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# Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse

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## Abstract

Despite high rates of gendered violence among youth, very few young women report these incidents to authority figures. This study moves the discussion from the question of why young women do not report them toward how violence is produced, maintained, and normalized among youth. The girls in this study often did not name what law, researchers, and educators commonly identify as sexual harassment and abuse. How then, do girls name and make sense of victimization? Exploring violence via the lens of compulsory heterosexuality highlights the relational dynamics at play in this naming process. Forensic interviews with youth revealed patterns of heteronormative scripts appropriated to make sense of everyday harassment, violence, coercion, and consent. Findings inform discussions about the links between dominant discourses and sexual subjectivities as we try to better understand why many regard violence a normal part of life.

## Keywords

sexual abuse, harassment, rape, youth, adolescence

Coming up against “the wall of patriarchy” (Gilligan 1990, 503), early adolescence is a defining period for young women. Many regard harassment and violence to be a normal part of everyday life in middle and high schools (Fineran and Bennett 1999), yet most of these crimes go unreported. A 2011 American Association of University Women (AAUW 2011) study found that almost half (48 percent) of the 1,965 students surveyed experienced harassment, but only 9 percent reported the incident to an authority figure. Girls were sexually harassed more than boys (56 percent vs. 40 percent); they were more likely to be pressured for a date, pressured into sexual activity, and verbally harassed (AAUW 2001; Fineran and Bennett 1999).

According to prevalence studies, reported violence in adolescent dating relationships ranges between 8.8 and 40 percent (Sousa 1999). Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that almost 20 percent of girls experience physical and sexual violence from dating partners (Silverman et al. 2001), and sexual assault accounts for one-third of preteen victimization (Finkelhor and Ormrod 2000). It is tempting to ask: Why do so few young women formally report their victimization experiences? Assuming that peer sexual harassment and assault is an instrument that creates and maintains gendered and sexed hierarchies (e.g., MacKinnon 1979; Phillips 2000; Tolman et al. 2003), attention instead must turn toward understanding how and why these violent acts are produced, maintained, and normalized in the first place. Despite the considerable body of research that shows high rates of gendered violence among youth, there has been little discussion of its instruments and operations.

This study is concerned with girls’ relational experiences of sexuality, harassment and assault, coercion, and consent. With few exceptions, girls’ construction of violence has received little attention from victimization scholars and those interested in the gendered power dynamics of adolescent sexual development. The lack of research is clear and a shift in analytical focus toward appraisals of violence is critical. It cannot be assumed that legal definitions of sexual harassment and assault are socially agreed on, understood, or similarly enacted. Research from the vantage point of young women themselves is necessary. How do girls talk about experiences that researchers and the law would label as harassment and rape? In what ways do they account for these experiences?

This study addresses how girls negotiate their lived experiences in ways that are often ignored by law and policy. This work aims to re-cast youth as agentic, having intentions, desires, and standpoints (Corsaro 1997; Hlavka 2010; Lee 2001), rather than as passive objects. The study is situated within feminist research and practices that embody the legitimacy of patriarchy, including sexual harassment and violence, sexual subjectivity, and heteronormativity (Gavey 1992). The narrative data come from a larger study on child sexual abuse in which youth were interviewed by specialized forensic interviewers following reports of sexual victimization. I situate the analysis to show how girls make use of culturally available discourses to explain their experiences. The findings complicate studies on the formal underreporting of sexual assault and provide a nuanced understanding of how violence is woven into youths’ sexed and gendered relationships from very young ages (Phillips 2000; Tolman et al. 2003).

## Feminist Perspectives and Hetero-Relational Discourses

Feminist scholarship on compulsory heterosexuality (Connell 1987; Rich 1980; Tolman et al. 2003), heteronormativity (Kitzinger 2005; Martin 2009; Thorne and Luria 1986), and heterogender (Ingraham 1994) consistently finds that traditional gender arrangements, beliefs, and behaviors reinforce women’s sexual subordination to men. Heterosexuality is compulsory in that it is an *institution* (Rich 1980) that organizes the conventions by which women and men relate; it is assumed and expected (Jackson 2009) as it is understood as

natural and unproblematic (Kitzinger 2005; Schippers 2007). Heteronormative discourses consistently link female sexuality with passivity, vulnerability, and submissiveness, and male sexuality with dominance, aggression, and desire (Butler 1999; Ingraham 1994).

Young people are socialized into a patriarchal culture that normalizes and often encourages male power and aggression, particularly within the context of heterosexual relationships (Fineran and Bennett 1999; Tolman et al. 2003). As men's heterosexual violence is viewed as customary, so too is women's endurance of it (Stanko 1985). For example, Messerschmidt (1986) has argued that "normative heterosexuality" involves a "presumption that men have a special and overwhelming 'urge' or 'drive' toward heterosexual intercourse." Women come to be justifiable objects of sexual exploitation. These discourses shape embodied experiences (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008; Lorber and Moore 2007), normalizing the presumption that men's sexual aggression is simply "boys being boys" (Connell 1987; French 2003; Messerschmidt 2012). Stanko (1985, 73) argued that "women learn, often at a very early age, that their sexuality is not their own and that maleness can at any point intrude into it." Girls are thus expected to endure aggression by men because that is *part* of man. Coupled with the presumption that women are the gatekeepers of male desire (Fine 1988; Tolman 1991), heteronormative discourses have allowed for men's limited accountability for aggressive, harassing, and criminal sexual conduct. Indeed, dominant notions of gender and heterosexuality underscore much of young people's identity work; they are subject to the pressures of heteronormativity from an early age. Youth negotiate and maintain gendered hierarchies and hegemonies, both within and between genders (Butler 1999). Young women's subjective understandings of gender, sexuality, and violence are thus critical sites for the reproduction of inequality on which feminist scholarship has much to offer.

## Discourses of Children, Sexuality, and Sexual Abuse

Beginning in the 1970s, rape reformists urged legal change to increase rape reporting to police, encourage prosecution, and increase conviction of sexual offenders in courtrooms across the country. Rape law reforms have not necessarily translated into increased system efficacy or sensitivity toward victims, however (Frohmann and Mertz 1995). Some argue that legal reforms do not address the structures and symbolic constructions through which people make sense of rape (Erich 2001; Matoesian 1993). Legal reform is limited by the everyday perceptions and cultural constructs that shape individuals' interpretations of coercion and consent.

Children and youth have largely remained exempt from legal and policy discussions of consent to sexual activity, and little scholarly research has taken up the task, perhaps, in part, because Western cultures today often characterize children as innocent, asexual, ignorant, and in need of protection from adult sexual knowledge and practices (Angelides 2004; Best 1990). Adults have historically worked to police the sexual behavior of young people, particularly of girls (Fine 1988; Gilligan 1982). Dominant cultural frameworks perpetuate adult/child, agent/subject, active/passive binaries, and, in this way, law and policy often ignore the subjectivities and experiences of youth. Of course, there are special taboos and tensions surrounding youth sexuality (Thorne and Luria 1986), often making it socially and discursively restricted to adults. Youth learn early that they should not talk about sex (Ryan 2000), often extending to sexual violence and harassment (Gilgun 1986; Phillips 2000; Thompson 1995).

Feminist writings have long documented the public silencing of women and children, especially as it has related to abuse and exploitation. To varying degrees, discursive strategies and ideologies have operated to undermine or dismiss survivors' speech. Alcoff and Gray (1993, 265-66) argue that, through history, survivor speech has been "absolutely prohibited, categorized as mad or untrue, or rendered inconceivable . . . and therefore could not exist within the dominant discourses." Further, feminist theorists argue that "real rape" (Estrich 1987)—or forcible stranger rape—is narrowly defined, largely enforced by law, and reinforced by popular media. Discursively, law and media draw absolutes between healthy heterosexual encounters and dangerous, abusive

relationships, creating divisions between what is and what is not violence, between “real rape” and “everyday violence,” or what Stanko (1985) termed “little rapes.” What counts as sexual violence, then, are the extreme cases “which constrain[s] and construct[s] the framework through which women have to make sense of events” (Kelly and Radford 1990, 41). The struggle to negotiate these tensions has meaningful outcomes, and young people are not exempt.

According to Averill’s (1980) social constructivist theory of emotion, an individual must appraise an experience in order to understand and respond to it. Appraisals are based both on dominant discourses and individual desires (Reavey and Gough 2000). Dominant discourses include core cultural beliefs about gender, sex and sexuality, childhood, victimhood, and the like (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Gagnon and Simon (1973) have termed these discourses “sexual scripts.” Like discourses, scripts mediate individuals’ relationships and sexual interactions through social context and cultural commitments (Brickell 2006). Dominant notions of heterosexuality underscore much of youths’ identity work, and their relationships are subject to the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Certain discourses make available particular subjectivities, and youth must wade through complex and pervasive cultural messages about sexuality, power, and violence. Much has been written on child sexual abuse, but little has come from the perspective of youth. Therefore, research has had little to say about how heteronormative discourses might impact young people’s descriptions and interpretations of sexual violence. To speak to the gaps in the literature, I focus on girls’ relational experiences and explanations of sexuality, violence, coercion, and consent. Gagnon (1977) suggested that sexual scripts are acquired and practiced during adolescence, and this study aims to contribute to the call for increased research on the “hetero-gendering” and “hetero-sexualising” of children (Angelides 2004; Martin 2009; Myers and Raymond 2010; Renold 2006).

## Methods

The data for this study include audio-videotaped interviews of youths seen by forensic interviewers for reported cases of sexual abuse between 1995 and 2004. The interviews come from the nonprofit Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) located in an urban Midwest community. The CAC provides investigative interviews and medical examinations for youths who may have been sexually or physically assaulted or witnessed a violent crime. Interviews take place between one forensic interviewer and one child referred to the CAC by law enforcement or Child Protection Services (CPS). Youths were brought to the CAC for an interview because they reported sexual abuse to someone, someone else witnessed or reported the abuse to authorities, or the offender confessed to the abuse.

The forensic interview is based on a semi-structured interview protocol designed to maximize youth’s ability to communicate their experiences and conforms to standards set by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC 2002). Protocol components include first establishing rapport and, next, obtaining details about sexual abuse only if the child first verbally discloses victimization to the interviewer. The two then discuss the circumstances surrounding the abuse using nonsuggestive, largely open-ended, questions. So, while the interview is set up to investigate whether or not abuse occurred, youths were consistently allowed to raise and discuss subjects important to them in response to questions such as “What happened? Did you tell anyone? How did they respond? How did you feel about that? Are you worried about anything?” This format allows for rich narrative data that do not rely solely on retrospective reports common in most sexual abuse studies. The interviews were video recorded and varied in length and scope, primarily based on age. The average interview length was 40 minutes for children between ages three and eight; 70 minutes for youths between ages nine and 14; and 110 minutes for youths between ages 15 and 17. Following the interview, CAC team members participated in a postinterview meeting to make one of three findings: abuse occurred, did not occur, or is

inconclusive. Findings are based only on what the child is capable of communicating during the interview rather than on outside reports from law enforcement or CPS.

The study sample included 100 interviews of youths between ages three and 17, stratified disproportionately by gender and age and proportionately by race. Descriptive data were gathered from case files, such as date of the interview, child and offender characteristics when available, pre-interview reports, family background, and CAC investigative assessments. Audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author. The study was reviewed and approved by the CAC and University Institutional Review Board. Human subjects protocol and data protections were taken to ensure confidentiality, including assignment of unique code numbers accessible only by the author on a password-protected computer. All data remained on-site during data collection, and pseudonyms for individuals and locations were used at all stages.

Analysis for the study was informed by research that suggests the ability to name an injustice or abuse is an important factor in an individual's ability to perceive a particular incident as unjust and abusive (Fine 1982). Interviews were coded using a qualitative, analytic-inductive method (Patton 1990) and analytic bracketing (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Categories were not imposed; rather they emerged from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Analytic bracketing searches for commonalities among individual subjectivities according to description (what) and construction (how). Using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program, open coding of transcripts was completed and classification schemes were developed (Patton 1990). The process included attention to preliminary frameworks and sensitizing concepts, data grounding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), data coding, and interpretations.

Comparisons were made across gender, age, and race for youths and offenders whenever available, to explore for demographic or case-specific patterns in the data. The majority of youths in the larger study appraised their experiences of victimization as a crime, harmful, or abusive ( $n = 68$ ). The naming of violence is not inconsequential as reporting has much to do with appraisal (Averill 1980). Of the remaining 32 cases, analytical differences emerged based on the developmental ability to understand sexual abuse, and discourses appropriated when discussing abuse. Some very young children did not have the linguistic, cognitive, or social/emotional ability to convey their meanings of violence. Children between the ages of three and five frequently made accidental abuse disclosures (e.g., "Daddy checked me for bumps"). For analytical purposes, they were excluded from the current analysis. Descriptive passages were then coded with a constant comparative method: exhausting the data, comparing cases, developing new codes, and returning to the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The study subsample includes 23 racially diverse young women (13 white girls, six black girls, and four Latina girls) between 11 and 16 years of age. The reported offenders were known to the girls, either as acquaintances or intimate others (intrafamilial abuse was more common in the larger study sample). Accounts were unpacked as everyday violence, instruments of coercion, and accounts of consent. These categories illuminate the heteronormative cultures within which girls accounted for sexual violence and negotiated what happened, how it happened, and why.

## Findings

### Everyday Violence

Objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse appear to be part of the fabric of young women's lives (Orenstein 1994). They had few available safe spaces; girls were harassed and assaulted at parties, in school, on the playground, on buses, and in cars. Young women overwhelmingly depicted boys and men as *natural* sexual aggressors, pointing to one of the main tenets of compulsory heterosexuality. Incorporating male sexual drive discourse (Phillips 2000), they described men as unable to control their sexual desires. Male power and privilege

and female acquiescence were reified in descriptions of “routine” and “normal” sexualized interactions (Fineran and Bennett 1999; French 2003). Assaultive behaviors were often justified, especially when characterized as indiscriminate. For example, Patricia (age 13, white) told the interviewer: “They grab you, touch your butt and try to, like, touch you in the front, and run away, but it’s okay, I mean . . . I never think it’s a big thing because they do it to everyone.” Referring to boys at school, Patricia described unwelcome touching and grabbing as normal, commonplace behaviors.

Compulsory heterosexuality highlights how conventional norms of heterosexual relations produce and often require male dominance and female subordination (Phillips 2000; Tolman et al. 2003). Young women like Patricia described sexually aggressive behaviors as customary: “It just happens,” and “They’re boys—that’s what they do.” Similarly, Kelly (age 13, white) told the forensic interviewer about her experiences with 20-year-old Eric:

[He] would follow me around all the time, tell me I was beautiful and stuff, that he could have me when he wanted to. He did that all the time, like, would touch me and say, “Am I making you wet, do you want me?” when he wanted. I think that’s just . . . like, that’s what he does, it’s just, like, how it goes on and everyone knows it, no one says nothing.

Kelly trivializes her experiences of sexual harassment by a man seven years older, telling the interviewer of this ordinary and allowable “masculine” practice. Her description of ongoing harassment also confounds romance and aggression, because Eric’s harassment was fused with courting, compliments, and sexual desire (Phillips 2000).

Girls’ characterizations of everyday violence paralleled both their assessments that “boys will be boys” and their understanding of harassment as a normal adolescent rite of passage. Sexual harassment is an instrument that maintains a gendered hierarchy (MacKinnon 1979), and girls described the many ways they protected themselves against expected sexual aggression, at the expense of their own feelings. Carla (age 14, white), for example, cast assault and threats as expected because they were typical. In this passage, she described chronic harassment by a young man as they rode the school bus. He often threatened to “come over to [her] house and rape [her]”:

Carla:

Like, on the bus, like when I’ll sit, he’ll try and sit next to me and then slide his hand under my butt.

Interviewer:

Okay, does he say anything?

Carla:

No, he just kinda has this look on his face. And then I’ll, like, shove him out of the seat and then he’ll get mad.

Interviewer:

What happens when he gets mad?

Carla:

He just kinda doesn’t talk. He gets, like, his face gets red and he doesn’t talk. And he, I guess he feels rejected, but I don’t care. He told me . . . he was like, “I’m gonna come over to your house and rape you.” And then, I know he’s just joking, but that can be a little weird to hear.

Interviewer:

Yeah, so when did he tell you that?

Carla:

He tells me it all the time, like the last time I talked to him. He just says that he's gonna come to my house and rape me since I won't do anything with him. And, I mean, I think . . . I'm . . . I know he's joking, it's just hard to, like, why would he say that?

Threats were used for compliance, becoming more persistent and coercive over time. Unsure of whether to take the threats seriously, Carla names her experience "weird" while normalizing the young man's behavior as understandable within a male sexual drive discourse ("I guess he feels rejected"), and trivializes his threats twice, saying, "I know he's just joking." Harassment was dangerously constructed as romance and flirting. These discourses often entitle young men to violate the bodies of young women (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2012). Prior to the forensic interview, Carla had not told anyone about these experiences, considering them an everyday hazard of riding the bus.

Given expectations of, and experiences with, male aggression, young women were charged with self-protection by reading and responding to potentially dangerous situations. While some girls attempted to "ignore" the behavior, others had to make additional maneuvers. In her interview, Lana (age 15, white) explained how 18-year-old Mike "tries to bring [girls] downstairs in the [school] basement and, like, try and force 'em to like make out with him and stuff." She said Mike tried to force her to go downstairs on numerous occasions and he would "get mad when [she'd] say no." In response, Lana altered her behavior by avoiding being alone in the school hallways, at her locker, or in the bathroom. Young women responded to harassment with a barrage of maneuvers, like avoidance and diverting attention. These tactics did not always work, however. In Lana's case, Mike was eventually "able to catch [her] off-guard":

I was going to the bathroom and he wouldn't let me go in. He put his foot in front of [the door], and he's a really strong person, so I didn't really, like, I couldn't open the door. And he said, "I'll let you in if you give me a kiss," and I said, "No." And I was going back to the classroom and he pinned me against the wall and tried to, like, lift up my shirt. And, like, touched me, and then I . . . I got up . . . I started to scream, and I guess someone heard, 'cause then, um, someone started coming. So he got away from me, I just went back in the classroom and forgot about it. I just didn't think it was really anything.

Girls in this study said they did not want to make a "big deal" out of their experiences and rarely reported these incidents to persons in authority. Most questioned whether anyone would care about the behavior; if it was not "rape" it was not serious enough to warrant others' involvement. "Real" assault was narrowly defined and contingent on various conditions that were rarely met (Phillips 2000; Stanko 1985).

Young women constructed classic boundaries between "real rapes" and everyday violence or "little rapes." Terri (age 11, black) was interviewed at the CAC because she told a friend she was forced to perform oral sex on a 17-year-old neighbor boy: "He forced me, he, uh, he grabbed me tighter, and he said if I didn't do it he was gonna rape me." For Terri, rape was only intercourse, as she candidly explained: "They always say they gonna rape you, if you don't do what they want, they say they'll rape you." Terri's mother also cautioned her about male sexual drives, warning her to expect aggression and to protect herself. Sitting in her apartment stairwell alone that day, Terri assumed responsibility for her own assault. Terri's experience demonstrates that if girls do not acquiesce to the pressure to have sex, they risk being raped. She did not tell her mother, because "I shouldn't have been there, my mom said I should've been home anyway, but I didn't want to get raped so I had to."

## Instruments of Coercion

The normalization of violence was intensified in peer groups and assault was often perpetrated by one older man. Peers communicated a specialized sense of sexual acceptability largely based on the perception of women as sexual gatekeepers. Gatekeeping occurred in a variety of ways, including allocation of resources, such as food,



alcohol, or a space away from adult others. Janice (age 14, white), for example, told the interviewer that 30-something-year-old Matt touched her and four girlfriends on a regular basis:

He does, like, touch us, you know? Like, he like rubs my leg, the thigh, but none of us told him, told him to stop, you know? But I . . . I always moved away when he did it. He'd just rub my leg and touch my boobs. And one time when I was over at his house, I asked him for something to eat and he goes, "Not unless I can touch your boobs."

Via access to resources, Matt presented Janice with a "gatekeeping choice" that deflected responsibility. Janice later told the interviewer that Matt had also touched her vagina, commenting, "He does it to everyone, you know, it just happens sometimes," and justified Matt's behavior by placing responsibility on the group: "But none of us told him to stop." Matt's actions were minimized because they were customary and something they "just dealt with."

Sexualized bartering or exchange for in/tangible resources (Orenstein 1994; Thompson 1995; Van Roosmalen 2000) was common. Access or restriction to something was a tactic used by men to coerce young women like Natalie (age 16, Latina) into sexual contact. Natalie was sexually assaulted by Jim, a 37-year-old neighbor. She told the interviewer that Jim allowed Natalie and her friends to "hang out," play basketball in his backyard, and drink beer and vodka. During the interview, Natalie described Jim's sexual touching and kissing as typical male behavior:

He'd just rub his hand across my butt, and then one time I was sitting there and he—I was, like, laying on the couch watching TV—and he came home. He was kinda drunk, then he, like, literally just, like, laid *on* me. That's what he . . . well, guys always try to get up on you, like just normal.

Because both were drinking alcohol, Natalie tolerated his actions: "He would be touching my butt, you know, with this hand, going under my butt, under the blanket. I was, like, oh well, but all this . . . nothing like totally big happened."

Overwhelmingly described as "normal stuff" that "guys do" or tolerating what "just happens," young women's sexual desire and consent are largely absent (Martin 1996; Tolman 1994). Sex was understood as something done to them and agency was discursively attributed only to gatekeeping. Abby (age 12, white) presents an ideal example of the highly prescriptive norms of heterosexual practice. Like others, Abby's peer group normalized the sexual interactions between her and 19-year-old Glen. According to Abby, many of her friends had been "hit on" by Glen, knew about how he "moved from girl to girl" in the group, or were sexually active with him. Abby was referred for a forensic interview after her mother overheard her talking to Glen about "having sex." Abby recounted her experience, making use of particular culturally available discourses of gender, heterosexuality, and power:

Interviewer:

What didn't you like about [Glen]?

Abby:

The way he used a lot of people, the way he moved from girl to girl, the way that . . . he thought that he was the ruler of everybody, he was really commanding, he always had to be in control, and he was rough, and just, you know.

Interviewer:

What kind of stuff did he do that was rough or commanding?

Abby:

I don't know, he'd just order me around, and be like, "Oh, do this for me," or, I don't know, he'd ask me to do certain things to him and he'd take my hands and put em' . . . I don't know, he'd just . . . he'd make me do things.

Interviewer:

When he would, like, take your hands and make you do things, was it stuff that you didn't want to do?

Abby:

Sometimes, and then I'd stop and he'd be fine with it, but after a while he'd, like, start it up again and he'd keep trying.

Interviewer:

You said he was rough—did he ever hurt you?

Abby:

No, but, like, he was just . . . I don't know, he was just . . . I don't know how to explain it, he was just . . . he'd pull my hair [laughs], so I don't know what he did, he'd like, he'd grab my hair and he'd pull me closer and he'd just, like, pull my hair backward, push my head or somethin' like that and it'd be weird. I don't know what he did.

Interviewer:

Okay, did he ever hit you or anything?

Abby:

He was very controlling.

Interviewer:

Can you give me examples of that?

Abby:

Basically he thought I was his maid, or, like, a toy with him that he could just, like, wind up and use whenever he wanted me to, and then he'd just, like, you know, like you have a Barbie doll and you can, like, use it whenever you want to and then you, like, throw it in the back and then you pick it up, how you have, like, a maid or butler, and you can just order them around if you don't get what you want you get mad at them and then you keep trying, he'd just . . . he'd do that, but I wasn't really . . . I think he thought I wanted it—but part of me did, but I knew it was wrong that he . . . that I didn't really care for it, and I knew that he'd just leave anyways since he was nineteen.

In this powerful sequence, Abby links sex with male power and female passivity. She positions herself as "acted upon" and Glen as the "actor" in sexual encounters. In response to the interviewer, she describes how Glen was controlling and rough and would "make" her do things. Analogous to "working a 'yes' out" (Sanday 1990), Abby twice told the interviewer ". . . he'd, like, start it up again and he'd keep trying" despite her resistance. Juxtaposed with Glen's pulling and pushing of her head, when asked if he ever hurt her, Abby responds, "No . . . I don't know how to explain it. . . . It'd be weird. I don't know what he did." She positions herself within particular social hierarchies, describing feeling like a "Barbie doll," a "maid," or a "toy" that could be used and thrown away. Abby reflexively identified with particular cultural positions, simultaneously perceiving herself as object but also as subject, holding herself responsible for Glen's actions.

With all its complexity, Abby interprets her experience far outside of victim/agent, passive/active dichotomies. Positioned in a social landscape of gendered power and sex, Abby struggles to account for consent and desire ("I think he thought I wanted it—but part of me did . . .") and responsibility ("but I knew it was wrong that he . . . that I didn't really care for it, and I knew that he'd just leave anyways since he was nineteen"). These shifts in blame uncover the power of heteronormative discourses that support a sexually unconstrained, emotionally detached male, but a "relational" female. Embedded in the dilemmas and double standards of heterosexual

practice (Phillips 2000), Abby silences her own feelings and desires (Thorne 1993) and questions whether a sexual relationship was acceptable if “he’d just leave anyways.”

## Accounts of Consent

The links between everyday harassment and violence was further reproduced through attributions of blame. Girls criticized each other for not successfully maneuvering men’s normalized aggressive behavior. Even when maneuvers “failed,” concessions were made. For example, Lily (age 14, Latina) was raped by a 17-year-old school acquaintance in a park as she walked home from school. The offender quickly spread rumors and she was labeled “sexually active” and a “slut” by her classmates: “There’s rumors about me already, that aren’t even true . . . that I want, that I want to, and I let him do that . . . and it wasn’t even true.” Cast as promiscuous, she was deemed complicit in her rape. On the rare occasion that rape was reported to an adult or authority figure, young women described feeling suspect. Kiley (age 14, black) was raped by a 27-year-old family friend at his home. She provided details about the assault, including how he held her down and covered her mouth to muffle her cries:

I didn’t want to but he did, you know, and I don’t know, [sex] just happened. I thought he was just a friend and that’s it. . . . He was calling me names, he was calling me a “ho” and a “slut” and all this kind of stuff, and that I gave him a lap dance and everything. That I was, I can’t . . . I took all my clothes off and that I was, like, asking him for it. That I wanted to be with him, and everyone believed him.

Sexual reputation mattered to girls (Van Roosmalen 2000) and the threat of being labeled a “ho” or a “slut” loomed large. The threat of sexualization and social derogation was often a barrier to rape reporting; it was connected with accusations of exaggeration through which peers decided whether and how to include, label, and ostracize. This finding is consistent with prior studies (Phillips 2000) that find young women are under pressure to manage their sexuality and sexual reputations. This is a confusing endeavor, of course, as girls may gain cultural capital among peers for being desired and pursued but not for sexual agency.

The precarious balancing act of attaining sexual status and avoiding the “slander of the slut” (Schalet 2010) proved powerful. Some girls belittled others’ experiences, holding them responsible for their victimizations. Obligated to set limits for sexual behavior (Orenstein 1994), it was girls’ duty to be prepared to say “no” (Tolman 1994) and to police each other. When asked about her friend who had reported sexual assault by a mutual acquaintance, Jacki (age 15, white) said, “I don’t know why she’s making such a big deal out of it anyway. He does it to everyone, so I say, well, ‘Just back off,’ I say ‘No’—so she should if she don’t want it, but she probably wants it anyway.” Jacki worked to discursively separate herself from her friend as she spoke of sexual desire and exaggeration.

Similarly, 12-year-old Jillian (black) was brought to the forensic interview in relation to reports of her friend’s sexual assault. Jillian explained that her 13-year-old friend Rachel said she was raped by 18-year-old Trevor. The interviewer asked her to explain:

Well, that’s what people been saying and I asked her. First she told me that she got raped and I asked her, “Did you really get . . . did you get raped?” and she goes, “Yeah.” Then I asked her again, “Why you telling everybody you got raped when you didn’t?” and she goes, “I’m not telling everybody I got raped.” And I go, “What you telling ’em?” and she goes, “That he forced me into it,” forced her into having sex which he, which, I don’t know if it’s true or not, but as far as I know, it’s not true that he forced her because [my friend] was there and she told me that he ask . . . or, this, it all started when Rachel wanted to have sex with Nate and Nate didn’t want to so Trevor said he would. And . . . and Rachel wanted to, but see, the reason why she’s telling everybody that he forced her into it ’cause she don’t want it right there and then. But he did . . . he talked her into it. But Rachel could of said no but she didn’t, so how should he know?

Girls were consistently positioned as the gatekeeper of sexual activity; they were disbelieved and policed by their peers, and their words were reconstructed and their actions deemed false. Jillian disbelieved her friend's report of rape and chastised her for not saying "No." Jillian did not hold Trevor accountable for his actions, at least partly because he was characterized as incompetent when it came to communication and consent. Instead, Rachel carried the responsibility and suffered the consequences for failing to clearly and effectively establish boundaries.

Girls were also aware of double standards and traditional sexual scripts. They claimed "guys get away with everything" and "they can do anything and not get in trouble." This critique stopped short of attributions of sexual responsibility, however; girls self-framed as active subjects by labeling others as passive objects. In this way, the complexities of naming sexual aggression was premised on behavior comparisons. April (age 13, white) reported that her 13-year-old friend "had sex" with Sean, a 22-year-old man. During her interview, she described her friend as passive and naïve:

I've heard rumors about that he's had sex with girls, and I know Sara has had sex with him, she came out and told me . . . she said that he came over and he was telling her that she was gorgeous and that he loved her and that he wanted to have her baby and all this stuff, and I guess it just happened, and that's what she said, it just happened, and I was like, "Oh, okay" [laughs], you know, which didn't surprise me, 'cause Sara, she'll be mad at him and then she'll go back to him, like, two days later.

April characterized sexual intercourse ("it") as something men do "to" women. She further interpreted Sean's manipulative tactics ("telling her that she was gorgeous and that he loved her and that he wanted to have her baby") as successful because "it [intercourse] just happened." April said similar ploys did not work on her: "First of all, he asked me, 'Would you . . . would you ever go out with me?' and I said, 'No' . . . and he's like, 'Well, would you ever have sex with me?' and I was like, 'No.'"

Despite April's resistance, Sean put his hands under her shirt, and tried to put her hands in his pants and her head on his penis. April told the interviewer: "I told him to stop and he didn't and he got to, like, right here, you know, he was tryin' to lift up my bra and I was like, 'No, stop!'" Further couched in rumors and reputation, April differentiated herself from Sara: "There's rumors going around saying that Sara had sex with him and so did I and that [she's] a slut and all this stuff." April insisted the rumors about her were untrue because, unlike Sara who let "it just happen," she "said no." As Nelson and Oliver (1998, 573) state, "Under these rules, any girl who permits herself to be persuaded into sexual activity is weak and to blame, as is a girl who voluntarily enters a situation where she can be raped."

## Conclusion

Research on sexual violence has long asked why victims do not report these incidents. Studies with adults have examined how women account for and "name" their experiences, yet adolescents remain largely outside the scope of this work. Exploring sexual violence via the lens of compulsory heterosexuality highlights the relational dynamics at play in this naming process. Unique characteristics emerged through inductive analyses and revealed patterned heterogendered (Martin 2009) and heteronormative scripts appropriated to account for the violence experienced. The current study adds to a significant body of work of girls' sexuality development using different modes of inquiry and method (Martin 1996; Phillips 2000; Thompson 1995).

Descriptions of assault here are concerning, having much to do with heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Sex was "something they [men and boys] do," or "something he wanted," and sexual assault was a "weird" threat, something "they just say," or "something she let happen." When resistance was voiced, as in April's case, it was couched in sexual refusal and used to establish boundaries. In their policing of each other, young women often held themselves and their peers responsible for acting as gatekeepers of men's behaviors;

they were responsible for being coerced, for accepting gifts and other resources, for not fending off or resisting men's sexual advances, for miscommunication, or, in Abby's words, for engaging in sexual activity she "didn't really care for." The discourses offer insight into how some young women talked about their sexual selves and relationships as they navigated a world ordered by gendered binaries and heterosexual frameworks (Butler 1999).

Importantly, the violence described in this study must be situated both by context and as told within an institutionalized, forensic interview setting. Child crime victims are often positioned as passive in exploitative relationships, in reporting practices, and in criminal justice processes. However, the significant research on youth's agency, subjectivity, and desire reviewed here turns our attention toward active negotiations within the interview setting. Foremost, CACs work within criminal justice systems, and youths might rightfully view forensic interviewers as an extension of the system. Girls' narratives in this study are produced within that system; thus, it is possible that young women's discursive minimizations and justifications of abuse also work to accomplish specific goals. As the findings demonstrate, girls understand their position in a patriarchal sexual system and therefore might assume authority figures of all types will blame them or perceive them as bad girls who "let it happen." Revealing sexual desire or agency in this setting might be perceived risky in the same way involving law enforcement might be; girls may be viewed as blameworthy for putting themselves in a situation where one can be raped (Nelson and Oliver 1998). The fear of revealing one's use of drugs or alcohol could also influence what and how disclosure is made with interviewers. This might be especially true for minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged youths with little trust of criminal justice authorities (Hlavka 2013). Therefore, conclusions offered here must be tempered not only by class and neighborhood context, but also by how the forensic interview is perceived and interpreted differently by young women depending on race, class, and sexuality. In this study, age, type of offender, and peer groups seemed to affect girls' narratives in important ways, whereas race did not. Also, it is not assumed that all the girls in this study identified as heterosexual, but without a measure of sexual orientation, the question remains, "How might lesbian or bisexual girls interact with common heteronormative discourses?" Based on the available data, class and sexuality could not be systematically analyzed in this study, but future work must prioritize intersectional analyses (Tolman 2006). Important implications for young women's relational sexuality and gender ideologies are bound to sociocultural context (Thompson 1995).

While my data cannot speak to variations among girls in terms of desire and agency found in other studies using different methods (e.g., Thompson 1995; Tolman 1994), it is certainly likely that young women both understand and internalize scripts to varying degrees. Appraisals are based both on dominant discourses and individual desires used for self-representation (Reavey and Gough 2000). Whether girls' accounts of violence reflect their subjective understanding of what happened, or are constructed to eliminate or negotiate possibilities of blame by authority figures, the specificity of the appropriated discourses engaged is significant. In the process of appraising and explaining violence, girls drew upon particular macro-understandings of gender and sex to interpret and justify actions that legitimated men's dominance. Specific heteronormative scripts were used to explain and describe, as well as to negotiate, within the forensic interview. These scripts were presented as legitimate, commonplace, and powerful—evident in the co-construction of common knowledge with interviewers ("you know"). These discourses are used to "pass," to "fit in," and to make events believable and understandable to others. To be sure, the absence of oppositional or alternative discourses is as relevant as the presence of dominant discourses. As Connell (1987, 195) points out, agencies of socializing "invite the child to participate in social practice on given terms. The invitation may be, and often is, coercive—accompanied by heavy pressure to accept and no mention of an alternative." Discourses are used to manage young people's place in the social order (Corsaro 1997) as they are encouraged into established hierarchies and compelled into prescribed scripts.

Alternative solutions for the education of young people on sexual relations and abuse are long overdue, and many have called for new sexual paradigms for some time (Fine 1988; Phillips 2000; Tolman 1994; Tolman et al. 2003). The sexual scripts culturally available to girls largely exclude sexual desire and pleasure, representing girls as victims in need of protection against boys' desires (Fine 1988). Placing responsibility on women and girls to "just say no" and excusing boys and men as they "work a 'yes' out" works to erase institutional and structural responsibilities. The lack of safe, supportive space for girls is palpable. We can thus better understand why young women in this study felt they were expected to protect themselves from everyday violence with little help from others, including those in authority positions. The lack of institutional support assumed by girls in this study should be deeply concerning for educators and policy makers. As Stein (1995) has argued, lack of adult interruption or response to sexual harassment and abuse functionally permits and encourages it. It is not enough to establish new policies and practices aimed at increasing reporting; there are larger underlying cultural practices and discourses acting as barriers. By drawing attention to youths' voices, structures of violence, power, and privilege become apparent in their gendered experiences that do not easily translate to law and policy reforms. Sexual education must be gender equity education (Stein et al. 2002), resistant to troubled, heteronormative binaries and cultural constraints that omit discourses of desire, gender, and sexuality. By treating young people as agents and decision makers, we could create spaces where they can work together with adults to appraise experiences of sex, assault, power, coercion, and consent prevalent in their lives.

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