one of them was more like [a] one time thing and she didn’t know where he is and stuff. So yeah, she didn’t really have like any support system around her. Yeah, that was quite shocking yeah. Yeah. But now she’s much better though […] She’s more interested in umm like being with somebody who makes, she can call him as a partner, so, and like that experience of, kind of freaked out and worried about herself…so she says that she doesn’t want to do anything like that any more and I think that’s good.

Rosie’s first concern, and I must admit my own, was for her sister’s safety. But it becomes evident that alongside her concerns for safety and sexual self-determination is Rosie’s own discomfort with ‘the gap’ she sees between their experiences and the fact that her sister is ‘willing to explore’ her sexuality. Ultimately, Rosie is relieved that her sister is ‘much better now’ because she ‘doesn’t want to do anything like that again,’ as though reigning in errant sexualities is itself a comforting assurance of safety. Again, value judgments about this experience are not the issue, rather Rosie’s relief and my own initial assumptions are evidence of how limited we are by the discourses of passivity and risk.

As Stewart acknowledges, the lack of discourse around alternative sexual subjectivities (in her case she is focusing on non-penetrative hetero sex) makes young women’s “[decisions] difficult, if not problematic” (1999:281) insofar as they attempt to reject dominant discourse of gendered (hetero)sexuality. Harris, Aapola and Gonick (2000) find that uncertainty is often resolved by falling back on what we ‘know best,’
those dominant discourses of gendered sexuality. Observing role-played negotiations\textsuperscript{82} between adolescent heterosexual couples around sexual activity, Harris et al. find:

[these] young people are keen to find ways to undo passive/active heterosexual relations, [yet in] spite of the [opportunities in the context of the research] they fall quickly into the pattern of man-as-initiator/woman-as-recipient…Once again, we see a situation in which the young women involved in cultural resistance are objecting to sexual objectification and want to be seen as people, and as sexual people, rather than objects. However, this seems to \textit{collide} rather than co-exist with the idea of female sexual desire (385, emphasis in original)

My exploration of young women’s ambivalence provides evidence of times when women “have succeeded in creating uncertainty, if not confusion, in regard to heterosexuality and contemporary femininities” (Stewart, 1999:281). Research that privileges and celebrates women’s sexual agency and active desire, while valuable because it does not assume women’s passivity, must occur \textit{alongside} research that continues to explore the power differences and inequalities of patriarchal society that frame all sexual experiences.

Signaling this dual need to remain cognizant of both agency and restraint is my finding that some young women use alcohol or drugs or both (but primarily alcohol) as a way to transcend the ambivalence they felt. In these moments women could “blame [sexual activity] on the alcohol,” so that evidence of their active desire is erased. Tolman (2002) and others (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998) similarly document women’s alcohol use in this way. Jackie is very explicit about her use of alcohol:

I think, it’s more like the alcohol releases, releases me because it’s, sometimes when I’m conscious I feel, I feel nervous because I want to maintain this kind of image maybe, so even though I may not be

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\textsuperscript{82} Related to the issue of negotiation, in my own interviews I asked participants about the incorporation of pornography, sex toys, ‘kinky sex’ and costuming into their sexual relationships. Many of the participants have incorporated some or all of these things into their sex lives. However, all of the women who incorporated s/m play with their partners were hesitant to articulate this play as \textit{part} of their sexuality, instead choosing to think of s/m play, no matter how extensive, as ‘just playing around.’ I related this to the abjection of alternative or kinky erotic experiences from the category of proper hetero sex.
intentionally doing it, I still want to, I still keep up this image about, then once alcohol kick in, umm I just do whatever I want instead of whatever I should do.

The use of alcohol signals a way to resolve ambivalence, but it is arguably a potentially problematic one, since it involves various levels of ‘impairment.’ Like one of Tolman’s participants, Jackie understands herself as being “[not] willing to give up her desire yet seeing no alternative…the best solution she can contrive is to keep her desire under the cover of alcohol” (2002: 140). Phillips’ (2000) exploration of female desire in *Flirting with Danger* draws a similar conclusion. She writes, “while women’s strategy of becoming (or pretending to become) intoxicated might appear, on the surface, to be an endorsement of men’s practice of ‘working out a yes,’ it is important to note that letting/making it [‘just happen’] represents a way for women to enter into encounters they already want” (2000: 119, emphasis in original).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen that ambivalence can be potentially subversive and empowering in signaling of instability of dominant discourse, but at the same time the lack of a discourse of women’s active sexual desire limits their freedom to negotiate their desire and sexual health. Maria clarifies this tension:

So when I’m invested I hope I’ll just shut up and do it, shut up and have the discourse [around sexuality], and not put up with [a male partner’s potential hesitancy]. But, um, yeah, I just don’t feel like I can expect that of some people, well maybe I can, I have a right to expect it, but whether or not I’m going to put the effort in and make everyone feel uncomfortable when I don’t even really care about the guy, you know. It’s like, why am I going to stress myself out that way? And also […] it’s trouble for me, if it was perfectly natural and easy, I’d be far more likely to do it, but it’s not.
The comment that discussing sexuality is clearly not ‘perfectly natural and easy’ shows how sorely lacking the discourses within which Maria can position herself as a sexual agent and negotiate her sexual health are. The limited availability of these discourses, which frames the experiences of women themselves, creates a void wherein, as Persephone observes: “a lot of people have sex for the wrong reasons or don’t have sex for the wrong reasons”, and then end up wrestling with the ‘guilt’ of having done so or not.
Chapter Eight: Young Women as Desiring, (Incoherent) Subjects in Sexuality Education

While the previous chapters are implicitly situated within the context of exploring sexuality and sexual health education, I have made only a few brief references to sexual health education. I will now explore the utility of my research for education policy. Relevance to young people’s lives is the key ideal in sexual health education in Canadian schools (Fisher et al., 2003). Relevance has two distinct facets. First, it must be understood as bearing some, ideally direct, connection with young people’s everyday experiences of sexuality. Second, relevance is achieved when sexual health educators are able to begin to account for and address people’s motivations in choosing their sexual partners, behaviours and health choices. In Canada, the predominant theory informing sexual health education is the Information, Motivation and Behaviour Model (IMB), which attempts to account for the role of ‘motivation’, in addition to health information, in health choices, actions, or behaviours. As part of a larger body of work that documents and advocates the inclusion of a discourse of active female desire, this dissertation explores the first aspect of relevance (the connection with everyday experiences). My second contribution, which is intricately related to the first one but more novel, is theoretical. I challenge the (sexual) liberal subject assumed by current sexual health education strategies by relying on a poststructural, discursively-informed, Lacanian perspective on the subject as fractured and contradictory. Through this exploration I offer insight into how psychoanalytic concepts, such as the abject, disavowal and ambivalence, can open up our understandings of the subject and subjectification in ways that are useful.

83 The category of sexual health educators refers not only to people employed as such but also to educators more broadly, parents, health care providers, social agents etc.
for the conceptualization and practice of sexual health education, such that the second facet of relevance, motivation, is addressed.

Using a Foucauldian-inspired discursive approach and a psychoanalytically-informed approach to making an ‘intervention’ into sexual health education may appear contradictory. From a Foucauldian perspective, intervention appears problematic because sexual health education is addressed as a ‘thing out there’ that I am trying to affect. Moreover, Foucault’s interests focus on how in liberal society our lives are disciplined by state agencies and texts. While in some senses I am trying to ‘improve’ a government project (the attempt to ensure the sexual health and docility of the population through education based on the IMB model as laid out within the Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education, a federal document discussed below), I use a Foucauldian psychoanalytic approach to open up some subversive space within sexual health education efforts in Canada. Acknowledging a tension in how I use Foucauldian discourse analysis, I understand my exploration of sexual health education, as it currently exists, as a form of ‘critical genealogy.’ Foucault challenges us to explore the circulation of discourses and power. This dissertation has examined how women’s contradictory discursive positions facilitate self-surveillance and limit their ability to negotiate their sexual pleasure and safety. I propose that by exposing these contradictions (via critical genealogy) and incorporating the discussion of these contradictions in sexual health education, the discursive field of sexuality can be reworked in novel ways that position women to act in ways that enhance their sexual pleasure, health, and self-interest.

This being said, attempting to ‘expose’ the contradictions young women face constitutes an arguably mistaken assumption that dialogue is a straight forward
pedagogical tool; a psychoanalytic perspective undermines such an assumption. As discussed in Chapter One, I acknowledge that tensions remain inherent to my attempts to ‘translate’ my psychoanalytically-informed poststructural theoretical insights to Canadian pedagogy. However given my anti-oppression feminist political commitments, I have made the conscious choice to posit some thoughts on ‘best practices’ in Canadian classrooms. My attempt may be fraught with difficulty but the tentative application of my insights, which will hopefully inspire future research and policy implications, seems more satisfactory than doing nothing at all. In the future we will have novel discursive (re)combinations that facilitate alternative approaches to understanding sexual subjectivity and sexuality education. My use of the concepts abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence draws on their meanings in everyday language and also expands upon these with psychoanalytical insights. As I have mentioned throughout this dissertation I, like feminists such as Gallup, Rose, Irigaray, and Kristeva, rely on Lacan primarily for his insight into the nature of the subject and do not passively accept his work as unquestionable orthodoxy. I am interested primarily in politically-engaged feminist appropriations of and engagements with Lacan rather than with the direct or ‘correct’ use of his work. My use of psychoanalysis is limited to the insights it offers into social discursive processes, which themselves are always open to be (re)worked and (re)signified.

Sondergaard (2002) criticizes the productivity of utilizing psychoanalytic theory for theorizing subjectivity. She argues that psychoanalysis has been positioned as articulating pre-discursive processes (the production of the subject, disavowal, abjection). This argument is useful in thinking through my critical engagement with psychoanalysis.
While psychoanalysis may claim to be describing pre-discursive processes, I see it as arising from particular relations of power and as useful in theorizing the processes of subjection that occur within such relations of power. As mentioned above, I argue for the utility of psychoanalysis to explore social and/or unconscious desires, anxieties, and conflicts that are analyzable as discursively articulated in a variety of ways, both direct and indirect, in young women’s narratives. How the social and/or unconscious processes expose themselves will differ by political and cultural context. Foucault (1990) argues that specific types of individuation accompany different types of governance. Canada is currently characterized by a liberal political and historical context and psychoanalysis provides useful concepts for understanding subjectivity within this context. Following Marcuse’s (1970) argument that the Freudian concept of man has become obsolete in light of later historical developments, I propose that one day the broader liberal context that allows for psychoanalysis’ resonance will have been sufficiently reworked to produce the obsolescence of psychoanalysis. In other words, arguably one day the same social and/or unconscious anxieties and desires will no longer structure our experiences and articulations in the same ways. Therefore I only utilize psychoanalysis as a discursive formation that offers productive critical insight at this particular historical and cultural moment.

**Moving beyond the Liberal Subject: Accounting for both Inequality and Desire**

Since the second wave of feminism, there has been much work accounting for how structures of gendered inequality limit young women’s self-determination in heterosexual encounters (Vance, 1984; Hollway, 1984; Holland et al. 1990, 1994a,
1994b, 2003; Segal 1994; Sobo 1995). As I have reiterated throughout this dissertation, such work is invaluable in informing sexual health education that speaks to the contradictions and complexities faced by young women as gendered subjects. My own research is inspired by the lack of documentation of a discourse of desire and attention to where the everyday experiences of young women’s desire are both delimited by and belie this silence. Lacking a discourse of desire, educators limit their chances of achieving relevance. A number of researchers have documented the disconnection between what is taught in primary and secondary school and young women’s understandings of their lives (Fine, 1988; Allen, 2004). These findings are confirmed in the interviews I conducted.

In recent years, alongside research that accounts for inequality and gendered risk, there has been much research on how young women resist traditional constructions of feminine (hetero)sexuality and how they strive to articulate their desire within the ‘void of silence’ (Stewart, 1999; Allen, 2003a, 2003b). I call this body of research the ‘I resist’ body of research. Like the work before it, which focused on risk and inequality, the ‘I resist’ body is invaluable. However, we know that while gendered prescriptions around sexuality are constantly being challenged, such transgressions are not necessarily translating into improvements in the health of young women. While rates of unwanted pregnancy have decreased since the 1970’s, STI rates have been increasing in recent years (McKay, 2004). In fact, according to statistics from Health Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca), in 2005 women accounted for 16.5% of the national total of people living with HIV and/or AIDS, while in 2001 they had accounted for only 12.1%. They represent 25% of newly reported HIV infections, a figure that has increased steadily since 1985. Moreover, among newly infected women, 53% of cases came from heterosexual contact.
(as opposed to from injected drug use). Among women, since 1985, those aged 20-39 have consistently had the highest rates of infection. In addition, Health Canada’s youth category (aged 15-29) continues to be disproportionately affected by STIs and women currently account for over two-thirds of reported cases of chlamydia (www.hc-sc.gc.ca).

While it is not my aim to provoke a moral panic in providing this information, these realities alert us to the possibility that sexual health education has not had the desired effect, though we must acknowledge the advancements that have been made, if only in the rate of unwanted pregnancies84. These facts beg two questions. First, are ‘health increases’ not being realized because mainstream education policy has not adequately incorporated research insights into teaching about sexuality, insofar as many young people’s education is limited to biology and sexual risks? Second, is relevance elusive because of the way we understand personal motivation in the IMB model and our assumptions about sexual subjectivity? I believe that sexual health education’s relevance is undermined with respect to education focused exclusively on biology and risk and assumptions about the sexual subject. In this chapter I will use the theoretical insights explored in this dissertation to show why this is the case. First, I argue we need to create a discourse of desire that can be included in sexual health education. Second, I show that we must excavate our assumptions about the liberal sexual subject in order to acknowledge the complexity and incoherence of the processes of subjection that are usually ignored or covered up in dominant discourse.

84 Reductions in the rates of unwanted pregnancies could also be related to the widespread availability of hormonal methods of birth control, though inevitably education plays a role in young women’s decision to access it. It is also important to note that ‘the pill’ removes (only) one of the risks connected to hetero sexual activity.
Sexual Health Education in Canada Today

*Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (hereafter the *Guidelines*, 2003), published by Health Canada first in 1994 and then revised in 2003, serves as the only coherent, authoritative outline of sexual health standards and goals in Canada. The purpose of this document is to provide an authoritative, coherent and national set of guidelines for people producing, assessing and delivering sexual health curriculum to youth and adults in educational settings across the country. The *Guidelines* are the direct result of an accumulating mass of critical research on ‘rational models’ of health education. In lieu of purely rationalized programs, which focus exclusively on providing information, the *Guidelines* suggest that the best educational model available integrates information with pupils’ individual insight into their motivations in order to produce behavioural change (34). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this approach has been informed by the Information, Motivation and Behavioural Skills, the IMB model.

The *Guidelines* are relied on by ‘Options for Sexual Health B.C.’ (previously known as Planned Parenthood B.C.), British Columbia’s dominant sexual health authority, which has also developed a certified training program for sexual health educators. In comparison with the B.C.’s official Ministry of Education curriculum documents (http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/), which are called Integrated Resources Packages or IRP’s, the *Guidelines* are relatively more ‘liberal’ in adopting an anti-oppression perspective that attempts to account for the myriad inequalities that shape sexual experiences. In many cases in B.C., it is more likely that a teacher will cover

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85 As a graduate of this program I am currently working on my practicum, and continue to attend educational in-services, in order to complete my certification.
sexual health education, rather than the school hiring a certified sexual health educator. As a result, the curriculum is likely to be drawn more directly from the IRP’s than the Guidelines. Connell reminds us in a footnote that “the use and implementation of the Guidelines [are] voluntary” (2005: 266). In this sense the Guidelines, when relied on by educators, can represent a sort of ‘best case scenario’ as far as sexual health education goes. Explorations of the IMB model, which the Guidelines cite as the ideal model on which programs should found themselves, provides the only directly accessible documentation of how we understand the recipients of sexual health education in Canada. It is possible that the sexual health problems prevalent today are due to the fact that educators have not integrated the Guidelines adequately, rather than to the assumptions of the IMB model. My participants were clear that their institutionalized educational experiences were generally lacking both in relevant content and comprehensiveness. However, having only anecdotal evidence from 26 women, and given the diversity in the amount and nature of sexual health Canadian youth receive, I have recourse only to the Guidelines, read in light of the participants’ experiences, as a point of reference in building a critique of current educational assumptions and experiences.

When I began this research project I was specifically interested in using the participants’ narratives to critique the Guidelines and the IMB model directly. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, however, in analyzing the transcripts I was drawn to the complexity and contradiction I saw and slowly moved in a more psychoanalytically-informed direction. Regardless, my findings about the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse and the processes of abjection, disavowal and ambivalence still provide access to a critical reading of the Guidelines and IMB model that facilitates novel
practices and conceptualizations of sexual health education. As there is no central text that all sexual health educators rely on in constructing sexual health lessons, I can only use the insights outlined in this dissertation to critically read the documents to which educators have access. Much research still needs to be done into the specifics of sexual health education in B.C. schools and contemporary sexual health curricula. This research could use Connell’s (2005) research on Ontario sexual health curricula as an example. Without access to such research, I can only use my theoretical findings and my participants’ evaluation of their sexual health education to critically assess the ‘best case scenario’ approach to sexual health education as outlined in the Guidelines. There is little direct connection between the everyday lives of my participants and the Guidelines. The women’s narratives do, however, offer some critical insight into the orientations that are implicit in government funded (neo)liberal attempts to change sexual behaviour, which are ideally based on the Guidelines, a privileged text. Foucault’s focus on governance suggests that critically engaging government documents can be a productive task.

In some respects the Guidelines are very ‘progressive.’ The Guidelines do attempt to account for desire and pleasure, in that they outline the goals of sexual health education as:

i. to help people achieve positive [sexual health] outcomes (e.g. self-esteem, respect for self and others, non-exploitive sexual relations, rewarding sexual relationships, the joy of desired parenthood); and

ii. to avoid negative outcomes (e.g. unintended pregnancy, HIV/STIs, sexual coercion, sexual dysfunction. (2003:1)

It is clear that an anti-oppression approach is espoused. The Guidelines recommend:

Effective sexual health education should be provided in an age-appropriate, culturally-sensitive manner that is respectful of individual choices and… [integrates] positive, life-enhancing and rewarding aspects of human sexuality while also seeking to reduce and prevent sexual health problems…Does not
discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious background, or disability in terms of access to information. Provides accurate information to reduce discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious background and disability. Encourages critical thinking about gender-role stereotyping. It recognizes the importance of gender-related issues in society, the increasing variety of choices available to individuals and the need for better understanding and communication to bring about positive social change…(2003:8)

There is a limited and implicit inclusion of pleasure and desire in the rhetoric of ‘positive, life-enhancing and rewarding aspects of sexual health.’ If a discourse of desire is at all limited in the Guidelines, then the inclusion of desire and pleasure in the classroom experiences of the participants seems nearly impossible. It seems that, as Fine found in 1988, there is still a fleetingly evident ‘discourse of desire that fades rapidly into the discourse of disease.’ Additionally, when the Guidelines attempt to acknowledge desire and pleasure, they do so in a gender-neutral manner, never mentioning the lack of discourses of desire around female sexuality specifically.

The Guidelines outline the essential ‘Components of Sexual Health Education,’ stating:

Sexual health education involves a combination of educational experiences that allows individuals to do the following:
* to acquire knowledge that is relevant to their specific sexual health issues;
* to develop the motivation and personal insight that they will need to act on the knowledge
* to acquire the skills necessary to enhance sexual health and avoid negative sexual health outcomes; and
* to help create an environment that is conducive to sexual health. (2003:12)

The IMB model is espoused to ensure the first three conditions. Creating an ‘environment conducive to sexual health’ is Health Canada’s way of acknowledging broader societal impacts on sexual health, such as “social and economic circumstances… access to health
services; and community norms, values and expectations related to sexuality, gender, sexual orientation, and reproduction” (40). The interviews I conducted, and previous research exploring sexuality within various experiences of inequality (race, class, orientation, gender, ability, etc), show the limited likelihood of creating an ‘environment conducive to sexual health’ within current dominant discourses of sexuality. The discursive positions to which young women have easy access, often discourses of sexual passivity, delimit the range of feasible health-protective measures they can enact. Addressing young women as desiring sexual agents needs to be central to any program that seeks to create an ‘environment conducive to sexual health’ and to be relevant to youth.

Before moving on to discuss the IMB understanding of motivation, I will briefly outline the three key aspects of the model: information, motivation, behaviour. There is a causal connection assumed in the logic of the IMB model in which information is supposed to affect one’s motivation which in turn determines one’s actions or behaviour. Therefore I will outline the model in order before critically engaging the IMB model’s understanding of ‘Motivation’ in particular. With regard to Information, the Guidelines write:

For sexual health education programs to be effective, they must provide information that is relevant and easy to translate into behaviours that can help individuals to enhance sexual health and avoid sexual health problems. (2003: 35).

The specifics of the Information to be included are to be:

…directly linked to the desired behavioural outcome that will lead to prevention of sexual health problems, or should directly influence behaviour that will result in the enhancement of sexual health….easy to translate into the
desired behaviour…practical, adaptable and culturally-sensitive…age, gender, and developmentally appropriate; programs should be tailored to meet the sexual orientation, mental, physical and emotional needs of people at different stages of their life. (2003: 35-36)

While the ideals of diversely applicable information seem to inform the Guidelines, these goals have not been fully translated into practice, as either research or education. As Maticka-Tyndale points out:

We have almost no data at all on forms of sexual interaction other than vaginal intercourse. The one exception is anal intercourse for which we have some information, primarily about the sexual practices between young men, thanks to research funded under the AIDS initiative. This says a great deal about what we think is really important with respect to the sexuality of our youth. Despite lots of talk about ‘outercourse’ or forms of sexual pleasuring other than vaginal or anal intercourse, and despite claims that our concerns are with sexual health (generally), we certainly don’t think these are important enough to address in research. (2001: 9)

Though Maticka-Tyndale does not explicitly mention it, there is an implicit valorization of exclusively heterosexual, able-bodied sexual activity in this type of research’s silence on some topics, despite the supposed ‘objectivity’ of the research. Moreover, I argue that by not addressing potential differences in culturally-negotiated aspects of sexual activity, the vast range of cultural diversity in Canada has yet to be fully explored. Thus, in regard to the Information component of the IMB model, we must question both what youth actually know (i.e.: what amount and type of knowledge) and how they come to know it.

With regard to Motivation, the Guidelines write:

To translate information into the desired sexual health behaviours, individuals must be sufficiently motivated to act upon the information they receive. Therefore, in order for sexual health education programs to achieve their goals, planners must address the motivational factors that are needed to bring about behavioural changes…[Motivation in this sexual health context] takes three forms. Emotional Motivation – A person’s emotional responses to sexuality and to specific sexual health-related behaviours generally determines whether or not that individual takes the necessary actions to avoid sexual health problems, and to enhance sexual health…Personal Motivation – A person’s attitudes and
beliefs in relation to a specific sexual and reproductive health behaviour strongly predict whether or not that person engages in that behaviour…Social Motivation – A person’s beliefs regarding social norms, or their perceptions of social support pertaining to relevant sexual and reproductive health behaviours are also likely to influence behavioural change. (2003: 36-37)

With regard to Behavioural Skills, the *Guidelines* write:

[individuals] should have the specific behavioural skills to help them adopt and perform behaviours that support sexual health…having appropriate behavioural skills is essential for behavioural change…Behavioural skills consist of the following: i. the objective skills for performing the behaviour (e.g. knowing how to negotiate); and ii. the self-efficacy to do so (e.g. personal belief in one’s ability to successfully negotiate)…Behavioural skills training for the prevention of STI/HIV and unintended pregnancy should include both the skills to negotiate safer sex (e.g. condom use) and to set sexual limits (e.g. to delay first intercourse). (2003: 37-38)

As we see in the *Guidelines’* understanding of Behavioural Skills, there is a reliance on modernist understandings of agency as residing in a pre-discursive, internal core. This assumption is problematized by poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory. A Foucauldian perspective alerts us to the additional issue that governmental discursive texts, such as the *Guidelines*, may have a vested interest in acknowledging only courses of action that produce and maintain an ‘orderly, behaving’ population.

When exploring young women’s sexual subjectivity from a poststructural, psychoanalytic perspective, it is the Motivation component of the IMB model that I problematize the most. I see subjectivity as a central aspect of what the *Guidelines* call Motivation, but I believe that the understanding outlined in the *Guidelines*, due to the IMB model, entails a misleading focus on rationalized ‘behaviour’ rather than agency. How we understand ourselves as ‘being in the world’ constitutes what range of possible choices, actions and understandings are possible. Instead of assuming a rationalized liberal actor, as do dominant discourses and the IMB model, I find it useful to disrupt the
coherent unitary subject in order to better account for the contradictions and complexities found in young women’s sexual narratives.

When arguing that the rationalized liberal subject is at the core of the IMB model it is important to consider the theoretical origins of the IMB model. William Fisher (one of the authors directly involved in the formulation of the IMB model) acknowledges that the theories of ‘Reasoned Action,’ ‘Planned Behaviour,’ and ‘Social Network’ inform the IMB model (1997). Within these influential mainstream theories we can see a long tradition of the liberal actor in (social) scientific models of actors and their actions. In another article, Jeffrey Fisher and William Fisher et al. (1996) outline how they approached the concept of motivation in their studies of HIV prevention. They write:

Motivation to perform AIDS preventive behaviour was assessed by standardized measures of (university) students’ attitudes toward performing a range of AIDS preventive behaviors, students’ social norms concerning the performance of these behaviors, and students’ intentions to perform these behaviors. (1996: 117)

As we saw in the preceding chapters, the complexities surrounding young women’s understandings of themselves as sexual agents and their sexual encounters are unlikely to be accounted for within this approach to motivation. The presence of the rational liberal subject is readily apparent in this quote. For Fisher and Fisher, the subject is one who can firmly articulate an ‘attitude towards performing a range of AIDS preventive behaviours,’ account for ‘the social norms’ that support one’s behaviour, specify one’s intentions and then coordinate one’s sexual health behaviours with these intentions.

The type of interventions this view of motivation warrants are small group discussions of negative attitudes that restrict condom use, such as the claim ‘that condoms can adversely affect sensation’ (Fisher, Jeffrey D. et al., 1996:118), and the presentation of alternative perspectives (i.e. using thin condoms with a drop of lube in the
tip to increase sensation). I do not want to contest the educational successes the IBM model claims with a range of populations, and indeed there has been much published on the topic (Guidelines, 2003; Fisher, 1997; Fisher et al., 1996, Fisher and Fisher, 1998, 2002; Fisher et al., 2003). Rather, I want to offer the possibility of increasing the relevance of sexual health education, so that an environment more conducive to sexual health can be achieved. Exploring the discursively-constituted Lacanian subject as core to educational interventions allows us to account for the multiplicity and complexity of experiences that might undermine both our personal motivation and sexual health choices (such as ‘alternative,’ non-intercourse erotic experiences and prolonged barrier usage alongside or being replaced by testing for monogamous partners). As I and others (Holland et al. 1998, Potts, 2002) have found, condom use in first or early encounters is assumed by both partners but usually decreases or ceases over time, without both partners being tested for STIs. Understanding subjectivity is a productive way to explore why condom use is eventually phased out without prior testing, despite that fact that the women I interviewed said, ‘I shouldn’t have’ and later ceased condom use even though they thought it ‘was stupid.’

Elsewhere, Fisher and Fisher (2002) claim that the most important aspects of motivation are “attitudes…social motivation…and perceptions of personal vulnerability” (46). In this later article, Fisher and Fisher seem to be realizing the broad range of ‘perceptions’ and processes that are involved in motivation. However, without abandoning the liberal subject assumption, Fisher and Fisher provide few ways for reworking their model. In the last paragraph of this article they write:

Our review also raises questions concerning the relationship of the information and motivation constructs, which are sometimes independent
and sometimes not. The model’s logic, which holds that well-informed people are not necessarily well motivated to practice prevention, and visa versa (J. Fisher & Fisher, 1992, 2000), would appear to permit at least the possibility of a relationship between informational and motivational factors (2002: 64).

I read this statement to mean that the IBM model and the rational liberal subject it assumes are not able to fully explain the sometimes contradictory relationship between what we know is ‘right,’ in the sense of being in our self interest, and what we end up doing. Upsetting the liberal sexual subject as I have done in this dissertation offers a possibly richer understanding of (hetero)sexuality that opens up more relevant approaches to education. Building on others’ work (Fine, 1988; Sobo, 1995; Hillier et al., 1998; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002; Abel and Fitzgerald, 2006 and Higgins, 2007 among others), I have explored new orientations that seem better able to address what types of ‘risks’ are immediate and relevant to women, consciously or otherwise. The assumption of a liberal subject in the IMB model maintains that it can account for behaviours in terms of the cogito (Descartes’ assertion, ‘I think therefore I am,’ or in this case ‘do’). However, my research has shown that such a direct connection between thought, being and action is not a valid premise. We do not always act in sexually healthy, self-interested ways but rather in ways that subjectively ‘make sense.’

In problematizing Motivation with a poststructural, Lacanian interrogation of the subject, I do not intend to contribute to the “trend toward the problematization of young people’s sexuality, not only evident in the public arena but also in the academic world,” a trend which “[emphasizes] their proneness to being ‘swept away’ by unanticipated, unintentional passion” (Jackson, 2005:283). I explore how dominant understandings of sexuality, which underpin sexual health education and the IMB model, hide or minimize
the ambivalence, complexity and contradiction present in psychosexual sentient beings. My work aims to account for rather than ignore such complexities. In contributing to a discourse of women’s active sexual desire, I hope to make the awareness of desire, pleasure and complexity and contradiction all *part of* what is explicitly included in the sexual decisions of youth and others.

Before turning to how my findings suggest we incorporate desire into sexual education, it is important to see what young women had to say about their formalized educational experiences growing up. I will not go into great detail, however, since their stories largely confirm studies that have already documented the limitations of sexual health education as it is currently organized. Very few of the participants in my study have ever been formally taught anything about their sexual pleasure and desire. Most relied on ‘trial and error,’ usually with partners, in order to learn about arousal, and the media provided the dominant context within which they understand sexuality. While most media sources seem to inform only their ideas of relationships, love and romance rather than sex directly, Sue Johansen’s *Sunday Night Sex Show*, on radio and later television, was mentioned by a number of the women as a positive source of explicitly sexual information. Jill’s response to my question about learning about her desire was fairly typical:

Brandy: So what do you remember being taught about your desire?

Jill: Honestly nothing. Like school was useless. Friends were useless. And it was more against the safety of it more than anything. I never remember anything about what pleasure is, like this is what you might feel.

Brandy: So about your desire. So what you have learned, you said not too much, what you have learned where did you learn it?

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86 I have already explored the silence that generally existed within the family about sexuality.
Jill: Just personal experience I would think would probably be the only real source. Uh, I’m sure TV has a lot to do with it too. And what you see in certain magazines. Media as well. But that’s pretty much it, yeah, it all came from my experience. Umm, yeah, that’s pretty much for that, yeah, I couldn’t really think of any other sources.

Lily says her education “was more like, if you have sex you’ll have a baby. Like the teen parody movies are totally true.” As we will see below, with regard to formal education, my findings support Connell’s analysis of the Ontario sexual health curriculum. What Fine calls the discourse of victimization, which stresses the risks of sexuality to young people in general but girls in particular, was present in women’s narratives, as was the discourse of individual morality. Here education taught women that “if you make an irresponsible, unhealthy choice, if you do have sex, there will be negative consequences” (Connell, 2005:258). Gina’s experience in school highlights this gendered fear-mongering:

Gina: I think about all the info I’ve received about STIs, I’ve always received it from a female perspective. That it’s really, really important to care for yourself and your sexual health and so your taking responsibility for, asking [about STIs] is what you should do, but I haven’t ever heard for men, that it’s really important for them to ask…From my receiving info in this world, um yeah, it’s always been, just because I’m a women, I really haven’t heard that it’s equally important for men to ask…I would say in high school my sexual education was so minimal, so pitiful, we learned how to put a condom on a wooden dildo, I barely remember any kind of sexual information but there was a real stress on self-defense, we had a *self-defense* course.

Brandy: Like physical? Really, wow!

Gina: And what we did, because our class included male and female, they separated us and women got the self-defense course and the guys got, *I don’t even know what they got*, like reasons not to, respect for women. So that contributed to the sexual part, the idea of protect yourself, yeah

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87 Arguably, such experiences are common in the West as Abel and Fitzgerald had similar findings in New Zealand (2006). This is disheartening since New Zealand and Australia seem to be at the forefront of sexuality education and research.
that message, take care of yourself but I have a feeling that the guys didn’t get that same message about protecting themselves.

Similarly Diane’s experience as a woman engaging in hetero sex was reduced to “just [going] yay or nay” within potentially (inherently) risky situations.

Persephone in particular is articulate about the lack of connection she experienced with education that failed to address or allow room for her desires. She reflects:

I remember in like grade 9 or 10, it must have been grade 11. It was. Our biology teacher made us go around one by one, in a class of like 66, it was a big school, and um he was like, ‘I don’t want to know what the reasons are, but I want to know how many reasons do you have for not having sex.’ I was like, ‘[But] I am having sex?!’ So I was like, ‘One. And my reason is, I’m in class right now, that’s why I’m not having sex.’ […] I wish I had like (said something more!) […] The [guts] to say, ‘You have reasons, tell me what they are.’ You know? It was very bizarre.

Nova voices the frustration of girls who are eager for education that both addresses their concerns and their desires:

Nova: [I finally learnt to be open about sexuality in university.] It was that class, it was amazing, it was umm, Family Studies 316 or whatever. Like he showed us pictures of people doing it and I’d never seen that before and I was like, ‘Holy cow!’ And I’d heard all this stuff about how to make it good and, why don’t they teach you that in high school?!

So many kids were doing it and didn’t have a clue, like I didn’t have a clue, like not about stuff that really matters […] All they teach you is these are the STIs you can catch, and it scares you, but it’s, they’re doing it anyways and like I didn’t, but I mean I could have easily and there was no, I wouldn’t have known all the (types of) birth control cause I wouldn’t have, I didn’t know any of that, like so important. They don’t talk to you about anything like important. Like I know STIs are important but they’re not everything by any means! Like they’re bad and you want to avoid them but there’s so much good stuff, I mean obviously we can’t go around promoting it, cause parents will get really upset but I feel like they should have talked to us about like, ‘Let’s role play about how to talk to our partner about [pleasure].’ Like it never, I didn’t know how to

Brandy: Typically about pleasure?

Nova: Yeah!
What Can Educators Do?: Bringing in Contradiction and the Abject

As early as 1988 Michelle Fine was making an articulate, well-founded plea for the inclusion of a discourse of desire. She reminds us that “[while] too few safe spaces exist for adolescent women’s exploration of sexual subjectivities, there are all too many dangerous spots for exploitation” (35). In addition to the silences that characterize formal sites of sexual education, with their classed and racialized affects, Fine was also one of the first researchers to document how little relevance sexual health education had to young women’s understandings of themselves as sexual actors. Fine’s work has been followed up by Tolman (2002), Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) and myself (among others), who build the case for the positive contributions a discourse of desire can add to sexual health education and to sexual health outcomes. Tolman reminds us that the “more entitled [young women] feel to desire, the more they speak of balancing pleasure and danger” (2002:163). On the other hand, without access to such discourses, to some degree young women are “[trained] through and into positions of passivity and victimization… [and] educated away from positions of sexual self-interest” (Fine, 1988: 42). This ‘training’ is by no means monolithic, however, as young women actively try to renegotiate traditional discourses of feminine (hetero)sexuality and to make sense of themselves within the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse. Like Abel and Fitzgerald (2006), I found that when asked about their sexual education growing up, participants are overwhelmingly dismissive of what they learned in formal settings such as school, and, as a result, are forced to take charge of their own sexual knowledge base.

Specifically with reference to the Canadian context, Connell evaluates the Ontario sexual health curriculum. As mentioned above, my participants’ experiences validate her
findings. Connell finds that a “discourse of victimization and individual morality"\(^8^8\) dominates in the Ontario sexuality education\(^8^9\) curriculum, while the discourse of desire is largely absent” (2005:254-255). She also documents the informal discourses of active female desire that are circulating among young people. She posits that “these voices may even influence official and institutional discourses, including those of school based sexuality education, so as to make them more relevant to the lives of young people” (265, emphasis added). As others have documented (Harris et al., 2000; Gonick, 2004) and as I showed in Chapter Four, “discourses of individual choice have emerged which tend to obscure...structural patterns” of sexual inequality (Harris et al. 2000: 374). In my view this occurs as part of an overarching discourse of (neo)liberal individualism. Within this context, sexual health education in Canada assumes a coherent, rational liberal (sexual) subject as its recipient. As we have seen, the liberal subject position is both the limit and platform of the subject. Therefore, research (as seen in Chapter Four and in Harris et al, 2000; Gonick, 2004) that deconstructs the contradictory positionings of liberal (sexual) subjectionhood and ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality is useful. In addition, in the Canadian context we must also question and destabilize the subject that sexual health education assumes. Documenting the missing discourse of desire in the context of sexual health education, as Connell (2005) does, is useful, but I also move beyond this critique to address the subject’s motivation and constitution.

In upsetting the subject assumed by the IMB model, which undergirds Canadian sexual health education, I am not making a truth claim with respect to my use of

\(^8^8\) A ‘discourse of individual morality’ (Fine, 1988) is one within which individual choices are supported as long as they support the status quo for female sexuality, such as premarital chastity. As Connell explains this is a discourse within which “individual restraint triumphs over social temptation” (2005: 257).

\(^8^9\) Connell (mistakenly in my view) conflates the terms sexual health education and sexuality education, an important distinction I discuss below.
psychoanalytic concepts. Rather, I see psychoanalysis as a novel way to set ‘fresh eyes’ on a topic that seems to have been subsumed by assumptions and covered-over anxieties for too long. To position the legitimacy of sexual health education in Canada within larger discourses of (neo)liberal subjectivity assumes “that both women and men are rational unitary subjects, [which makes] it impossible to be sensitive to the inconsistencies, confusions and anxieties which characterize heterosexual relating, an area which encapsulates the uncertainties and threats to identity in contemporary gender relations” (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998:406). Hollway and Jefferson’s argument, which I outlined in Chapter Seven, reminds us of the value of psychoanalysis for offering novel ways to think about human agency. I use psychoanalytic concepts to “explore the shifting positions, conscious and unconscious, potentially motivating the discursive positionings taken here, and the intersubjective dynamics mobilizing, sustaining and destabilizing these” (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998: 411, emphasis added). In quoting Hollway and Jefferson, I emphasize the word ‘motivating’ because it is in this context that my use of psychoanalytic conceptual tools informs a critique of the IMB model. Rather than being used in a pathologizing or medicalized way, terms such as abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence are instead tools that account for why and how subjects position themselves in various discourses. In other words, I offer a view of how psychic processes “motivate investments in discursive positions” (Hollway and Jefferson, 1998: 418). The nonrational aspects of our motivation must be explored in order to move beyond assumptions of the liberal (sexual) actor in sexual health education and to increase educators’ ability to connect to youths’ experiences.
I propose that explicitly discussing the contradictions women face and bringing the abject into education constitutes a novel approach to achieving relevance because this both brings in a discourse of desire and disrupts the liberal subject. Bringing in and being explicit about the abjection of proofs of desire, as seen in slut discourse, STIs and pregnancy, we can disrupt the ways sexual subjectivities, and subjectivity more broadly, are currently sustained and reiterated. Our current sexual health education designs, which assume the liberal subject, perpetuate (feed) the discourses negotiated by the hybrid ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse. In a related way, we must explicitly address the cultural contradictions that surround sexuality. Having students critically engage media representations of sexuality can make explicit many of the ambivalences and disavowals that attend sexuality. My recommendations do not differ greatly from calls that have been made to include a discourse of desire into the classroom since Fine’s pivotal 1988 paper, though I also recommend that we must address the contradictions that surround sexuality. Moreover, the poststructural and psychoanalytic insights provided by my work into the subject and how subjection is sustained offers a possible disruption in how we understand our world and ourselves as individuals. Many streams of psychoanalysis, in their typically universalized manifestations, provide little room for reworking subjectivities. However, following Foucauldian insights into the productivity of critical genealogies, we see how being explicit about the discourses and processes that undergird our assumptions and positionings can bring them into conscious light. Upon examination, we see how these assumptions and contradictions serve various vested interests and represent only one possible reality.
Thompson (1990) proposes some of the following questions for inclusion in a curriculum that addresses active female desire:

- Do you get wet when you have a romantic or sexual dream?
- When you think about kissing or petting?
- Do your genitals become warm or feel pleasure?
- Do you know where your clitoris is? Have you touched it? Excited it?
- Do you have an idea of what an orgasm is?
- Have you touched yourself inside?
- If you are considering having intercourse, have you imagined what penetration may feel like?
- Does the idea of having sex with the person you are considering it with excite you?
- Do you think your prospective lover will take the time to pleasure, or learn how to pleasure, you?
- Stop whatever he or she is doing if you insist?
- Continue until you want to stop?

These would be invaluable questions for sexual health education to ask. Also, explicitly addressing the contradictions young women face empowers them to make critical, fully-informed choices while at the same time exposing disavowal and ambivalence. Many authors (as summarized in Potts, 2002) also explore the possibilities of imagining non-penetrative erotic experiences and the discursive subjective shifts these practices would necessitate. In addition to these important interventions, I propose a course of action similar to Butler’s call for the “public assertion of ‘queerness,’” which she argues resignifies the abjection of homosexuality into ‘defiance and legitimacy’ (1999:21). In other words, I propose curricula that assert the abject of (hetero)sexuality in the context of fluidity, queerness and homosexuality, active female desire and its ‘proofs.’ This explicitness would expose and disrupt this very abjection, and in turn the subjectivity premised on it, demanding the resignification of active female desire, queerness,
alternative erotics, STIs and unwanted teenage pregnancy, among other things. Fine’s research in 1988 began to address the necessity of ‘bringing in the abject.’ She writes:

The ambivalence surrounding female heterosexuality places the victim and subject in opposition and derogates all women who represent female sexual subjectivities outside of marriage – prostitutes, lesbians, single mothers, women involved with multiple partners, and particularly, Black single mothers … ‘Protected’ from this derogation, the typical adolescent woman, as represented in sex education curricula, is without sexual subjectivity. The discourse of victimization not only obscures the derogation, it also transforms socially disturbed anxieties about female sexuality into acceptable, even protective talk. (1988:42)

By addressing the abject and the process of abjection explicitly we expose the thin veneer that translates abjection into protection and does a disservice to all people. Specifically, our current sexual health programs and (neo)liberal funding cuts to sexual health education leave women to negotiate the contradictions they experience alone.

There are definitely efforts being made to bring a diversity of experience and varied representations of sexual practices into the classroom (Smith, 2004; Sumara and Davis, 1999). Smith (2004) explores gay and lesbian challenges to education practice in British Columbia specifically. While there are people and organizations working towards ‘bringing in the abject,’ we must also acknowledge the power some parents and lobbyists have to suppress comprehensive sexuality education in Canada. For some, there is still the fear that teaching about a range of sexual practices or how to protect oneself if they choose to be sexually active will endorse or encourage such behaviour, despite much evidence to the contrary (for an overview see McKay, 2004). And even within comprehensive sexuality education there continues to be basic assumptions of

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Again, certain ‘fundamentalist’ versions of psychoanalysis may dispute the possibility of such an event, as abjection is seen as a foundational subject effect, but by including a Foucauldian poststructural perspective we see that perhaps our current understandings and experiences of subjectivity are linked with the types of individuation linked with the (neo)liberal state. Hence these understandings and experiences could be disrupted.
heteronormativity (Ferfolja, 2007). There is still limited conversation around all topics, experiences and practices abjected from the category of ‘proper’ (hetero)sexuality. Sexual health education as it is currently organized also fails to adequately address the contradictions that surround sexuality in our culture. If sexual health education is not addressed in a comprehensive inclusive manner, young women (and men) are forced to turn to the media for sexual education, as occurred for most of my participants. The media typically reinforces and perpetuates sexual contradictions.

In Chapters Six and Seven I also explored the processes of disavowal and ambivalence. In order to expose the power of these processes in young women’s sexual subjectivity and decisions, sexual health education must explicitly address the cultural and discursive contradictions that surround sexuality. As mentioned above, critical media consumption would be central in any attempt to make disavowal and ambivalence explicit. Sexual health curricula could encourage conversations about the various and contradictory ideas about sexuality that youth, and young women in particular, are exposed to. Topics of discussion could include how commercialized images show youth that sexual activity is both good and bad, how you must have it but that it is also ‘scary.’ How do the media show that youth should be both attracted to and repulsed by sexual activity? How does this occur in ‘advice columns’ in teen magazines? With regard to how vulnerability to physical sexual risks, including violence and STIs, is disavowed, conversations around vulnerability would be very important. As has been shown throughout this dissertation, sexual health education has already ‘successfully’ incorporated a discussion of the sexual risks women face. This conversation must now be shifted to include a discourse of responsibility on behalf of the perpetrators. Educators
could also facilitate conversations about the broader social contexts that violence occurs in, exploring why and how people who have been physically or sexually violated might blame themselves. Key would be having each student make connections between the possibilities of being an empowered sexual being and one who may also have experienced violence. With regard to STIs, it would be important have youth explore why it might be hard to ask about a partner’s STI status, exposing the assumptions we make about our competency in partner choices and how we assume those at risk of STIs can somehow be identified through an assessment of a partner’s friends, clothing, personal grooming habits, political orientations, and so on. It would be interesting for people to see how their assumptions affect their choices. Having students prepare a list of issues they would ideally like to discuss with any potential partner before having sex would be a useful tool for them. Preparing in advance of facing a situation empowers youth to deal with the situations in ways that coincide with their self-identified values and beliefs.

With regard to ambivalence, exposing fears and assumptions within these conversations would be important. The other central issue would be opening up space for a discourse of desire, as has been discussed above. These suggestions do not provide an exhaustive list of educational possibilities; rather, they offer some areas to be explored and expanded upon based on their success in educational settings.

A small part of challenging assumptions about education would include shifting the notion of sexual health education in Canada to ‘sexuality education.’ As it stands in Canada, sexual health education is still the most commonly used term and denotes a medicalized and arguably normative orientation in its focus on ‘health.’ The limit of ‘healthy’ sexuality is a contestable and shifting boundary. Attempts to bring in the abject
destabilize our current boundaries. The *Guidelines* are still the most privileged text for most mainstream sexual health educators in Canada. In my training with Opt B.C., the notion of sexuality education was used only informally, among educators who were more critical of the normative boundaries sexual health education has historically reinforced (such as those around heterosexuality, monogamy, emphasizing the dyad relationship, etc.). I know ‘freelance’ educators who now market themselves as sexuality educators. However, the mainstream service providers continue to use the term sexual health education, for any number of reasons, including their struggle to maintain conservative government funding. Even though the *Guidelines* are sure to emphasize and “support the positive integration of sexuality” (2003:v), critical connotations of sexuality education have yet to be integrated fully into Canadian classrooms (also see Connell, 2005, findings). Sexuality education specifically emphasizes “sexual dialogue and critique” (Fine, 1988:30), which necessitates ‘comprehensive’ (versus abstinence-based) education that informs people about many aspects of their sexuality rather than focusing exclusively on the biomedical absence of disease (Tolman, 2002:202). I feel this is a useful distinction, especially since Connell’s (2005) examination of the Ontario curriculum and the *Guidelines* conflates the terms sexual health education and sexuality education. It is possible that in Ontario the ground level implementation of the *Guidelines* has advanced beyond its reliance on the term ‘sexual health education’ in a way that has not occurred in B.C. However, we need to acknowledge the current state of education rather than use terms in our research that reflect only our own critical perspective. This conflation of terms occurs despite Connell’s acknowledgement of the debates that question “whether ‘sexual health,’ as a category and concept, is socially constructed… [acknowledging that]
‘health’ or ‘healthy’ carry an assumption of medical authority, normativity or objectivity” wherein those whose behaviours do not fit within accepted norms can be defined as ‘unhealthy’ (2005:261). Research in Australia and New Zealand (Abel and Fitzgerald, 2006; Allen, 2003a, 2003b, 2004) seems to rely on the term sexuality education. While I do not know if this reflects what is occurring in the classrooms there, I do think it is important to remain aware of the fact that using the term ‘sexuality education’ does not reflect the reality of Canadian, or at least British Columbian, classrooms.

I found that many of the women I interviewed were open to and recommended resignifying the meanings of STIs, which undermines the abjection of STIs as proof of active (female) desire. At least a few women explicitly mentioned this suggestion. Shawnequa was most vocal about disrupting this abjection. Perhaps this is because Shawnequa, as seen in Chapter Five, had had an experience with a friend who had been improperly positioned to deal with living with genital herpes in an empowered way. Instead Shawnequa claimed that her friend ‘got really weird because she thought her life was over’ and ended up in drug rehab. As Shawnequa vehemently asserts:

Shawnequa: [Education] shouldn’t just be like herpes is evil, use condoms always! And, you know, those are all terrible things to have, and HIV is a terrible thing to have, but I think they should have [communicated] the fact that, if however, you do have these, or contract these, this is where to go, it’s not the end of the world.

Brandy: So more like living with HIV or herpes as opposed to dying of sheer shame?

Shawnequa: Yeah.

Analyzing the interviews made it apparent to me that, to some degree, ‘bringing in the
‘abject’ within sexual health education has already occurred\(^91\). The silence that has in the past surrounded female masturbation still exists, though in a limited way, in the women’s lives. There are many popular cultural manifestations, such as *Sex and the City* and *Bust* magazine, which provide positive portrayals and discussions of female masturbation. Overwhelmingly, participants are very comfortable speaking about masturbation and generally had learnt about both female and male masturbation in school.\(^92\) The incorporation of women’s pleasure via masturbation in sexual health education is important because it provides young women with a discourse within which to articulate their experiences of masturbation and pleasure. Arguably, discussing female masturbation in education is an example of incorporating a previously silenced expression of active female sexuality that has, through ‘defiance,’ been resignified. The incorporation of this topic in education in turn is supported by myriad popular cultural texts and productions that encourage women’s masturbation. Most of the women seem comfortable with their masturbation and had discussed it with female peers growing up, though some emphasize that it only occurred when their partner was not available for long periods of time. A few women said they never masturbated, while interestingly, more than a few expressed concern over their lack of desire to masturbate\(^93\). For these women it seems that *not* masturbating was to varying degrees experienced as a problem. Schwartz and Rutter’s research in the U.S. generally supports this proposition, arguing that while “[rates] of masturbation may still reveal a gender difference…the absence of

\(^91\) In chapter five I also discussed how women are informally, amongst themselves, resignifying the meaning of slut, slut discourse and, in turn, this abjection.

\(^92\) This is not surprising as this is one of the first ‘myths’ sexual health educators in my experience address when we talk about puberty and very few of the prepubescent students (those that speak out anyways) still hold the belief that only boys masturbate.

\(^93\) I must note here that in the WRAP project in the UK Holland et al. generally found that “if masturbation was touched on at all [in sex education], it was usually in relation to men” (1994b:66). I cannot fully account for our different findings, though perhaps the national, political context accounts for this.
masturbation, rather than the presence of it, is more frequently being identified as the problem” (1998:45). For Miriam there is not a perceived problem per se, but her partner was shocked by the fact that she did not masturbate. For Jo, not masturbating is a disturbing issue. She says:

I don’t think I decided to and touched myself for any prolonged period of time until like two years ago…deciding I think I want to explore my sexuality more. Ok, I’ll read about what to do because I don’t really know what to do…That was all fine and good but it’s like half an hour I felt like I was, my body was more in a like relaxed state, but I wasn’t turned on and then… about a year ago, I tried, I had this, I moved into this apartment, there was a mirror on this whole wall and I was like, ‘Ok, I’ll try to take advantage of this connection and see if my body turns me on.’ It was really, really difficult to look at myself, like in my eyes, in the mirror...while touching myself, so it was difficult. See, guilt comes up a lot, but I thought that like, what I had read, that if you couldn’t do that, at least the way I read it, it made me feel like I didn’t love my body and I could see there being a link with that…I can’t even masturbate on my own! So then I think I got a vibrator. And then I tried that and it was nice, but I didn’t come.

Jo’s ambivalence is interesting in that it seems to result from what she has read (from the ‘experts,’ feminist or psychological perhaps?) about women and masturbation. She should be interested in masturbating if she loves her body and, by extension, herself. The guilt she expresses is unclear. Is it guilt about masturbating generally (which does not seem as likely), or because she should want to masturbate and love her body? Jo went on to emphasize the ‘experts’ role in her discomfort, saying:

Jo: I guess, like it would be nice to read somewhere, but maybe, yeah, it would be nice to read somewhere, that for anyone, but women who don’t masturbate, that that’s just another variation and not necessarily a, like, ‘If you don’t, you don’t have relationship with yourself”[…] It would be nice to see that, cause all the literature out there and the sex manuals [say] that you need that, and so yeah and that’s, I just , you need to be critical of anything that says it’s

Brandy: ‘The way’?
Jo: One way. I’m sure there’s a lot of benefits to having that relationship, but it can’t be for everybody. But just more like, just seeing that like, just positive reinforcement for any choice that people make.

Jo is explicit that the normative discourses of sexuality make her masturbation habits, or lack thereof, an issue. Jill too feels she *should* masturbate more in order to ‘understand herself more’. Less than a hundred years ago, male masturbation was demonized and pathologized (Hall, 1992) and female masturbation was barely even recognized. My findings are certainly different and indicate a significant shift in our orientation towards masturbation. Since masturbation was not the focus of my interviews per se, I do not have extensive findings on this shift. This shift does show how the abject has been resignified. However, the unease I saw in a few of the interviews led me to jokingly refer to this phenomenon as ‘the tyranny of masturbation.’ The term ‘tyranny’ suggests (in an admittedly exaggerated way) the role dominant normative discourses have in constructing experience. As such, this particular inclusion of ‘the abject’ reflects a resistance that has been recuperated as a new form of normative restriction. It seems that people are talking more about women’s masturbation, but now women are compelled to self-survey their masturbatory practices.

In a context where only some aspects of active female sexuality have been resignified, it remains necessary for young women to negotiate sometimes contradictory discourses and motivations. Diane’s experience with cyber sex (seen in Chapter Five as well) brings these complexities to the fore:

Diane: We used the webcam a couple times but strictly, we haven’t actually done anything over the webcam. It’s more, he can see me and me him, that sort of thing

Brandy: Like, while you’re masturbating?
Diane: No, him more, not me.

Brandy: So he’s masturbating?

Diane: Yeah. I don’t want to do that! (laughs)

It seems that while masturbation is encouraged while women are alone, and for some this was explicitly a matter of being a better partner for their boyfriends, no participant mentioned being comfortable expressing the ‘completion’ of her desire, if that is to be understood as achieving orgasm, through masturbation in front of a partner. Interestingly, I remember noting this because it reinforced my own experiences. In light of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, masturbation has been refigured as part of women’s ‘healthy’ sexuality, but only seems to work in this way when women are alone or when their masturbation is seen as being part of pre-intercourse foreplay with their partner. Thus, the norms of women’s sexual competency are being reworked but the privileging of male partners’ pleasure within the sexual dyad remains unchallenged. Masturbation enhances hetero sexual relations, it does not replace them. Masturbation and active female pleasure are in some cases allowed, if it is done alone or as part of foreplay, but contradictions become evident when female desire is at risk of supplanting male pleasure. Explicitly exploring such contradictions in the classroom will expose and address the ambivalences of sexuality.

While this inclusion of the abject is inevitably complicated and ambivalent, there is also another area where I found evidence of the resignification of women’s active desire. In the present cultural context of the internet and rapidly expanding technological advances in communication, there are arguably new playing fields on which meaning and discourse are being constantly reworked. While the complexity of the technological
mediation of gender and sexuality in contemporary society is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will briefly explore how technology came up in my interviews. Of the participants that I asked\textsuperscript{94}, eight had, at some point in time, used the internet and related technology for sexual stimulation (including cybersex on text based interface, reading erotic literature on-line, sending erotic e-mails or ‘sexting,’ sending erotic texts to partners), four had participated in phone sex and six had not been involved in any of these practices. Sexual interactions and the articulation of women’s active desire on the internet and related technologies are not made necessarily emancipatory by their historical ‘newness’. However, there are some encouraging signs that within this realm of communication, there are an increasing number of contexts where women are able to communicate and negotiate the articulation of their desire in unpredictable ways.

For some of the participants the internet played a definite role in the articulation of their desires. Olivia sought out cybersex as a teenager. Emma cites the internet as a primary source of sexuality education. For other participants the context of online chatting provided a forum where it became obvious to them that their desires were expected to be subordinated to male partners. The internet thus created a space for women to critically assess their experiences. Shawnequa remembers her experiences of cybersex in chat rooms when she was between the ages of twelve and fourteen. She says:

Shawnequa: [The guys online] said like, ‘Seventeen year old male from Wisconsin,’ but I knew he could be like a forty six year old guy in Japan or whatever. So it’s kind of like, this is just for me to be aroused by it now…I would go into chat rooms to play checkers and in every chat room there’s always like five or six guys that are like, ‘Does anyone want to cyber?’ And a couple times I must have gone in too and been like, ‘Ok.’ I never checked specific chat rooms for like, ‘hot loving’ or whatever.

\textsuperscript{94} I only started asking about this after it came up with one of the early participants.
Brandy: You keep rolling your eyes. Was it like just kind of a joke or…

Shawnequa: Not necessarily a joke, it was just sort of, I don’t know, it was just so dumb. I was never having a good time, cause it was always just stupid guys who were like, ‘Yeah, tell me what you’re gonna do now’ and I would never ever just get to sit back and have a guy describe a scenario to me. It was like, ‘Ok, tell me something you do.’ ‘Yeah, I want to do you!’ I’m not getting the sexual gratification I need from this, so why bother.

Shawnequa is explicit in acknowledging these exchanges as imperfect ways to facilitate her own arousal and pleasure. She rolls her eyes signaling a distain for the men’s laziness and expectation that she provide all the titillation. Clearly, these technologically-mediated spaces are among the myriad and growing number of contexts within which sexuality and gender (not to mention class and racialization which is not signaled in these particular experiences) are negotiated, and where discourses are both reiterated and disrupted in complex and ambivalent ways.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined how poststructural and psychoanalytic insights into the subject and subjectivity potentially move our conceptualization of young women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivities beyond the assumption of lack and passivity. I have offered some thoughts on how these insights facilitate a critical interrogation of the premises on which Canadian sexual health education is built (as outlined in the *Guidelines*) in ways that allow us to rework our approaches to education, to resignify various abjected manifestations of women’s sexuality, and to address the disavowed and ambivalence producing contradictions young women face.
Conclusions: Imagining a Future

After introducing the participants and my own orientations to this research project, I began this dissertation by outlining three important discourses used to understand young women’s (hetero)sexuality: dominant, feminist\(^\text{95}\) and sexual health (education) discourses. I have shown the continual presence of the assumption of women’s sexual lack and passivity within these discourses. I did this in order to provide an overview of the context within which our theoretical work on women’s sexual subjectivity occurs. I sought to move beyond current theoretical understandings of young women’s sexual subjectivity by utilizing poststructural and psychoanalytic insights. Building on previous feminist sexual health research, I approached the topic of young women’s sexual subjectivity from a novel perspective that attempts to show how the positioning of women in various discourses as somehow ‘lacking’ actually constrains what we as researchers are able to hear in their sexual stories. If we do not assume that women are always, already lacking and at risk of sexual harm we can better account for the complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions that are present in young women’s sexual stories, which generally have been smoothed over and covered up in dominant, feminist and sexual health discourses. I used a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis that focuses on the power that circulates through discourses and our positioning within them, in turn limiting and enabling various courses of action, understandings and experiences. I also used psychoanalytic insights that allow us to explore how processes of subjectification can occur as young women constitute themselves as (hetero)sexual women.

\(^{95}\) It must be noted that I focused on certain privileged streams of feminist discourse, which I distinguished from pro-sex feminism.
As discussed in Chapter One, my work contributes to the growing body of literature that has problematized and unpacked the assumptions theorists make about the naturalness of heterosexuality by exposing the processes and negotiations through which young women position themselves as both competent liberal sexual actors and ‘proper’ women. In Chapter Four, I explored how young women negotiate dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality that often position them as passive objects of male (hetero)sexuality in ways that they feel empower them and allow them to maintain a coherent sense of their subjectivity within the hybrid discourse of ‘competent feminine sexuality.’

This dissertation made three distinct theoretical contributions. The first is my articulation of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, which allowed me to account for how women’s agency is sometimes directed towards privileging male pleasure rather than their agency being undermined by their privileging of men’s pleasure. The emergence of this hybrid discourse illustrates Foucault’s argument that discourses are always being reworked in unanticipated ways, ways that in moments disrupt and in other moments reiterate current power relations. The ‘competent feminine sexuality discourse’ offers new understandings of ‘unwanted consensual sex,’ showing how women are able to smooth over the contradictions of ‘performing pleasure’ by evoking this hybrid discourse wherein they understand themselves as ‘choosing’ to privilege their male partner’s desire and pleasure by positioning themselves within discourses of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality and liberal (sexual) agency. Positioning themselves within the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse allows women to experience themselves as ‘successfully’ navigating sexual encounters. Women’s negotiations of both liberal and gendered discourses at times enable them to assert their
desire, pleasure and safety, but at other times delimit their ability to do so. We saw how the liberal subject, as constituted in the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse, provides both a limit and a platform for women to exert their sexual agency.

A second theoretical contribution I made is my use of psychoanalytic concepts to deepen our understanding of women’s sexual subjectivity. Using the psychoanalytic concepts of the abject, disavowal, and ambivalence, I explored how these processes help to account for how subjection is both productive and negative, in the sense of both delimiting our actions and as the only basis on which transgression and resistance are possible.

In Chapter Five, I considered how the abjection of female sexual agency and its ‘proofs’ in ‘slut discourse’ and STIs were used to shore up and set the limits of the category of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality. The silences around young women’s active desire, particularly within the family, help to reiterate this abjection. Exploring the role of abjection in subjectification allowed me to offer new perspectives on how women relate to their desire, which structures their sexual choices and actions. I showed how the social or structural abjection of women’s active desire is experienced in the participants’ everyday sexual experiences. I highlighted moments in the narratives that illustrate how sexual subjectivity is consolidated in distancing itself from the abject - the not-me; I also explored the continual threat that the abject presents to young women’s understandings of themselves. The threat of the abject is the threat of being contaminated by or becoming the abject, which undermines the subject’s attempts to assert its competency and exposes the vulnerability of the subject. Exploring how the abject is expelled in the ongoing process of subjectification, I also showed how proofs of women’s active desire ‘act back’
on the category of ‘proper’ feminine (hetero)sexuality in ways that undermine and destabilize this category. Slutty and dis-eased bodies are rejected and pathologized. At the same time, however, I documented participants’ struggle to redefine the terms through which their sexuality is experienced and articulated; central to this process is the constitutive but never ‘fully controlled’ nature of the abjection of women’s active desire.

In Chapter Six I explored the role of disavowal in subjectivity. I showed how disavowal is part of the constant reiteration of subjectification. Through the process of disavowal, we saw how women’s desire within late-modern patriarchal society can come to be constructed as primarily about trust and safety in ways that assert the female (hetero)sexual subject’s autonomy and freedom from sexual risk (such as sexualized violence and STIs) in the face of these perceived threats. As noted, Freud defines disavowal as “a token triumph over [a perceived trauma] and a protection against it” (1986: 353). Using Freud’s notion of disavowal, I outlined how desire itself becomes constituted as a desire for trust and safety in the face of both real and perceived traumas of violation and how women position themselves as ‘unrapable’ or ‘unviolable’ subjects. I additionally explored how being ‘trusting’ subjects allows women to position themselves as subjects not at risk of STIs or violence. The spectre of these risks, similar to ‘proofs’ of women’s active desire, was expelled, but remains constitutive of how women see themselves as actors. In this sense, I explored how the process of disavowal is central to the attempted maintenance of the ‘impermeability’ and stability of the subject, which reinforces the positioning and articulation of oneself as a competent female sexual actor. However, because the impermeability and mastery sought is illusory, I also
highlighted moments in the narratives where the participants’ disavowals were exposed in language.

Throughout my exploration of participants’ interviews, I implicitly acknowledge the ambivalence suffusing their narratives. In Chapter Seven I addressed this ambivalence directly. From the psychoanalytic poststructural perspective that I take in exploring subjectivity, ambivalence in narratives is inevitable. If the processes of abjection and disavowal are part of subjectification then ambivalence will be one of the primary ‘manifestations’ of these underlying processes. How could our narratives possibility be coherent and stable if the subjectivity we are attempting to articulate is itself fragmented and premised on defensive processes? Investigating the ambivalence in the contradictions and complexities in the women’s narratives, I also showed that the attempts of the available discourses to organize and frame young women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity are often incomplete. I highlighted the ambivalence that occurs in two specific areas of women’s narratives: condom use and their articulation of their desires. In much feminist sexual health research, ambivalence in women’s sexual stories has been assumed to signal their coercion within hetero sexual encounters. I disrupted this assumption by arguing that ambivalence in young women’s sexual stories is not necessarily or always evidence of coercion, personal or cultural, to privilege male pleasure. I showed that ambivalence in narratives may also occur for two other reasons: there is few easily accessible discourses of women’s active desire and ambivalence in our verbal articulations of ourselves is inevitable. In other words, I showed how from a psychoanalytic perspective ambivalence is inevitable and how women’s stories are
sometimes ambivalent and ‘limited’ because they lack the framework within which to articulate their active desire.

In considering the second theoretical contribution I make, one might ask if the three concepts of abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence are sequential processes where one concept builds on the other. In many ways, this is how these three concepts have been presented in the body of this dissertation with each substantive chapter expanding on the previous one. I showed how abjection is central to the subject’s development as a distinct entity within normative social structures. In turn, I presented the insights the term disavowal has for the process in which we, as subjects, need to defensively construct a boundary between that which the subject is and is not. The abject references the not-me of the subject whereas via disavowal participants attempt to position themselves as invulnerable to perceived sexual threats. Disavowal in the face of perceived threats is necessary in order for young women to maintain the stability of their subjectivity and their positioning within discourses of autonomy and competency. From this ‘sequential’ perspective, ambivalence in the women’s narratives, particularly in regard to their condom use and articulation of their active desire, is the inevitable ‘manifestation’ of these underlying, and premising, defensive processes. At the same time however, I argue that abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence are not merely sequential processes. They are also mutually constitutive and can be seen as a fluid and dynamic process wherein none of the individual processes are to be granted causal priority. Ultimate, the answer to the question of relationship between these processes is yes and no. They are sometimes sequential but that this is not always the case. My research constitutes a novel intervention into the theorization of women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity and can act as a
starting point from which future research can further examine the nature of the relationships between psychoanalytic processes of subjectification.

When addressing my use of psychoanalytic concepts to invigorate the sociological exploration of young women’s (hetero)sexual subjectivity, I must briefly acknowledge here that other psychoanalytic concepts may have been used to examine the participants’ narratives. As has been reiterated throughout this dissertation, I used the psychoanalytic concepts that I did purely for their analytic value and not for their therapeutic value, which has traditionally had a considerable pathologizing force. My role is that of researcher rather than psychiatrist. One of the many strengths of this work is its exploration of the ‘normal’ process of subjectification from a psychoanalytic perspective. I have argued that my insights are useful for theorizing the reiteration and disruption of the normative gendered discourses that all people are immersed in; my insights are by no means specific to a somehow ‘pathological’ or ‘troubled’ group of women. It is perhaps this ‘normalcy’ that dictated my choice of psychoanalytic concepts. Certainly there are other relevant concepts, Butler (1999) for example productively explores the role of melancholia in subjectification, but I found abjection, disavowal, and ambivalence to be most relevant. The relevancy of these processes is premised on their ability to illuminate ‘normal’ processes of subjectification.

Just as other psychoanalytic concepts may have provided different theoretical insights, the participants’ narratives could also have been explored in different ways. Here I would like to address one particular approach that I briefly mentioned in Chapter One. I have spent much time in this dissertation showing how the participants position themselves as competent female sexual actors. In exploring the processes of abjection,
disavowal, and ambivalence, I also showed how the competent subjective positioning is enabled. What I have not explored in great detail is how the interviews themselves were an opportunity for the women to verbally perform their sexual competence for an ‘expert’ audience. Foucault’s (1990) argument that the modern-day interview with an ‘expert’ parallels earlier (Catholic) confessional practices motivates the exploration of the interview itself as a form of confessional and opportunity to (re)position oneself as a ‘good’ (competent) subject. From this perspective, one might ask how competency was performed in the interviews. As mentioned in Chapter One, I highlight the parallels between the narratives participants wove and our everyday enactments of self-articulation and performance. By no means were the women performing in the sense of ‘acting’ during the interviews. It would have been interesting to self-reflexively examine the narratives as an everyday, mutually-produced, between the participants and myself, enactment of participants’ subjectivity. In this sense, I could have explored the narratives as part of the continuum of everyday events that, like our clothing, utterances, and movements through society, both reiterate and shore up our various discursive and embodied positions. It is interesting to note that even though I did not explore the narratives from this ‘interview as verbal enactment’ perspective this expansion on and speculation about Foucault’s insights into the confessional process support my other explorations of competency (how one is positioned as such and how this occurs) in the narratives.

Given my feminist orientations, I hope that the participants ‘got something’ out of participating in this research. Related to the idea of the interview as a performance of competency, a number of the participants indeed did express that they had enjoyed the
interview process. For some, the interview was a chance for them to get a ‘clear’ storyline of their sexual history in their head. Some expressed that the interview was an opportunity to take time to think about themselves and articulate their experiences which was an opportunity rarely afforded them. It seems that there were both pragmatic personal benefits, such as articulating oneself to an interested non-judgmental person, and psychic benefits, like the opportunity to clarify and shore up one’s competency and mastery.

Before moving on to discuss my third contribution, I would like to make a last note about my use of psychoanalytic theory. Many feminists have been critical of the ability of psychoanalytic theory to provide a productive foundation for either the exploration of sexual subjectivity or for political action (for an overview of this perspective see Jackson, 1999:22-23). These criticisms, which generally focus on the ‘truth claims’ made by the traditional uptake of psychoanalysis and the exclusive nature of psychoanalytic categories that assume a White, heterosexual male subject (see Fanon, 1982; Irigaray, 1985; and Campbell, 2000 among others), are useful to bear in mind; also important are claims that psychoanalysis can only lead to individualist political interventions that are not aligned with the ‘collective’ orientation of feminism as a movement. While keeping this in mind, like Butler (1999), I attempt to show how psychoanalytic processes can illuminate the structural reiteration and transgression of inequality. Admittedly additional perspectives may better inform political interventions, but I have shown the value of psychoanalytic concepts for exploring processes of subjectification. My theoretical contributions must inform and be supplemented by practical interventions. Given my political commitments to feminism, I try to engage
psychoanalysis in a critical, active way by rejecting its truth claims and pre-discursive posturing. These commitments to political activism inform my third and final contribution.

The third contribution I made lies in the practical implications of my work. In exploring the complexities of young women’s sexual subjectivities, I began to reimagine what sexuality education could look like if educators bring poststructural and psychoanalytic insights into their pedagogies. My recommendations are specific to the provision of sexuality education in public schools. In Chapter Eight, I made two specific recommendations. First, sexuality curricula need to be explicit about the contradictions young women face in being positioned as both liberal and gendered subjects. Educators would also need to address the contradictions that reinforce the disavowal and ambivalence I documented. Well-funded sexuality programs can offer young women the critical analytical skills to make fully informed, self-interested decisions about their sexuality. The point is not simply to empower women to say ‘no,’ but to enable them to make decisions that are premised on understanding themselves as sexual agents with a variety of sexual rights that include pleasure and desire. Second, I recommended explicitly discussing the ways that we have abjected certain forms of female (hetero)sexuality (active desire), and other forms of sexuality (queer sexuality and ‘alternative,’ non-penetrative erotics). Incorporating these two recommendations can show youth how their understandings of themselves are based on processes that, when not conscious, reiterate discourses that deny women’s sexual agency. Exposing the process of abjection and allowing for a diversity of sexual practices and identities are likely to have empowering effects for young women and all youth. Critical conversation
gives young women new platforms from which to rework and imagine their sexual subjectivity because doing so offers discursive space for them to position themselves in ways that allow them to comfortably assert their desires, pleasures and safety. Such conversations will reinforce the influence sex-radical feminism has had on popular culture and young women’s lives for the last three decades.

While this dissertation makes a number of contributions, there are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. As discussed in Chapter One, I interviewed only a small number of women who were similarly positioned in a number of privileged ways. The women were all part of the minority of the population that has access to a university education. In some ways, much of what I found is a reflection of my sample. I believe that interviewing other women would significantly deepen and enrich my findings. None of the women I interviewed had ever had children or been married. Participants were responsible solely for themselves. The narratives of first-time mothers, in all likelihood, would be quite different. Arguably, the different frameworks and perspectives within which women position themselves greatly affect their sexual experiences.

Much research has alerted us to the issue of how class intersects with (hetero)sexuality, discussing how limited access to financial resources (Higgins, 2007) and cultural knowledge and privilege (Kaplan, 1985; Sangster, 1996; Mahay et al., 2001) forces women to negotiation a range of sexual delimitations. Migration between countries also affects women’s experiences of (hetero)sexuality, as Espin (1996) and Espiritu (2001) have shown. With regard to racialization, I addressed Espiritu’s (2001) findings in Chapter One. There remains a need for my work to be extended to incorporate a focus on
how processes of racialization intersect with (hetero)sexuality, affecting the processes of abjection, disavowal and ambivalence, and to explore the range of contradictory positions women of colour must negotiate. Work that explores the specifics of racialized women’s (hetero)sexual experiences can inform this extension of my work, such as that of Mahay et al. (2001), DasGupta and DasGupta (1996), Hammonds (1997) and White (1999) into racialized women’s experiences in the U.S., while the research of Tharao and Massaquoi (2001) and Ship and Norton (2001) on racialized women’s experiences in Canada could also be used. Work that explores the textures of women’s sexual experiences is invaluable; however, it must never assume that ‘non-White’ or working class women have ‘less’ agency than their privileged counterparts. We must explore how agency is directed and experienced in myriad ways.

I entered this research expecting to find differences in the experiences of racialization and sexuality. In this context, the relative lack of diversity in the narratives was surprising. I argued in Chapter One that class and educational privilege are more salient in interviews than was racialization or sexuality identity (bisexual/exclusively heterosexual). In light of my exploration of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse in Chapter Four, I made some speculations about the similarity of the narratives of racialized/non-racialized women and the one self-identified bisexual woman, Lily, in comparison to the rest of the women, who did not identify as bisexual. As discussed, a number of women disrupted the assumption of an ‘exclusively’ heterosexual identity. Despite the fact that Lily identifies as a bisexual, her narrative, as mentioned, was very similar to other participants’ narratives. I argued that gendered, hence heterosexualized, dichotomies were predominant in her sexual experiences. Her sexual experiences, though
diverse like many of the other women’s, even if they did not self-identify as bisexual, were primarily understood within gendered discourses that frame women’s sexuality as necessarily and naturally orientated toward men. The ‘feminine sexuality’ aspect of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse is homogenized and naturalized as heterosexual within this context. Arguably, same-sex sexual experiences, unless supported by political identification and experience as a sexual minority, are often subsumed within overarching gender dichotomous discourses, which Butler (1999) refers to as the ‘heterosexual matrix.’ When the diversity of women’s sexual experiences is understood primarily within gendered discourses, it is unsurprising that disruptions of the default heterosexual identity are rarely privileged in speech. In the context of my research, participants seemed to understand their ‘feminine sexuality’ primarily in relation to men, regardless of the diversity of their experiences.

With regard to the lack of racialized diversity discussed in Chapter One, it is useful to again read similarities in relation to the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse as well. With regard to racialization, the liberal discourse-informed competency aspect of the ‘competent feminine sexuality’ discourse is also very salient. Again, the women I interviewed all attend post-secondary institutions. Most of them are middle-, if not middle-upper, class. In this way, all of the women have access to a range of economic and educational resources. In this sense, participants could easily position themselves within (neo)liberal discourses of competency. I also argue that the fact that they were willing to self-select into this study speaks to their ability to position themselves as sexually competent subjects as well. They felt confident enough in articulating their sexuality to speak with an ‘expert.’ Claiming (neo)liberal competency often necessitates
minimizing difference and diversity and relying on the assumption that we all have the same rights, access to resources, and opportunity to succeed. I believe that experiences of diversity based on racialization were minimized in the participants’ narratives. I argued that the (neo)liberal subject, despite being differentially positioned in gendered, classed, and racialized ways, seeks to claim, ‘I’m the same as everyone else!’ Particularly within the university population where it may be argued that homogenization often occurs, it seems that experiences of difference are often understood in ways that smooth over contradiction. At times, (neo)liberal discourse effectively covers over experiences of gendered and racialized contradiction and difference. While trying to account for a lack of diversity in the narratives, I must also acknowledge that the question remains: how would the narratives been different if I was a woman of colour or if I had collaborated with a woman of colour?

Even though participants’ experiences are by no means representative of all women’s, there are a number of reasons why these women are part of an ‘important’ or significant population. The women I interviewed were young, university-educated women. Their education will likely provide them with access to ‘good’ careers and ‘bright futures.’ Positioned as competent (neo)liberal subjects, these women are in many ways well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the second wave of feminism. Participants have access to educational, political and economic capital. At the same time, however, my research has shown how gendered discourses continue to delimit these women’s ability to negotiate their (hetero)sexual encounters in self-interested ways. I showed how women’s increasing access to (neo)liberal discourses of
individual rights since the second wave of feminism has in some ways been translated into sexual gains but in other ways has not.

Given the fact that I have explored (hetero)sexuality from a perspective that allows for the differences of racialization and class to remain silenced (because often there is an implicit reliance on a non-racialized, middle-class subject), there are a number of productive directions future research can take. I am interested in how Aboriginal women’s experiences of (neo)colonialism, racism, class and gender in Canada intersect with their experiences of (hetero)sexuality and their elevated risk of violence and sexually transmitted infections (Ship and Norton, 2001). I discussed the ‘dirty White girl’ discourse as it occurs within the South Asian community in Chapter One. I also showed that White privilege plays a role in (hetero)sexuality and desire in Canada. Gina’s experience of the abjection of her Aboriginal body as ‘undesirable,’ in relation to her White friend’s body, indicates the need to further explore the specificities of the process of abjection in Aboriginal women’s sexual subjectivity. Such research is particularly timely and needed given the context of disappeared and murdered sex trade workers, many of them Aboriginal, in B.C.

As mentioned above, my research is a ‘starting point’ that can motivate further research into both other psychoanalytic concepts that are relevant to the process of subjectification and the relationships between various psychic processes within subjectification. Looking back on the narratives, I also see how crucial similar research with heterosexually-active men is. Explorations of dynamic psychoanalytic processes as both social and interpersonal phenomena can only be strengthened by comparative gendered analyses. I was particularly struck by a desire to speak with men when in
Chapter Four I was exploring the idea of ‘performing pleasure’ and the participants’ understandings of instances when their levels of desire had differed from their partners’. Future research could explore how men psychically position themselves as competent male sexual agents and how they experience their own and their partners’ ‘performances’ of pleasure within gendered discourses of heterosexuality.

Future research could also determine to which extent my findings are generalizable to other populations. As mentioned, if I were to have spoken with first time mothers or with women living in rural New Brunswick I may have found very different experiences. However, something about the diversity and commonality of the participants’ narratives suggests that there may be similar social processes and processes of subjectification occurring in different contexts in Canada and North America. Consider what would differentiate ‘slut discourse’ in the 1950s in Canada from how it operates today. Arguably, there may be similar disciplinary and subjective processes occurring even if the actual abjected behaviours and social anxieties maybe different. Perhaps similar ‘parallels’ occur in differently positioned women’s experiences in different contexts. Speaking with groups of various women would help to explore the possibility that my insights have some ‘translate-ability’ to other women’s experiences. I do feel that future research inspired by this project will need to remain focused on high-quality qualitative data. In a related manner, future research could examine to what extent my findings are specific to particular historical or generational discursive contexts. Here, comparing the narratives of women in different generations, who have access to various discursive streams, would be productive.
Lastly, while I am in public school classrooms teaching sexuality education and completing my Sexual Health Educators Certification practicum, I hope to gain grounded experience in the field that will invigorate and innovatively rework my attempts to ‘translate’ psychoanalytically-informed poststructural theoretical insights into the classroom and concrete policy implications.

Opening sociological theory to poststructural and psychoanalytic insights allows us to mine the fissures of contradiction that are usually covered up in sociological research in ways that help us to begin to imagine subjectivities that are not dominated by liberal humanism and a denial of our connections to other human beings. Jo’s words poignantly attune us to the background melancholy that occurs in the context of the objectification of bodies and subjectivity and which delimits the possibility of connecting to others:

I think sex is a very, very, very healing, um, loving, not always, but even the not so pretty situations…there was still human contact and love that did exist, and love that kind of, maybe some of the other things overshadowed it, but humans in general, I just feel like we need more contact…Yeah, so on the lower levels we’re still benefiting from those encounters. So I think it’s dangerous to not accept and promote and encourage, um, sex, it’s dangerous not to encourage and promote it and keeping it kind of taboo because ultimately, with healthy relationships, people could really benefit from, from that, satisfying themselves, which a large chunk of people have a real difficult time doing that, whether it’s buying themselves something or taking things and time for themselves and I think that’s part of it and I think it just needs to be more open, and accepted into what defines a healthy lifestyle. And I don’t really think of AIDS and STDs and pregnancies as a risk because I think that going that route, that ‘sex equaling risk to those things’ depromotes it. It overshadows the pleasures and such, and it’s not that those things aren’t important, but that’s one way… There’s just all sorts of risks everywhere. My point is only that like [most risks and accidents] are not pregnancies and STDs (laughs), some of them are soccer accidents, so sometimes as much as the education is important, it really, there’s something about the way that sex is discussed in our society even. You can be in the act of it and you’re still distanced from it.
Part of this dissertation has shown the limitations that variously available and privileged discourses place on how we understand and experience our sexual encounters, our selves and our world, as well as how they produce particular ways of asserting agency through individualization. Other parts of this dissertation showed that the ways we currently come to be subjects and subject ourselves need not be the only ways we do so. In this sense, I hope to contribute to Foucault’s understanding of how our political, ethical, and philosophical agendas “promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” (2003:134).
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Hollway, Wendy.


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Skeggs, Beverly


Appendix A: Participant Information Chart

Where possible in this chart I directly quote the participants’ responses to how they self-identify in relation to these categories. Their responses are enclosed by quotation marks. Where necessary, additional contextual information, my own interpretations, or an interpretation of the participant’s specific words negotiated between us in the interview context are included in parentheses. In regard to ‘Country Raised In,’ I include the information but do not include direct quotes since this is not a matter of self-identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number and Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Self-identified Class</th>
<th>Self-identified Ethnicity/Racialization</th>
<th>Country Raised in</th>
<th>Self-identified Sexual Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Sue</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>“Working middle-class”</td>
<td>“A dirty Slovak” (Caucasian)</td>
<td>Canada, Surrey</td>
<td>“Heterosexual with a splash of bi”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Gina</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>“Middle-class” (but she goes on to acknowledge that it was because she lived with her father after her parent’s divorce that she remained middle class, whereas her brothers, who lived with her mother on a reservation would have had different class experiences)</td>
<td>“Aboriginal”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” (Also “open to” bisexual desire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Number and Participant Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Self-identified Class</td>
<td>Self-identified Ethnicity/Racialization</td>
<td>Country Raised in</td>
<td>Self-identified Sexual Identity</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Shawnequa</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“My parents were divorced. My mom was poor and my dad was rich” (Poor/Middle-class)</td>
<td>“Scandinavian” (White)</td>
<td>Canada, Surrey</td>
<td>“Heterosexual…probably 80/20 but I’ve only had relationships only with men”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Mary Jane</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Lower level of the upper class”</td>
<td>“Lithuanian” (White)</td>
<td>Canada and US (educated in US)</td>
<td>“Heterosexual…but I wouldn’t say I’d never try anything else”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Miriam</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“Persian”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” (Exclusively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Nova</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“White”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Straight…not exclusively”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Maria</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Definitely middle class, if not upper middle” (Parents were poor when the first emigrated but worked up to upper middle-class)</td>
<td>“White but sort of culturally I’m more in the Latin community…I’m definitely sort of whitewashed or Canadian washed”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Heterosexual…in regard to [the] Kinsey scale…about a [1], not, I’m not exclusively”96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Jackie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Upper middle-class”</td>
<td>“Chinese”</td>
<td>Hong Kong. Moved to Canada at age eleven.</td>
<td>“Heterosexual…maybe I’ve thought about [bisexual desire], considered the possibility” (Predominantly Heterosexual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Rosie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“Japanese”</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>“Heterosexual…straight” (Some bisexual desire in her fantasies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Annie Cohen</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“Canadian” (White)</td>
<td>Canada, Kenora</td>
<td>“Straight” (Has had bisexual experiences)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

96 Alfred Kinsey developed a scale for categorizing human sexuality. He felt that people were rarely exclusively heterosexual or homosexual in their activities or desires but that we exist on a continuum. The Kinsey scale is from 0 to 6. A ‘0’ on the Kinsey scale, denotes exclusive heterosexuality, a ‘3’ indicates being equally hetero and homosexual and a ‘6’ denotes exclusive homosexuality. Therefore, a Kinsey 1 or 2 would denote primarily heterosexuality with some homosexual desire or activity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number and Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Self-identified Class</th>
<th>Self-identified Ethnicity/ Racialization</th>
<th>Country Raised in</th>
<th>Self-identified Sexual Identity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 Maia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Higher middle-class”</td>
<td>“White first but Jewish heritage wise. It’s not that important to me” (White)</td>
<td>US, Massachusetts</td>
<td>“I had some questioning when I was growing in my adolescence and I’m still not entirely sure, but I’m happy with [the male partner] I have” (She brings up the Kinsey scale and places herself as a1 or 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Olivia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“White”</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” (Later in the interview she identifies as bisexual but acknowledges ‘political’ problems in never experiencing homophobia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Libby</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>“Upper middle-class”</td>
<td>“Caucasian”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Exclusively Heterosexual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Yazmin</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“Arab Canadian”</td>
<td>Split between Dubai and Canada</td>
<td>“Heterosexual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Lisa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>“Upper middle-class”</td>
<td>“White”</td>
<td>Canada, Calgary</td>
<td>“Heterosexual… In practice, exclusively” (She did not elaborate on what this means)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Lola</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“White” (Sometimes identifies with her Jewish heritage)</td>
<td>US, Idaho</td>
<td>(Exclusively Heterosexual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Leah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>“Upper-class”</td>
<td>“Latin but I have an Asian background”</td>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” (Exclusively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Diane</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Working middle-class” (Parents are both teachers, which many would consider middle class jobs)</td>
<td>“Third generation Canadian but I definitely consider myself from a Western European decent” (White)</td>
<td>Canada, Prince George</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” (Exclusively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Alex</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(Upper) Middle-class</td>
<td>“Punjabi or Indo-Canadian”</td>
<td>Canada, Castlegar</td>
<td>“Heterosexual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Number and Participant Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Self-identified Class</td>
<td>Self-identified Ethnicity/ Racialization</td>
<td>Country Raised in</td>
<td>Self-identified Sexual Identity</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Jo</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Middle-class, upper middle-class. Sort of between the two.”</td>
<td>“White”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Heterosexual… I wanted to say bisexual but I’m not” (Feels people exist naturally as bisexual but has no same-sex desire herself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Gray</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“Caucasian”</td>
<td>USA,</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” Exclusively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Sheena</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Upper-class”</td>
<td>“White”</td>
<td>Vancouver, Canada</td>
<td>“Heterosexual but I’d engage in other sorts of behaviour as well and have”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Persephone</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>“Lower upper-class or upper middle-class”</td>
<td>“Jewish”</td>
<td>Canada, Toronto</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” Exclusively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Emma</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Middle-class”</td>
<td>“Vietnamese”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” Exclusively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Jill</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Middle-class… Definitely the lower end”</td>
<td>“Basically Canadian, Canadian, Canadian, far back and white”</td>
<td>Canada, Vancouver</td>
<td>“Heterosexual” Exclusively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Lily</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>“Middle-class” (Parents were poor when the first emigrated but worked up to upper middle-class)</td>
<td>“I’m Chinese Canadian…I usually just see myself as a Canadian”</td>
<td>Canada. Moved to Canada when she was four years old.</td>
<td>“Probably Bi…practicing Heterosexual”</td>
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</table>
Appendix B: Interview Schedule

As noted in Chapter One, I did not always ask every participant every single question included here; rather, I used this interview schedule as a guide for what topics I wanted to discuss. What questions I asked and how I asked them were dependant on the interview context and the topics the participant’s brought up themselves and were interested in discussing. For an extended discussion of this, see Chapter One.

Introduction and Chit Chat:
What year of your undergrad are you in?

How do you identify yourself: Sexually? Ethnically? Racially? Anything else you see as important (disability, etc) to your identity?

How do you identify your class background? Your religious background?

Part I – Negotiating Pleasure:
What do you enjoy about having sex?

How do you decide if you’ll have sex with someone?

What makes a sexual encounter pleasurable for you? Can you discuss an example?

Is there a difference in how easy or pleasurable giving or receiving sexual pleasure is for you? Are different types of pleasure easy or difficult for you to receive/give? Why do you think this is?

Have you ever been aroused by things/people you wish you hadn’t have been? What things? How do you feel about this?

What are your criteria for desirability? What makes you desirable? What makes other (seemingly) hetero women desirable? What makes your partners desirable?

How do you communicate to a partner what is pleasurable and desirable for you?

Generally, how do you feel talking about sex with a partner?

Where do you feel or recognize desire (intellect, emotions, body, etc)? How is desire related to your body? What can you say about your body in sexual encounters?

How would you describe your idea of an IDEAL sexual experience?
And now the good-old, have you ever faked your own pleasure and/or orgasm?!

Do you ever have one-night stands, hook-ups, or ‘friends with benefits’? What has your experiences with hook-ups been? Do you find it easier to communicate about your wants and desires (and their wants and desires) in hook-ups or longer term romantic relationships?

How does masturbation figure into your understanding of yourself as a sexual person? Porn? Abortion?

Does abstinence ever figure into your idea of yourself as a sexual person?

In what ways is your sexual self related to other aspects of your life? School? Work? Attracting potential partners?

How do you see your sexuality as related to your race/ethnicity at all?

Around sexual experiences there are often and number of different thoughts and feelings going on at once. We’re often thinking about the past, present AND future! There may be many ‘voices in your head,’ as it were! Are there aspects of your sexual please and experiences that are confusing or contradictory?

Have you ever had a sexual experience that you thought would be pleasurable but wasn’t? Can you tell me about that experience? What did you do? Looking back would you like to do anything differently?

*Part II – Negotiating Protection:*

How do you decide what type of protection, if any, you’ll use with a partner?

What do you see yourself as ‘protecting’?

What types of safer sex, if any, do you practice - birth control, barrier methods, etc?

Where did you learn about safer sex practices? What types of sexual health stuff have you learnt?

Have there been times when you have not used any protection but there was a chance of pregnancy? Would you be willing to discuss that encounter? Can you tell me what you remember about it?

Have there been times when you have not used any protection but been unsure if your partner had any STIs? Would you be willing to discuss that encounter? Can you tell me what you remember about it?
Have you ever had a STI?

Have any of your male partners been having/had sex with men as well? Was this an issue for you? How did you handle this situation?

Have you had any uncomfortable experiences when both of you weren’t on the same page, as far as protection goes? What happened?

How do you define sexual health for yourself?

**Part III – Negotiating Problems:**

Have you ever had a sexual experience where you have been uncertain or ambivalent (pulled in both directions) about what you were doing? Can you tell me what you remember about that?

Do you see drugs and/or alcohol as affecting your choices about having sex and using protection?

Do you see any risks to having sex? What are these risks (reputation, identity, sti’s, pregnancy, violence, etc)?

Is there anything you specifically do not enjoy about having sex? Can you tell me more about that?

Have you ever had sex when you didn’t want to? Tell me about that experience. Have you ever had sex when your partner didn’t want to?

Have you ever experienced sexual violence of any form (harassment at work, on the street, in a relationship, etc.)?

**Part IV – Negotiating People:**

What does being called a slut mean to you? Have you ever been called that or some variant thereof? Can you tell me about that?

What do your parents know about your sex life? Did they teach you about sexual health? What are their values/expectations regarding your sexuality? Do their values affect your sexual behaviour?

From what (other) sources do you remember getting information about sexuality and sexual health (friends, tv, sexual partners, porn, mags, witnessing other’s relationships, etc)?

What were you taught about your desire?
In what ways are your beliefs and values around your sexuality similar to and different from those around you (peers, media, anything)?

What do you ‘count’ as (hetero?) sex (penetration only, outercourse, types of penetration, etc)? What about anal sex specifically (unpack ideas around ‘hetero’ activities)? What counts as sexual activity (if only vag-pen penetration mentioned above)?

*Conclusion and Final Remarks:*

Is there anything this conversation has reminded you of or brought up for you that you’d like to share with me?

Is there anything else about yourself as a sexual being/your sex life that you think is important for me to know? Any last thoughts?
Appendix C: Ethics ‘Certificate of Approval’

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

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<th>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</th>
<th>UBC BREB NUMBER:</th>
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<td>Dawn H. Currie</td>
<td>UBC/Arts/Sociology</td>
<td>H06-03442</td>
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INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:

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<td>Point Grey Site</td>
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CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
Brandy Wiebe

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Young Women’s Sexual Subjectivity: Negotiating (Hetero)Sex and Sexual Health

REB MEETING DATE: November 23, 2006
CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: November 23, 2007

DOUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:

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<tr>
<td>Potential Interview Questions</td>
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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Arminee Kazanjian, Associate Chair
Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Associate Chair