

**Heterosexual Tensions within Canadian Neoliberalism:
Young South Asian Women's Negotiations Toward Sexual Autonomy**

by

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ABSTRACT

With the proliferation of neoliberal discourse in the West, there has been a congruous emphasis on the sexual freedoms purportedly available to young women. While navigating gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings of and expectations for their heterosexuality, young women are simultaneously compelled to understand themselves as sexually ‘empowered,’ able to freely dictate the terms of their heterosexual desire and behaviour. Exploring the experiences of young, heterosexually-active South Asian women in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, my research builds upon a burgeoning area of scholarship considering these contradictions of contemporary femininity. Through a thematic analysis of data generated through focus group discussions, with a total of twelve participants, I consider how these young South Asian women experience and make meaning of their heterosexual desire and behaviour. Ultimately, I found participants’ heterosexual experiences to be characterized by their negotiation of a central tension: while their sexual freedoms remain conditional and constrained, these young South Asian women nonetheless constructed themselves as fully in control of their heterosexual experiences and, accordingly, as individually responsible for effectively navigating any restrictive understandings or expectations that may threaten their sexual autonomy. In the following analytic discussion, I trace this tension through participants’ navigation of the heterosexual expectations encompassed within an idealized notion of South Asian femininity, efforts to work through moralistic understandings of heterosexuality, and pursuit of wanted and pleasurable heterosexual encounters.

PREFACE

The research encompassed in this thesis was carried out entirely by myself, Michelle Dhillon. I identified and designed the research project, organized and facilitated the focus group discussions, transcribed the focus group discussions, and analyzed the data generated.

Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The Ethics Certificate for this research is numbered H12-03157.

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*For my sister Mira,
and all that she has ahead of her.*

1. THE TERRAIN OF CONTEMPORARY HETEROSEXUALITY

Experiences and understandings of heterosexuality¹ are contoured by numerous discourses; within any particular social context, “gender, sexuality and heterosexuality are constituted as objects of discourse and subject to regulation through specific discourses in circulation at any historical moment” (Jackson, 2006, p. 112). Recent scholarship has argued that young women in the West are currently negotiating heterosexuality within a novel social context.² As neoliberal discourse has proliferated in the West, so has a neoliberal understanding of contemporary female heterosexuality: young women are now ostensibly fully autonomous in regards to their sexual desire and behaviour, with “the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures ... not just made available but encouraged and also celebrated” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 83). However, this construction of female sexual ‘empowerment’ coexists with systemic constraints: gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded³ understandings and expectations shape the meanings attributed to heterosexuality, delineating particular desires and behaviours as commendable, permissible, or reprehensible. While heterosexual desire and behaviour are not inevitably constrained, these understandings and expectations may challenge sexual autonomy.

¹ I conceptualize heterosexuality as encompassing heterosexual desire and behaviour. This understanding of heterosexuality is often related to but crucially distinct from heterosexuality as an identity.

² In subsequent sections of this chapter, I draw upon an extensive body of scholarship in substantiating this claim. Particularly compelling and comprehensive works include *The Aftermath of Feminism* (McRobbie, 2009) and the edited anthology *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

³ Numerous dimensions of social privilege and oppression work to constitute both heterosexual experience and correspondent processes of meaning-making. Within the context of this thesis, I am unable to fully consider this multidimensionality in adequate depth. Consequently, I have narrowed the focus of my research to the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity. However, in my analysis I remain attentive to the presence and influence of other dimensions of participants’ social location.

In this contemporary moment, in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, my research explores how young,⁴ heterosexually-active, South Asian women are negotiating their heterosexuality within this context.

In exploring young South Asian women's heterosexual experiences within this context, I engage with and build upon an important array of scholarship that addresses neoliberal constructions of 'empowered' female heterosexuality, discusses how gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations can threaten sexual autonomy, and considers the implications of neoliberal discourse for individuals' negotiations of heterosexual desire and behaviour. In the sections that follow, I offer an overview of these complex, multifaceted, and ultimately inextricable areas of scholarship, tracing the empirical and theoretical work that has informed my thinking and within which my research is situated.

'EMPOWERED' FEMALE HETEROSEXUALITY

In the present moment, many scholars see the West as characterized by a neoliberal worldview. Emphasizing political and economic rationality,⁵ neoliberalism can be considered a novel form of governance in that it has expanded across many different spheres of life (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Young women in the West are implored to take advantage of the various opportunities promised them within neoliberal Western culture: obtain a good education,

⁴ The young women who participated in my research were between 19 and 22 years of age. (While I do discuss participant demographics in more depth in Chapter 2 an overview of participants' self-reported demographic information can be found in Appendix A.)

⁵ Privatization and the state's withdrawal of social provisions are generally considered key tenets of neoliberalism (Brown, 2003; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Gonick, 2004). However, the components and boundaries of neoliberal discourse are by no means finite; 'neoliberalism' may reference a variety of different meanings, dependent on individual perspective (Ong, 2006).

participate in the paid workforce, and enjoy their newly-afforded sexual freedoms (McRobbie, 2009). Emphasis is often placed on female sexual ‘empowerment’: McRobbie (2009) conceptualizes young women’s sexual engagement as “one of the most visible features of so-called female freedom today” (p. 86). She further contends that young women are encouraged to “emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality” (p. 84) of their male counterparts, “concur[ing] with a definition of sex as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and status” (p. 83). This neoliberal construction of female sexual ‘empowerment’ presupposes that contemporary sexuality is fundamentally unconstrained, denying the existence and influence of systemic factors. This framework obscures the ways in which understandings and expectations of sexuality remain contoured by gender, race, ethnicity, and other facets of individuals’ social location.

This understanding of female heterosexuality has been disseminated largely through popular culture and media, where female sexual ‘empowerment’ is seen and celebrated (Gill, 2008; Tasker & Negra, 2007; McCleneghan, 2003; McRobbie, 2009). Contemporary Western society is saturated with sexualized messages and expectations. The term ‘sexualization of culture’ has been used to reference the proliferation of these sexual representations and discourses (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Harvey & Gill, 2011). This sexualized culture is, in many ways, framed as liberating or empowering for women. Female-oriented magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* place an emphasis on female sexuality, freedom, and opportunity (McCleneghan, 2003, p. 324). Recreational burlesque and pole dancing have been conceptualized as sexually empowering (Rehehr, 2010; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Levy (2005) discusses a number of additional aspects of ‘raunch culture’ that have been framed as empowering for women: watching female strippers, becoming infatuated with female porn stars,

donning Playboy or Hustler magazine paraphernalia, and ‘flashing’ their breasts for ‘Girls Gone Wild’ videos. These observations are substantiated by the mainstream popularity of female ‘porn stars’ such as Jenna Jameson and Sasha Grey.⁶ In recent decades, women's engagement in casual sex has been normalized by its prevalence in TV shows and movies. The ‘empowered’ female sexual subject has been represented in a number of television shows, including *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) and *Girls*.⁷ While the women in *SATC* (King et al., 1998-2004) are somewhat older than the young women most frequently portrayed as ‘empowered’ sexual subjects, the show has often been credited for mainstreaming the notion of contemporary female sexual empowerment through its explicit depiction and discussion of women pursuing “equal opportunity sexual freedom” (Markle, 2008, p. 46). The television show *Girls* (Dunham et al., 2012) has been presented by many media outlets as a younger, ‘indie’ version of *SATC*. It also engages with the ‘empowered’ sexual subject, though it does so differently than *SATC*. Though not its sole focus, sexuality figures prominently in *Girls*, with the young women desiring, fantasizing, ‘sexting,’ masturbating, ‘dirty talking,’ and engaging in heterosexual sex outside of romantic contexts – all the makings of an ‘empowered’ sexual agent.

While there is variation in these presentations of female sexuality, the predominate message relayed by media and popular culture is that female sexual ‘empowerment’ is ideal,

⁶ Jenna Jameson has written the New York Times best-selling book *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale* (2004) and starred in the comedic horror film *Zombie Strippers* (Schapiro, Golov, Lee & Lee, 2008). Similarly, Sasha Grey has starred in Steven Soderbergh’s film *The Girlfriend Experience* (Cuban, Jacobs, Wagner, & Soderbergh, 2009), as well as a number of episodes of the television show *Entourage* (Ellin et al., 2010).

⁷ It is important to recognize that neither *SATC* nor *Girls* presents female sexuality as *unfailingly, unproblematically* ‘empowered.’ Notably, *Girls*’ primary writer and director, 26-year-old Lena Dunham, seems cued into the contradictions presented by the ‘empowered’ sexual subject; *New York Times* columnist Bruni (2012) conducted an interview with Dunham, wherein she expressed how “various cultural cues [exhorted] her and her female peers to approach sex in an ostensibly ‘empowered’ way that [Dunham felt] she couldn’t quite manage” (para. 12).

fully achievable, and ‘effectively compulsory’ (Gill, 2008; Phillips, 2000). Ultimately, the cultural prevalence of this neoliberal construction of young women’s ‘empowered’ sexuality has important implications for young South Asian women’s heterosexual desire and behaviour, as well as the ways in which they make meaning of these experiences.

GENDERED UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPECTATIONS

Historically, young women in the West have negotiated their heterosexuality within the context of sexual double standards (see Reiss, 1967), characterized by a fundamental tension between sexual pleasure and (physical, social, and emotional) sexual ‘dangers’ (Vance, 1984). More recent scholarship suggests that young women’s heterosexual desire and behaviour is moving toward the neoliberal model of ‘empowered’ female sexuality. Young women in the West appear to be increasingly engaging in ‘masculinized’ sexual behaviour, characterized by increased attention to orgasm, pursuit of pleasure, interest in sexual experimentation, and separation of sexual intimacy from romantic intimacy (Kimmel, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). Furthermore, with the increased prioritization of university, career-building, and later marriages, many young women are spending longer portions of their lives engaging in non-marital sexual encounters (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Wilkins, 2004). Although such observations might indicate a lack of restriction on young women’s sexual desire and behaviour, normative conceptions of heterosexuality (i.e. heteronormativity) remain highly gendered. Jackson (2006) explains that while “some of the old familiar stereotypes [of male and female sexuality] may have been eroded, it is the degree of difference and the forms of difference that are changing – not the idea that there *is* a difference” (p. 113). Jackson clarifies why these ideas of gender difference are not innocuous: with its restrictive conceptualizations of gender and sexuality,

heteronormativity regulates heterosexuality (in addition to regulating queer sexualities). A significant body of recent scholarship substantiates this argument, exploring how gendered understandings of heterosexuality place restrictions on the ‘sexual freedom’ offered to women within a neoliberal context.

Within normative constructions of heterosexuality, the male sexual experience is prioritized while female sexual desire and pleasure are neglected (Hakvåg, 2010; Tolman, 1994). There is an enduring social emphasis placed on female sexual inexperience, often understood as representing young women’s ‘purity’ or ‘virtue’ (Valenti, 2009). Female sexuality is permitted primarily within the context of monogamous heterosexuality (Armstrong, Hamilton & England, 2010), supporting the cultural myth that women are predominately interested in love and utilize sex in the service of their romantic relationships (Allen, 2003; Tolman, 2002). Regardless of relationship context, women are expected to act as sexual ‘gatekeepers,’ passively responding to their partner’s sexual advances (Kimmel, 2004; Holland et al., 2000).

While female sexual pleasure has been historically understood as threatened by various sexual ‘dangers’ (see Vance, 1984), recent scholarship points to the continued relevance of such risks. Sexual behaviour makes young men and young women differentially vulnerable to negative social consequences; young women’s transgression of social expectations can result in judgment, stigmatization, sexual labeling, or loss of social status (Attwood, 2007; Beres, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Jonason & Fisher, 2009). The threat of these negative social consequences can inhibit young women’s pursuit of wanted heterosexual encounters. Additionally, although both men and women are vulnerable to physical sexual risks – such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy – young women’s heterosexuality is influenced by these risks in a way their male counterparts’ is not: the messages

about sexuality conveyed to young women emphasize these risks, as well as position young women as responsible for their management (Connell, 2005; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Harvey & Drew, 2001; Tolman, 1994).

In addition to these social and physical sexual ‘risks,’ young women must navigate the threat of sexual harassment and assault. Sexual harassment is a common experience for many young women, necessitating a negotiation of gendered and sexualized power hierarchies as women move throughout the world (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Loe, 1996; Magley, 2002).⁸ The risk of sexual assault is also significant in young women’s lives. Data from the 2004 General Social Survey reports the rate of sexual assault for the preceding year, with 3, 248 women being assaulted for every 100, 000 Canadians aged 15 years and older (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Despite this prevalence, there remain pervasive assumptions about the circumstances that ‘count’ as sexual assault, what ‘type’ of people are perpetrators, and what makes for a ‘legitimate’ victim (see Filipovic, 2008, p. 23). Such understandings shift responsibility away from the perpetrator, silence victims whose experiences are inconsistent with dominant narratives of ‘real’ rape, and ultimately promote a culture (‘rape culture’) where sexual assault is tacitly accepted (Ahrens, 2006; Burt, 1991; Heath et al., 2011; Lonway & Fitzgerald, 1994).⁹ Moreover, it is often difficult to determine at what exact point and under what circumstances unwanted sex shifts from being

⁸ While young women’s negotiation of sexual harassment is often non-confrontational (see Chung, 2007; Magley, 2002), the web-based *Hollaback!* (2012) movement aims to facilitate a more assertive response to sexual harassment. *Hollaback!* seeks to ‘break the silence’ surrounding harassment, encouraging those harassed in public spaces to indicate the location on a map and document the experience online through pictures and text.

⁹ As one means of confronting cultural silencing, the online photography-blog *Project Unbreakable* creates a space for sexual assault survivors to give voice to their experiences in a public realm (see Brown, 2012). For an excellent theoretical discussions of trauma victims’ silence please see Culbertson (1995) and Janoff-Bulmen (1992).

consensual to nonconsensual, particularly when gendered power dynamics are taken into consideration (see Hickman & Muehlenard, 1999; Lim & Roloff, 1999; McCormick, 1987).

Ultimately, young women continue to negotiate their heterosexuality in a context where their sexual autonomy – the ability to freely dictate the terms of their heterosexual desire and behaviour – is challenged by various gendered understandings and expectations.

RACIALIZED AND ETHNICALLY-GROUNDED UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPECTATIONS

Historically, feminist sociological research has considered gender central, positioning other aspects of social location – such as race and ethnicity – as secondary (Gamson & Moon, 2004). While young women in the West face gendered understandings and expectations that challenge their sexual autonomy, these gendered dynamics take particular forms for different ‘groups’ of women: the heterosexual terrain young women negotiate is not uniform. Gendered dimensions of heterosexuality intersect with other aspects of social location. The understandings and expectations young women face are influenced by a multitude of factors, including race and ethnicity. This is exemplified by empirical research which observes that the young women who attempt to resist or challenge traditional constructions of female sexuality tend to be white and of higher socio-economic background (see Tolman, 1994; Hamilton & Armstrong, 1999). Research findings such as these suggest that racial, ethnic, and class-based social privilege may allow young women significant leverage in resisting or challenging restrictive heteronormative expectations of female heterosexuality. For the purposes of my own research, an intersectional

lens enables a consideration of race alongside gender, given its recognition of “multidimensionality of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).¹⁰

In contextualizing the heterosexual experiences of young South Asian women in West, I engage with scholarship that explores the heterosexuality of young women in the West who are racialized and ethnically ‘Othered,’ in relation to dominant white culture, as well as scholarship that focuses explicitly on the heterosexuality of young South Asian women in the West. This scholarship suggests that, as they intersect with gender, racialized and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations of heterosexuality can challenge young women’s sexual freedoms in particular ways, contouring the space within which they negotiate and make meaning of their heterosexual desire and behaviour.

In considering how race and ethnicity shape expectations and experiences of female heterosexuality, my conceptualizations of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ echo those of Nagel (2001, 2003). ‘Ethnicity’ encompasses cultural, lingual, religious, and other differences between groups. An individual’s ethnicity is negotiated within a social context, influenced by both what this individual considers to be their ethnicity and what others consider to be the individual’s ethnicity. In contrast, I consider ‘race’ as referring primarily to *visible* distinctions between groups. While the concept of ‘race’ is socially constructed, it is reified through its ability to shape individuals’ and groups’ experiences: “we believe [racial distinctions] to be real, and so they are” (Nagel, 2003, p. 43). As Glenn (2009) discusses, skin colour is considered to be a

¹⁰ While this quote emphasizes experiences of marginalization, it is crucial to recognize that an intersectional perspective is essential in exploring both positions of social marginality *and* those of privilege. I have included this quote on the basis that (a) the concept of intersectionality emerged from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) foundational work, and (b) the young South Asian women my present research focuses on are marginalized by their gender, ethnicity and (for many) race.

fundamental racial boundary, important to both intragroup and intergroup stratification. Glenn argues that although the prevalent discourse of ‘colour blindness’ asserts that race is irrelevant in contemporary Western society, skin color remains a socially pertinent distinction.

The sexual experiences of ethnic or racial minority women in the West are shaped by the perceptions and expectations of the dominant white culture, as well as those from within their own ethnic or racial group. Cultural values and understandings influence what constitutes ‘appropriate’ female sexuality (Espin, 1999). Clearly, even within a particular ethnic or racial minority group (such as South Asian), the sexual experiences of young women of colour in the West are by no means uniform; the following discussion therefore cannot be wholly comprehensive nor generalizable.¹¹ Overall, what is critically important is the recognition that “neither sexuality nor race and ethnicity ... can be understood without careful analysis of their mutual constitution, regulation, and use” (Gamson & Moon, 2004, p. 55).

Racialized and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations – and the ideas of racial and ethnic difference they encompass – also work to construct sexual boundaries that “hold some people in and keep others out, to define who is pure and who is impure, [and] to fashion feelings of sexual desire and notions of sexual desirability” (Nagel, 2003, p. 1). As ethnic groups tend to discourage outside sexual contact, there is always potential for controversy when these boundaries are crossed (Nagel, 2003). Speaking to the subjugation of Canadian Aboriginal women, Thompson (2009) argues that “in any country where (supposedly) distinct ‘races’ live in close proximity there has been concern about racial intermixing” (p. 355). Although this

¹¹ Additionally, as a lot of this empirical and theoretical work was done in the late 1990s or early 2000s, the scholarship discussed serves less as conclusions than as important areas to focus our attention in contemporary investigations.

‘intermixing’ has historically been enforced through legal means (see Thompson, 2009), contemporary regulation tends to be more insidious. The crossing of these racial boundaries through sex or marriage is often gendered, differentially influencing men and women.¹² Female heterosexuality is negotiated within the context of these sexual boundaries, with differential implications for white women and racialized women.

These racial and ethnic sexual boundaries are entrenched in politics of the past and present, constructing sexualities as a means of justifying systems of inequality and domination (Nagel, 2001). Throughout history, dominant groups have routinely stereotyped the sexuality of racialized men and women, placing their sexuality in opposition to an idealized ‘white’ sexuality. Dasgupta and DasGupta (1996) remark that “perhaps more than any other facet of human identity, the sexuality of minority groups is systematically, metaphorically, and subversively targeted by those in power” (p. 234). Young South Asian women in Canada, as with other women of colour, may be sexually invisibilized, perceived as exotic, or otherwise ‘Othered.’ Desirability is racially constructed, with women with lighter skin generally considered to be more beautiful and desirable than their darker-skinned counterparts (Glenn, 2009). Additionally, women of colour in the West – particularly those with darker skin – are often constructed as sexually deviant, promiscuous, immoral, and unrestrained (Dasgupta & DasGupta, 1996; Tolman, 2002; Espiritu, 2001; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Hill Collins, 2004). Although racialized constructions of sexuality are frequently negative, they may also position people of colour as desirably ‘other’: hooks (1992) notes that people of colour are sometimes perceived as more sensual, sexual, exotic, or ‘worldly’ than their white counterparts. Members of dominant

¹² For a thorough discussion of gender and interracial marriage, see Nagel’s (2003) statistical analysis of United States census data.

groups may also racialize and exoticize immigrant women's sexuality in flawed attempts to be culturally 'sensitive' (Espin, 1999). Regardless of its precise form or consequences, the sexualization of women of colour is a political process, and those targeted are typically limited in their ability to control it (Nagel, 2001). The influence of these sexual stereotypes and expectations extends beyond shaping young women's consensual encounters. Ethnic minority women may be particularly vulnerable to sexual *and* ethnic harassment in the workplace (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). Racialized victims of sexual assault might also be less likely to be considered 'legitimate' victims, and perpetrators of these crimes are generally perceived as less guilty than they would be if the victim had been a white woman (Pietsch, 2009-2010). Young women who are racialized or ethnically 'Othered' by dominant white culture must negotiate these various stereotypes, expectations, and risks imposed on their sexuality.

Ethnic and racial sexual boundaries are not only enforced by dominant groups. Young women of colour receive messages about appropriate and acceptable sexual behaviour not only from the dominant culture, but also from within their own ethnic community. In South Asian immigrant communities, and ethnic minority immigrant communities more generally, women's sexuality has been tied to the preservation of 'traditional culture' (Bauer, 2000; DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1996; Espin, 1999; Espiritu, 2001; Handa, 2003). Within this context, 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour marks a transgression of both gender and culture (Bauer, 2000; Handa, 2003). The regulation of female sexuality may also become a means through which moral superiority over the dominant group can be asserted (Espin, 1999). Immigrant communities' view of the West as valorizing sexual pleasure can increase women's options for sexual exploration, but may also stimulate patriarchal concerns about immigrant women's sexuality (Espin, 1995, 1999; Espiritu, 2001). This may allow immigrant communities to fortify patriarchal regulation of

female sexuality and recuperate a modicum of the power denied to them by the host society (Espin, 1999).

Ultimately, young women of colour in the West may find themselves monitored and regulated by both the dominant white culture and their ethnic culture of origin. Furthermore, these divergent sources of scrutiny are mutually reinforcing: “Prejudices and racism of the dominant society make the retrenchment into tradition appear justifiable. Conversely, the rigidities of tradition appear to justify the racist or prejudicial treatment of the dominant society” (Espin, 1999, p. 8). Dasgupta and DasGupta (1996) emphasize this, discussing how South Asian (specifically, Indian) American women are often left somewhat powerless in the face of simultaneous and often contradictory restrictions on their sexuality from both the “racist mainstream culture” and a “controlling immigrant community” (p. 236). Whether they choose to resist, negotiate, or accept the expectations placed on their sexuality by their immigrant community, young women tend to be acutely aware of these expectations (Handa, 2003).

Racialized and ethnically-grounded understandings of and expectations for female heterosexuality shape the heterosexual experiences of racialized and ethnically ‘Othered’ young women in the West, including young South Asian women. While their heterosexual desire and behaviour is not inevitably constrained, these circumstances often necessitate navigation and challenge young women’s sexual autonomy. They may internalize these understandings and expectations, or they may be able to contest, resist, or even subvert these discourses of female heterosexuality.

Given that the sexualized definitions and meanings attributed to ethnicity and race continue to structure individuals’ lived experiences of sexual intimacy (Nagel, 2001, p. 137), there is a need to consider how race and ethnicity, in conjunction with gender, influence the

understandings of and expectations for the heterosexuality of young South Asian women in the West. In their constructions of heterosexual desire and behaviour, these racialized and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations may challenge young women's sexual autonomy, restricting their ability to freely determine the terms of their heterosexual desire and behaviour.

NEGOTIATING HETEROSEXUALITY WITHIN NEOLIBERALISM

In recognizing these gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations that shape heterosexuality, there is a need to consider the implications neoliberal constructions of female sexual 'empowerment' may have for the lived experiences of young women. Bell (2013) identifies women as the 'ideal' neoliberal subject. This resonates with Gill and Scharff's (2011) observation that, within neoliberal discourse, it is predominantly *women* who are urged to self-manage, self-discipline, and present all their actions as freely chosen. Following contemporary representations of female sexuality in media and popular culture, young women are both encouraged and expected to see themselves as sexually 'empowered' (Gill, 2008; Phillips, 2000). They are supposed to demonstrate "a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency" (p. 72). A significant body of feminist scholarship argues that the neoliberal illusion of gender equality in heterosexuality is problematic, both obscuring and enabling novel modes of sexual restriction.

Within neoliberalism, individuals are conceptualized as agentic: we are fundamentally in control of – and personally responsible for – our lived experiences, regardless of how constrained our lives may actually be (Brown, 2003; Gonick, 2004). Understood in this way, individuals are essentially 'obliged to be free' (Rose, 1999). Young women are compelled to make sense of their life choices and pursuit of success (including those related to heterosexual

desire and behaviour) within this discourse, obscuring any continued influence of systemic inequalities (McRobbie, 2009). Through its emphasis on individual agency, personal responsibility, and free choice, the tenets of neoliberal discourse bolster an understanding of the social world that negates consideration of any systemic inequalities (such as those structuring gender, race, and ethnicity). Following this, the sexual freedoms purportedly available to young women obscure the presence of systemic constraints; although heterosexuality continues to be shaped and constrained by gendered, racialized, and ethnically-situated understandings and expectations, neoliberal discourse conceptualizes female heterosexuality as fundamentally unconstrained.

Some scholars conceptualize these circumstances as obscuring and enabling novel modes of sexual restriction. McRobbie (2009) argues that “the granting of some degree of freedom or liberation for (Western) women actually becomes an expression of a new form of capture or control” (p. 180). In their discussion of the British reality television show *The Sex Inspectors*, Harvey and Gill (2011) clearly delineate the ways in which this compulsory ‘empowerment’ may actually serve to impede women’s sexuality. *The Sex Inspectors* seeks to ‘repair’ heterosexual couples’ ‘dysfunctional’ sex lives. The show’s approach to sexual reparation compels women not only to acquire new sexual skills, but also to transform their sexual subjectivity, their attitude toward their bodies, and their dis/comfort with various sexual practices (p. 59). This process reflects demands placed on *all* women in contemporary society, wherein ‘sexual entrepreneurship’ is obligatory but framed as “authentically self-chosen and ... empowering” (p. 61). The concept of power is individualized, with language of ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ disguising the fact that women’s sexuality remains largely restricted to the traditional confines of heterosexuality and monogamy. Similarly, Gill (2008) views advertisements depicting

‘empowered’ sexualized women as a form of regulation on female sexuality; these advertisements contort and repurpose sexual agency in order to enforce an internalization of female objectification as enjoyable and self-chosen. This can also be seen in Levy’s (2005) discussion of young women’s appropriation of ‘raunch culture’: through sexualizing themselves and other women in ways consistent with sexist female objectification, young women’s ‘choice’ to engage with this sexualized culture is framed as ‘empowering’ or ‘liberating.’

Consideration of race and ethnicity raises further questions regarding the potential implications of neoliberal constructions of female sexuality. Discourses of female sexual ‘empowerment’ also encompass ideas about racial and ethnic difference. In this contemporary ‘sexualized’ culture, representations of women of colour and white women are often disparate: a number of scholars have contended that neoliberalism’s ‘empowered’ female sexuality is fundamentally white. The ‘empowered’ female sexual agent is predominately depicted as a white woman who is relatively young, conventionally attractive, heterosexual, class-privileged, and able-bodied. Women of colour seem to be implicitly positioned through their *absence* in these depictions. Gill (2008) states that “black women’s bodies are presented sexually in advertising, to be sure, but in ways that differ sharply from the figure of the active, knowing, desiring sexual subject” (p. 44). Similarly, Harvey and Gill (2011) make note of the “overwhelmingly white” (p. 57) racial composition of *The Sex Inspectors*’ participants, with women of colour largely absent in these ‘transformations’ toward sexual entrepreneurship. Similarly, in their engagement with and presentation of the ‘empowered’ female sexual subject, *SATC* and *Girls* both explore the heterosexuality of four women privileged by both their race and socio-economic class. *Girls*’ overwhelming ‘whiteness’ elicited extensive criticism from a number of feminist and race-conscious online news blogs (see James, 2012; Rosenberg, 2012; Stewart, 2012; Wortham,

2012). *New York Magazine* writer Nussbaum (2012) succinctly argues that “like SATC, Dunham’s show [*Girls*] takes as its subjects women who are quite demographically specific – cosseted white New Yorkers from educated backgrounds – then mines their lives for the universal” (p. 2). In these representations of ‘empowered’ sexuality, the experiences of women of colour are often markedly absent.

SITUATING MY OWN RESEARCH

Incongruous with contemporary neoliberal constructions of young women’s sexuality as ‘empowered’ and unencumbered, the preceding scholarship suggests that the sexual freedoms offered to young women in the West are both limited and tentative; gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations construct particular heterosexual desires and behaviours as ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate,’ while others are condemned or looked down upon. Negotiating their heterosexuality within the context of these boundaries, young women in the West – as subjects of neoliberalism – are simultaneously implored to understand themselves as sexually empowered, able to freely dictate the terms of their heterosexual desire and behaviour.

Engaging with and building upon this scholarship, my research explores how young South Asian women in the West have negotiated their heterosexuality within the context of these complex – and potentially contradictory – understandings and expectations regarding what their heterosexuality can and should be. I facilitated four focus group discussions,¹³ with a total of twelve heterosexually-active young South Asian women offering their experiences and voices to

¹³ My research methodology is overviewed in depth in the following chapter (Chapter 2).

this research. My analysis considers how these participants have experienced their heterosexual desire and behaviour, as well as the ways in which they make meaning of these experiences.

Through my analysis of participants' narratives, I found their heterosexuality to be characterized by their negotiation of a central tension: while there were various conditions and constraints placed on their sexual freedom, shaping their heterosexual desire and behaviour, they nonetheless constructed themselves as fully in control of – and ultimately responsible for – their heterosexual experiences. I understand the conditions and constraints these young women discussed as fundamentally systemic, rooted in gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings of and expectations for their heterosexuality. Although these understandings and expectations had shaped their experiences in numerous ways, participants consistently emphasized their own sexual agency. Consistent with neoliberal understandings of 'empowered' female heterosexuality, participants constructed individual young women as fundamentally in control of their heterosexual experiences; this translated into a personal responsibility for effectively navigating any understandings or expectations that may threaten their sexual autonomy.

In the chapters that follow, I first overview my methodological approach (Chapter 2). In the subsequent chapters, I analytically engage with participants' heterosexual experiences, exploring what understandings and expectations challenge their sexual autonomy, and how they negotiate their heterosexuality within this context. I first consider how these young women navigate the sexual expectations encompassed within an idealized notion of South Asian femininity (Chapter 3). Next, I explore how participants work through (social and internalized) understandings of heterosexual desire and behaviour as having moral implications (Chapter 4). In the last analytic chapter (Chapter 5), I contemplate the challenges these young women

encounter in their pursuit of wanted, pleasurable heterosexual encounters. Following this, the final chapter (Chapter 6) brings my analytic chapters into conversation with one another, considers the significance of my findings, and explores some potential trajectories for future research.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Engaging with the academic literature I overviewed in the preceding chapter, my research contributes to a burgeoning area of research exploring the relevance of neoliberal discourse to contemporary female heterosexuality in the West. Drawing upon data generated through focus group discussions, I consider how twelve heterosexually-active young South Asian women in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland are negotiating their heterosexual desire and behaviour.

In this chapter, I overview my research design, introduce the twelve young women who participated in this research, reflexively position myself within my research, discuss the generation of data through focus group discussions, and describe the processes by which I analyzed this data.

RESEARCH DESIGN

I used focus group discussions as a means of generating data regarding of how young South Asian women in the West are experiencing and making meaning of their heterosexual desire and behaviour. Between March and May of 2013, I facilitated four separate group discussions, with three or four participants in each. Participants were asked to allocate two hours of time for the focus group, including both the discussion itself and their preceding review and completion of the informed consent form, demographic information form (see Appendix D), and confidentiality agreement (see Appendix E). In three of the four groups, the participants expressed a willingness to continue the conversation past the allotted time; accordingly, the discussions themselves lasted between one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. To assist in both

the transcription of group discussions, and in my subsequent analysis of participants' narratives, I recorded both audio and video¹⁴ for each focus group.

I recruited participants who were female-identified, heterosexually active, South Asian, between the ages of 19 and 25, conversationally fluent in English, and currently living in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. As my research was fundamentally interested in the discursive constructions of female heterosexuality that underlie young women's meaning-making, I made efforts to represent the research in a way that would not suggest I was interested solely in a particular 'type' of heterosexual narrative. I presented the research as broadly focused on experiences of heterosexuality. Given that systemic inequalities may be obscured by neoliberal discourse (as discussed in the preceding chapter), I did not explicitly present this research as interested in participants' gendered, racialized, or 'ethnicized' heterosexual experiences. I also did not suggest that the concepts of agency and empowerment were central to my analytic objectives. Furthermore, given the significant body of feminist scholarship describing contemporary disparagement of feminism and the feminist disidentification of many young women in the contemporary West (for example, see Aronson, 2003; McRobbie, 2009; Rich, 2005), I chose to not explicitly frame this research as 'feminist' in presenting it to potential participants.

The young South Asian women who participated in focus group discussions were recruited through a variety of methods. These included recruitment posters displayed throughout the city of Vancouver, social media websites (*Facebook* and *Twitter*), emails passed along

¹⁴ The recordings were made with participants' full knowledge and informed consent. In order to ensure participants' confidentiality, these audio and video recordings were stored on my personal password-protected computer. Participants were also informed that these recordings would be destroyed after completion of this research.

through my extended personal network, various feminist organizations in Vancouver, University of British Columbia Listservs,¹⁵ a post on Vancouver's *Craigslist* website, and an advertisement in the classified section of local news and entertainment paper, *The Georgia Straight*. Potential participants were invited to either contact me directly or via the website I had created (which had further information about the research). Those who chose to participate were also given the option of inviting friends to partake in their discussion group or in a separate discussion group.

While recruiting participants and scheduling discussions was somewhat more difficult than I had anticipated, I was heartened by the responses I did receive. Many of the women who contacted me were very enthusiastic about the research. A number of women within the South Asian community conveyed a sense that research on South Asian women's sexuality in Canada was both necessary and important. One woman had initially messaged me saying, "I'm very interested in participating in this research. I've never heard of anything like it and it's been a long time coming."¹⁶

MEETING THE PARTICIPANTS

Twelve young, heterosexually-active South Asian women participated in the focus group discussions I facilitated, contributing their experiences and opinions to this research. These women were Amelia, Miranda, Sonia, Jasneet, Ishita, Nina, Priya, Rehka, Deepa, Elena, Karina, and Jasmine.¹⁷ All participants fit the parameters originally established for the research

¹⁵ 'Listserv' refers to electronic mailing lists.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, this woman was ultimately unable to participate in the research due to scheduling issues.

¹⁷ All participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Participants were invited to suggest their own pseudonym. For those who chose not to, a pseudonym was assigned.

‘population,’ though the individual participants varied from each other in many significant ways.¹⁸

The participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 years old. The selection of this general age group was intentional and important: within neoliberal discourse, ‘empowered’ sexuality is demanded most of young, unmarried women who came of age within the context of these discourses (see Bay Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Harvey & Gill, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). Additionally, working with participants over the age of 19 enabled me to obtain informed consent directly from all participants, foregoing the need for parental or guardian consent.

The research was focused on young women who identify as South Asian. I employed the United Nations’ (2012) definition of ‘South Asia’ as comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. That being said, I wish to emphasize that I have not approached this research with assumptions regarding what commonalities and differences this imagined geographic boundary might contain. The demographic information form asked participants to indicate their racial and/or ethnic identity. While I had sought to recruit South Asian women in general, all women who participated indicated that they were (wholly or partially) of Indian heritage.¹⁹ Even setting aside the important cultural differences *within* the country of India, these young women of Indian heritage in Vancouver are by no means a homogenous group. The term ‘immigrant’, often employed in reference to non-native ethnic

¹⁸ Unless noted otherwise, participants’ information has been relayed as participants reported it on an open-ended demographic information form. (Please refer to Appendix A for more complete information on each participant. The original demographic information form is presented in Appendix D.)

¹⁹ Although all participants presented themselves as having Indian heritage, not all stated their ethnic or racial identity as ‘Indian.’ Hence, I retain the term ‘South Asian’ in my analysis and discussion, as this was the term specified in recruiting participants. While such a narrowing of geographic focus may appear innocuous, I am reluctant to risk categorizing any participant in a way that does not resonate with her self-perception.

groups, does not adequately capture the diversity of the participants' past experiences. Furthermore, while these women were located in Canada at the time of this research, I do not wish to neglect the potential geographic trajectories of their future. Their life histories are varied. Miranda identifies as a third-generation Indo-Canadian and considers herself to be Canadian more so than Indian. Rehka was born in a non-Canadian Western country, moved to India, and is now an international student in Canada. Priya grew up in both urban India and Canada. Nina grew up in a number of different developing countries. Deepa, who grew up in a large city in East Asia, identifies as North Indian. Elena identifies as Indo-Canadian, though feels a sense of disconnection from India given her family's Melanesian background. Amelia grew up in both Canada and the United States, and has an Indian father and a Caucasian mother. Many participants also indicated whether their families were 'conservative' or 'liberal.'²⁰

All participants were conversationally fluent in English. Many of them spoke other languages as well, and a few spoke with accents. In her discussion of female immigrants, Espin (1999) suggests that the languages female immigrants speak may influence their experiences of gender roles and sexuality. While I ideally would have liked to make space for women who are not fluent in English to participate, there were a number of factors that prevented me from doing so. First, as the discussion facilitator, I am fluent only in English and therefore limited by my own linguistic abilities. Secondly, employing a translator would have been a substantial strain on both finances and time. Lastly, participants' ability to communicate freely – in a shared language – is essential for dynamic focus group discussion.

²⁰ The distinction between 'conservative' and 'liberal' Indian culture emerged in each of the four focus groups, suggesting that participants share an understanding of this categorization.

Contemporary Western culture tends to tie sexual practice to sexual identity (Nagel, 2003). As my interest has been in the dynamics of heterosexual *interactions*, I had no desire to limit my research to participants who *identified* as heterosexual. Accordingly, I chose to recruit ‘heterosexually active’ participants. Of the women who participated, all but one identified as ‘heterosexual’ (or ‘straight’).²¹ Ishita identified as ‘bisexual’, specifying that she is currently in a relationship with a man.²² Once ‘in the field’, I recognized that I had made assumptions about ‘heterosexual activity’ that did not necessarily hold true for the participants. Three of the women stated that they had never had sex or identified as a ‘virgin.’ Two of these women had kissed men, but effectively had no sexual ‘experience’ outside of this. This challenged me to reconsider my original understanding of ‘heterosexual activity.’ In acknowledging the boundaries of ‘sexuality’ as blurry, personal, and context dependent (see Jackson, 2006), I have reconceptualized ‘heterosexual activity’ as encompassing heterosexual desire, in addition to heterosexual encounters.

I also asked participants to indicate what they considered to be their ‘social class.’ While Jasmine chose not to provide an answer, all other participants self-identified as either ‘middle class’ or ‘upper-middle class.’ Although she identified as ‘middle class,’ Elena indicated that she had grown up with “working class values” as a result of where she was raised. Additionally,

²¹ Notably, some participants who identified as ‘heterosexual’ later discussed having had sexual encounters with women; this further emphasizes the importance of not conflating sexual identity with sexual behaviour.

²² This unsolicited addition suggests that Ishita, who self-identified as bisexual, felt some need to legitimize her participation in research on heterosexuality; this reflects Nagel’s (2003) observation of the ways in which sexual identity and behaviour are socially linked.

almost all participants indicated (on the ‘demographic information’ form, during the discussion, and/or in personal communication with me) that they had pursued post-secondary education.²³

While I did not explicitly ask participants about religion, many of the participants also indicated that religion was an important facet of their identity. Some participants identified themselves as religious. Elena and Priya identify as Hindu, and Nina identifies as Christian. Other participants explicitly identified their *family’s* religion as significant, choosing not to position themselves. Sonia’s family is Sikh, Miranda was raised in a Hindu household, and Amelia grew up within a “relatively Christian” family. Some participants drew upon religion as a means of signifying their departure from it, suggesting a more complex negotiation of religion. Deepa identifies as Hindu, but said she “cannot relate much to the demands of Hinduism.” Jasmine identified as an atheist; although she has attended religious schools, she stated that she does “not conform to religious expectations.”

Participants also shared numerous other facets of their identity they saw as important. For example, Elena identified as a “radical feminist” and Nina marked her struggles with depression as salient. Although not self-reported, there are some further observations worth making. All participants were visibly able-bodied, which has important implications for experiences of sexuality. The participants are also all cisgender women; they have navigated the world as people whose gender identity corresponds with the gender assigned to them at birth. Additionally, skin color is an important social marker of race (Glenn, 2009). Amelia has light

²³ A great deal of social science research disproportionately explores the experiences of university undergraduate students for reasons of convenience. My efforts to reach potential participants beyond this population were marginally successful. The majority of participants *had* received post-secondary education, though not all at universities; some had attended community colleges and one participant was attending a visual arts school.

skin and could easily ‘pass’ for white. All other participants had darker skin; though their skin tones varied significantly, their skin nonetheless stood as a visible marker of ‘difference’ in relation to the hegemonic whiteness of the West. It is also worth noting that none of the participants were married or living with a common-law partner, which has important implications for experiences and negotiations of heterosexuality.

These various dimensions of social location, alongside countless others, work to mutually constitute experiences of heterosexuality. However, knowledge of these demographic ‘facts’ do not enable us to ascertain precisely how various dimensions of social location may come into play. Furthermore, specific systems of privilege and oppression may be more or less salient in any given context, to say nothing of the way in which the relevance of social location is understood and constructed by the participants themselves. Hence, the demographic information I present here serves primarily as a starting point for a more nuanced exploration of participants’ constructions of their heterosexual experiences.

LOCATING MYSELF, THE RESEARCHER

Along with my participants, I come to this research from a particular social location, with my own political orientation and personal experiences. This inevitably shaped the research questions I asked, the co-construction of knowledge within the research itself, and my subsequent exploration of the generated data. My theoretical orientations further shape the way in which I designed my study, how I recruited participants, my methods of transcription, what aspects of the discussions I devoted my analytic attention to, where and how I chose to share my research, and the type of conclusions I ultimately came to. Acknowledgment and interrogation of these factors does not, by any means, ‘neutralize’ my presence in the research. However, as

Harding (1995) argues, 'strong objectivity' can be achieved – or at least approached – in bringing such underlying beliefs and assumptions to the foreground.

My interest in this area of theory and research is rooted in my lived experiences. I have negotiated my own heterosexual desire and behaviour as a young, educated, class-privileged, able-bodied, biracial, heterosexually-identified woman; these intersecting positions of privilege and subjugation have contoured my experiences in significant ways. Throughout the past decade, I have negotiated contradictory messages about my sexuality as a woman. With particular desires and behaviours variously constructed as empowering, permissible, objectionable, or unspeakable, these messages have influenced the ways I negotiate and make meaning of my own sexuality. Following this, scholarship addressing the implications of neoliberal discourse for female heterosexuality have deeply resonated with me on a personal level. I also experienced further bifurcation, as the various messages I received as I moved through the world clashed with the restrictive sexual expectations I perceived as integral to Indian culture. My negotiations of my own heterosexuality within this context were aided by various positions of relative privilege. Although I did not grow up with feminist politics, it has resonated strongly with me in recent years; as feminism shapes my perception of the world, I approach my research through this particular lens. Taken together, my personal social location, experiences, and politics shape the demarcations of my academic engagement.

In my interactions with participants, various aspects of my social location took on different meanings. There is plenty that we have in common, as well as areas in which we diverge. Like them, I am a cisgender woman. I am also heterosexually-active, though it is likely that this concept has different meanings for each of us. Like the participants, I live in Vancouver, though I have moved here more recently than many of them. I am also close to these participants

in age, having been 24 years old at the time of the focus group facilitations. I also share with them my class privilege, having grown up in an upper middle class environment.²⁴ While, like myself, most of the participants had pursued post-secondary education, they were pursuing undergraduate degrees or non-university diplomas, while I was in pursuit of a graduate degree. These young women and I also shared ethnic backgrounds, to an extent: with a Caucasian mother and an Indian father, I identify myself as Indian, and as South Asian more generally. However, I have always been hesitant to do so without qualification; I understand myself as neither fully South Asian nor *not* South Asian. This hesitancy is furthered by the fact that, while I certainly have features that mark me as not wholly Caucasian, my skin color is light; I am not clearly marked as ‘Other.’

While I cannot determine precisely how participants perceived and related to me, the data generated are not in any way separate from myself and my role in the research process. It is possible that participants felt that our many similarities allowed them to relate to me in a way that made them more comfortable. Conversely, given that I was their peer in many ways, I may have been perceived as a less ‘legitimate’ academic researcher. I am also aware of the importance of my racial and ethnic identity; throughout this research, I negotiated what it meant to be an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider.’ While I relate to many of the participants’ experiences and share similar understandings of Indian culture, I recognize that my own immersion in Indian culture likely does not echo theirs, and that – due to my relatively light skin – their ethnic background has likely defined them to others in a way that mine has not. In my interactions with participants, there were instances where these differences were brought to the forefront; when I

²⁴ With the possible exception of Jasmine, as she chose not to indicate a social class.

first met Elena, she almost immediately commented on the tone of my skin and asked if I was ‘half,’ as in half Indian. Dependent on the ways in which they perceived me, their perceptions of my ethnicity and race likely shaped the co-construction of data throughout the focus group discussions. I also approached the research aware of my own educational status; although I was similar to my participants in a number of ways, I facilitated the group discussions as a graduate student and as a researcher with an academic interest in sexuality. This elevated my position relative to the participants, and likely influenced the way in which these young women spoke to me about their heterosexuality. For example, I noted Sonia’s use of the terms ‘slut-shaming’ and ‘rape culture,’ thinking that her language-use was perhaps a means of establishing some sort of feminist academic solidarity with me. As my space here is limited, this brief discussion is not intended to be comprehensive; it serves as a cursory overview, placing myself within my work as a means by which to begin interrogating the ways in which my own social location, personal experiences, and political orientation shaped the research process. Throughout my analysis, I remain cognizant of this and continue to question my role in my research.

GENERATING DATA

Following Berg’s (2009) advisement against the use of large focus groups, I chose to have three or four women (in addition to myself) participate in each discussion. These smaller discussion groups allowed for a more in-depth and intimate discussion than would have been possible in a larger group. The first three focus groups were held in a meeting room at the Mount Pleasant community centre in Vancouver, selected because of its relatively central location, accessibility via public transit, and removal from an academic environment. For the first three focus groups, participants were grouped together on the basis of their availability. The first and

second focus groups were each comprised of three women. These women did not know each other prior to their participation. The second and third focus group discussions were held on the same day. Unbeknownst to both the participants and myself, all three women I had scheduled for the third group were previously acquainted with each other, as well as with Nina (from the second focus group). After I had ensured that they were still comfortable participating under these unforeseen circumstances, Nina asked if she could stay in the room during her friends' focus group discussion. As Nina had been talkative and engaged throughout the second focus group, I invited her to participate in the third focus group as well. As I had hoped, Nina's presence and contribution to the discussion helped to engage her friends and further the conversation. The fourth focus group discussion again included three women who were friends. In this case, one of the participants had recruited two of her friends to take part in the same group. I accepted her offer to host the focus group discussion at her home, for the participants' convenience and comfort.

The 'focus' of these focus groups (see Duggleby, 2005) was participants' experiences of heterosexual desire and behaviour; the discussions centered on such experiences, while my subsequent discursive analysis sought to contextualize the discussion and interrogate processes of meaning-making within it. With my empirical interests and analytic questions in mind, I developed four questions to guide the focus group discussions. (For the complete question guide, please see Appendix B.) I made a conscious decision to frame these questions in a way that did not explicitly ask participants about their gender, race, or ethnicity. Given that neoliberalism and 'postfeminism' may work to obscure such systemic inequalities (as discussed in the preceding chapter), it would have been unproductive to ask questions that implicitly presumed differential

experiences based on gender, race, or ethnicity; my interest was in *whether* and *how* gender, race, and ethnicity might emerge through their narratives.

I began each discussion by sharing a quotation from Amita Handa's (2003) research with young South Asian women in Toronto during the early-to-mid 1990s:

All the [South Asian] women in my study knew how they had to behave in order to be accepted as 'good' daughters and community members. They were all concerned about their sexual reputations in one way or another and were very aware that their behaviour has an impact on how their family is viewed by the rest of the community.

(Handa, 2003, p. 109)

After sharing this quote, I asked participants how it 'synced up' with their own experiences. This facilitation question certainly points to ethnicity, but avoids assumptions that participants' beliefs and values are contingent upon their ethnic background; participants were thus able to situate themselves in answering this question. I found that beginning the discussion with this question worked well, as it was directed toward an area of experience somewhat departed from potentially sensitive sexual details. Being able to engage with this quote also allowed participants to 'ease into' sharing their own personal experiences. Furthermore, participants' discussion of their families proved productive in building group rapport. Next, I asked how the participants' family's expectations had influenced their sexual experiences. In facilitating the discussion groups, I found that participants often moved the discussion in this direction themselves without being prompted. Some participants – often those who were engaging in less sexual activity – did not experience a disjuncture between their family's expectations and their own desires. Other participants, who did experience their desires as inconsistent with some of what was expected of

them, discussed their strategies for negotiating others' expectations. The third question asked how participants decide whether or not to become sexually involved with someone. This question was intentionally ambiguous; my interest was in what they saw as most salient to their sexual decision-making. For example, they might discuss what influenced their sexual desire or whether a romantic connection was important. While the ambiguity of this question proved somewhat difficult for participants to engage with at first, this question ultimately cultivated fruitful discussion of factors influencing sexual desire and behaviour. The last question asked participants to identify what differentiated their 'really good' sexual encounters from 'bad' experiences. This question was meant to explore what they valued or found pleasurable in their sexual encounters, as well as experiences of (social, physical, and emotional) risks in heterosexuality. While I used these four questions to guide the conversation toward particular areas, much of my facilitation involved probing for clarification, depth of detail, or further thoughts. Given the loosely structured nature of focus groups, the trajectory of each discussion was largely driven by the participants. This reflects a departure from traditional researcher-participant power dynamics, allowing participants more control (Wilkinson, 1998); this is part of what makes focus groups such a valuable resource for feminist research.

Focus group discussions are also beneficial for participant disclosure. Research exploring sexuality often utilizes methods designed to maximize anonymity and confidentiality, as a means of encouraging candid disclosure (Frith, 2000). However, focus group discussions offer a valuable means of exploring participants' sexual experiences, as well as the way in which they make meaning of such experiences through talk. The presence of others does not necessarily close off a participant's willingness to disclose. In fact, Frith (2000) contends that having multiple participants can reduce the pressure for an individual participant to contribute to a topic

of discussion they feel reluctant about speaking to. In the focus group discussions facilitated for this research, participants candidly discussed a number of potentially sensitive topics including sexual pleasure, social stigmatization, and various forms of sexualized violence. Additionally, participants' engagement with each other resulted in discussion that would likely not have been generated through alternative research methods: they expressed agreement and elaborated, disagreed then offered justification for their statements, and asked questions as a means of situating their own experiences or probing others' experiences. Such participant interaction is a key attribute of focus group discussions, allowing for more dynamic conversation than would be possible in a conventional one-on-one interview (Kitzinger, 1994; Frith, 2000; Duggleby, 2005). Furthermore, many of the participants seemed to value the opportunity to discuss their sexual experiences and opinions with others. Priya, who considered herself to be uncomfortable with her own sexuality, saw the discussion groups as an opportunity to learn about sexuality from women she perceived as more sexually confident and knowledgeable than herself. At the close of another focus group discussion, Nina said that it had been "really refreshing to be able to talk openly about sexuality."

Although focus group discussions can facilitate dynamic conversation and encourage disclosure, the structure of these groups *will* ultimately influence what participants choose to share, choose to withhold, and choose to frame their experiences and opinions. This should not be considered a flaw in the research method; the co-construction of meaning is a key attribute of focus group discussions (see Wilkinson, 1998). Furthermore, talk and meaning are always socially constructed, regardless of research design. The focus group discussions were not meant to uncover some objective, decontextualized 'Truth'; young women's sexual experiences are "always perceived through an (implicit or explicit) theoretical framework from which [they] gain

meaning” (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997, p. 522). Given my analytic interest in how these young women make meaning of their heterosexual experiences – as opposed to the precise nature of these experiences themselves – focus group discussions allow for productive exploration of how heterosexual experiences are co-constructed through talk within this particular research context.

It is evident that focus group discussions have a great deal to offer sexuality research. However, it is important to account for the ethical issues presented both by sexuality research in general and by the use of focus groups in particular. While contemporary Western culture may be seen as saturated by sexual messages (see Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Harvey & Gill, 2011), many individuals continue to regard sexuality as intimate and private. The various physical, social, and emotional risks associated with sexuality (see Vance, 1984) are also sensitive topics of conversation. In setting out to conduct this research, I was aware of the possibility that the discussions might touch upon topics that participants were uncomfortable with or found upsetting. All participants were informed that they may, at any time and without penalty, discontinue their participation in any portion of the focus group discussion or leave the discussion entirely. Participants were also given a list of counseling, sexual health, and support services available to them online, by phone, and in person at locations in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland (see Appendix C). Participants were encouraged to make use of these services if they felt concerned, upset, or triggered after participating in the discussion. Discussing experiences in a focus group context also raises issues regarding anonymity and confidentiality. I sought to minimize these risks by asking all participants to honor an agreement of privacy and confidentiality (see Appendix E). However, it is important to acknowledge that I ultimately had little control over what participants chose to discuss after they left the group; this was flagged in

the consent form, and therefore the acknowledgment of this risk was part of receiving participants' informed consent.

ANALYZING GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In my analysis of the data generated through the focus group discussions, I was interested in the experiences that participants relayed, as well the ways in which participants made meaning of these experiences. As with all language-use, the data generated within this research is socially constructed. The group discussions were facilitated in a 'formal' structured setting, at a particular time, in a particular place, for the overt purpose of generating data for academic inquiry in a previously-defined realm of lived experience. Following Plummer (1995), I consider the participants' discussion of their heterosexual experiences within this context as "issues to investigate in their own right" (p. 5). I approach this research from an intersectional feminist perspective, attentive to the ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity²⁵ mutually constitute heterosexual experience.

I began data analysis concurrent with the facilitation of focus group discussions, keeping field notes to reflect upon various aspects of the group discussions, including the overall rapport, my own facilitation of the discussion, the dynamics between participants, interesting or novel topics of conversation, themes that seemed to be recurring, what synced up with or diverged from my expectations, and any notable points of nonverbal communication. Using the audio and video recordings I had made of each group discussion, I created a verbatim transcript. The complexity of discussion is often streamlined in the transcription process, for simplicity and for

²⁵ Please refer to the second footnote in the preceding chapter for rationale regarding my decision to limit this intersectional analysis to these three dimensions of social inequality.

clarity. In my own transcription of these discussions, I sought to preserve this aural and visual complexity wherever possible, indicating where participants used inflection or intonation, paused or hesitated in their speech, abruptly changed or abandoned a train of thought, laughed or smiled, allowed a sentence to trail off, uttered *ums* or *uhs*, furrowed their brow when attempting to recall an experience or articulate a thought, interrupted or were interrupted by others, indicated engagement or disengagement through nonverbal cues, or added dimension to their speech with gestures or body language. In the process of transcribing, I kept additional field notes, marking notable segments of discussions, identifying topics I may want to focus on, making connections with scholarship I had previously read, and writing any preliminary thoughts or questions that might be useful in analysis. Building upon my field notes, I extensively reviewed the completed transcripts of each focus group discussion, which included my notations of participants' notable verbal and nonverbal cues.

In working through the transcripts in this way, I began to 'code' the data thematically; my interest at this point was in the actual experiences or concepts participants relayed, as opposed to their processes of meaning-making (which I primarily engaged with later in the analysis process). The 'themes' I identified were the topics or ideas that I found to be either particularly prominent or struck me as noteworthy. Some of the more prominent themes included discussion of 'family expectations,' 'difficulty achieving orgasm with partners,' and the concept of 'slut-shaming.' I also made note of Priya's distress regarding her lack of sexual experience and discomfort with her sexuality, which I considered to be interesting and important, despite it not being a prominent topic of conversation throughout the four group discussions. After identifying a number of key themes that I wanted to focus my analysis on, I deepened my analysis through consideration of how participants constructed their experiences. For example: In what way are

they presenting themselves? What do they discuss as influencing the way they see their heterosexuality and/or how they experience their heterosexuality? How are they positioning themselves in relation to other participants? What types of language are they using, and to what effect? What assumptions or ‘common sense’ knowledge underlies their talk? How does the emotionality conveyed shape the meaning of what is being said? Additionally, rather than isolating the few sentences or paragraphs that addressed each theme, I was careful to analyze the data within their original discussion context. I was able to inform and further my analysis through consideration of a number of contextual ‘clues,’ including how the theme emerged within the discussion, if and how other participants engaged with it, and whether it contradicted or was in sync with what the participant said at other points in the discussion. Moving through the transcripts in this way, I was able to build a more comprehensive understanding of these young women’s experiences and the meanings that they gave to them, as well as the threads – of commonality and of difference – that connected them.

DELVING INTO THE DATA

Ultimately, the data generated through the focus group discussions were extensive, rich, and multifaceted. The following chapters encompass a number of important themes that I consider particularly salient to my analytic focus, and the observations I have made in analyzing how these participants made meaning of these aspects of their heterosexuality, within the context of the focus group discussions. Engaging with participants’ narratives, I consider how these twelve heterosexually-active young South Asian women negotiate their heterosexuality as they navigate expectations based in an idealized South Asian femininity, work through moralistic

understandings of heterosexual desire and behaviour, and pursue heterosexual encounters that are both wanted and pleasurable.

3. EVADING RESTRICTIVE EXPECTATIONS

Heterosexuality is negotiated within the context of various imposed expectations, endorsing particular desires and behaviours while others are discouraged or condemned. Although contemporary neoliberal discourse constructs the female sexuality in the West as liberated and unencumbered (McRobbie, 2009), the sexual expectations placed on young women remain gendered, diverging from those expectations placed on young men (Attwood, 2007; Bogle, 2008; McRobbie, 2009; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Valenti, 2009). The nature of these gendered expectations is not uniform; the sexual expectations young women face are contoured by other aspects of their social location. Within ethnic minority immigrant communities in the West, the sexual expectations placed on young women are often ethnically-grounded, linking sexual behaviour to ethnic identity (Bauer, 2000; DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1996; Espin, 1999; Espiritu, 2001; Handa, 2003).

In the focus group discussions I facilitated, the twelve participants readily discussed expectations imposed on their heterosexual activity by many family and community members, particularly those they saw as retaining traditional South Asian cultural values. These expectations were simultaneously gendered and grounded in ethnicity, based in understandings of sexuality encompassed within a broader understanding of what South Asian femininity should and should not encompass. Restricting the realm of 'acceptable' or 'normal' heterosexual activity, such expectations have the potential to restrict young women's sexual freedoms. It was within this context that participants negotiated their heterosexuality, and strategically sought autonomy in their heterosexual decision-making.

IDEALIZED NOTIONS OF SOUTH ASIAN FEMININITY

Prior scholarship has identified sexuality as a particularly volatile issue within South Asian immigrant communities in the West (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1996; Handa, 2003). Participants' narratives indicate that young women's sexuality continues to be an area of contention within South Asian families and communities. Almost all of these young South Asian women – eleven of the twelve participants²⁶ – had negotiated their heterosexuality within the context of expectations that sought to restrict their heterosexual activity, posing a threat to their sexual autonomy. They discussed these expectations as imposed by traditional South Asian family members and/or community members, ultimately grounded in an idealized notion of South Asian femininity. These restrictive sexual expectations persisted across the individual women's varying life histories and differential engagement with South Asian culture.²⁷ Participants' experiences of restrictive sexual expectations were certainly not identical; their narratives indicated variation in the pervasiveness of these expectations in their lives, who held these expectations, whether and how such expectations were enforced through regulation of their behaviour, and the weight attributed to their compliance with these expectations. However, while participants' experiences were not identical, their narratives coalesced in that they all constructed their heterosexuality as negotiated, to varying extents, within the context of restrictive sexual

²⁶ While Amelia did describe her parents as having restrictive expectations for her sexual activity, she was dissimilar from others in that she did not see these expectations as necessarily grounded in traditional South Asian culture. (This is likely, in part, related to being raised by an Indian father and a Caucasian mother of European descent. Additionally, Amelia articulated a sense that her family was disconnected from the South Asian immigrant community in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland.)

²⁷ Whereas some women had grown up in India, others had experienced Indian culture primarily within the context of immigrant communities in Canada. Many of the women constructed their lives as largely located within South Asian culture, while a few perceived this cultural influence as minimal in their lives. (More detailed information can be found in Chapter 2, as well as Appendix A.)

expectations from members of their immediate family, extended family, and/or ethnic community.

Whether such sexual expectations had been discussed with them directly or – as was more often the case – indirectly conveyed, all participants knew the boundaries of ‘proper’ South Asian female heterosexuality. Rehka exemplified this sentiment, speaking to expectations of South Asian femininity more generally while identifying the governing of sexuality as particularly pronounced.

REHKA: [I] definitely [know what is expected of me]. Especially when it comes to sexual encounters. I think, um, with a lot of other things, at least for me, I would have never thought about, like, what I would need to do to be a good daughter. But when it comes to this, I know *exactly* how I need to act, and it's pretty clear for most of us.

While expectations regarding other aspects of her life may be less clear, Rehka is certain of what is expected of her sexual activity. She also constructed her awareness of these expectations as typical of young South Asian women in the West; she saw these expectations as “pretty clear for most of [them],” an assertion which I saw as substantiated by other participants’ discussions of their own lives.

Young women’s sexual abstinence or inactivity was crucial to the mode of South Asian femininity bolstered by these expectations. Over half of the participants – seven of the twelve – stated that members of their (immediate and/or extended) family expected them to abstain from sexual activity prior to marriage. Sonia explained that “there's this expectation, like, both my mom and my dad, they were each other's firsts, so they met, got married, whatever, started a

family.” Sonia was expected to act as her parents’ had. Although Priya was confident that her parents wanted and expected her to abstain from premarital sexual activity, she explained that they had “never even had a *discussion* about the concept of sex, the concept of using birth control, the concept of, like, protection.” She shared an anecdote that illustrated the indirect way in which she became aware of her parents’ sexual expectations:

PRIYA: I didn't know why parents didn't want us to use them [tampons] until, like, one of my older cousins was like “Oh, do you use a tampon?” This was when I was like 16. I'm like, “No.” She's like, “You know why? It's 'cause parents don't want anything to go up there until you're married.” I'm like, “Oh my god, that makes so much sense.”

For others, this emphasis on sexual abstinence or inactivity was more blatant. As she was growing up, Nina had been taught that “if you were having sex, you’re *bad*. You’re going to hell. It’s *evil*.” Later in that same group discussion, Nina more generally framed South Asian parents’ restrictive sexual expectations as intended to guard their virginity,²⁸ as part of a broader paternalistic safeguarding of the young women themselves: “It's like they [our parents] have to protect us and fight for our virtue or whatever. So it just drives them crazy ... 'cause it's almost like a failure on their part [if we are sexually active].” While the expectations these young women experienced varied in their explicitness, rigidity, and pervasiveness in their lives, ultimately none of the participants were fully exempt from restrictive expectations intent on limiting their sexual activity to the confines of ‘proper’ South Asian femininity.

²⁸ While I believe there are crucial issues with both the concept of ‘virginity’ and the value placed upon it, I recognize the term as one that has social meaning, and employ it here in reference to its normative usage, first experience of penile-vaginal intercourse.

While expectations regarding sexual activity were often not explicitly discussed, this idealized South Asian femininity was multifaceted; expectations regarding other aspects of their lives often encompassed undertones of sexual regulation. This echoed the findings of Handa (2003) in her work with young South Asian women in Toronto in the 1990s. She saw South Asian “feminine codes of behaviour” (p. 109) – and attendant expectations – as rooted in the concept of sexual reputation, though this was often implicit. Similarly, the participants in my research relayed a number of expectations for their behaviour that contained what Handa (2003) referred to as a “sexual subtext” (p. 109). Throughout each of the discussion groups, participants made reference to numerous aspects of an idealized South Asian femininity.

ELENA: There's a lot of things brown girls aren't supposed to do. ... We shouldn't do drugs or alcohol. We shouldn't go out. We should come home after school; that's what our job is. ... Just anything in daily life, I'd be like, “Oh, and you're brown and you're doing that?” ... Even with sexuality. Like, um, oh, you like to masturbate or something. Brown girls shouldn't do that.

At times, there were sexual undertones in expectations regarding wearing revealing clothing, drinking alcohol, and particular types of socialization. However, apart from those expectations that directly addressed sexual activity, the sexual undertones in conceptions of ‘proper’ South Asian femininity were strongest and most visible in regards to romantic relationships. Unlike expectations directly addressing sexual activity, participants described expectations regarding dating, relationships, and marriage as being directly conveyed. Implicit in these expectations was an understanding of romantic involvement as carrying the inherent ‘risk’ of sexual activity.

KARINA: ... I've actually grown up like this. Where, like, how you are, how [sexually] active—[Your relatives] know you have a boyfriend, it's like, “Oh my god!”

ELENA: Oh yeah, I totally relate to that.

KARINA: You have a boyfriend and it's just— “You're sleeping with him.” That's what they connect it to.

Rather than dating being encouraged or considered normative for young adults, almost all of the participants discussed members of their family seeking to abolish, limit, or otherwise monitor their dating behaviour. Although Rehka described her parents as “really, really good with her guy friends,” this does not extend beyond male friendships; “as soon as it becomes a relationship or anything involved with that, it’s hell.” Amelia, who is currently in her first sexual relationship, explained, “I don’t think my parents, or my dad, even wants to think about me having any relationship at all. They probably think I should be 30 [years old] before any of that stuff happens.” Similarly, Elena stated that “[her] dad would always tell [her], ‘Yep, you can date when you get married!’” None of the participants, the oldest of whom were 22 years old, described being pressured to participate in an arranged marriage or to marry a partner of their own choosing. However, despite my not raising the topic of marriage, almost half of the participants did relay discussions with family members regarding their marriage, positioning it as something that is on their radar. Relatedly, some participants positioned others’ perceptions of dating as directly related to the relationship’s perceived potential for marriage or, at least, a long-term commitment. Prohibitions of dating were described as particularly strong when a relationship was regarded as ‘casual’, or when a dating partner was considered an inappropriate

long-term partner. For example, Sonia chose to introduce her current Indian boyfriend to her parents – but not prior white boyfriends – partially because she knew her parents wanted her to marry an Indian man, offering the rationale that he would be “integrated better into [their] family and, like, he’d be understanding of the culture.” Sonia discussed this as compounded by perceptions of dating held by relatives. The participants in Group Four – Elena, Jasmine, and Karina – also constructed caste²⁹ position as potentially relevant, with Elena stating that “you can't date anybody outside your caste.”

Throughout the discussions, participants spoke with a (presumably shared) assumption that South Asian individuals – unless explicitly identified otherwise – would have restrictive expectations for young South Asian women’s sexuality. Ultimately, traditional understandings of and expectations for South Asian femininity – and for female sexual activity – functioned to classify women’s sexuality along ethnic lines, differentiating South Asian culture from Western culture. This reflects prior scholarship on ethnic minority immigrant communities in the West: the preservation of ‘traditional culture’ has often been employed as rationale for policing young women’s sexual behaviour (Espin, 1999; Espiritu, 2001). Female sexuality is tied to ideas of familial or national honor, with women positioned as “guardians of morality and tradition” (Espin, 1995, p. 225) or “carriers of culture” (Handa, 2003, p. 64).

ISHITA: I know if I told [my parents] that I’m going to be with this guy, it’s not going to be, like, a shock. But obviously, because they’re very Indian and very conservative, they’re going to be like, “No way, you’re not going to do that.”

²⁹ Historically, South Asian societies have been stratified according to inherited caste positions. This discussion of dating partners was the only place in which participants constructed the caste system as structuring their heterosexual experiences.

In a context where women's sexual activity is largely inextricable from ethnic identity, this type of transgressive heterosexual behaviour can be understood as marking a transgression of both gender and culture (Bauer, 2000; Handa, 2003). Ishita constructed Indian ethnicity as inextricable from her parents' expectations regarding her romantic and sexual engagement with men; their ethnicity and traditionalism – “very Indian” and “very conservative” – are constructed as inextricable, making their restrictive sexual expectations a presumably “obvious” inevitability. This sentiment was also made explicit by Elena when she listed the many “things brown girls aren't supposed to do.” These sexual expectations were constructed as restrictive in comparison to those placed on white ‘Western’ women. A few participants relayed a corresponding assumption – among South Asian immigrants and South Asians living abroad – that young white women were hypersexual or sexually promiscuous. While participants themselves generally did not endorse this perspective of ethnic sexual difference, Elena demonstrated how these ethnically-grounded assumptions may be internalized: “Okay, so, you would say something like, 'Oh, you slept around.' and I'd be like, 'Oh, is she white?' That's how our conversations go. It's really bad.” Elena reiterated this sentiment later, stating, “When my best friend was, like, hooking up with different guys *all* the time, at first I was, like, taken back. I'm like, that's not what a brown girl *does*.” While recognizing such generalizations as problematic, Elena relayed this assumption of white women's sexual promiscuity, implicitly placed in opposition to assumptions regarding the comparably-chaste sexuality of South Asian women. Based on her research with South Asian immigrants in Toronto in the 1990s, Handa (2003) observed conceptualizations of the West as “a sexual threat to notions of South Asian femininity” (p. 119). In my own research, while participants did not construct sexual expectations for young

South Asian women as grounded in an explicit understanding of the West as a ‘threat,’ South Asian women’s sexuality was still placed in opposition to – and elevated above – the sexuality of white women. This suggests that the regulation of female sexuality within an ethnic minority group may function as a means by which moral superiority can be asserted over the dominant group (see Espin, 1999). **The** dichotomization of Western and South Asian understandings of female heterosexuality substantiates Nagel’s (2001, 2003) argument that sexuality is always negotiated within the context of racialized and ‘ethnicized’ sexual boundaries, celebrating ‘our’ (here, South Asian) women’s sexuality while denigrating ‘their’ (here, white or ‘Western’) women’s sexuality.

In addition to being ethnically-grounded, the expectations imposed on these young South Asian women’s heterosexual activity were deeply gendered; the sexual activity of young men was not regulated in the same way. Participants saw themselves as subject to sexual expectations that were not similarly imposed on their male counterparts; young South Asian men – whether participants’ relatives or peers –were **seen** as **navigating heterosexuality** without the **parallel** limits of an idealized South Asian masculinity. Almost all of the participants constructed gender as fundamental in structuring sexual expectations and regulation for young South Asians in the West. In the messages and expectations relayed by their family and ethnic community, sexual activity **was** differentially interpreted for young men and young women.

PRIYA: ... I wasn't allowed to have, like, boys stay after certain times and stuff. But my younger brother, he's like 15, 16, [and] his girlfriends are always over. And they're always, like, together, like, in our theatre. My parents never check up on him! It's like, what the hell is this shit?

Priya expressed frustration as she discussed her parents' disparate expectations and rules for her younger brother and herself; they guard her sexuality in a way that they do not guard his. In a different group discussion, Elena, Karina, and Jasmine relayed the expectations placed on them by their families, and contrasted these with the experiences of their Indian friends and cousins.

MISHA (facilitator): So there aren't really [gender] differences with that [moving out of their parents' home], but there are with sex?

KARINA: Oh, no, [parents] wouldn't care if a guy's fooling around.

ELENA: ... I think everyone should be treated equally. But, um, there's definitely that factor for guys' sexuality.

Although participants considered this sexual double standard to be problematic, Karina and Elena also framed it as nonnegotiable. Similarly, in a different group discussion Sonia argued that “females, like, in the Indian community, are under so much more scrutiny than guys are,” and later elaborated upon this point:

SONIA: I think, like, in general, engaging in, like, masculine behaviour, for girls, is like *really* taboo. Uh, like, you can't have a lot of sex if that's what a lot of the— Like, a lot of Indian guys are, like, going out and getting laid, like whatever, nobody says anything. But if a girl does that it's, like, completely, like, not okay.

Here, Sonia's framing of sexual behaviour coded promiscuity – and, more generally, being sexually active – as inherently 'masculine.' This construction of heterosexual activity draws upon heteronormative, gendered understandings of heterosexuality (see Beres, 2008; Kimmel,

2004). In places where participants did not explicitly frame expectations as gendered, their silences should not be misinterpreted. Taken within the broader context of the group discussions, I see the invisibility of gender at some points in conversation as indicating that the gendered nature of sexual expectations is so deeply embedded that it is almost taken for granted. In the few instances where gender was explicitly constructed as irrelevant, participants still framed gender as *normatively* salient to traditional South Asian understandings of heterosexuality. Jasneet described her immediate family as “pretty open,” stating that “if [her] brother’s getting his girlfriend home, then [she’s] getting [her] boyfriend home.” However, her decision to frame her family’s expectations as gender-neutral can be understood as insinuating that gender typically *is* significant, with its absence here therefore marked as noteworthy. This point was underscored by other participants’ narratives, many of whom – in contrast with Jasneet’s experiences – did not feel they could spend time with boyfriends in their family home. Encompassed within understandings of ‘proper’ South Asian femininity, the gendered nature of these sexual expectations is prominent in prior scholarship: for young South Asian women living in Canada and the United States, the gendered basis of restrictive sexual expectations seems to have endured over recent decades (see Dasgupta & DasGupta, 1996; Handa, 2003).

Fundamentally, these young South Asian women’s narratives point to the pervasiveness of the expectations placed on their heterosexual activity by South Asian family and community members. Negotiating their heterosexuality within the context of these gendered and ethnically-grounded expectations, they are compelled to fall in line with an idealized notion of South Asian femininity that aims to restrict their heterosexual activity.

NEGOTIATING THE CONFINES OF SEXUAL EXPECTATIONS

Reflecting an idealized South Asian femininity, the sexual expectations participants discussed offered little room within which to negotiate heterosexual activity that did not transgress the boundaries of these expectations. Despite this potential affront to their sexual autonomy, the participants in this research did not construct their heterosexuality as necessarily restricted. The majority of these young women – nine of the twelve participants – identified these restrictive sexual expectations as in conflict with their own understandings of sexuality and/or the sexual activities they wanted to engage in. Within a social context where systemic constraints are obscured – or at least minimized – by neoliberal discourse (McRobbie, 2009), participants placed emphasis on individual negotiation of restrictive sexual expectations: despite such expectations being systemically-produced, rooted in traditional South Asian ideals of femininity, participants framed young women themselves as ultimately in control of their heterosexual activity. As noted previously, these restrictive sexual expectations, as well as the young women's conflict with these expectations, largely echoed the circumstances described in prior research concerning young South Asian women's sexuality in the West (see DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1996; Handa, 2003). Although the participants in this research have navigated similarly restrictive sexual expectations, what is crucial is how these young women make meaning of their own heterosexuality within the context of these restrictions; it is here that these young women's narratives differentiate them from their counterparts in decades past, drawing upon a neoliberal understanding of individuals' lives – including sexuality – as fundamentally within each individual's own control. The way these participants make meaning of their heterosexuality stands in contrast to that of the young South Asian women in Toronto, Ontario that participated in Handa's (2003) research in the 1990s. In discussing the expectations of South Asian

femininity, all of her participants discussed their lives as restricted by expectations of South Asian femininity (p. 53). As young South Asian women in the 2010s, the participants in my research rejected the idea that their lives were restricted by others' expectations; instead, consistent with neoliberal discourse, these young women emphasized their sexual self-determination.

Although traditional South Asian sexual expectations were constructed as relatively prominent in their lives, none of the discussions postulated that *all* South Asian individuals held restrictive expectations for young South Asian women's heterosexuality. Additionally, regardless of their individual heterosexual activity, none of the twelve participants presented themselves as having wholly and completely adopted traditional South Asian values regarding sexuality. However, this apparently did not constitute a critical mass: rather than conceptualizing these more permissive sexual attitudes as representing a broadening of South Asian understandings of sexuality, sexual permissiveness was – implicitly and explicitly – equated with Western culture.³⁰ Despite this, more sexually open-minded South Asian individuals – including the participants themselves – were generally discussed with Western culture as a pivotal point of reference. Instead of representing a distinct transformation in South Asian culture itself, 'liberal' or 'modern' South Asians were framed as having shifted toward 'Western' values and understandings. This reflects a broader pattern wherein South Asians in the West are subject to

³⁰ Although a historical review of sexuality in South Asia is beyond the scope of this research, the conceptualization of traditional South Asian culture as sexually repressive is not unchallenged. Dasgupta and DasGupta (1996) assert that this 'imagining' of traditional South Asian culture is unfounded. They argue that, historically, Indian culture has approached sexuality quite openly. Handa (2003) points to the legacy of Western colonialism in South Asia as catalyzing the restriction of South Asian women's sexuality, ostensibly in an effort to preserve South Asian culture and differentiate 'their' women from those of the colonizers.

evaluations of their ethnic authenticity. Sonia explained, “That’s always the assumption that people have, like, with more liberal [South Asian] families, is that they’ve lost their roots.” Sonia and Miranda further described ethnic authenticity as regulated through terms such as ‘whitewashed’ and ‘coconut,’³¹ used to signal assimilation with Western culture (sometimes referred to as ‘Westernization’). These understandings of ethnic authenticity work to further embed an understanding of South Asian perspectives of heterosexuality as inherently restrictive, and Western perspectives as fundamentally permissive.

For South Asians living in the West, time of immigration was often constructed by participants as salient: recent immigrants exemplified traditional South Asian culture, whereas those who had immigrated earlier – and therefore had been more exposed to the West – were presented as more ‘liberal’ and less ‘traditional.’ Elena explained that, in her Canadian high school, it was more recent immigrants (or “dippers”)³² whose parents were least open to the idea of their children dating. Even in describing changing attitudes in South Asian countries, participants in Group Three conceptualized this shift as a move toward Western culture and away from South Asian culture. Rehka, Nina, Deepa, and Priya constructed class privilege and education as increasing exposure to and acceptance of Western culture, which ostensibly facilitated a departure from ‘traditional’ South Asian culture.³³ The sentiment of this conversation can be summarized by Nina’s talk, where she describes class-privileged children in

³¹ Miranda explains the term ‘coconut’ as indicating that someone is “brown on the outside, white on the inside.”

³² When I asked her to explain the term ‘dipper’, Elena described it as “this really discriminating term” used to refer to “people straight from India.” Its meaning is similar to that of the term “F.O.B.” (‘fresh off the boat’), which a few research participants also employed.

³³ It is worth rearticulating here that all four of these young women are class privileged, having self-identified as either ‘middle class’ or ‘upper middle class’ (see Appendix A).

India as mostly “[having] Western values,” with these families generally being “more open to the West.”

In constructing their sexuality as unconstrained by the boundaries of ‘proper’ South Asian femininity, participants drew upon this understanding of South Asian culture as inherently sexually repressive. A number of participants emphasized their sexual agency in discursively distancing themselves from the South Asian culture of their families and communities. This was particularly true for those young women whose heterosexuality most transgressed restrictive expectations.

SONIA: I haven't adopted any traditional values, like, Indian values regarding sex or relationships or anything like that. So, like, my, kind of like, understanding of all that stuff is pretty, like, Western-based.

(Group 1)

ISHITA: I have, culturally, grown in a Hindu family and, um, raised in a very middle-class environment but, uh, and I *do* know that, you know, family and parents, they're very conscious of society. ... But, growing up, I have been a rebel, and I've done whatever feels right with me. ... If I have sexual preferences, like, I will not consider society to come between it. It's all on me. I'm bisexual. And I have a boyfriend who's three years younger than me. So I really don't care.

NINA: Umm, well, when I was in 11th or 12th grade, until then I was, like, the good little girl who did everything [I was expected to do], and then it came to a point where I was like, ‘This is just, like— What am I doing? Like, I— This is not who I am.’

(Group 2)

JASMINE: I don't let my, like, tradition or even culture affect, like, my choices. ... It's just finding yourself and just realizing if this makes *you* happy, it shouldn't matter what your parents think, right? Like, at the end of the day, you don't want to live with regrets, right?

(Group 4)

As these quotes demonstrate, these young women's separation of themselves from others' expectations – and 'traditional' South Asian culture more generally – was often constructed as a 'liberatory' process. Further, this process of emancipation was constructed as an individual achievement, implicitly positioning individual young women as responsible for freeing themselves from the sexually restrictive expectations of traditional South Asian culture.

In negotiating the disjuncture between others' expectations and participants' heterosexuality, simply dismissing restrictive expectations was constructed as insufficient. While their heterosexual behaviour may transgress restrictive expectations, a strong majority of the twelve participants described their sexual and dating³⁴ behaviour as concealed – to varying extents – from those members of their family and ethnic community who held traditional South Asian understandings of and expectations for female sexuality. When the topic was broached in a discussion group, other women would inevitably chime in, eagerly discussing what themselves and others kept secret and from whom. Participants constructed this type of secrecy as pervasive not only amongst themselves, but also more generally among young South Asian women in the

³⁴ Following the importance placed on young women's premarital sexual abstinence, participants described themselves as more secretive regarding relationships that were perceived as less serious or unlikely to endure. A number of young women conveyed that they would be more likely to disclose if and when a relationship was seen as having 'marriage potential.'

West. This reflected the findings of Handa's (2003) research with young South Asian women in the 1990s. Handa identified her participants' lying as largely motivated by the concept of respect (for family and the South Asian community), while functioning as a means to negotiate some freedom within expectations they saw as restrictive (p. 121). In contrast, the young women who participated in my research did not construct themselves as restricted by the sexual expectations of family and community members; these expectations were spoken of matter-of-factly, and secrecy was generally understood and presented as the 'obvious' means of dealing with disjuncture between others' expectations and their own heterosexual behaviour. While they occasionally discussed the possibility of doing otherwise (eg. refraining from 'transgressive' heterosexual behaviour, being honest about 'transgressive' heterosexual behaviour and dealing with subsequent consequences or conflict), secrecy was constructed as the means through which to maximize their sexual autonomy. This concealment was a rational choice, a means of asserting control over their circumstances; I conceptualize this as a *strategic* secrecy.

The extent to which strategic secrecy was utilized, and the means through which it was achieved, varied depending on participants' individual circumstances. Half of the twelve participants were currently living in their family home, while the other six were living away from their family – alone, with roommates, or in a residence on campus. For participants who lived with family members, strategic secrecy was generally a more active process of concealment. This often involved lying about who they were spending time with or what they were doing. It also effected how they used their family's home, with implications for their dating life and their sexual activity. Amelia had "never actually brought [her] boyfriend to [her] house." Sonia described strategically planning when to have her boyfriend over, particularly when they wanted to have sex:

SONIA: I only bring my boyfriend over when my parents aren't home. When *nobody's* home. Like, I'll even call my sister. I'm like, "Hey, like, my boyfriend's coming over." Uh.. And she knows why, like, I'm bringing my boyfriend over and, like, she'll be like, "Do you *have* to?" And I'm like, "Well.. yeah!"

Elena delineated clear boundaries between her sexual activity and her family home: "I would never, ever, ever bring a guy over here." Discussing a friend who had "met some guy at the club and ... brought him home" to her bedroom in her parents house, Elena stated that she "totally flipped out" and "would never do that" herself. A couple participants described how the need for strategic secrecy extended beyond the family home, when there was a chance of being 'outed.' Jasmine and her mother have the same physician, causing her concern about the confidentiality of her reproductive healthcare. As a result, she would make the effort to "come all the way out to [a different city nearby] to go to this doctor just so [her usual physician] is not aware that [she's] taking birth control." In contrast to these young women, strategic secrecy required less effort for participants who lived apart from their families; often, they were able to navigate restrictive expectations through passive omission.

JASNEET: ... I would *not* be able to do that [emotionally unattached sex] in India.

NINA: Mm uhh. [*Indicating agreement*]

JASNEET: Yeah. It's— Just the fact that I'm in Canada and I have *only* myself to answer to—

NINA: *Yes.* I would not *dream* of this in India.

Jasneet and Nina saw living in Canada as allowing them sexual freedom that would be inconceivable while living in India, where they would be both embedded in South Asian culture and in close proximity to family members who resided there. Young women's Internet presence can make this geographic distance less relevant; in Group One, Miranda and Sonia discussed the need to regulate the photographs visible on their Facebook profile pages. For Sonia, failing to do so undermined her strategic concealment of her current boyfriend: "My dad actually found out I was dating my boyfriend because of my Facebook profile." While managing their use of technology was not addressed in the other three discussion groups, it is likely integral to successful strategic secrecy.

While the perceived necessity of concealing transgressive heterosexual activity was not considered ideal, strategic secrecy was also not constructed as a significant imposition upon or restriction of their heterosexuality. After Ishita described her parents' beliefs as inconsistent with her own sexual and romantic desires, the other participants in Group Two – Nina and Jasneet – explicitly endorsed strategic secrecy as a means for her to negotiate agentive heterosexuality:

JASNEET: I think a possible solution for you [Ishita] might be just kind of, like, do your own thing and just don't talk to them [Ishita's parents] about it—

ISHITA: Exactly, that's what I do.

JASNEET: —just leave them out of it.

NINA: What they don't know can't hurt them. Trust me, I learned the hard way.

JASNEET: Give them need-to-know answers. Like, the short answers to everything, but don't really get them involved.

While purposefully concealing 'transgressive' interactions with men would inevitably influence these young women's lived experiences in some way, participants did not emphasize the constraints of this perceived necessity. In discussing their heterosexual experiences, strategic secrecy was constructed as enabling agency, as opposed to restricting their movements. The subtle nuance of this distinction was most clearly articulated in Sonia's discussion of how she negotiated her own heterosexuality within the context of restrictive messages and expectations.

SONIA: ... I don't know if my *choices* would have been a lot different [if my family were more sexually liberal]. I think, like, my execution of those choices would have been different. Like, I wouldn't be sneaking guys into my house, I'd be like, "Oh, mom, my boyfriend's going to sleep over tonight, or I'm going to go sleep over at his place" 'cause, like I can't do that right now, like, I'm pretty sure. ...

Strategic secrecy was significant in Sonia's life, given that she lived with her parents, was quite immersed in the South Asian immigrant community, and was also quite sexually explorative. In constructing her 'choices' as distinct from her 'execution,' Sonia frames her sexual decision-making as effectively unencumbered; within the context of competent heterosexual 'execution,' she is heterosexually agentive.

For participants who either lived away from their families and those whose families knew they were heterosexually active and/or dating, the management of this information often remained a crucial underpinning of their heterosexual autonomy; here, strategic secrecy functioned as a means of navigating the restrictive sexual expectations held by members of

extended family and the South Asian immigrant community. A number of these participants constructed this secrecy as mandated – if not facilitated – by their family members. When encouraged by family members, this secrecy was constructed as functioning to guard against social judgment, though it simultaneously enabled the young woman’s continued engagement in ‘transgressive’ heterosexual activity. While Elena’s immediate family knows she is taking oral contraceptive pills (though not without some conflict), hiding this ‘evidence’ of her heterosexual activity from others was framed as obligatory:

ELENA: I'm on the [oral contraceptive] pill. And my mom knows. And my dad, I'm pretty sure he knows. 'Cause he asked my mom what the heck I'm doing with them. And my sister knows. But I'm not allowed to tell anyone outside. Like, not even allowed to tell my cousins or anything.

Similarly, Sonia described her mother’s insistence that her current relationship be kept secret from their extended family, reasoning that if and when the relationship ended, it would negatively influence their perceptions of Sonia. Although the boundaries of ‘traditional’ South Asian understandings of heterosexuality were understood as narrow, these young women did not construct their heterosexuality as necessarily restricted. Gendered and ethnically-grounded restrictive sexual expectations are constructed as penetrable through strategic secrecy.

While this bifurcation of their lives was predominately constructed as a means of enabling sexual freedom within the context of restrictive sexual expectations, these young women’s narratives suggest that negotiating heterosexuality in this manner is not unproblematic. While these strategies for negotiating heterosexual agency are constructed as both necessary and effective, there are issues with conceptualizing the navigation of restrictive sexual expectations

as young women's individual responsibility. This conceptualization is problematic in that it positions young women as primarily responsible for negotiating agentive heterosexuality, and correspondingly responsible for any failure to do so. Although many participants had distanced themselves from traditional South Asian understandings of female heterosexuality, the strategic secrecy they engaged in was sometimes constructed as complex and wrought with difficulties. Rehka explained, "It's unfortunate [that I can't talk to my parents about it] 'cause like, now, my relationship, I really think it's something that will last, or could last. Something I definitely want to talk to my parents about." Throughout the group discussion, Priya had discussed her discomfort with her own sexuality. She framed her discomfort as rooted in her upbringing, and particularly its imposed silences regarding sexuality. Priya articulated her processes of internal negotiation as she endeavored to embrace her sexuality:

PRIYA: ... I think, like, [my parents and I have] never even had a *discussion* about the concept of sex, the concept of using birth control, the concept of, like, protection. ... Like, we never talked about it, and I just feel like.. that not being able to talk about it has played an impact on my life ... because it's either it's like, okay, this forbidden fruit that I don't really know about, so it's like, maybe I should, like, you know, go out and try it but then, when I want to go out and try then I— I, myself, I know that that *internal*, like, acceptance. That internal thought of 'no, no, this is not right, this is not right, this is not right' kind of goes ahead and then I just, like, kind of get scared and then I'm like, I don't know what to do and then.. So, it really does go back to them. It could go either way, for most girls, for any girl, right?

Although Priya constructed this struggle as something that young women have in common, it remains an individual struggle: young women themselves are positioned as primarily responsible

for navigating restrictive expectations, as well as embracing their sexuality despite these expectations. The ‘achievement’ of heterosexual autonomy is restricted by these difficulties in the individual, internal negotiation of systemic constraints.

Furthermore, while strategic secrecy was constructed as a means of freeing their sexual activity, this strategy does not work to disrupt the expectations themselves. Consequently, while a number of participants constructed their nondisclosure of ‘transgressive’ heterosexuality as a means of enabling agentic heterosexuality, this approach remained risky. Discussing the possibility of ‘transgressive’ sexual and dating behaviour being exposed, many participants made reference to violence as a potential consequence:

PRIYA: If my parents ever found out, like, I was having sex, they would physically— they would disown me. They would first beat the shit out of me, and they would disown me. They would disown me.

NINA: Yeah, I don't blame my mom for reacting the way she did [when she found out I was having sex]. I mean, not a lot of parents can— Like, I got a better reaction than most kids would, to be honest.

MISHA (facilitator): Like, most kids with Indian families or in general?

NINA: Yeah, Indian families. They would get beaten up and, like, thrown out of the house and like.. a lot of, a lot of, like— I'm sure of it.

This segment of discussion is by no means atypical; I was struck by how frequently participants, across all of the discussion groups, made reference to violence as a potential consequence. This risk was predominately framed as emanating from young women’s parents, and particularly their

fathers. These statements were made casually, and often punctuated with laughter. For example, responding to an anecdote about a young Indian woman who had brought a man into her parents' home to have sex and spend the night, Karina exclaimed that if she were to do the same, she would "probably be murdered." This statement was met with laughter from the other participants. While it was unclear the extent to which these various remarks were literal, hyperbolic, or emblematic, their severity clearly conveys the importance of any 'transgressive' heterosexual behaviour remaining undisclosed. As a means of avoiding these various negative consequences, the perceived necessity of strategic secrecy inevitably influences young women's experiences of heterosexuality, rendering their sexual autonomy conditional.

In addition, strategic secrecy – and the covert engagement in heterosexual activity it involved – was constructed as potentially dangerous. Sharing a personal experience, Rehka discussed how this need for secrecy had influenced her relationship with her parents:

REHKA: I think the fact that I've never had a conversation with my parents about this [sexuality] and, like, I think that— And I *always* say this now. I feel like— 'Cause, I've, like, I've had some pretty bad, like, relationships or whatever. And I feel like if I had been able to talk to my parents about it, I would have gotten out of that very quickly. But I kinda had to go through that myself. ...

Although Jasneet described herself as candid with her own parents, she noted that, for those who have to hide things from their parents, "if something goes wrong, if they genuinely end up in trouble, they can't go crawling back to their parents." While Sonia emphasized the necessity of concealing her 'transgressive' heterosexual behaviour, she also constructed this strategy as hazardous: "I think it's hard when you're trying to, like, please your parents and your, like,

reputation. It makes it more dangerous for you because then you start doing things behind their back.”

By concealing heterosexual activity that transgresses the expectations encompassed in ideals for South Asian femininity, these young South Asian women are able to negotiate more autonomy in their heterosexual decision-making. Critically, though, these narratives also indicate that strategic secrecy can be problematic for young women.

CONCLUSION

Intended to regulate – and ultimately restrict – young women’s premarital heterosexual activity, the boundaries that idealized notions of South Asian femininity demarcate pose a threat to the sexual autonomy of these young South Asian women. Despite these sexual expectations being restrictive in nature, they were not constructed as precluding heterosexual autonomy. Consistent with neoliberal conceptualizations, participants constructed individual young women as fundamentally in control of their sexuality, and responsible for navigating any threat that restrictive expectations may pose to their sexual freedoms. For those whose perspectives contrasted with traditional South Asian understandings of and expectations for female sexuality, strategic secrecy enabled them to negotiate a degree of sexual autonomy, giving the illusion of conforming to expectations despite covertly transgressing them. Although this allowed participants some latitude in regards to their heterosexual behaviour, the preceding discussion demonstrates the complexity and high stakes of these negotiations. Given the perceived necessity of discretion and the risk of being ‘found out,’ there are limits on participants’ ability to freely engage in heterosexual activity that transgresses expectations; their sexual autonomy remains both conditional and heavily constrained.

4. NAVIGATING SEXUAL MORALIZATION

Moral meaning has often been ascribed to human sexuality, with some sexual desires and behaviours revered as ‘good,’ ‘right,’ or ‘natural,’ while others are renounced as ‘bad,’ ‘wrong,’ or ‘unnatural.’ In most cultural contexts, including the West, these conceptualizations of sexual ‘morality’ have been deeply gendered: social standards of sexual permissiveness have historically differed for men and for women, with women’s sexuality disproportionately subjected to moral evaluation (Reiss, 1967). Within the contemporary West, neoliberal discourse has emphasized the sexual freedoms offered young women (Harvey & Gill, 2011; McRobbie, 2009), presumably liberating them from moral evaluation of their sexual desires and behaviours. Scholarship has argued that young women in the West are increasingly engaging in ‘masculinized’ heterosexual behaviour (Kimmel, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). However, although cultural norms have widened to allow for more expressions of female sexuality within the context of a committed relationship, gendered norms continue to determine what is considered ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’ sexual interest and behaviour (Lai & Hynie, 2011). In analyzing the narratives of the young South Asian women who participated in my research, I found that participants had negotiated understandings of heterosexual desire and activity as having moral implications, imposed externally, via the threat of sexual judgment, as well as through internal processes of meaning-making.

Conceptualizations of sexual morality delineate the boundaries of ‘appropriate’ sexual activity, condemning sexuality that transgresses these boundaries. While these boundaries are neither finite nor static, we can engage with conceptualizations of sexual ‘morality’ that reflect larger social propensities. Through the focus group discussions, the young women who

participated in this research relayed a particular understanding of sexual morality that has shaped their own experiences of heterosexuality. In these young women's lives, constructions of 'moral' or 'good' sexuality have generally promoted non-marital sexual abstinence or permitted sexual activity primarily within the context of a committed, monogamous, and heterosexual relationship. The conceptualizations of sexual morality and immorality discussed by participants reflect a social context where young women's sexual 'purity' – conceptualized as sexual abstinence or inexperience – is considered valuable (Valenti, 2009).

While certainly contoured by race and ethnicity, the conceptualizations of sexual 'value' or 'morality' participants engaged with are fundamentally gendered. Such moral evaluations ultimately continue to delineate the boundaries of 'acceptable' heterosexuality in the West. I consider this to be an important tension in contemporary heterosexuality, wherein the purported freedom to pursue wanted heterosexual encounters clashes with the moral 'value' attributed to particular heterosexual choices. With particular forms of sexual expression associated with moral depravity or perversion, such conceptualizations of sexual morality threaten young women's freedom to make decisions about their heterosexuality without the risk of judgment or concern about a deprecation of their sexual 'value.' For the young South Asian women who participated in my research, these moralistic understandings shaped their negotiations of heterosexual desire and behaviour, as well as their processes of meaning-making. However, their navigation of these circumstances was fundamentally constructed in neoliberal terms, with individual young women positioned as responsible for dismissing the sexual judgment of others and effectively working through their own conceptualizations of 'bad' and 'good.'

(DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT) MY BAD REPUTATION

Sexual desire and behaviour have historically put young women at risk of negative social consequences (Vance, 1984); if young women transgress the (gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded) boundaries of sexual morality, they have been made vulnerable to the sexual judgment of others (Attwood, 2007; Valenti, 2008). In the contemporary West, neoliberal discourse constructs heterosexuality as gender-neutral terrain: the latitude traditionally afforded to male heterosexuality has presumably been extended to female heterosexuality, with young women now “entitled to pursue sexual desire seemingly without punishment” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 85), their sexual experiences ostensibly unconstrained by the risk of moralistic sexual judgment. This reframing of female heterosexuality suggests that there has been a shift away from the differing standards of sexual permissiveness that have historically constituted the ‘sexual double standard’ (see Reiss, 1967). While young women may have more sexual leeway in monogamous, heterosexual relationships (Harvey & Gill, 2011), female sexuality that is perceived as transgressive continues to make young women vulnerable to sexual judgment. The sexual double standard is still frequently applied when women’s sexual expression is focused on exploration and physical gratification, as opposed to love and intimacy (Kimmel, 2004). Furthermore, for young South Asian women in the West, the understandings of sexuality within traditional South Asian culture can place even stricter limits on permissible heterosexuality, often condemning non-marital heterosexual activity.³⁵ In three of the four focus group discussions I facilitated, participants introduced the topic of sexual judgment. Approximately half of the twelve participants relayed experiences of harassment or gossip involving sexual

³⁵ These understandings of sexuality, and attendant sexual expectations, are discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

judgment, ranging from an offhand comment to extensive denigration. In addition to these instances of sexual judgment, the threat of sexual judgment was constructed as powerful in and of itself: these young women did not need to visibly transgress understandings of sexual morality to know where their boundaries lie. Overall, eight of the twelve participants discussed experiences involving the sexual judgment of others. It is no coincidence that the most sexually active, open, and explorative of participants were among these eight.

Ultimately, the modes of heterosexuality targeted by sexual judgment were those perceived as transgressing (gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded) understandings of ‘acceptable’ heterosexual behaviour.³⁶ These young women constructed various types of heterosexual behaviour as resulting in sexual judgment or putting them at risk of it. Additionally, sexual judgment was not necessarily rooted in the realities of young women’s heterosexuality; it was often described as precipitated by others’ perceptions, assumptions, or exaggerations of their heterosexual behaviour. While I will engage with some of these examples in more detail below, the following is a partial list of what participants constructed as having elicited sexual judgment or making them vulnerable to sexual judgment: heterosexual activity at a young age, sexual activity outside of marriage, sexual activity outside of a romantic relationship, having engaged in any heterosexual activity prior to her current partner, having sex with ‘too many’ sexual partners, having sex with a new partner ‘too quickly,’ taking oral contraceptive pills, having sex simultaneously with multiple partners, or their self-presentation being perceived as ‘too’ sexual. The harassment Priya discussed was particularly pervasive. She described others’ sexualized judgment as largely rooted in her sexual experimentation:

³⁶ Although my focus here is on heterosexual behaviour, sexualized judgment is not confined to sexual activity itself; it can similarly regulate other aspects of femininity.

PRIYA: ... with my independence [from my family] came, like, fooling around. Unfortunately, fortunately, I don't know. Um. Uhh. Parties happen and.. parties happen, right?! Things happen! And there was, like, this ... group of, like, these Indian boys ... who saw and started [saying,] “whore, whore, whore.” In, like, English and, like, Hindi and everything. And like, they were just like, “Oh, she's that kind of girl. You use her and you throw her [out]. She's probably done it with so many guys.” Even though one of them knew I'm, like, I'm still a virgin.

Priya emphasized the disjuncture between this sexualized judgment and the realities of her heterosexual experience. Her sexual behaviour is seen as transgressing the boundaries of what is appropriate or normal. She is constructed as promiscuous and dispensable, and the realities of her sexual (in)experience – “I’m still a virgin” – are rendered irrelevant. The expanse of heterosexual activities that participants described as instigating sexual judgment reflects the findings of recent empirical research; even within the contemporary West, young women continue to risk judgment if they are perceived as having sex with ‘too many’ men (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009), having sex with a new partner ‘too quickly’, or having casual sex ‘too often’ (Beres, 2008).

The sexual judgment participants discussed often took the form of sexual labeling; they made reference to a plethora of pejorative terms³⁷ denoting ‘transgressive’ sexual behaviour,

³⁷ While primarily articulated using this English terminology, a few participants described experiences of sexual labeling in other languages. Given that the group discussions were carried out in English, and that I am only fluent in English, participants were placed in a position of needing to translate any sexual judgment in other languages that they may have negotiated within South Asian cultural contexts. While this seemed to be done with ease and without hesitation, it is possible that some meaning was lost in translation.

including ‘slut,’³⁸ ‘whore,’ and ‘easy.’ This terminology is deeply gendered, governing the sexual behaviour of young women but not men; as Valenti (2008) has observed, “there isn’t even a word – let alone a concept – to signify a male slut” (p. 15). Priya’s experiences of sexual labeling were quite extensive; she described being bombarded to the point of being desensitized.

PRIYA: Before, I used to flinch when somebody said [the word ‘whore’]. Now I’m just so used to it, I’m like, “Oh my god. Okay, fine. I’m a whore. I’m a slut. Okay. Anything else you want to say?”

While Priya’s experiences of sexual labeling were the most intense and frequent, many other participants similarly constructed sexual labeling – real or threatened – as necessitating their navigation. Terms such as ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ were stippled across the focus group discussions; moralistic evaluations of young women’s sexuality (real, perceived, or otherwise) were conveyed as quite pervasive. This sexual labeling functions to regulate female heterosexuality, branding women as a means of enforcing the sexual double standard (Attwood, 2007; Jackson & Cram, 2003).

Reflecting participants’ construction of traditional South Asian culture as more sexually restrictive than Western culture (as I discussed in Chapter 3), it follows that some participants considered themselves particularly at risk of judgment from those who shared their ethnic background and were attuned to the expectations encompassed in traditional conceptualizations of ideal South Asian femininity. Alluding to this vulnerability, Sonia constructed young South

³⁸ Please see Attwood’s (2007) work for a more nuanced exploration of the term ‘slut’, including recent feminist efforts to reappropriate the term. I have chosen not to engage with this terminological complexity here in regards my own work, given that participants in my research employed ‘slut’ and related terminology solely in the pejorative sense.

Asian women's heterosexual behaviour as judged more harshly than the behaviour of their male counterparts:

SONIA: ... There's always, like, the group of, like, aunties³⁹ who are just sitting there and like, talking shit. ... [And] you don't want to be the one they're talking about, because it shows that you have a bad, like, rep, pretty much, in your community. And females, like, in the Indian community are under so much more scrutiny than guys are. Like, guys can do pretty much whatever the hell they want ... [and] nobody says anything. But as soon as a girl does it ... they start, like, slut-shaming, pretty much. That's what happens, when it comes to, like, sexuality and stuff and they found out that, like, um, she's had sex with a lot of guys or something like that ...

While sexual labeling was often perpetrated by those observing – or making assumptions about – young women's sexual activity from a distance, a couple of participants also discussed experiencing sexual judgment within the context of their romantic relationships. Nina described being sexually labeled by a past boyfriend: "Occasionally he'd call me a slut when he *knew* that I was only ever with *him*. He'd just use it against me." Rehka relayed similar experiences. Her first boyfriend "used to call [her] a slut for making out with one guy before him." She also described this risk of judgment as present in her current relationship, as her partner had initially been "a bit uncomfortable" with her sexual past, although he ultimately "accepted [her] for it." Rehka's past experiences offer a tangible context for her concern of being judged by potential future partners; she admitted to being apprehensive about "how the person is going to judge

³⁹ Within Indian culture, the terms 'auntie' and 'uncle' do not necessarily denote familial relationships; they're employed more generally as a term of respect for elders.

[her], based on [her] past [sexual] experiences.” Priya similarly expressed concern that, after she had sex for the first time,⁴⁰ the man would subsequently judge her and “be like, ‘Yeah, see how easy she was?’” While Deepa had consistently presented herself as sexual and confident in her sexuality, she also constructed herself as at risk of judgment from future romantic partners:

DEEPA: You know what I think, that after I get out of— Like, right now, [my boyfriend] thinks I lost it [my virginity] to him. But after I get out of the relationship, I’m— I don’t know, what if it [my current relationship] doesn’t work out? I’m always worried that the guy I like would not, like, after [my current boyfriend], would not accept me because I’m not a virgin.

Although Deepa did not construct female virginity as something that should be preserved, the concern she expressed reflects an awareness of the moral value ascribed to female sexual ‘purity.’ Simply by being heterosexually active, she is vulnerable to sexual judgment. Furthermore, while Deepa is discussing potential future male partners, her talk here seemed to imply that she had led her current sexual partner to the false assumption that he was her first: he only *thinks* she “lost it to him.”

The threat of sexual judgment was navigated even within the context of the focus group discussions themselves. Deepa divulged that “sex isn’t really a huge thing for [her],” and immediately qualified her statement by adding, “Not that I’ve slept with a lot of guys.” With these comments occurring in quick succession, I understand Deepa’s talk as illustrating her active negotiation of the risk of social judgment, with her latter statement working to defuse the

⁴⁰ As I have discussed elsewhere, Priya self-identifies as a “virgin.”

potential implications of the former. In the first focus group I facilitated, I also found myself unintentionally participating in this navigation of the threat of sexual judgment.

SONIA: ... we [my boyfriend and I] actually had sex two weeks into our relationship, so I'd only known him pretty much for two weeks before we had sex. And, like, um, I think, like, I've had sex with guys who I haven't been in relationships with. [*In a lowered voice:*] I've actually had more sex with guys [outside of a relationship]—

MISHA (facilitator): I have, too. I don't want you to feel like you're the only one here.

SONIA: —than people who I've been in relationships with. And, like, I don't feel bad about that, like, that's my choice, but like, I don't know.

Discussing her heterosexual experiences outside of romantic contexts, Sonia spoke more quietly, with her intonation suggesting that this was a type of confession. Knowing that the other participants in Group One were comparatively heterosexually inexperienced,⁴¹ my interjection was almost automatic, seeking to establish solidarity as a means of reassuring Sonia.⁴² This exchange – Sonia's volume and intonation, and my response to it – reflected a shared understanding that heterosexual activity outside of a relationship context challenged the

⁴¹ My awareness of Miranda and Amelia's relative heterosexual inexperience was based on the conversation that preceded this interaction. Having "never actually had sex before," Miranda stated that she was "still a virgin." Amelia described her current boyfriend as "the only one who [she's] ever had sex with." Furthermore, both Miranda and Amelia constructed romance as an important precondition for heterosexual activity; Miranda was 'waiting' for a committed relationship, while Amelia conceptualized sexual intimacy as a crucial means of building romantic intimacy.

⁴² Although well-intentioned, I soon afterward recognized my comment as potentially problematic; it may have had the unintended consequence of alienating Miranda and Amelia.

boundaries of ‘acceptable’ female heterosexuality, carrying the potential for judgment. While the focus group discussions may offer a unique opportunity for conversations about female heterosexuality, these instances illustrate that the discourses that shape the outside world – such as restrictive moralistic constructions of female sexuality – cannot be presumed to end where research begins.

Although sexual judgment was discussed as a significant presence in these young women’s lives, it was not constructed as prohibitive to their sexual autonomy. Sexual judgment was predominately regarded by participants as logically unfounded and – given its basis in gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ heterosexual desire and behaviour – fundamentally unfair. Priya clearly engaged with the gendered double standards that precipitate sexual judgment:

PRIYA: The thing is, like, *we* [women] get judged [for having sex]. But [men are] like, when they, like, do it all the time with *randoms*. We do it with our boyfriends, we do it with someone that we like romantically and it's— We just have such stigma attached.

Rehka similarly articulated her frustration with the gendered nature of sexual judgment: “I hate that concept. ‘Hard to get.’ ‘Easy.’ I hate it. It’s not ‘hard to get.’ I want it.” Sonia drew upon the concepts of ‘slut-shaming’ and sexual double standards at various points throughout the discussion, framing sexual judgment as both gendered and related to South Asian cultural expectations. Reflecting on the idea of sexual judgment more generally, Miranda observed that “it looks bad for girls” to be heterosexually active, pinpointing the gendered nature of sexual judgment.

Participants did not construct the threat of sexual judgment as necessarily limiting their heterosexual activity. Although sexual judgment was constructed as having a systemic basis, related to these young women's gender and ethnicity, participants predominately understood themselves as individually responsible for strategically navigating the threat of sexual judgment. There was an expectation that young women take control of the situation by deciding to disregard others' judgment, precluding any influence on either their self-perception or heterosexual decision-making. This was exemplified by Nina and Priya's conversation about how they each had navigated others' sexual judgment, with Nina offering advice to Priya.

NINA: ... People used to give me a hard time about this. Like, about the fact that I slept with him. But, eventually, they weren't able to, like, make me feel bad about it because I was like, "Mm, okay, whatever. I slept with him. It's not a big deal, it's not a secret." ... They'll only target you if you, like, let them.

PRIYA: But the thing is, I don't stand up for myself. ... I'm just so.. What would the word be? I'm so *passive* about it. I'm just like, 'Okay, whatever, it happens, it happens.' But it doesn't happen! And it's not right to happen! So, like, I never know how to react. And I just go and cry and then it happens again, then the cycle just continues, because I don't do anything to stop it.

Having experienced significant harassment about her sexuality, including being labeled a 'whore' and a 'slut,' Priya expressed her frustration. Notably, this frustration was not directed at her harassers; Priya was primarily frustrated with *herself*, for the influence this harassment has had on her sexuality. She constructed herself as somehow 'lesser than' for her inability to disregard others' judgment.

PRIYA: I don't understand. Like, why *can't* I be comfortable with my sexuality? Like, because of what *they* said? It's like, I'm too scared because they're going to judge me? ... I'm just like.. Okay, now, we're having.. not sex, but like just hooking up out of relationships or just me wanting to just, you know, be with a guy and, like, not having to have a serious commitment. Why do I— Why am I so fearful of that? Like, it's fine, I think it's so natural, right, to want human touch. So why does it have to be that it's justified and acceptable only if I'm in a relationship with someone? I don't get it.

Understood in this way, individual young women are positioned as responsible for strategically navigating others' sexually judgmental harassment. You are victimized because you "let them" make you a target, instead of choosing to be confident in your sexual choices. You are victimized because you "don't do anything to stop it," instead of taking control of the situation. Priya holds herself responsible for failing to "stand up for [herself]." This understanding of victimization and personal responsibility resonates with the findings of Chung's (2007) research on how young women made meaning of their experiences of dating violence. The participants in her research distanced themselves from the concept of victimization, instead constructing themselves as agentic. Chung argues that this understanding of dating violence is bolstered by these young women's view of themselves as equal to men – a view Chung identifies as different from prior generations of young women. Within this understanding of gender, structural factors can no longer be used to explain their decision to stay with a violent or abusive partner; instead, under the pretense of gender equality, not leaving an abusive partner – i.e. 'choosing' to be a victim – becomes constructed as an individual failing. Similarly, for young South Asian women who participated in my research, the structural factors underlying sexual judgment were largely

dismissed. Instead, their talk implicitly positions young women as responsible for effectively negotiating the threat of sexual judgment, conveying the idea that they are only victims if they allow themselves to be victims.

MORAL SELF-EVALUATION

While boys are taught that the things that make them men – good men – are universally accepted ethical ideas, women are led to believe that our moral compass lies somewhere between our legs.

(Valenti, 2009, p. 13)

During our discussions about sexual judgment, participants themselves generally did not endorse an understanding of sexual activity as having inherent moral value. Rather than implementing a socially-constructed logic of what is ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of an individual’s heterosexual desire and behaviour seemed to be evaluated relative to that individual’s personal preferences; they emphasized young women’s entitlement to pursue wanted heterosexual activity. While dismissing the moralistic understandings underlying others’ sexual judgment, ideas of sexual morality shaped the ways in which [participants](#) made meaning of their heterosexual activity. Engaging with an understanding of moral value differentially ascribed to various types of heterosexual activity, these moralistic considerations threaten these young women’s sexual autonomy, potentially dissuading them from pursuing the sexual activity they want, desire, or find pleasurable. Through complex and often contradictory processes of meaning-making, these young women negotiate their heterosexual decision-making within this context.

The moralization of female sexuality in the West is perhaps most evident in considering the social valuing of female heterosexual abstinence. Within heteronormative constructions of ‘first sex’ (with ‘sex’ conceptualized here as penile-vaginal intercourse), female ‘virginity’ has traditionally been conceptualized as something precious that should be ‘saved’ until it is ‘given’ to a male partner within the context of committed, romantic, monogamous love (Valenti, 2009). Within the group of twelve participants, seven young women constructed the experience of ‘virginity loss’ as significant. Two of these women – Miranda and Karina – expressed a personal desire to not have sex until marriage, for reasons they framed as related to their ethnic culture and religious beliefs. While the other five did not idealize the context of marriage, they nonetheless constructed ‘virginity loss’ as consequential. However, the rationale for this significance remained predominately unspoken and unproblematized, framing this understanding of ‘virginity loss’ as natural rather than socially constructed. This is exemplified by Priya’s discursive construction of ‘virginity loss’ as “[giving] it up”; her first experience of penile-vaginal penetration is conceptualized as encompassing a type of loss. Moreover, following the social value attributed to female sexual abstinence, female ‘virginity loss’ was constructed by many participants as emotionally ‘risky.’ While evident in a number of participants’ narratives, Nina and Jasneet offered a particularly dynamic description of their negotiation of these emotional ‘risks’:

JASNEET: I've always kind of been very cautious when it comes to, like, *doing* sexual *things*. Like, from the beginning, like— 'Cause I waited to have sex 'til I was, like, almost 20 years old. Even though, like, I had friends who were doing it like, 15, 16. And I was just like, what's wrong with you? Like, when I was 15 I hadn't even, like, kissed a guy, you know? 'Cause ... I tried to, like— You know, I

made myself go super slow, because I'm like, I don't want to screw this up, you know, I don't— because I know I can't handle it. I am *too* emotional and I've seen *too* many people like, you know, get, like, really really messed up about things like that. So, I've always kind of been like, okay, you know what, just take it easy, like, don't take it too seriously, but— but take it easy. Just know what you're doing. And— and kind of be sure-footed about it.

NINA: It's actually interesting, 'cause it was the opposite for me. It was like the forbidden fruit, you know? So I like— I really wanted to try it! I was like, what is the big deal? Like, that looks like-- Like, why's it such a big deal? Like, so many people are addicted to it, what is.. so—so great about sex, you know? I mean, I had a boyfriend before that, but then I didn't wanna—I felt like it was important to, like, *like* the guy *enough*. That—you know, like, sort of, like, love him, you know. Like, have strong feelings for a guy before you did anything with him. And so I waited with my— like, for my ex. And then as soon as we had the opportunity, we did it.

Here and in subsequent talk, Jasneet and Nina both described managing the perceived emotional risks of 'virginity loss' by 'waiting'; this concept of 'waiting' implied a disjuncture between their desire and their actions. These constructions of 'virginity loss' suggest that, as Vance (1984) discussed of female sexuality in decades past, Jasneet and Nina continue to actively negotiate a tension between sexual pleasure and various sexual 'dangers,' including potential emotional costs. The perceived significance of this decision is emphasized by the caution and thought-processes demonstrated in Jasneet's statement, motivated by her not wanting "to screw this up." Similarly, Nina's intonation emphasizes the importance of liking the guy "enough," suggesting that an adequately romantic context offers some protection from emotional 'risks' in her first experience of 'sex.' Despite their negotiations of virginity loss being contoured by ideas of sexual morality, these young women do not construct these sexual decisions as constrained by

moral understandings or expectations. Notably, while most participants did not make reference to religious ideas of sexual morality, Nina does identify as Catholic and acknowledged that within “the Catholic faith you’re not *supposed* to have sex outside of marriage.” However, even in referencing religious concepts of sexual sinfulness, Nina constructs her sexual decisions as ultimately self-chosen: “It’s for your own benefit. ... Like, you could sleep with a hundred guys, and you would still not be fulfilled, you know? And so I feel like it’s for our own benefit, rather than, ‘Oh, God’s going to be upset.’”

Even beyond the context of ‘virginity loss,’ participants endorsed heterosexual activity within the context of love and intimacy, they framed their own sexual expression less permissible when focused on exploration or physical gratification (see Lai & Hynie, 2011; Kimmel, 2004). Understood in this way, women’s sexual activity – under the ‘wrong’ conditions – involves an inherent failure of vigilance, a loss of value: he takes sex and she ‘gives it up.’ The value placed on female sexual abstinence or inactivity is also evident in participants’ constructions of heterosex as something their male partners should have to either work for or wait for, even if this means denying or delaying sexual activity that the woman wants to engage in. Their narratives encompass this sense of ambivalence.

JASMINE: For me, I would have to say, like, I'm very happy with my boyfriend right now, but when we first started dating, when, like, when we did get intimate, I feel like I just kind of—like, girls have standards. I feel like that might have been too easy for him. So now it's like there's no way I can take that back and be like, actually, you know what, you gotta go through this, you gotta wine and dine me, *then* you get to go there, right?

Deepa similarly “regretted” how she “gave [herself]” to her current boyfriend, stating that it was “so easy for him.” In these negotiations of heterosexual decision-making, participants constructed themselves as having failed to ‘protect’ their sexual ‘value’, employing terms such as “too easy” and “hard to get.” These constructions reflect heteronormative roles, wherein women are positioned as sexual ‘gatekeepers’, expected to protect their sexual ‘value,’ responding to their partner’s sexual advances passively (Kimmel, 2004), “[resisting and] slowly [ceding] bodily territory and finally [consenting] to intercourse” (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2000, p. 225).

The salience of moral evaluation to participants’ heterosexual decision-making was also particularly evident in constructions of ‘casual’ sexual activity (i.e. non-romantic, outside of a relationship context), in comparison with constructions of sexual activity within the context of an emotional relationship. Many of these young women constructed emotional attachment or love as an important precondition for their heterosexual activity. While many participants also described enjoying heterosexual activity outside of emotional contexts, embracing the ‘masculinized’ approach to heterosexual expression purportedly available young women within the contemporary West (McRobbie, 2009), these types of sexual encounters were sometimes constructed as having moral implications. While Deepa had enjoyed many sexual encounters outside of a relationship context, she harbored mixed feelings, stating that “sometimes [she] feels so bad” that having sex was “not a big deal” for her in an emotional sense. Jasneet emphasized her enjoyment of sexual encounters outside of romantic contexts, noting that “the first time that [she] had *completely emotionally unattached* sex ... it was *amazing*.” However, later in the group discussion, she described a more complex negotiation regarding the role of emotional attachment:

JASNEET: ... to me, if I have, like, sex and it's not really, like— If I don't really care about the guy, I always kind of feel *sad*. I don't feel *bad* or anything like that. Just kind of sad. Because I feel like, you know-- Because I think of the way that I *used* to think about these things and the way that I think about it now and now that— that idealism is gone. You know, now I'm the kind of person that can have a casual sexual encounter and not feel bad about it. And then I feel bad about the fact that I'm not feeling bad about it. ... I mean, I was naked with this guy, and I'm *completely* okay with not talking to him anymore, you know? If I never see him again, whatever. And it's just like, okay, I'm the kind of person that does that now. Okay. So I have to kind of reconcile my feelings.

Despite choosing to engage in – and having enjoyed – heterosexual activity out of a relationship context, many participants discussed their experiences in a way that suggested a complex engagement with the role of emotionality in heterosexual activity. These young women's constructions of non-romantic sex, in contrast with romantic sexual intimacy, reflect and reproduce a moralistic understanding of female heterosexual desire and behaviour as more acceptable within a committed, long-term, romantic context (Allen, 2003; Kimmel, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In their social interactions and/or in their internal processes of meaning-making, many of the young South Asian women who participated in my research made reference to their negotiation of moral understandings of sexuality. While neoliberal understandings encourage young women to emulate 'masculine' understandings of sexual activity as "light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and status" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 83),

participants' narratives demonstrate the moralistic value attributed to female sexual 'purity' and the ideal of young women's sexual activity be primarily an expression of love and intimacy. These moral understandings place conditions on young women's sexual expression, challenging their sexual autonomy; it is only particular types of sexual activity, in particular contexts, that are morally sanctioned. Harvey and Gill (2011) have argued that neoliberalism's sexual 'empowerment' largely restricts female sexual expression to the traditional confines of heterosexuality and monogamy. For the young South Asian women who negotiated moralistic understandings, they were not seen as inevitably restrictive; young women are positioned as responsible for dismissing these systemic moral evaluations – both internally and externally attributed.

5. PURSUING WANTED AND PLEASURABLE SEX

Writing three decades ago, Vance (1984) conceptualized female sexuality as characterized by a fundamental tension between sexual pleasure and sexual danger; women's pursuit of wanted⁴³ and pleasurable sexual encounters was inevitably constrained. Reflecting the social, physical, and emotional dangers Vance discussed, a discourse of risk has remained prevalent in constructions of female heterosexuality in the West.⁴⁴ Currently, in the West, neoliberal discourse offers young women the promise of sexual pleasure without these barriers. Young women are called upon to "emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 84). Purportedly freed from the restrictions traditionally placed on the sexuality of women in the West, they are encouraged to enjoy sexual pleasure and pursue the sexual experiences that they want.

In many ways, the young South Asian women who participated in this research suggested that these neoliberal promises had been fulfilled: Nine of the twelve participants presented themselves as quite sexual, actively desiring, and/or pursuing heterosexual encounters. Despite this, their discussion of their heterosexual experiences suggests that their pursuit of wanted and pleasurable sexual encounters is not without complication. Their sexual autonomy is challenged by gendered, racialized, and ethnically-constructed understandings of and expectations for

⁴³ Following the work of Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005), I conceptualize 'wanted' sex as a multidimensional concept that encompasses sexual desire but is not limited to it.

⁴⁴ An earlier iteration of this research project was unintentionally complicit with this: I had positioned such risks as central, focusing on young women's negotiations of sexual consent. Endeavoring to more fully capture the complexities of young women's heterosexual experiences, I have modified my research focus to create room for the productive alongside the problematic, with an increased emphasis on sexual desire and pleasure.

heterosexuality, limiting their ability to negotiate pleasurable heterosex and constraining their navigation of unwanted sexual encounters. Despite the systemic foundation of these barriers – gendered and, to a lesser extent, racialized and ethnically-grounded – their navigation of these circumstances reflects a neoliberal emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility. Their narratives relay an ambivalence as they negotiate their heterosexuality within this context.

“I KNOW YOUR MACHINERY; YOU SHOULD KNOW MINE.”

Heteronormative constructions of heterosexuality have prioritized male sexual desire and pleasure while simultaneously erasing female sexual desire and decentralizing female sexual pleasure (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002). However, within the context of neoliberal discourse and ‘postfeminist’ sensibility in the West, female sexuality is reframed in a way that claims to create space for the acknowledgment of women’s desire and women’s pursuit of pleasure (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). In discussing heterosexual encounters, many participants constructed themselves as sexually desiring and in pursuit of sexual pleasure, consistent with these ideas of ‘empowered’ female heterosexuality. In addition to recognizing women as desiring and placing importance on women’s pleasure, these constructions are productive in that they deviate from heteronormative discourses that are predominately risk-oriented, emphasizing female vulnerability to physical, emotional, and social ‘dangers’ (see Vance, 1984).

While dominant, heteronormative understandings of heterosexuality have worked to obscure and suppress female sexual desire (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002), the concept of sexual desire was woven throughout participants’ constructions of their heterosexuality. While it often remained unspoken, sexual desire seemed to be implicit in

participants' discussions of appealing heterosexual partners, enjoyable heterosexual activities, and favorite heterosexual experience.⁴⁵ A few participants more explicitly constructed themselves as heterosexually desiring. Amelia described herself as “perverted” and “super interested in sex,” both currently and throughout the earlier years of her life. She framed desire as a crucial component of her heterosexuality, stating that she’s “very [sexually] inexperienced except for the fantasy.” She also firmly positioned her desire as motivating her sexual activity, including her experience of ‘first sex’:

AMELIA: Before we had sex [for the first time], he [my boyfriend] was just like, "I want you to be ready. Like, I don't want to pressure you to." But I was just like, "*But I want to!*"

In some cases, participants discussed their sexual desire as located within the body. This conceptualization of desire as a biologically-driven ‘need’ has traditionally been constituted as the exclusive domain of male sexuality (see Allen, 2003; Beres, 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2006). In the group discussion, Ishita consistently constructed sexual desire and pleasure as important; she considered the physical body apart from the realms of love or logic, worthy of attention in and of itself:

⁴⁵ While explicit discussion of masturbation was largely absent from the four group discussions, desire was not constructed as necessarily contingent upon a male partner’s presence. For example, a number of participants discussed solo desire and sexual fantasy in the context of reading erotic fiction (‘erotica’), romance novels, or graphic comics. Notably, participants did not discuss pornography as having a role in their heterosexual desire.

ISHITA: ... Like, what if we had to sleep with somebody? Why is that so wrong? Like, I don't— I don't understand. Your body needs to sleep with somebody, you should. Like, that's how your body is, right? There's nothing right or wrong about it. Like, if you feel like it, you should. It's not about the crap, it's not about the shit you have to deal with later on. ...

Through her use of commanding phrases – “had to;” “needs to;” “should” – Ishita moves beyond the idea of desire as ‘wanting,’ instead framing embodied sexual desire as a more fundamental biological imperative. This conceptualization is echoed later in the same discussion, with Nina and Jasneet making reference to their own desire – “if the need arises”; “the need would no longer be there” – while constructing it as physiologically-rooted.⁴⁶ In addition to constructing themselves as desiring, many of these young women emphasized the importance of their own sexual pleasure, and female sexual pleasure more generally. Deepa unambiguously constructed heterosexual activity as a means to this end: “[Sex is] for me. For me to feel better. For me to have an orgasm.” Expressing discontent with past experiences of non-romantic sex, Nina also emphasized the importance of her sexual pleasure:

NINA: ... *I* get nothing out of it, but they get off. Like, the guy would get a lot out of it, but I would get nothing out of it. So it's of no benefit to me, if I can take care of myself, you know.

⁴⁶ These quote segments are attributed to Jasneet and Nina, respectively. I have chosen to present them in this abbreviated, decontextualized format simply as a means of illustrating how these participants operationalized the concept of desire as ‘the need.’

As demonstrated in Nina's construction of her heterosexual experiences, a number of participants similarly constructed sexual pleasure as having implications for their decisions regarding what 'types' of heterosexual they would engage in and with whom.

These young women's constructions of sexual desire and pleasure at times suggested a potential fulfillment of the sexual freedoms promised to young women in the contemporary West. In participants' narratives, there is reason to believe that systemic constraints are adversely shaping their heterosexual desire and pleasure. In these discussions, young women's recognition of their sexual desires and pursuit of sexual pleasure were not framed as inevitable or automatic; their negotiation of pleasurable heterosexual encounters was more complex.

These barriers to desirable and pleasurable heterosexual experiences were predominately grounded in gendered understandings and expectations, though at times also related to racialization and shaped by their ethnicity. However, despite signaling recognition of these systemic constraints, the negotiation of these barriers as being predominately framed within an individualistic discourse of personal responsibility. Participants' narratives worked to construct individual women as ultimately responsible for the negotiation of desirable and pleasurable heterosexual encounters. Nina, Jasneet, and Ishita – the participants in Group Two – constructed hegemonic discourses of female heterosexuality as inadequate for many women:

JASNEET: ... It's so shocking, though. There's so many girls that I know who've *never* had an orgasm. Like, they've been having sex for years, but they've never had an orgasm. I mean, how do you *do* that? Like, you've never *had* that feeling? And they're just like, 'No.' And I'm like, 'Can I *please* draw you a diagram to show because, like, you're missing out. You know?' It's just so *sad*.

MISHA (facilitator): What are they missing out on, you think?

JASNEET: Like, well, okay. They're having sex, but they're not having orgasms. At the very *least*, at least learn how to give yourself one. You know? 'Cause, like, if you don't know what you like, then how can you tell *him* what you like?

NINA: Honestly, I was— I was like that until very recently. Like, I didn't— I just believed that there were some women that just *can't*. And, like, a lot of women believe that they're— they're the ones that can't, but it's just that.. The *information* is not out there that, like, or, like, you don't.. look— you don't know how to look for, you don't know who to ask, you don't know ...

ISHITA: Or a lot of times, they just *think* they've had one but they haven't.

In placing herself in opposition to women who have never had an orgasm, Jasneet constructed herself as sexually knowledgeable and placed value on that knowledge. Ishita similarly constructed herself as possessing this type of sexual knowledge. These understandings of sexual pleasure place the onus for developing sexual knowledge on individual women, conceptualizing women's 'failure' to achieve orgasm as a personal inadequacy. Challenging this framework, Nina situated her own difficulties within a larger social context. Here, Nina's construction of women's 'failure' to orgasm highlights continued absences in heteronormative discourses of female sexual pleasure, shifting responsibility away from individual women and toward systemic inadequacies. However, at other points in the discussion groups, Nina drew upon a more individualistic framework in discussing women's orgasmic difficulties. This is most evident during an exchange in Group Three, where Nina offered advice to Priya:

PRIYA: You know how you [Nina] were saying, like, you can get yourself off? I can't even do that.

NINA: It takes a *lot* of practice.

PRIYA: No, I've never *tried*.

NINA: Okay. Read erotica. Start with that. ... Most women, from what I've read, get satisfied through clitoral stimulation.

Despite Nina's earlier recognition of systemic factors working against women's sexual self-knowledge and subsequent pleasure, an alternative construction was evident as she advised Priya. Nina constructed herself as having successfully developed the sexual knowledge necessary to facilitate her own sexual pleasure. Through these recommendations, Nina shared this sexual knowledge while simultaneously constructing herself as sexually knowledgeable.

Participants also utilized the focus group discussion itself in a way that I saw as making visible the ways in which hegemonic discourses of female heterosexual desire and pleasure were lacking, while simultaneously disrupting these absences. With these types of sexual knowledge constructed as the responsibility of individual women, the focus group discussions seemed to be, to an extent, repurposed as a place for sharing and learning. A couple of participants explicitly constructed the focus group discussion as enabling a type of conversation about female heterosexuality that differed from those taking place elsewhere. As Group Two was coming to an end, Nina reflected on the conversation we had engaged in: "It's really refreshing to be able to talk openly about sexuality. ... Like, it's nice to know that you're not the only one that feels a certain way." Deepa constructed the group discussion in a similar way, while explaining her

hesitation upon realizing that the other participants were friends of hers;⁴⁷ within the context of the focus group, her discussion of her heterosexuality differed from how these friends would ordinarily discuss sexuality with each other. I found this sexual sharing and learning to be particularly visible in the questions participants asked both of each other and of me. While such questions were asked by a number of participants, and in all four of the discussion groups, the pursuit of sexual knowledge was most evident in Priya's discussion group participation. Repeatedly emphasizing her discomfort with her own sexuality, Priya approached her participation in this research as an opportunity to learn about sexuality from women she perceived as more sexually confident and knowledgeable than herself. She shared this with me prior to the beginning of the group discussion, and reiterated it within the context of the discussion itself:

PRIYA: I think the only thing stopping me from having sex today, like, is my, um, confidence. And my self-esteem. And then another thing is, like, the whole concept of [my boyfriend manually stimulating me]. Whenever I think about it, like, when he's— I'm like, 'No, you have to stop.' Why— Why am I? 'Cause I'm like 'Oh my god, what if I don't orgasm?' Like, fuck, that's my fault. Like, you know, I *internalize* everything, and I can't stand that anymore. I need a break from that. You guys are going to help with that. With this conversation.

⁴⁷ As discussed in the methodology chapter, I organized Group Three without knowledge that the women knew each other. Before beginning the discussion, I was careful to ensure that each woman still felt comfortable participating.

NINA: Yeah. Um. I think women take a lot of the blame for if, like, if they're not satisfied. Like, I know I did that all the time. I was like, 'No, it's just— I just can't orgasm. Or I can't, you know, I can't do it.' And it was always— there was always a pressure, you know? Because he'd always ask me, 'Oh! Did you come yet? Did you come yet? Umm. Are you there yet?'

Conveying her negotiation of heterosexual activity and heterosexual pleasure, Priya constructs these difficulties as situated in her own individual inadequacies. Following this individualistic understanding, Priya consequently takes responsibility for developing – through the focus group discussion – an understanding of her sexuality that enables her to confidently embrace her sexual desire and successfully pursue heterosexual pleasure.

While they positioned their orgasm as important, Nina, Sonia, and Amelia each individually discussed their difficulties achieving orgasm through 'regular' or 'normal' heterosex.

SONIA: ... I'm going to be honest; it's kind of hard for me to orgasm in, like, regular sex. ...

(Group 1)

NINA: I really like sex, but I.. don't orgasm. And so, like, there was *one* time, or maybe two times that I orgasmed. And that was *not* because of the guy but because we, maybe, used.. toys.. [*laughs*] Um, and then, like, now I can get myself off. But, still, I have to *really* focus. Like, and it takes awhile, so.

(Group 3)

AMELIA: ... I always need to, like.. [laughs] I always stimulate myself.. during it. Like, it doesn't— It never, uh, orgasms just from him.

(Group 1)

These young women's talk ultimately reconstitutes a heteronormative understanding of heterosex as centered around penile-vaginal penetration. However, their heterosex largely excludes or minimizes sexual activity that would enable them to reach orgasm or increase their overall enjoyment. Nina and Amelia's construction of sex toy usage and manual clitoral stimulation, respectively, implicitly glorified orgasms that result from normative heterosex (i.e. orgasms that *were* "because of the guy" or induced "just from him").

Additionally, although many of these young women presented themselves as sexually desiring and their own sexual pleasure as important, their construction of their heterosexual experiences suggests that their male partners may nonetheless embrace restrictive conceptualizations of their sexual desire and pleasure. In some cases, these limiting forces are explicitly presented as gendered, racialized, and/or ethnically-situated. As previously discussed, Amelia's construction of herself as sexually desiring disrupts heteronormativity's erasure of female desire. However, she also relays an understanding of this desire that I interpret as indicating that gendered dimensions continue to shape understandings of heterosexual desire: "I'm always the most [sexually] insistent one. Sometimes [my boyfriend is] just like, 'Are you the *guy* in this relationship?'" Her boyfriend's comment frames sexually-desiring Amelia as embodying 'masculine' heterosexuality, reflecting a heteronormative understanding of men as more sexually desiring – and sexually motivated – than their female counterparts. Although

Amelia freely discussed her sexual desire, her decision to include this comment suggests that she continues to negotiate her heterosexuality within the context of gendered understandings of sexual desire. For others, it was the intersection of ethnicity, race, and gender that was constructed as most salient in shaping what was expected of their sexuality.⁴⁸ In Group Three and Group Four, participants described confronting assumptions that South Asian women are uncomfortable with their sexuality, less sexually desiring, and uninterested in sexual activity. Ultimately, such gendered assumptions regarding South Asian heterosexuality are bolstered by racialized stereotypes, as well as perceptions of South Asian culture as sexually restrictive in a way that the West is not (see Dasgupta & DasGupta, 1996; Handa, 2003). These assumptions of South Asian female heterosexuality were constructed as having real implications for participants' sexual and dating experiences. In Group Four, Elena and Karina relayed some of these potential implications:

ELENA: ... It's just the whole shaming thing, like, you'd think that Indian girls aren't sexually active or whatever. But, like, I think— I'll give an example. My boyfriend only dated girls that weren't Indian because he thought they were wild and adventurous. So he would only date Spanish or white girls and stuff. And, yeah, I feel like he's demystified that now because, ever since he's started dating me— he's just like— I feel like he had an idea that Indian girls are like *this* or whatever.

⁴⁸ It is possible that Amelia, as a light-skinned biracial woman who is not deeply embedded in the South Asian community, did not have to similarly negotiate these racialized or ethnically-situated expectations regarding her sexuality.

KARINA: Yeah, I think guys have that idea, like, you should be with a white girl because she's [sexually] adventurous, but you should date a brown girl if you want to be serious.

While these assumptions were initially presented in relation to men outside of South Asian culture, my participants also discussed how men within their own ethnic group would accept and endorse a perception of South Asian women as less sexual. Offering a rationale for why she “detests” Indian men, Ishita stated that they are “not open sexually” and hold repressive views regarding female heterosexual desire. Considered together, I understand these conversations as indicating that gendered understandings continue to shape perceptions of heterosexual desire and pleasure. Furthermore, scholarship has suggested that constructions of ‘empowered’ female heterosexuality – and attendant understandings of these women as sexually desiring and invested in their sexual pleasure – may exclude racialized women and women from ‘non-Western’ ethnic backgrounds (see Gill, 2008; Harvey & Gill, 2011). While many of the young women participating in this research have emphasized their desire and pleasure, others’ (gendered, racialized, and/or ethnically-situated) understandings of heterosexuality may nonetheless constrain their expressions of sexual desire and pursuit of sexual pleasure.

The sexual freedoms purportedly available to women in the contemporary West hold the promise of equal-opportunity sexual pleasure (McRobbie, 2009). However, participants’ discussion of their heterosexual encounters suggests that female pleasure may be neglected as a result of male partners’ indifference or incompetence. Participants’ constructions of these inadequacies appear to be a ramification of male partners’ continued adherence to heteronormative constructions of heterosex, grounded in deeply gendered assumptions and expectations of heterosexuality. In emphasizing the male orgasm and conceptualizing penile-

vaginal penetration as both the foundation and pinnacle, heteronormativity endorses a mode of heterosex from which female sexual desire and pleasure are largely absent.

Although participants generally constructed mutual pleasure as important in heterosexual encounters, pleasurable heterosexual experiences were not constructed as the norm. A number of young women discussed heterosexual encounters where their male partner had been unconcerned with their pleasure. Within this context, a couple of participants constructed their pursuit of sexual pleasure as necessitating their insistence:

ISHITA: I don't want to be the one giving orgasms to other people but I do want to have my own orgasms, right? So I'm really clear about it, like, with my boyfriend. Last night I was, like, talking to him about it and telling him that if I don't have an orgasm, I'm not going to give you one.

(Group 2)

SONIA: ... I feel like reciprocity is a huge thing when you're having sex with another person. It's like, you're sharing this experience *together*, so it's not just about yourself, it's about the other person. So if you're not going to give a shit about the other person, then you can just go masturbate... And you can totally tell when someone's just in it for themselves, um, and you just kind of— I've called guys out on it before. I'm like, “Okay, you finished. My turn,” sort of a deal.

(Group 1)

While this assertive approach to achieving sexual pleasure was met by enthusiastic admiration and respect from the other members of Ishita's discussion group, other participants indicated that similar situations more frequently ended with the woman unsatisfied. Notably, some participants

constructed male partners' concern with female pleasure as related to his ethnicity, with white men generally positioned as more invested in their partners' pleasure than their South Asian counterparts:

SONIA: ... a lot of guys, Indian guys especially, just do not give a shit about, like, girls and like, girls, like, in sex, like, they're just kind of like, out to hunt these girls just to have sex with them but, like, their.. pleasure does not matter.

(Group 1)

NINA: White guys are, like, more, um, accepting to go.. down on you. ... They're, like, really cool with it. And I think, like, Asian guys in general, are like, "Eww, that's gross. I don't want to go down there. *You* can go down there."

(Group 2)

Participants' talk suggested that a male partner's lack of investment was not the only barrier to their sexual pleasure. Female pleasure was also constructed as inhibited by partners who lacked sexual knowledge or skill. Through both individual narratives and interactive discussions, a number of participants suggested heterosexual men were frequently sexually inept. Predominately, these male partners were constructed as relying too heavily on vaginal penetration, while neglecting pleasurable 'foreplay', cunnilingus, and manual clitoral stimulation. Jasneet, Nina, and Ishita's discussion drew a parallel between their own sexual competence and the sexual competence of male sexual partners, suggesting a gender asymmetry in heterosexual knowledge and ability.

NINA: I think part of the reason why I don't like it when guys go down on me because the guys that have gone down on me don't know what they're doing. I don't know if this has happened to you, but I end up getting swollen down there.

JASNEET: Oh, that's happened to me!

NINA: Right?! Okay, it's not— it's not just me. Okay. So it's like, [*pained sound*]. ... if you don't know what you're doing, *don't do it*, you know.

JASNEET: Um. Has it ever happened to you that, like, they *want* to kind of make you feel good, but instead they kind of hurt you? ... Just like, sweetheart, you have *no* idea what you're doing. Please. Stop. ... Do your research, okay? Like, I know your machinery, you should know mine. ...

NINA: Yeah, and we do know. But, like, when it comes to you, it's like, 'Oh, okay, I'm going to do whatever and hopefully get you off.' And it's just like, no.

ISHITA: ... women do have, like, spots where they feel really happy, especially down there. And guys, like, don't recognize them sometimes. Like, they don't know what is the right spot, the right way. It's really frustrating. ...

Sonia also discussed male partners who were sexually unknowledgeable, emphasizing that vaginal penetration alone was inadequate for female sexual pleasure:

SONIA: A lot of guys assume that, like, this normal 'sticking it up into your vag' is going to, like, stimulate you, and forget that you have a clitoris. ... There's always these assumptions about, like, what pleasure is for, like, men and women. It's, like, different. And guys usually get it wrong., [*laughing*] I don't know. And like, most of

my sexual experiences, like, I've usually had to, like, tell them to do something else, aside from, like, the normal stuff— [*air quotes*] "normal" stuff, so, yeah.

When I asked her to clarify her use of the term 'normal,' Sonia specified that she was referring to 'fingering' (manual penetration of the vagina) and penile penetration of the vagina. Conceptualizing normative sex within these gendered ideas of heterosexual desire and pleasure, I understand these obstacles to desirable, pleasurable female heterosexuality as a legacy of heteronormative, gendered constructions of heterosex.

Despite substantial discussion of men lacking sexual knowledge or competence, these young women were not eager to direct their male partners. The need to communicate about what is pleasurable was constructed as unfair, frustrating, and disappointing.

ISHITA: ... men have to be told [what to do] and it's, like, really annoying, and—

MISHA (facilitator): Do you end up telling them, or— How do you deal with that situation?

ISHITA: I try to tell people— Like, I try to tell the guys I've been sleeping with that, you know, this is what I like, this is what I don't like. But too much of telling is like—

JASNEET: It kind of takes the fun out of it.

ISHITA: Yeah. Like, why am I spoon-feeding you? Have you never had sex before? Like, what the heck? And so I stop, like, I don't want to.

This aversion to sexual communication expressed by some participants should be understood within the context of heteronormative heterosexuality, wherein men are expected to be sexually assertive and confident; showing hesitance and uncertainty may be understood as incompatible with truly ‘masculine’ heterosexuality. I see these constructions of heterosexual desire and pleasure within participants’ narratives as indicating that despite the importance these young women place on their sexual desire and pleasure, they are ultimately positioned as responsible for navigating the numerous constraints at work against their pursuit of desirable and pleasurable heterosexual encounters.

AVOIDING UNWANTED SEX

Unwanted sexual experiences are closely linked to perceptions female sexual desire and pleasure; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) argue that, following gendered assumptions that women are not sexually desiring, young women’s embodied experience is often overridden by men and discounted by women; whether a young woman *wants* a sexual encounter is easily devalued when female desire is disregarded. Although I did not explicitly initiate discussion regarding unwanted or nonconsensual heterosexual encounters, the topic emerged in each of the four discussion groups.⁴⁹ (Scholarship exploring consensual but unwanted sexual encounters has not consistently differentiated ‘compliance’ from ‘coercion,’⁵⁰ and my interest here is not in

⁴⁹ I had developed questions to loosely guide the conversation, but the trajectory of each discussion group was fundamentally driven by the participants themselves. (See Chapter 2 for an overview of the facilitation questions I used.)

⁵⁰ This statement is based on my own observations, after having considered the work of Adams-Curtis and Forbes (2004), Basile (1990), Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008), Katz and Tirone (2010), Muehlenhard and McCoy (1991), O’Sullivan and Allgeier (1998), Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson and Anderson (2003), Vannier and O’Sullivan (2010), and Walker (1997).

analytically distinguishing them.) In a social context where such encounters continue to be relatively commonplace, and often crucially shaped by gendered understandings and expectations (see Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gavey, 2010; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010), young women cannot be sure that their expressions of unwillingness or nonconsent will be respected. Across the discussion groups, five of the twelve participants explicitly discussed being verbally pressured or emotionally manipulated into consenting to unwanted sexual activity.

Sonia shared that she had “been coerced into doing some things that, like, [she] didn’t really *want* to.” Although her current male partner had “actually coerced [her] into doing something once that [she] didn’t really want to,” she described her experiences of sexual coercion as predominately occurring within “casual encounters.” After I asked her to expound upon her use of the term ‘coercion,’ Sonia discussed being unrelentingly pressured to engage in sexual activity, until she acquiesced:

SONIA: It wasn't necessarily something I wanted to do but I just did anyway, 'cause they were, like, pressuring me like that, they were just, like, *so* insistent and.. like. I wouldn't say it was, like, he was assaulting me or, like, violating me, but it was just something that— I think that's their way of kind of, like, tiptoeing around the whole 'violating a girl' thing. It's just like *really* pressuring them into doing it, and then they'll do it.

Sonia constructed coerced consent as not fundamentally dissimilar from nonconsensual sexual encounters.⁵¹ Although she framed her sexual participation as coerced, Sonia's discussion of these encounters nonetheless placed an emphasis on her own culpability.

SONIA: I'm not, like, ashamed of it, but I'm kind of just like, "Why didn't I say no to that?" Like, if I didn't want to do it, I should have just said no. It, like, naturally makes sense in my head but when it actually happens you're just like— you don't really know what to do, you're just like, [*hesitantly*:] "Okaaaay," like, "I guess sooo."

Admonishing herself for failing to take action, Sonia discursively rejected any implication that she is rendered helpless by men's sexual coercion. She constructed herself as ultimately responsible for her own experiences, only a victim if she allowed herself to be one. This framework of personal responsibility was reflected in Sonia's discussion of why she was unable to talk to her female friends about her experiences of sexual coercion. She explained, "I'd say I'm the most sexually explorative [of my female friends]. ... I don't think they'd understand and they'd probably, like, assume those old, these like, these like really embedded ideas of like slut-shaming and that kind of stuff. ... I feel like there would be repercussions in that sense."

Rehka also discussed being sexually pressured, at a time in her life where she "knew what sex *was*, but it was, like, this foreign concept." While she did not construct herself as culpable

⁵¹ Implicit in Sonia's talk was the possibility of her nonconsent not being respected: coercion was framed as an alternative means for male partners to get what they wanted, without resorting to sexual assault. Her decision to eventually acquiesce to unwanted sexual activity *could* be understood as preempting the possibility of sexual assault. Given that Sonia did not blatantly present sexual assault as a possibility, I am reluctant to presuppose her motivation to acquiesce; I offer these thoughts here only as a salient point of consideration, rather than an analytic observation. (Other scholars have explored sexual compliance as a strategy for evading sexual assault; see Basile (1999), Katz and Tirone (2010) and Vannier and O'Sullivan (2010).)

for what happened, her construction of the experience does somewhat absolve him of responsibility for the incident.

REHKA: ... he, um, pretty much forced me into it [having sex]. Like, not physically, but it was just, like, mental pressure. ... We had these two *huge* fights about it, and I was just like, “I don't want to do it.” And basically *his* argument was, “Why not? If you're sure about this relationship, if you really love me, you will do it.” And I was, um, 16 at this time. So, okay, by the time it happened I was about 17. But I was definitely pressured into it. And then basically the relationship just got really bad, um, like, he was just.. He's a good person but he, um, basically had his priorities wrong and, like, he just didn't know. Basically the relationship got really bad ...

While Rehka did not elaborate, her correction of her age and subsequent reiteration that she had been pressured – “So, okay, by the time it happened I was about 17. But I was definitely pressured into it.” – seems to indicate that her age was a factor in whether she held herself responsible for ‘letting’ herself be pressured into sex. Further compounding her experience, Rehka discussed the various ways in which she was tacitly silenced; she had “no one to talk to at that time.” She felt unable to talk to a counselor. Although her parents “obviously ... knew something was wrong,” what she had been experiencing “*never* came up.” Ultimately, “there was no one who actually helped [her] through it,” and the onus was on her to extract herself from the situation: “Basically I got out of that relationship when I came here [to Canada], and I had the opportunity to.”

In negotiating pressure to consent to unwanted sexual activity, these young South Asian constructed themselves as in control of and responsible for extracting themselves from the

situation. These narratives reflect the findings of Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008), in their research on young women's consensual but unwanted sexual experiences. They saw gender as significant in shaping their participants' unwanted sexual experiences, both laying the foundation and influencing participants' negotiation of the encounter. Despite these gendered dynamics, the young women constructed themselves as sexually agentive, drawing upon neoliberal concepts of personal responsibility, self-determination, and free choice to explain or reconcile these unwanted encounters. Participants' personal responsibility for consensual, unwanted sexual encounters was primarily established through either blaming themselves or constructing situations as blameless. For the young South Asian women who participated in my research, gendered understandings of and expectations for heterosexuality were similarly dismissed, with my participants instead emphasizing their own autonomy and responsibility.

This construction of individual culpability was also evident in the narratives of Jasmine and Miranda. While each of them was also pressured to engage in unwanted sexual activity, they were able to extract themselves from the situation without consenting or acquiescing.

MIRANDA: I've sort of been pressured into sex, once, and I just turned it down. ... I don't like being pressured to doing things and somebody like me, I tend to give in to pressure. I was actually happy that I never actually gave in to this particular guy, 'cause he was just a creep.

(Group 1)

JASMINE: ... [Him and I] were on a date but, um, he's like, "Well, I'm not going to go home." And I'm like, "Well, what do you mean? What are you talking about?" He's like, "I can't go home now. Where am I going to sleep?" I'm like, "I don't know.

Somewhere else?!” So he actually ended up coming back home with me. But I made it clear to him, “I’m a virgin, I don’t have any intention.” and stuff. But he still tried. But it wasn’t, like, he didn’t force himself. Like I just said, like, “I’m not doing this. I’m not doing this.” It was.. I don’t know. It was a bad experience, but I kind of, like, learned from it. Like, you know, I have will power. I wasn’t like, “You know what? Do whatever you want to me.” kind of thing.

(Group 4)

In discussing these experiences, Miranda and Jasmine commend themselves for effectively navigating the situation, declining to engage in unwanted sex. Miranda “just turned it down,” while Jasmine emphasized her “will power” to not give in or acquiesce. Their constructions of these experiences again position young women as responsible for navigating this situation, and culpable for failing to do so successfully.

CONCLUSION

Neoliberal understandings of ‘empowered’ female sexuality sustain the promise of wanted and pleasurable sexual encounters. In their pursuit of wanted and pleasurable sex, many aspects of these young South Asian women’s narratives are encouraging. Many participants constructed themselves as heterosexually desiring and placed importance on the pursuit of pleasure, suggesting moves toward a more fulfilling and less restricted negotiation of heterosexual encounters. However, these heterosexual encounters continue to be negotiated within the context of gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations, fortifying systemic barriers to these young women’s pursuit of sexual pleasure and their pursuit of wanted (and *only* wanted) sexual encounters.

6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the preceding discussion, I have explored how twelve young South Asian women in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland have negotiated their heterosexuality within a contradictory social context. Their narratives engaged with the various means through which gendered, racialized, and ethnically-grounded understandings and expectations challenge their sexual autonomy. Within this context, the sexual freedoms made available to these young women are ultimately both conditional and constrained, contradicting neoliberal understandings of young women in the West as ostensibly ‘empowered’ to pursue “assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality ... seemingly without punishment” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 84-85). Nonetheless, with the expansion of neoliberal discourse across various spheres of life (see Gill & Scharff, 2011), these neoliberal understandings of female sexual ‘empowerment’ are implicit in participants’ discussion of their heterosexual experiences. While acknowledging the ways in which their sexual autonomy is challenged by various understandings and expectations, these young South Asian women construct themselves as fundamentally in control of and responsible for their lived experiences of heterosexuality; their negotiations of heterosexuality embody this central tension.

Within the context of various constraints and conditions, participants negotiated their heterosexuality in ways that worked to enable their sexual autonomy. While idealized notions of traditional South Asian femininity shape the restrictive sexual expectations of family and community members, young women wishing to transgress these expectations were able to negotiate increased sexual freedom through what I have termed ‘strategic secrecy.’ While moralistic constructions of heterosexuality delineate what heterosexual activities are considered ‘good’ or ‘appropriate,’ participants navigated these boundaries in their engagement with others’

sexual judgment and in their own processes of meaning-making. While their access to pleasurable and wanted sexual encounters remains constrained, they worked to facilitate the heterosexual encounters they want. Individually negotiating systemic conditions and constraints, they endeavored to maximize their sexual autonomy.

Although productive in offering young women a means of negotiating sexual autonomy, a neoliberal emphasis on individual control and personal responsibility simultaneously works to obscure the roots of the conditions and constraints that challenge their sexual autonomy; there is a pretense of equality in regards to gender, race, and ethnicity. While young women are called upon to emulate the heterosexuality of their male counterparts under a pretense of gender equality (McRobbie, 2009), participants' narratives signal the ways in which gendered understandings and expectations place constraints and conditions on the heterosexuality of young women in contemporary Canadian society. The continued relevance of participants' gender is evident in their negotiation of the sexual expectations encompassed in ideas of South Asian *femininity*, the divergent moralization of male and female heterosexual activity, and the heteronormative understandings that complicate their pursuit of wanted and pleasurable sexual encounters. This substantiates McRobbie's (2009) argument that "coming forward and showing [themselves] to be, in common parlance, 'up for it'" (p. 85) continues to make young women vulnerable to "old-fashioned sexist insults and hostility from the men [they] seek both to please and to emulate" (p. 85). These gendered aspects are complicated in their intersection with other facets of social location. In the context of Canadian neoliberalism, ideas of racial and ethnic inequality are concealed by national discourses of 'cultural difference' and multiculturalism (Handa, 2003; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010; Thompson, 2009). Participants' narratives position these facets of social location as intersecting with gender, mutually constituting heterosexual

experience. For these young South Asian women, racialized and ethnically-grounded understandings of heterosexuality shaped others' assumptions regarding their sexuality, as well as participants' own assumptions regarding various people in their lives. Similarly, the expectations placed on their sexuality by family and community members was grounded in race and ethnicity; perceptions of what "brown girls aren't supposed to do" (as Elena framed it) were grounded in understandings of South Asian traditionalism and placed in opposition to constructions of 'Western' women's sexuality. Overall, in these ways, the neoliberal understandings of heterosexuality implicit in participants' talk worked to conceal the ways in which young women are differentially afforded various freedoms, opportunities, and accomplishments echoing their relative positions of social privilege and oppression (McRobbie, 2009). While minimizing the systemic factors that constrain and place conditions on participants' heterosexual desire and behaviour, the neoliberal understandings participants drew upon position young women themselves as individually responsible for navigating threats to their sexual agency that are structurally produced; employing an individualistic approach to overcoming systemic issues, young women are considered responsible for successfully navigating a set of circumstances over which they may have limited ability to overcome, and then holds them responsible for any subsequent failure to do so.

Pulling together established and burgeoning areas of scholarship, there are a multitude of valuable avenues for moving beyond the scope of this research. While focus group discussions facilitated dynamic conversation and the co-construction of knowledge, it is possible that in-depth one-on-one interviews would enable participants to share divergent constructions of their heterosexual experiences. Although I narrowed the focus of my intersectional analysis to gender, race, and ethnicity, participants' narratives suggest that it would be productive to engage in

deeper exploration of how other aspects of individuals' social location – such socio-economic status, education, geographic history, and relation to the South Asian community – have shaped their negotiations of contemporary Canadian neoliberalism. In my own theoretical grappling with conceptualizations of sexual autonomy, I also believe there are important questions to engage with regarding conceptualizations of choice and agency within the context of neoliberalism (see Gill, 2012; Lamb, 2010; Peterson, 2010; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

Ultimately, my findings are not, nor are they intended to be, generalizable to heterosexually-active young South Asian women in the West, as a group. The narratives of these twelve heterosexually-active young South Asian women in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland are invaluable in that they enable a deeper, more nuanced understanding of negotiations of heterosexuality within the context of Canadian neoliberalism. Furthermore, in considering participants' narratives through an intersectional lens, my analysis highlights the necessity of considering the ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity mutually constitute heterosexual experience. Engaging with neoliberal conceptualizations of heterosexual 'empowerment,' the narratives of these young South Asian women offer an understanding of their dynamic and difficult negotiations toward sexual autonomy within a contradictory social context, conditional and constrained as that sexual autonomy may be.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

At the beginning of each focus group discussion group, participants were asked to complete an open-ended 'demographic information' form (see Appendix D). This form asked for their age, racial and/or ethnic identity, sexual identity, what they considered to be their 'social class', and anything else they viewed as important to their identity.

Participants' information is relayed here either verbatim, or slightly paraphrased for clarity and brevity.

Sonia

Group 1	20 years old	Punjabi	Upper-middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sikh family • University student • Grew up in a suburb of Vancouver
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Miranda

Group 1	21 years old	3rd generation Indo-Canadian; considers herself Canadian before Indian	Upper-middle class	Heterosexual, cis-gendered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised in a Hindu household • Mother is more "liberal", father is more "conservative" • University student • Grew up in a suburb of Vancouver
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Amelia

Group 1	20 years old	Part South Asian [Indian], part Caucasian	Middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grew up in a "relatively Christian family" • University student • Feels a connection to East Asian cultures • Until age 6, lived in a "fairly Indian community" in the United States
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Jasneet

Group 2	21 years old	Indian, “born and raised”, and therefore “South Asian by ethnicity”	Upper-middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grew up in a “very open household within a sexually repressive community”
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Ishita

Group 2	22 years old	East-Indian	From an upper-middle class family	Bisexual, currently in a relationship with a man	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grew up in conservative family• Sees her education as enabling her ‘open’ approach to sexuality
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Nina

Groups 2 & 3	21 years old	Indian	Upper-middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Catholic• Grew up in multiple developing countries• Has always attended international schools• Suffers from long-term depression
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Rehka

Group 3	21 years old	South Indian	Upper-middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hindu by birth, now questions religion• Born in a non-Canadian Western country, moved to India in pre-teen years• Currently an international university student
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Priya

Group 3	19 years old	Indian	Middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hindu• Grew up in Dubai and Canada• She views growing up in these locations as having made her “more open and comfortable with sexuality” but “being a Hindu girl coming from a somewhat traditional family [she hasn’t] been able to come to terms with [herself] being sexually active”
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Deepa

Group 3	19 years old	Indian (North)	Middle class	Straight	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “My religion (Hindu) needs me to be conservative with my physical needs but I grew up in [a large city in East Asia] for the most important part of my life. Therefore, I cannot relate much to the demands of Hinduism.”
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Karina

Group 4	22 years old	Indo-Canadian	Middle class	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• University student, and in paid workforce as well.• Grew up in Vancouver, now lives in a suburb of Vancouver.
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Jasmine

Group 4	21 years old	Indo-Canadian	<i>[Jasmine chose to leave this question blank.]</i>	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attended “a religious school” for a significant portion of her life, but “did not conform to religious expectations” and identifies as atheist.
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Elena

Group 4	22 years old	Indo-Canadian, though her family is from Melanesia. While she recognizes her Indian heritage/background, she doesn't fully connect herself with the country India.	Middle class, but sees herself as having “grown up with working class values” because of where she grew up.	Heterosexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Full-time student• Practices Hinduism• Identifies as a “radical feminist”
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APPENDIX B: QUESTION GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. To start things off I wanted to show you a quote from research conducted by a woman named Amita Handa in the early-mid 90s. She conducted interviews with young South Asian women in Toronto. This quote is from a book she published about that research.

“All the [South Asian] women in my study knew how they had to behave in order to be accepted as ‘good’ daughters and community members. They were all concerned about their sexual reputations in one way or another and were very aware that their behaviour has an impact on how their family is viewed by the rest of the community.”

(Handa, 2003, p. 109)

How does this quote sync up with your own experiences?

2. How have your family’s rules or expectations influenced your sexual experiences?

3. How do you decide whether to get sexually involved with someone?

4. In the sexual encounters that you’ve had, what differentiates the really good experiences from the bad ones?

APPENDIX C: LIST OF RESOURCES FOR PARTICIPANTS

COUNSELING, SEXUAL HEALTH, and SUPPORT SERVICES

SEXUAL HEALTH:

Opt: Options for Sexual Health

Operates over 50 reproductive health clinics in B.C.

Please visit their website for a complete list:

<https://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/providers>

COUNSELING & CRISIS SUPPORT:

Oak Counseling Services Society

949 West 49th Ave

Vancouver, BC

604-266-5611

www.oakcounsellingservices.com

Family Services of Vancouver – Counseling Program

Locations:

Vancouver, BC - #202 - 1193 Kingsway

Richmond, BC - The Caring Place: 250 - 7000 Minoru Blvd

New Westminster, BC - 301- 321 Sixth Street

604-874-2938

<http://www.fsgv.ca/programpages/counsellingsupportservices/>

Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) – Rape Crisis Centre Victim Services, Free Counseling, and 24 Hour Crisis Line

604-255-6344 or 1-877-392-7583

VictimLink 24 Hour Crisis Line

1-800-563-0808

24 Hour Vancouver Crisis Line

604-872-3311

Sexual Assault Support Centre University of British Columbia

For U.B.C. students, staff, faculty, and those living in the campus community.

Student Union Building, Rooms 119A and 119B

604-827-5180

sasc@ams.ubc.ca

www.ams.ubc.ca/sasc

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Please answer these questions in your own words, using whichever terms you feel best describe the way you see yourself.

Your name, as indicated on this form, will only be used to attach this information to your participation in the discussion. Your real name will never be attached to transcripts of the discussion or appear in the final research.

1. Name: _____

2. Age: _____ years old

3. How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?

4. What is your sexual identity? *eg. your sexual orientation*

5. What do you consider to be your social class?

6. Is there anything else you see as important to your identity? *eg. religion, where you grew up, mental/physical health issues, occupation/student status, ...*

APPENDIX E: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

The discussion you will be participating in focuses on sexuality and sexual experiences. It is likely that participants will be sharing things that are personal and potentially sensitive. It is important that all participants – including you – feel comfortable discussing their experiences and opinions, without concern that this information will be shared with individuals outside of the focus group.

To help create a safe, comfortable environment for the discussion, all women participating in the focus groups will have read and signed this confidentiality agreement. By signing this form, you are agreeing to not disclose any of the information discussed during the focus group.

I agree not to share the experiences, opinions, or identities of the other participants.

I will not discuss (or otherwise disclose) any of the discussion with anyone outside of my fellow focus group members and the facilitator/co-investigator (Misha Dhillon)

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Participant