

UNLOCKING DESIRE:  
YOUNG WOMEN REFLECT ON EARLY EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL DESIRE AND  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SEXUAL SELF

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to explore how young women make meaning of early experiences of sexual desire, and how these experiences contribute to the development of their sexual selves. The development of the sexual self is one of the fundamental building blocks to adulthood for adolescents, but there are many strong and some diametrically opposing viewpoints on how the discussion around sexuality should be framed. Much of the literature has focused on the health risks and social consequences of sexual activity, such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Brook, Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang & Rivera, 2010) with less examination of the positive aspects of this phenomenon (e.g. pleasure, respect, emotional connection). In 1988, Michelle Fine opened a dialogue with adolescent women about their experience of and opinions about sexual desire, attempting to shed light on the consequences of suppressing this discourse, including disconnection from their physical selves, possible victimization, and a denial of pleasure. In the last two decades, there has been interest in the concept of sexual desire and its role in the development of sexual subjectivity.

Sexual subjectivity is particularly important in the lives of young women, who live, work and learn in a patriarchal society which objectifies their bodies and sexual identities (Levy, 2005; Tolman, 2002a). I interviewed 5 women (19-25 years old) about how they make meaning of their early experiences of sexual desire and how this contributes to the development of their sense of sexual selfhood. I recruited participants using posters placed across a university campus to facilitate interest. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as developed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) to understand how participants perceive their experiences to have influenced their feelings and ideas about their sexual desires. My study design also addressed how they retrospectively view early experiences and understandings of sexual desire to have contributed to the development of their sexual identities. In my interviews I also employed the listening guide developed by Gilligan (1982) and Brown and Gilligan (1991). Analysis revealed an overarching theme of *unlocking desire with trust and connection*, as well as superordinate themes of *exploring desire through fantasy and imagination, the power of desire, the spectrum of desire and reflections on lived experiences of female desire*. The current research study will be discussed in relation to previous literature (e.g. commonalities, distinctions, its strengths

and weaknesses). Finally, future directions for the research, as well as implications for counselling practice, will be elucidated.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother, Judy Widdup. Mom—you are the reason any of this was possible, in more ways than I can count. Your unwavering support, your insight and encouragement throughout this process was a gift, and I am deeply grateful. Thank you for always, always believing in me, and teaching me to believe in myself. Thank you for being a mentor and a friend who taught me to seek joy in all its forms and celebrate life in all its complexity, with courage, laughter and hope. I love you.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The development of the sexual self is one of the fundamental building blocks to adulthood for adolescents (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Tolman, 2002a). However, it is also an area of development that is fraught with tensions around how and when young people should be learning sexual information, in schools, religion, politics and the media (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Levy, 2005; Ninomiya, 2010; Regnerus, 2007; Tolman, Hirschman & Impett, 2005; Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Ussher, 2005). Particularly for young women, the messages about sexual identity development and experiences of desire have primarily been centered on what is 'appropriate' behaviour, and the risks of pregnancy and disease associated with sexual activity (Brook, Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang & Rivera, 2010; Champion, Collins, Reyes & Rivera, 2010; Fine, 1988; Morrison-Beedy, Carey, Feng & Tu, 2008; Tolman, 2002a). This focus, in essence, pathologizes female sexuality, discouraging open discussion about the positive aspects of this phenomenon. This creates, as Fine (1988) has stated, 'a missing discourse of desire' for young women that discourages exploration of personal pleasure or development of sexual agency, and promotes the image of women as sexual objects.

The dominating view of women as sexual objects continues to be a significant issue impacting the development of young women. Sexual objectification (SO) theory states that images in the media and as a part of daily life (e.g. in fashion, among peers) promote a disconnect between mind and body that undermines bodily awareness while creating hyper-vigilance toward bodily appearance (Fischer, Bettendorf, & Wang, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski, Carr, & Moffitt, 2011). This message is absorbed by young women, as they not only make sexual objects of themselves, but also of other women (Attwood, 2007; Levy, 2005; Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011). This can lead to pressure to behave in very constricted ways, or run the risk of social ostracization and derogatory labeling from one's peer group (e.g. 'slut,' 'whore,' 'prude').

Sexual objectification and a lack of sexual agency can be problematic as young women enter the world of romantic and sexual relationships. Without a clear sense of their rights, needs and desires in a sexual relationship, many girls describe sexual experiences that 'just happen' (Tolman, 2002a). This lack of agency sometimes leads to confusion and regret, or worse, risky sexual behaviours and victimization (Champion et al., 2010; Fine &

McClelland, 2006). In developing sexual agency, young women can learn to create boundaries for themselves and explore their sexual selves as a positive, healthy part of becoming an adult.

There has been considerable growth in the research over the last decade on adolescent females' experiences of desire (e.g. Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002a; Welles, 2005). The voices of young women are being sought out to understand how they experience sexual wanting, and how they navigate these feelings in a society that still discourages them from talking about them. There has been less exploration of this population's earliest understandings of the phenomenon of female sexual desire, and how they made sense of sexual feelings before they had a well-developed vocabulary or extensive experience with them (Bay-Cheng, Robinson & Zucker, 2009; Ussher, 2005; Wansley, 2007). Given the impact that not developing an understanding of these feelings can have on adolescent girls' emotional, physical and social well-being (Burns et al., 2011; Champion et al., 2010), extending the literature on early, salient experiences of sexual desire and young women's meaning-making around these experiences in the development of their sexual selves could contribute perspective to the literature on what messages are impactful for young women.

In examining a phenomenon like early experiences of sexual desire, an appropriate research methodology allows the investigator to gain first-person perspectives in the participants' own words. The methodology would focus on the way participants make sense of their feelings and the (possibly conflicting) messages around expression of desire. I also believe that conducting truly objective research that does not incorporate the researcher's perspective in some way is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. As feminist analysis demonstrates, all knowledge is situated (M. Lovrod, personal communication, Sept. 11, 2013). With these ideas in mind, an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology [IPA] (Smith, 2004) was chosen. An IPA framework works from the basic idea that in order to understand a social phenomenon, one must learn from those who have experienced it through how they make sense of their experiences. Further, IPA acknowledges that research is a social process, and that the researcher conducting the study has their own background and ideas that will influence the research process. However, in order to conduct sound research, the investigator must be rigorous in

understanding how their background and ideas may influence the research process, and make every effort not to let these conditioning forces colour the data (Giorgi, 2006; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The research has shown that while there is a growing body of literature on sexuality and sexual desire in young women (e.g. Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Hensel, Fortenberry, O'Sullivan & Orr, 2011; Johansson, 2007; Tolman, 2002a; Welles, 2005), there is less on its earliest manifestations and how it was understood (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Ussher, 2005; Wansley, 2007) by those who remembered it. In this study I wished to extend the literature on how young women make meaning of early experiences of sexual desire, with the hope that doing so will create a clearer picture of how they perceive this experience, and how this shaped their ideas and beliefs about their sexuality. The research questions guiding my study were as follows: 1) how do young women recall their first experiences of sexual desire?; and 2) how do they perceive, and make meaning of, those experiences in terms of the development of their sexual selves?

### **Researcher Interest**

I knew that I wanted to study female sexuality in some way since beginning my master's program three years ago. However, what I wanted to study about this topic, the way I wanted to study it and the reasons behind my desire (pun intended) to study it have undergone significant metamorphosis as I have learned more about the topic and examined my motivations for choosing it. Some of this reflection has resulted in shifts in my approach, and some of it has reaffirmed previous decisions.

I grew up in small town Saskatchewan, in a family with three brothers (I was the only girl) and two loving parents. Both of my parents were teachers at the local high school (my mother the biology and chemistry teacher, my father the principal), and despite the fact that other kids sometimes disliked my parents, I always had a great deal of respect and love for both of them. I was a 'good kid,' making good grades, not rebelling, not experimenting and (for the most part) being unusually close and honest with both of them, particularly my mother. On the topic of sexuality, my mother was warm, open, matter-of-fact and intelligent. She created a dialogue that encouraged and normalized my curiosity about sexuality, neither trivializing nor demonizing the subject. This meant that,

intellectually, I felt I was a 'sexpert,' not shocked or embarrassed by anything sexual, very much in touch with my own body, while at the same time having no real-world experience.

I feel that the stance I just described is similar to my first ideas about studying this topic. I wanted to talk to teachers about their experiences teaching young women and how (or if) they tried to negotiate open communication about sexuality with their students. As I learned more about female sexuality, however, I began to realize that I was allowing myself to maintain an intellectual distance from the phenomenon by focusing on the teachers' (my parents') perspectives. What interested me, and what would make the best research at this stage in my life, was closer to home. As a young person, while I was learning and developing strong opinions about sexuality (based in beliefs of acceptance and equality), I remained completely inexperienced in sexual relationships. This was not because I was unwilling, or even unable (my parents had the same rules for all of us, in that dating could start at sixteen). For whatever reason, the opportunity never came.

Meanwhile, I was a favourite sounding board for my female friends who were having sex, or thinking about having sex, or dating, or thinking about dating, and everywhere in between. And from them, I heard stories that sometimes made me wish for their chances more than anything, and sometimes made me very glad I was only observing the dating scene. For them, my life was an oddity. They were alternately fascinated, horrified and envious of my candid relationship with my parents, but they often came to me for a 'smart' person's perspective as they struggled with whether or not to have sex, how to talk to their boyfriends about the decision, and how to deal with the intensity of their feelings.

Reflecting on my past experiences in this way, I realized that what I wanted to know was how desire manifested itself for young women with different experiences, and how they conceptualized it. For my friends, it was sometimes a struggle to negotiate and understand the multitude of feelings and sensations that they were experiencing, both in and out of relationships. For me, not being in a sexual relationship made me incredibly curious about what that experience may be like, while at the same time developing a strong sense of my sexual self, independent of being in a romantic relationship. I saw, in reflecting on my friends' experiences as well as my own, that the experience of sexual desire and its contributions to sexual development is far more complex than feeling attraction, or being

in a relationship or not, or the relationship one has with their body. Sexual desire is multi-faceted and deeply personal.

My experience growing up made me realize that as a researcher, I had a unique perspective and that I had to be conscious of how my past experiences and beliefs affected the social process of engaging in research. It was important to be reflexive in my privileged role as researcher, and be conscious of how my engagement with participants and their experiences could affect data collection and analysis. One aspect of my background I recognized as significant was that, having come from a home with open communication, I believe that safe sexual exploration and frank, open discussion about sexuality with trusted adults is healthy and additive in the lives of youth. I also believe that not speaking about sexuality can be detrimental, so I had to be cautious not to influence the interview process or impose my values on participants who have reason not to share my beliefs, such as youth from more conservative backgrounds, those who had become pregnant and chose to have an abortion, or youth who had been abused or sexually objectified.

Another bias that I had to be conscious of during the interview and analysis process is my feminist beliefs. I feel that every young woman has a right to sexual subjectivity, both in and outside relationships. However, I also remember what it was like as a teenager, to want more than anything to attract a certain boy's attention and being willing to privilege his desires above mine to achieve that goal. Therefore, when my participants expressed views that were objectifying or negative toward themselves or others, I had to be careful to recognize that these retrospectives were a reflection of the participants' thoughts and feelings at the time, and it was not my place to make judgments about them as a part of this process. Not only could expressing my worldview have had a negative impact on our rapport as researcher and participant, but it would have also worked against the objective of interpretative phenomenological research, which is to understand the participants' lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However, it was important to consider and reflect on these thoughts as a part of IPA and a social constructionist framework. I sought to remain cognizant of my own assumptions by working closely with my supervisor to maintain consistency with my interpretation and analysis in reflecting the worldview of the participant. I also kept a journal and discussed with the participants in the second

interview whether they identify with my interpretation of their experiences. I will discuss these issues in more detail in the methods section.



## Definitions of Terms

**Adolescent:** a young person in the process of developing from a child into an adult, to grow up or grow into maturity (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009)

**Embodied desire:** awareness, understanding and acceptance of one's own sexual desire and feelings in the mind and body (Tolman, 2002a)

**Sexuality:** a central aspect of being human throughout life that encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (World Health Organization, 2003)

**Agency:** the ability to act, accomplish, and feel efficacious in other parts of one's life (bolstered with a sense of sexual subjectivity, [Welles, 2005])

**Sexual Identity:** An individual's sense of self as a sexual being, including natal sex, gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation and sexual self-concept. Sexual identity may also refer to the language and labels people use to define themselves.

<http://www.religiousinstitute.org/acting-out-loud/definitions>

**Sexual Objectification Theory:** Women in Western society live and work in a culture that equates their worth to their bodies and sexual functions (Szymanski et al., 2011)

**Sexual Subjectivity:** the ability to feel confident and in control of one's body and sexuality (Welles, 2005)

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

“What turns you on?” That question has been posed to the masses so casually, so overtly *and* covertly, and in so many different ways that members of Western society have learned to treat it as ubiquitous white noise, just one of the many attention-grabbing ploys to sell us something. But if one begins to think about sexuality as a serious topic, to examine what desire is and where it comes from, the answer becomes very elusive, indeed. The question of what motivates sexual desire becomes even more complicated when one thinks about it in regard to early experiences. Society has historically been both fascinated with and frightened by the idea of sexualized youth (Levy, 2005), and particularly young women (Tolman, 2002a). While provocative images are pervasive in the media (Levy, 2005; Szymanski, Carr, & Moffitt, 2011), there remains a reluctance to actively, seriously discuss the development of a young woman’s sexual identities (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Wansley, 2007; Welles, 2005).

In my review of the literature, I will first provide a brief description of the developmental perspective of sexuality, as detailed by Diamond and Savin-Williams (2009), Tolman (2002b), Auslander, Rosenthal and Blythe (2006) and Link (2009). I will then examine the variety of sources that work to shape and influence the development of young women’s understandings and perceptions of individual sexuality and desire, using the model developed by Tolman, Striepe and Harmon (2003). The model shows the variety of social influences that affect the development of a sexual identity. First, the model begins with an outer circle, which symbolizes the social institutions that influence attitudes and beliefs about sexuality and access to resources. These institutions include the media (Levy, 2005; Szymanski et al. 2011), religion (King & Roeser, 2009; Regnerus, 2007; Rotostsky, Regnerus & Wright, 2003), politics (Fischer, Bettendorf & Wang, 2011; McClelland, 2010; Tolman, Hirschman, & Impett, 2005); and school (Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011; Charania, 2009; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006). The model then moves inward to social relationships and how they affect the young woman’s feelings about sexual expression and normal sexual development, including peers and close friends (Attwood, 2007; Champion, Collins, Reyes & Rivera, 2009; Griffin, 2000; Kitzinger, 2000; Impett, Sorsoli, Schooler, Henson & Tolman, 2008; Weaver, MacKeigan & MacDonald, 2011), parents (Lefkowitz, 2002; Lefkowitz, Sigman & Au, 2000; Somers & Paulson, 2000) teachers and counsellors

(Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Moving further inward, the model illustrates the effects of intimate relationships on sexual selfhood (Hearn, O'Sullivan & Dudley, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2005; O'Sullivan, Cheng, Harris & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Raley, Crissey & Muller, 2007). Finally the model comes to the inner circle of the individual herself, and her thoughts, feelings and ideas about sexuality (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Daniluk 1994; Hensel, Fortenberry, O'Sullivan & Orr, 2010; Shucksmith, 2004; Tolman, 2002a; Tolman, 1999).

In discussing these social influences on the development of young women's sexuality, I will show that there is room to extend the literature to investigate young women's retrospective perceptions of their early sexual identity development. While there is a great deal of literature on adult sexual development (e.g. Daniluk, 1994; Gagnon & Simon, 2005; Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011; Szymanski, Carr & Moffitt, 2011), and adolescent and teenage sexual development, particularly in terms of risk and disease prevention (e.g. Regnerus, 2007; Chandra et al., 2008; Teitelman, Bohinski & Boente, 2009), earnest discussion about sexuality as a positive aspect of adolescent health, particularly in the case of young women, is recent (i.e. in the last twenty-five years) (e.g. Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002a; Shucksmith, 2004; Fine & McClelland, 2006). There has been less discussion of when and how awareness of desire begins, and how early perceptions and understandings of sexuality contribute to the development of the sexual self (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Ussher, 2005; Wanseley, 2007). The idea of where awareness of desire begins for young women is my main research question of interest, specifically: 1) how do young women recall their first experiences of sexual desire?; and 2) how do they perceive, and make meaning of, these experiences in terms of the development of their sexual selves?

There have been critical examinations of the detrimental effects that a negative and alarmist discourse may have on the development of healthy sexuality. Foucault (1990) elucidated the interplay of power, control, gender and sexuality in Western society, noting that by framing the issue of sexuality as a moral one, those in positions of authority were able to privilege certain 'ways of being' over others, and thus marginalize any behaviour considered 'abnormal' (p. 4). This includes female sexuality and desire, which prevailing societal discourse dictates must be controlled and quieted in order to maintain values of 'propriety' and 'decency'. As Johansson (2007) states, "Through these constant reminders, a certain normalcy is segmented in people's consciousness. Breaking with this normality is

difficult, not least because it is closely tied to the individual's emotional life—a fear of doing the wrong thing is created” (p. 2). For women, and young girls especially, ‘fear of doing the wrong thing’ has become increasingly complex, as they are expected to walk a tightrope between being labeled a ‘prude’ or a ‘slut’ (Tolman & McClelland, 2010). The prevailing messages are that equality between the sexes has been achieved and that we live in a post-feminist world—yet women continue to be objectified and devalued, creating a dissonance between what they are told and what they experience (Attwood, 2007; Levy, 2005; Welles, 2005).

Michelle Fine's (1988) seminal work, *Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire*, has raised questions for over twenty years for researchers regarding the cost to young women of maintaining a silence around their bodies and their sense of sexual agency (e.g. Tolman, 2002a; Welles, 2005). Fine (1988) argued that pathologizing youth sexuality by focusing on the risk of disease and pregnancy fosters a discourse of fear and ignorance that fails to prepare or adequately inform youth about the realities of sexual experience, much less celebrate sexual development as a normal part of the lifespan. In doing so, girls are denied sexual subjectivity, defined as the ability to feel confident and in control of one's own body and sexuality (Welles, 2005). Any opportunities to speak openly about their pleasure, their physical, emotional, social and spiritual desires and needs regarding sexuality are framed as the pathways to danger. In recent years there has been a resistance to the shroud of silence surrounding the subject, in the form of burgeoning discussion around female sexuality, and the many different areas of a woman's life that contribute to her perception of and feelings about sexuality (e.g. Tolman, 1999; Tolman, 2002a; Shucksmith, 2004; Welles, 2005; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Regnerus, 2007; Bay-Cheng et al., 2009). So the question becomes, how do all these social spheres influence each other, and affect a young woman's thoughts and beliefs on the subject of sexuality?

### **Sexuality Development**

Sexuality exists as a normative part of development (Link, 2009; Tolman, 2002b). One does not have an absence of sexual feelings, or opinions and ideas about sexuality, and then simply wake up one day as a fully developed sexual person. Link (2009) describes sexual development in childhood, adolescence, adulthood and older adults as gender identity, sexual response and the capacity for close, dyadic relationships. In her report, the

author describes how sexual development progresses from the very early stages of life, including in infants as young as 24 hours old.

In infants and toddlers, sexual exploration often begins with a child fondling their genitals unintentionally (Link, 2009), in boys at six to eight months old, and in girls eight to eleven months old. Masturbation can begin for children as young as two and a half to three years old. As awareness of cultural norms around sexuality begin to develop, particularly around the age of entrance into school, children learn to make sexual self-exploration more concealed (Link, 2009; Tolman, 2002), and gender norms are stressed and solidified. This is also manifested in play that mirrors contemporary gender norms (e.g. playing 'house' for girls or 'soldier' for boys). As children develop toward adolescence, interest in the genitals of adults and other children can become more pronounced. Behaviours such as kissing, touching and hugging can be a part of learning about burgeoning sexualities (Link, 2009). In pre-adolescence (i.e. twelve years-old and younger), the likelihood that consensual penetration, oral-genital or anal-genital contact would occur is low.

In adolescence, the sexual development of the body (such as increased body hair growth, increase in genital size and breast growth) coincides with an increased sexual drive, usually beginning somewhere between ten and fourteen years of age (Auslander et al., 2006; Link, 2009). Exploration of sexuality increases with higher levels of hormones, and research has shown that the age of the initiation of sexual intercourse has dropped for both males and females, for both heterosexual and same-sex intercourse. There has also been a drop in the age of menarche for young women (12.7 years for Caucasian women and 12.5 years for African-American women), and an increase in the availability of birth control. These factors have all been cited as contributing to a shift in attitudes and ideas about young women's sexualities (Link, 2009).

The process of physical development for young women will inevitably occur simultaneously with their social development (Auslander et al., 2006; Link, 2009), but not always in step with each other. At times, physical development accelerates ahead of social maturity, or vice versa. Research has shown that for girls who develop early, it can often be socially difficult, being targeted for teasing and also statistically more likely to have early sexual initiation (Tolman, 2002b). But for males, the opposite is true—boys who develop early have more positive outcomes than boys who develop late. Specifically, boys who

develop early have been shown to show more confidence, leadership and initiative than late-developing boys (Link, 2009). But sexuality does not occur in a vacuum, for either boys or girls. Sexuality is an aspect of one's development that is affected by larger forces than personal experiences and ideas.

### **Sociocultural/Sociopolitical Contexts**

There are many influences on the discourse surrounding sexuality in the wider social sphere. As previously mentioned, institutions that claim authoritative perspectives on the subject of sexuality include the media, schools, religion and politics (Tolman et al., 2003). The interaction between these institutions and the development of young women's sexualities has been one of the major foci in the literature, in part because those researching this topic recognize the importance of impacting social policy on the subject to initiate systemic change (e.g. Tolman et al., 2005). Another likely reason that there has been such wide and extensive coverage on the topic of young sexuality is the fact that there are so many aspects of public life that impact private life and personal opinions. Further, the eroticization of young bodies alongside the privileging of virginity and a growing internet porn industry also contribute to the fervor around the topic (M. Lovrod, personal communication, September 11, 2013).

#### **Influence of the media on the development of young women's sexuality.**

Levy (2004) in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, chronicled women's path to sexual liberation, particularly in relation to the media's influence, and spoke about the shift in attitudes around what is considered normal female sexual expression in modern media: "A tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular. What was once regarded as a kind of sexual expression we now view as sexuality" (p. 5). From the days of burning bras and picketing the Playboy mansion, girls and women are now encouraged to become empowered by going to female strip clubs, by wearing the Playboy bunny stretched across their chests and by learning 'how to make love like a porn star' (the title of adult film star Jenna Jameson's 2004 bestselling memoir). Women have gone from being objectified by others, to objectifying themselves and other women (Levy, 2005; Fisher et al., 2011; Szymanski et al., 2011). These messages are further reinforced by the growth of celebrity culture in the last decade, and celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian, who

came to the public's attention specifically through the release of sex tapes (Jones, 2012; Levy, 2005).

In terms of young people's development, this can have a particularly strong effect, with the heavy emphasis on 'fitting in,' sexual experimentation and the search for role models (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Tolman, 2002a; Tolman et al., 2003). With the pervasive message being that to fit in, to be popular, or to be like a celebrity, young women must emulate the hypersexuality being shown as the norm in the media, sexuality has become conflated with social status (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009). This, in turn, shifts the focus further away from the exploration of personal, embodied pleasure for women and girls, and toward linking personal worth and achievement in their ability to fit a narrow definition of what it means to be 'sexy' for a man, rather than for themselves.

Women are being encouraged to emulate a very specific type of beauty and sexuality that often has little to no ties to their own experiences or values. This edict discourages bodily awareness while privileging bodily surveillance, meaning that women focus their attention outward—on their physical appearance or on pleasing others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus, less attention and care is paid to one's own arousal and desire, and an emphasis is placed on external validation.

The concern over female sexual objectification has led to the development of objectification theory (Fischer et al., 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2011). Objectification theory posits that when a woman is treated as a body, or as a group of body parts, this attitude is not isolated and does not exist in a vacuum, it is within a cultural context that is designed to devalue women's experiences and perspectives (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This research has shown that the disconnect that exists for women between their bodies, their sexualities, and their selves is an issue that is not limited to the media, but is something that is present as a part of the daily lives of most women and girls, and not easily avoided (Fischer et al., 2011).

In Tolman's (2002a) research, she interviewed 31 young women, ranging in age from fifteen to eighteen years old, with a roughly even split between urban and suburban homes in the northeastern United States. The participants were of Caucasian, African-American and Latin-American descent, and had varying socio-economic statuses. Twelve of the young women identified as victims of violence (e.g. childhood sexual abuse, rape or

other types of assault). The majority of the participants identified as heterosexual, with one young woman identifying as lesbian and two others identifying as bisexual. Tolman (2002a) observed that many of her participants adopted an attitude of being responsible for their partner's experience of pleasure and were critical of their abilities to provide it, with little thought of their own desires (which could be read as making themselves objects of their partners' pleasure). For the participants who did make personal pleasure a focus, it was often done subversively, so as not to be seen as 'a slut' (p. 134). That is, if pleasure was achieved, it was as a by-product of first giving pleasure to others, or achieved without expressing pleasure as a goal, so as not to upset a sexual script in which the role of women is to give pleasure to men.

### **Influence of religion on the development of young women's sexuality.**

Religion is one of the spheres in which sexuality, objectification and attitudes toward what is considered acceptable behaviour provides tension. For the purpose of this review, I will focus on Christianity, as it remains the dominant religion in Western culture, with 77% of Canadians identifying as such ("Religion in Canada," 2001), and 76-80% of Americans ("Religion in the United States," 2010). In the United States, there has been an increasing influence of the religious right and conservatism (Levy, 2005; Tolman et al., 2005), and an emphasis on 'abstinence only until marriage' sex education within that movement. Therefore, it is clear that both politically and socially, religion remains an important institution influencing discussion about adolescent sexuality. On a more basic individual level, spirituality and religion also remain an important aspect of adolescent development, as one of the major socializing influences, and an elemental building block in a young person's search for meaning and understanding in their life (King & Roeser, 2009; Regnerus, 2007; Rostostsky, Regnerus & Wright, 2003).

Historically, women and girls have received strong messages about female sexuality through religion. Beginning with Judeo-Christianity's 'original sin' in which Eve offers Adam the forbidden fruit that leads to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, women are construed as 'tempting' men to sin (Regnerus, 2007). Similar assumptions inform Islam (m. Lovrod, personal communication, September 11, 2013). There is also strong imagery in the Christian Bible of the Madonna/whore dichotomy, offering women and girls two options: to remain virginal, pure and above reproach, or to engage in sin (sexual activity) and fall from



grace. Research shows that in fact, young women's attitudes surrounding their religious beliefs and sexual practices are far more complex than an 'either/or' proposition (Regnerus, 2007; Rostosky et al., 2003).

Rostosky et al. (2003) conducted an examination of the Add Health survey of adolescent sexual behaviours and attitudes in relation to religiosity and sexuality. The Add Health survey collected information in the United States via 3,691 adolescents' (aged 15-21) self-reports of beliefs and behaviours regarding sexuality. Rostosky et al. (2003) found that religiosity was a predictor of a delay in 'sexual debut' (i.e, first sexual intercourse). The authors suggested that this may be due in part to more sex-negative attitudes among religious youth, such as associating premarital sexual activity with guilt, embarrassment about pregnancy, disapproval from authority figures, not being seen as 'a good girl,' or the threat of sexually transmitted infections. More secular youth, in contrast, may have more sex-positive attitudes, such as associating sex with excitement or social status. They noted that onset of sexual activity was earlier for males overall, regardless of degree of religiosity, and that the use of contraception once sex was initiated was lower among religious youth than secular youth.

However, young people who identify as religious are not immune to curiosity, wanting excitement or to be seen as popular. Regnerus (2007) provides examples of how religious youth navigate the moral pitfalls that they see possibly occurring should they choose to engage in sexual activity, using data collected through the Add Health survey and through the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR was completed by first conducting a telephone survey that was answered by 3,370 adolescents aged thirteen to seventeen. Researchers in that study then followed up with in-depth interviews with 267 participants regarding how (or if) religiosity affected their sexual attitudes and behaviours; it was from this pool of data that Regnerus (2007) made his observations. The author notes that the moral compass of what is considered acceptable sexual behaviour for Christian teens among the teens themselves was not uniform or static. Some participants engaged in some sexual activities (e.g. oral sex) while abstaining from others (e.g. vaginal intercourse), which is seen as something one should reserve for marriage (p. 30). Others in his study engage in sexual activity, but view it as a part of growing up and something that can be reconciled as part of their private relationship with God, whom they trust not to see it as an

egregious sin, or who will forgive them for doing it. For example, one young man, when asked how he reconciles within himself doing something that is discouraged in the Bible, he states, “I just, just ask God to forgive me” (p. 35).

### **Influence of sociopolitical context on the development of young women’s sexuality.**

Sexuality is perhaps one of the most politically charged and contentious issues in society today (McClelland, 2010; Sex Information and Education Council of Canada [SIECCAN], 2009; Tolman et al., 2005). Issues such as reproductive rights (Tolman et al., 2005), discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation (McClelland, 2010), who should be talking to young people about sex, its risks and rewards, and how they should present this information (SIECCAN, 2009; Tolman et al., 2005) are all played out on the political stage, shaping public policy and influencing opinions (SIECCAN, 2009).

Tolman et al. (2005) argue for the use of qualitative research to influence public policy. They note a shift in the rhetoric surrounding the discussion about young people’s sexuality, in that statistics are not the only or even the primary influence in political decision-making. Instead, the use of testimonial is often used to provide support for particular agendas, the rationale being that personal experience is more compelling than percentages or correlations. Indeed, the authors noted that in instances where policymakers used qualitative experience, such as young women’s testimonials supporting abstinence-only sex education, as the major form of evidence over statistical data, these policymakers were more successful than comprehensive sexual education supporters, who relied on quantitative data alone, in passing legislation. The concern that the authors raised in relation to this issue is the likelihood that testimonials—unlike what scientifically rigorous quantitative and qualitative studies strive to achieve—are not an accurate or balanced reflection of human experience. Instead, because personal stories are emotionally charged, captivating and persuasive, testimonials are used to convince those influencing the decision-making process to invest in an agenda, while those presenting them can choose perspectives that support their own worldview and omit those that do not.

Another aspect of the sociopolitical sphere of influence with sexuality is the concept of placing a lens of social justice on sexuality. McClelland (2010) writes of ‘intimate justice’ in terms of sexual satisfaction and how past literature has constructed the concept of

'satisfaction'. The author argues that clearly and consistently incorporating concepts of 'entitlement,' 'deservingness' and expectations into satisfaction research may help to illuminate the reasons behind discrepancies in self-report measures. For example, research has found results indicating that women report higher levels of sexual satisfaction, while reporting less actual sexually satisfying experiences (e.g. Daniluk, 1994). By accepting these results at face value, McClelland (2010) points out that researchers are in fact normalizing lower expectations in women around sexual satisfaction and extrapolating to conclude that men are 'naturally' more sexually driven, which may be more a function of culture than biological predisposition (e.g. Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2006). By examining the contexts in which these responses were elicited using the 'relative deprivation' model, it becomes clearer that it is possible that women are satisfied with lower levels of sexual satisfaction because they do not feel they are entitled to more. Seen in this way, reduced sexual and relationship satisfaction levels among women makes sense, but is not 'normative' or 'natural'.

### **Influence of educational settings on the development of young women's sexuality.**

According to the literature, there are few places as influential to the development of young women's sexuality as schools (Burns et al., 2009; Charania, 2009; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman et al., 2005). It is in this setting that adolescents spend the majority of their day interacting with peers, learning about social rules and the world, and developing relationships with their contemporaries. It is also in this setting that the decision of who should speak to young people about sexuality, when and in what way is most hotly debated (Charania, 2009; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; SIECCAN, 2009). In an attempt to determine how comprehensively and effectively sex education was being delivered to Canadian youth, SIECCAN (2009) conducted a study answering some of the most frequently posed questions asked by parents, educators and policymakers about young people's sexuality.

Though it is not within the scope of this review to address all of the questions in SIECCAN's (2009) study, some of them included: how are we doing [statistically, in comparison to other developed countries]?; why do we need sexual health education in the schools?; do parents want sexual health education taught in schools?; do young people

want sexual health education taught in the schools?; what values are taught in school-based sexual health education?; does providing youth with sexual education information lead to earlier or more frequent sexual activity?; are "abstinence-only" programs an appropriate and effective form of school-based sexual health education?; and should school-based sexual health education address the issue of sexual diversity?

In general, the data indicated a positive response to school-based sexual health education and providing adolescents with accurate, unbiased information from the public and the government. Encouraging trends regarding unintended pregnancies and rates of sexually transmitted infections were also observed (SIECCAN, 2009). Statistics Canada reported that unintended pregnancy rates among young women aged fifteen to nineteen have dropped from 47.6 per 1000 in 1995 to 29.2 per 1000 in 2005 (as cited in SIECCAN, 2009). Sexually transmitted infections (specifically chlamydia) have unfortunately risen in recent years, which the authors cite as support for the need to provide youth with comprehensive sexual health education. In response to the query of why we need sexual health education in schools, the Public Health Agency of Canada (2008) states:

Since schools are the only formal educational institution to have meaningful (and mandatory) contact with nearly every young person, they are in a unique position to provide children, adolescents and young adults with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes they will need to make and act upon decisions that promote sexual health throughout their lives (p. 19).

SIECCAN (2009) reports that both parents and youth agree with this assertion, with over 85% of parents and over 92% of youth affirming that sexual health education should be covered in schools, and should include a wide variety of topics, including reproduction, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, sexual decision-making in dating relationships, safer sex practices and sexual abuse/coercion.

In terms of the values espoused by Canadian schools, SIECCAN (2009) noted that Canada public schools recognize and respect the different viewpoints and backgrounds of the nation's diverse population, with an emphasis on equality and democracy for all its members. As such, principles such as inclusiveness, the right to education and valuing multiculturalism underlie the curriculum around which sexual education in Canada is based. These ideals speak to each of the remaining questions—specifically, of whether

comprehensive sexual education is a predictor of earlier or more frequent sexual activity, as well as the questions of the appropriateness of an abstinence only curriculum, or of providing information applicable to sexual minority youth. As the basis for the program centers around recognizing diversity and democracy, the authors cite evidence that providing comprehensive sexual education is simply an attempt to ensure youth are able to make informed choices, as is their democratic right, and in fact is a predictor of responsible contraceptive use and not a predictor of earlier or more frequent sexual activity. Further, they argue that the evidence shows abstinence only sexual education is not a deterrent to earlier initiation of sexual activity, and is a predictor of less consistent contraceptive use. More fundamentally than these practical considerations, however, is the concern that by limiting adolescents' access to information regarding their sexual health and thereby imposing a set of moral principles that the adolescents may or may not adhere to, Canadian society would be denying them freedom of choice and disrespecting their personal belief systems.

The framework described above, however, is in contrast to the individual state-mandated curriculums in the United States, and this is reflected in the conflicting views among the states surrounding the appropriate way to address sexuality in schools (Charania, 2009; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Kohler, Manhart & Lafferty, 2008; Tolman et al., 2005). Controversy exists over what is termed the AOUM curriculum (abstinence only until marriage). Though research shows similar results on the effects of AOUM curriculum as those obtained in Canada (e.g. Kohler et al., 2008), the increasing influence of religious social conservatives (who believe premarital sex is a sin, and favour the 'sanctity' of monogamous, heterosexual marriage [Regnerus, 2007]) has made AOUM a politically attractive option.

A particularly interesting finding by Burns et al. (2011) is the interrelationship between the discourse surrounding sexuality, and the discourse of academic achievement in the United States. The authors interviewed 98 girls aged twelve to seventeen, collecting narratives about performing fellatio, and found a link between sexual performance and academic achievement. Specifically, the studies link the legislation of AOUM and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) during the Bush administration. While the intent of NCLB was to improve the academic achievement of students, measured quantifiably through test scores,

the result was less than hoped. The simultaneous introduction of NCLB and AOUM was detrimental, "...particularly in the common deployment of scare tactics foregrounding the consequences of failure, the relentless individualizing of blame, and the disproportionate distribution of support and punishments by race/ethnicity, gender and social class" (p. 240, Burns et al., 2011). The authors argue that this same punitive attitude has been adopted by adolescent girls in regards to sexual performance, specifically fellatio, as the two arenas (the social and the academic) have intermingled. The researchers suggest that the reason why performing fellatio may have been so salient to girls relates to the manner in which academic achievement is presented to males versus females. That is, in conservative NCLB contexts males are encouraged to achieve as a means to work and get ahead within the social system, whereas girls are encouraged to strive and try their best as an end in itself. Though the authors caution that they are not implying there is a causal link between academic achievement and fellatio, they do suggest that for young women, the narrative of achievement is a more comfortable space around which to frame their sexual anxiety, than that of desire. By focusing on performance, girls do not question whether they did or did not want to engage in fellatio, whether there was mutual pleasure or a sense of intimacy in the act. Instead, by engaging in the achievement narrative, participants were either 'good' or 'bad' at performing fellatio, and it was a skill they could 'master' (p. 247). The satisfaction they feel from the performance of the act is more based around being seen as competent by their partner than any sense of embodied pleasure. In fact, many participants describe a great deal of anxiety (similar to test anxiety) while performing fellatio.

This data again underscored the point that my interest in early perceptions and understandings of sexual desire had to be framed by attempting to understand as clearly as possible how my participants perceived their experiences of desire, both then and now, and then go further by trying to analyze how and why I was interpreting the data as I was. Working closely with my supervisor ensured that my interpretations of the data were supported by evidence by continually referring back to the source transcript text, as well as checking with participants in the follow-up interview that my interpretation of themes reflected their experiences. Burns et al.'s (2009) study was also illuminating for me in that I could not necessarily expect that my participants would have fully articulated understandings of themselves as sexual people or their embodied desires. I attempted to

introduce and situate the participants in relation to my area of interest using the initial email contact to provide them with the first question on the interview schedule, and allowing them time to reflect on that question before the first interview. The authors of the above mentioned study did not expect to hear discourses relating to academic achievement in interviews regarding fellatio performance (Burns et al., 2009), but in maintaining a flexible stance in their interviews, in their questions and their approach to the data, they were able to discover a link between the two curricular approaches, and add something unique and useful in understanding adolescent girls' sexual experiences in the United States. They accomplished this by allowing the participants room to introduce unanticipated avenues of inquiry and following up if they sensed the new direction would contribute depth or nuance to the research question and results.

### **Context of Social Relationships on the Development of Female Adolescent Sexuality**

Research has shown that social relationships can have significant influence on adolescent girls' attitudes, feelings and beliefs about sexuality (Attwood, 2007; Champion et al., 2009; Griffin, 2000; Impett et al., 2008; Kitzinger, 1995; Lefkowitz, 2002; Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Levy, 2005; Rahimi & Liston, 2009; Somers & Paulson, 2000; Teitelman, Bohinski & Boente, 2009; Weaver et al., 2011). For example, Teitelman et al. (2009) found in their study examining the social contexts that shape sexuality for young girls that their participants felt pressure from many different arenas to behave in contradictory ways. These researchers conducted 33 open-ended interviews with African-American and Caucasian-American females, aged fifteen to nineteen, on the importance of different social forces in influencing their views and behaviours on sexuality, including parents, peers, teachers and the media. Most girls desire the approval of their parents, particularly their mothers, but when faced with the often conflicting desire to be popular amongst their peers and be seen as an adult, they do not feel comfortable being open with authority figures about how they behave in different social spheres. In examining the various groups that have significant impact on the development of the adolescent sexual self (e.g. peers and friends, parents, and teachers), it will become clear that these spheres can both significantly bolster an adolescent's positive sexual development, and alternatively, be a source of sustained stress.

### **Influence of friends and peers on female adolescent sexuality development.**

In the literature on female adolescent sexuality development, it has been shown that relationships with peers and friends can be a significant source of acceptance, closeness, exploration, experimentation and confidence-building (Griffin, 2000; Impett et al., 2010; Teitelman et al., 2009; Weaver et al., 2011). However, there is also evidence to show that it is within the peer group that ostracizing, harmful labeling and pressure to conform most often occurs (Attwood, 2007; Kitzinger, 1995; Levy, 2005; Teitelman et al., 2009). So how do adolescent girls navigate the shifting sands of peer and friend relationships, and how do these relationships help to shape young women's perceptions of their sexual selves?

Both Impett et al. (2010) and Griffin (2000) found that young women gained significant self-confidence through their friendships with other women. Impett et al. (2010) found, specifically, the construct of 'relationship authenticity' to be a significant predictor of whether young girls would rebound in older adolescence from the drop in self-esteem that is typically experienced in early adolescence (twelve to fourteen years old). Relationship authenticity refers to the degree of congruence in the relationship between what each member thinks and feels, and what he or she does or says. The authors noted that as negative body image issues also begin to become apparent at this stage, it is possible that the drop in self-esteem could be attributed to these physical changes; however, this did not account for the gradual recovery in later adolescence. Further, in a longitudinal study, they were able to follow the progression of both the girls' relationships and levels of self-esteem over five years, and it was found that higher levels of relationship authenticity correlated significantly with resiliency of self-esteem. Body image issues connect significantly to the development of sexuality and the experience of desire, in that the experience of sexual subjectivity is directly influenced by connection to and appreciation of one's own body (Schick, Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2008).

Another facet of the study of sexuality and friendship is the concept of 'friends with benefits' or 'FWBs,' where two people in a friend relationship engage in sexual exploration together without romantic attachment (Weaver et al., 2011). Weaver and colleagues explored this construct through semi-structured interviews with 26 young adults in Nova Scotia with 'friends with benefits' experience. In this type of relationship, many adolescents speak of the ability to explore their sexuality in a trusted relationship characterized by



feelings of comfort and safety. However, there were also reports of 'hurt feelings,' fear of endangering the friendship and awkwardness within the friendship. The authors commented that this phenomenon is becoming more common, or at least more documented, though a majority of participants (77%) believed that there still existed a double standard around this type of relationship, with women more often being perceived in a negative light for their participation than men.

In contrast to the protective factors found to be associated with genuine, reciprocal friendships in the lives of adolescent girls, there is arguably an equal amount of apprehension toward the peers who may judge them, gossip about them, or label them a 'slut,' 'slag' or 'skank' (Attwood, 2007; Levy, 2004; Kitzinger, 1995; Teitelman, 2009). Attwood (2007) in tracing the history of the use of the term 'slut,' noted that it has the distinction of being a word adopted in the early 1700s especially by women to denigrate other women as a means to question the sexual purity of the servant class and align with the masters of the house. This draws an interesting parallel to its most prevalent use today, by females against other females (Attwood, 2007; Kitzinger, 1995). Much as in the past, many girls who place this label on other girls report using it to show social superiority or disdain. Kitzinger (1995) noted in her interviews with twenty female participants (aged nineteen to twenty years old) in Glasgow that while her participants would use the term against other women, there was also underlying dissonance in their feelings around the word—used to denote an 'other,' someone unlike the participant or her friends, there was still anxiety expressed in the possibility of having such a term applied to them by others, thereby calling reputations into question. This indicates that while it is fairly common for young women to engage in relational aggression (defined by Crick and Grotpeter [1995] as 'behaviors that are intended to significantly damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by the peer group') as a means to obtain power and social capital, there is an awareness of the tenuous nature of such status, and the need for vigilance against the loss of power through loss of reputation.

### **Influence of parents and teachers on the development of female sexuality.**

The place of authority figures in an adolescent's life is in a constant state of negotiation as the young person strives to gain autonomy, independence and a clear sense of self (Lefkowitz, 2002; Lefkowitz et al., 2000; Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Rahimi & Liston,

2009; Somers & Paulson, 2000). Parents and teachers are also in a difficult position, as they attempt to balance setting boundaries with allowing opportunities for exploration, struggling with what information is too much, too soon, and what is too little, too late. For both adolescents and authority figures, conversations about sexuality can be fraught with anxiety and embarrassment, but to ignore it completely is not a feasible option—so how does such a conversation begin, and what should its content be?

Some research has shown that it is not the facts of the discussion that matter the most, but how the information is approached (Lefkowitz, 2002; Lefkowitz et al., 2000). For example, Lefkowitz (2002) analyzed past research that measured parent-child communication about sexual behaviour and attitudes, and found that while communication about relating facts about HIV/AIDS, STIs, contraception and pregnancy is consistently measured (e.g. Brook, Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang & Finch, 2010), information such as positive or negative attitudes towards sexual activity and comfort with the topic were often as important in determining the adolescent's receptivity to the information (Lefkowitz, 2002; Lefkowitz et al., 2000; O'Sullivan et al., 2001). Further, it is interesting to note that there can be a wide variation between the quality of conversations between parents and adolescents according to many communication measures, and the statistical results would be the same because the questionnaires only note either the presence or absence of communication about sex (Lefkowitz, 2002). For example, both a conversation between parent and adolescent characterized by tension and only the bare facts about sexual intercourse, and a conversation characterized by openness and a willingness to discuss a variety of topics about sexuality would score positively on communication about sexuality.

This discrepancy has led to an exploration in the research about the quality of conversations and the importance of closeness in relationships, though results have been mixed. Some researchers (e.g. Lefkowitz, 2000; Lesch & Kruger, 2005) have found that open communication between parent and adolescent about sexuality has predicted more positive attitudes toward sex and more responsible contraception use. Others (e.g. Somers & Paulson, 2000) have found no significant correlation between parental closeness, communication and sexual activity or attitudes. O'Sullivan et al. (2001) found that as adolescent girls advanced further along in physical maturity and romantic relationship experience, there was more hostility and tension both observed and reported by mothers

and daughters in discussions about sexuality, and suggested that it may be useful for young women to obtain information from other sources.

One such source of information is that of teachers and counsellors at school. Much like parents, research has found that teachers experience tension with their role in disseminating the necessary information about sex and sexuality while ideally remaining sensitive to each individual student's needs, in terms of developmental stage, comfort level and background, such as experiences with abuse or religious upbringing (Gerouki, 2011; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Ninomiya, 2010; Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Part of that tension emanates from the desire to maintain authority and professional distance, while allowing for comfort levels and openness with and among students (Gerouki, 2011; Ninomiya, 2010). Gerouki (2011) examined the experiences of teachers who reported students flirting with them while the educator was relating sexuality education to primary school students. While the stories she chose to focus on in her research were those of female teachers responding to male students, the negotiation of roles is something that also extends to male teachers responding to female students, in the sense that male teachers are also expected to be cautious with their students in maintaining professional boundaries (Ninomya, 2010). Gerouki (2011) notes that respondents found this difficult to do at times, in that they wished to respect students' curiosity and wonderings and to be responsive to genuine concerns, while not wishing to encourage crushes or inappropriate behaviour. One way this was accomplished by respondents was to desexualize themselves and present a 'motherly' persona (e.g. responding to a student's profession of love by stating that she loved him too, as she loves all her students). However, this stance can, in an attempt to skirt an awkward situation or prevent hurt feelings, dismiss a student's real, embodied sexual feelings, and stifle the personhood of the teacher (e.g. opinions, reactions and beliefs). One way Gerouki suggested this could be addressed would be to respond that a teacher cannot love a student in that way, thereby preserving both person's right to sexual personhood. However, it is worth noting that there would likely be different problems that would present themselves with an older group of students.

An interesting perspective on the feelings, reactions and beliefs of (female) teachers relates to their opinions on issue of female students' clothing, which has become increasingly revealing as a reflection of popular culture (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). These

authors observed through conducting in-depth interviews with eleven female high school teachers that there still exists a noticeable double standard on female sexuality among these authority figures, including a failure to recognize sexual harassment through derogatory labelling, and a view of girls as the 'gatekeepers' of both their own and heterosexual sexuality (p. 517). This is evident in a more relaxed attitude toward male sexual exploration (e.g. 'boys will be boys'), while expressing disdain and anxiety over what is seen as female aggression, in dress and attitude. In the study, Rahimi and Liston (2009) conducted in-depth interviews with eleven female middle and high-school teachers on their beliefs and observations regarding female dress and sexual behaviour. The authors noted that teachers tended to hold negative opinions of female students who dressed more provocatively, and were more dismissive of sexual harassment directed at these students as a problem. It is worth noting that the population of this study were situated in the southeastern United States, which the authors acknowledged is considered highly conservative (e.g. traditional gender roles). However, the results can hardly be dismissed based on this fact. The message that pervades throughout these comments is that not only are male students not held accountable for their actions, but that by dressing in a revealing way, female students are deemed culpable in any harassment directed toward them. The question then becomes, how does this message translate in the minds of young girls, and what does it mean in the context of their intimate relationships?

### **Influence of Intimate Relationships on Development of Female Sexuality/Desire**

Though there has been a considerable amount of attention in the last decade paid to the physical aspects of the development of adolescent romantic relationships and risk behaviours associated with them (e.g. Brook et al., 2010; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009), the social contexts of these relationships and young women's perceptions of the experience has been of increasing interest (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009). Romantic or intimate relationships can have a significant impact on the development of female adolescent sexuality. It is within the context of these relationships that young women begin to experiment with physical intimacy with another person (Champion et al., 2009; O'Sullivan et al., 2007; Raley et al., 2007), the social status of being a part of a couple (Hearn et al., 2003; O'Sullivan, 2005) and the potent emotion of romantic love (O'Sullivan, 2005; Raley et al., 2007). It is also within the context of these (heterosexual) relationships that girls are confronted with

the issue of whether or not to use contraception, and whether to insist her partner does as well (Champion et al., 2009; O'Sullivan, 2005; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003; Raley et al., 2007).

One of the shifts that has occurred as researchers have begun to focus more on the social contexts of these relationships is a broader perspective on what constitutes sexual behaviour and exploration, as well as the situations in which this exploration occurs, such as at home, at school and unsupervised parties (O'Sullivan, 2005). The researcher interviewed 180 early-adolescent (twelve to fourteen year-old) ethnically diverse girls, and found that there was a positive link between the amount of unsupervised opportunities for exploration and higher degrees and different types of experimentation (e.g. oral sex). However, O'Sullivan also found that adolescents engaged in a much wider range of behaviours, significantly more frequently, than penile-vaginal intercourse, often as a precursor to heterosexual coitus, with a general progression from crush, to boyfriend, kissing, being in love, breast fondling, genital contact, to sexual intercourse. Overall, participants reported their romantic relationships as satisfying and fulfilling, though there were some girls who voiced uncertainty as to the status of their relationship, indicating that the degree to which both partners view a relationship as being romantic may vary.

In relation to the reliability of the perception of romantic feeling and reporting of sexual behaviour, Hearn et al. (2003) assessed the degree to which fifty adolescent female participants (twelve to fourteen years old) would consistently answer whether they have engaged in specific types of sexual acts upon retest. The participants were administered surveys that assessed their sexual behaviours, twice with a three week interval between administrations. Overall, participants reliably and consistently answered from initial to follow-up testing questions about their sexual histories, and were specific about times and ages they experienced romantic and sexual milestones.

Diamond (2004) reported that research has shown there are separate evolutionary purposes and pathways for sexual behavior and romantic attachment. It is hypothesized that while sexual attraction is useful in motivating people to propagate the species, romantic love need not be present for this desire to occur, and thus affective attachment would serve a different purpose. There is evidence to support the theory that romantic love originally evolved from infant-caregiver attachments. That is, some of the core components

of infant-caregiver attachments are also present as a part of romantic relationships, including: a heightened desire for closeness, a resistance to separation and a preference for the partner as a preferred target for comfort and security (Diamond, 2004). The author goes on to say that it does make sense that sexual attraction can often go together with romantic love, as sexual attraction can also foster a desire for closeness, and a positive sexual relationship can provide comfort and security, which in turn can deepen and strengthen into romantic ('companionship') love. Interestingly, the author also highlights the fact that the release of oxytocin (a chemical that facilitates mammalian bonding) during sexual activity is higher among women than men, suggesting that there may be biological underpinnings, along with social and cultural factors, to explain why many women emphasize the relational components of sexual partnering.

### **The Individual's Perspective in the Development of Female Sexuality/Desire**

Since Michelle Fine (1988) first questioned the lack of discussion about female adolescent desire, researchers have been working to fill in the gap and provide opportunities for the voices of those adolescents to be heard (e.g. Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Daniluk 1994; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Hensel et al., 2010; Shucksmith, 2004; Teitelman et al., 2009; Tolman, 1999; Tolman, 2002a; Ussher, 2005). These researchers have uncovered many rich, deep and complex stories around wanting, pleasure, and the negotiation of a sexual identity—stories that are often at odds with the social scripts these young women are expected to enact to maintain images of traditional femininity. The resulting tension leads some girls to be pressured to make inauthentic choices for themselves or risk the backlash from a patriarchal society invested in maintaining the status quo.

Tolman (2002) documented in detail the struggle these women face in her book *Dilemmas of Desire* by interviewing thirty-one sixteen to eighteen year-old girls, from both urban and suburban centres. Participants were Caucasian, African-American and Latin-American. She noted that there were varying degrees of agency, ownership of sexuality, experiences of wanting and pleasure, and awareness of the double standard and politics surrounding female sexuality. Though it is not practical to go into detail about each of the subtypes the author discovered, I will discuss the implications that a number of these categories have on learning about young women's experiences of desire. Some girls report not experiencing desire in any way, what Tolman terms 'silent bodies' (p. 55). For these

girls, the role of culture, socioeconomic status and familial pressure led to a strict policing of their sexualities, viewing the possibility that they could become caught up in sexual wanting as a dangerous prospect, threatening to derail their goals and hopes for the future. They work, in effect, to distance themselves from anything that could lead to sexual desire, because they view having ambition and experiencing sexual desire as an 'either/or' proposition. As one participant stated, she doesn't think about sex or sexual feelings because she is "always busy at school" (p. 57).

This idea of sexuality as dangerous for young girls and women is pervasive throughout the literature (Daniluk, 1993; Welles, 2005). Daniluk (1993) noted in her phenomenological group interview with ten adult women (ranging in age from thirty to sixty-six years of age) that her participants often spoke of the role of institutions such as medicine and religion in disempowering women. Through these institutions, women are often given the message that they are aberrant, dirty or less than, and that to recognize and own their sexualities is dangerous or immoral. Welles (2005) and Ussher (1989; 2005) argue that women may internalize these messages and perpetuate them from a young age, eventually passing them on to the next generation. This is not to say that women are at fault for the continuation of this training (this is in essence 'blaming the victim')—in some ways, communicating these social rules is protective, shielding young women from the censure of patriarchal society. However, Tolman (2002) argues that this lack of awareness only leads to more risk. In silencing voices and bodies, girls are not learning about their own needs and boundaries, leaving them vulnerable, as is demonstrated by one participant who said no to sex, then 'let it go' upon being pressured, leading to confusion and regret (p.62).

Other participants in Tolman's (2002) research were described as having 'confused bodies' (p. 66), young women who had difficulty articulating whether what they have experienced was sexual desire or not. For some, the experience of sexual violation may complicate their understanding of desire. For example, one participant described being sexually abused at seven, and subsequently not being supported by the adults in her life (p. 70). How difficult would it then become to examine and be clear about her own desire, when the idea has been so closely linked to fear, distrust and silencing from such a young age? This concept is also spoken about in other research (e.g. Koehn, 2007). At its core,

sexual abuse robs a young woman of her agency and choice, and links her sexuality to being literally used as an object to fulfill someone else's desire. Therefore, it becomes a method of survival for a target of sexual abuse to disassociate herself from her body and sexuality (Koehn, 2007; Tolman, 2002a).

Still others in Tolman's (2002) study 'disappear' their desire (p. 82). They are very much aware that they have the ability to experience desire, unlike the girls with 'silent bodies,' but much as the 'silent' young women do, these participants view desire as dangerous. They are engaged in a battle inside themselves, recognizing what their feelings are and what they mean, but fearing the consequences of acting on them. As a result, they actively push these feelings down and away, avoiding situations that may bring them to the surface. One example of this struggle is a participant who describes knowing how wanting feels in relation to a boy she likes, but who is also "afraid of sex" (p. 86). She has seen what the consequences for girls in her community who have acted on their desire, such as becoming pregnant and subsequently being abandoned by the father of the baby. Teitelman et al. (2009) have also documented the powerful influence that the risk of pregnancy can have on young women's perceptions of sex and desire, particularly in relation to poverty. Pregnancy symbolizes a real threat to independence and freedom, as well as the disappointment and disapproval of their families and communities; as such, sex becomes equated with a type of oppression. This, at the same time, is in conflict with genuine curiosity, wanting, and pressure from friends and significant others to be sexually active.

Another subgroup of young women was described as experiencing 'desire under cover' (Tolman, 2002a, p. 134). These participants were fully aware of their desire, but also equally as cognizant of the danger of acting on these feelings. Unlike previous participants, however, they found ways to fulfill their needs, without appearing to be active agents in the process. This allowed them to shield their true feelings and (they hoped) skirt the danger of being labeled 'skank' or seen as eager. One participant described her thought process when she felt desire for a boy at a party, wanting to "see what the person's like" (p. 139) and explore her own sexuality without appearing to do so (which, in her own estimation, would make her seem 'a slut'). She accomplishes this by drinking enough alcohol to loosen her inhibitions, allowing her to approach him. Doing this also accomplishes a second, more subversive function, however. If she is seen as 'flirty' (read: assertive) by others, she can



blame her behaviour on being drunk, rather than risk the consequences of openly challenging the double standard at play in this situation. This balancing act of engaging with one's own desire while denying that it is occurring is echoed by the voices of Ussher's (2005) heterosexual participants. They described the importance of not appearing too assertive, and in fact choosing to use the traditional female roles of being coy and 'giving in' to male sexual desire as a screen behind which their own feelings can hide, but still be explored. The script for these women, on the surface, reads much the same as would one for the stereotypical submissive female, but the subtext speaks of a cautious (and quiet) ownership of sexual subjectivity.

The final subgroup of women I wish to speak of in Tolman's (2002) study are those who claim their right to sexual desire openly, and further, challenge the sociopolitical structure that would punish them for doing so. They recognize that "the 'reality' of gendered sexuality is a con of immense proportions" (p. 151). These adolescents very purposefully choose not to engage in behaviours and language that both demean and isolate them from other women, and actively seek out safe spaces and opportunities to learn about themselves as sexual beings, both by themselves and in relationship. One participant, despite not being encouraged to express her feelings and thoughts about sexuality at home, nevertheless is firmly grounded in her right to have sexual impulses and experiences, while being consciously critical of a society that celebrates male sexual agency and firmly disapproves of the female equivalent. She recognizes the risk of social disapproval that is present in acting on her choices, such as the conscious decision to have sex with her boyfriend and taking precautions beforehand, as well as remaining friends with girls who have been labelled 'bad' by her peers; however, she recognizes this threat of losing status as a form of social control, and refuses to be bound by it.

Attwood (2007) also documented the conscious resistance of some women to bow to societal mores, specifically in reference to the aforementioned derogatory labelling. Much in the same way that the homosexual community has reclaimed the label 'queer' as a positive identity, women are choosing to proudly own labels such as 'slut,' 'whore' (or 'ho'), 'pussy' and 'girl'. In an interesting example of this practice, 'riot grrrl' bands, whose explicit purpose is to promote female empowerment, choose to write the word 'slut' on their stomachs and take off their shirts at concerts. In doing so, they are expressing the message

that they are the owners of their bodies and their sexual choices, and are not ashamed. Attwood goes on to note, however, that this new, more assertive expression of female empowerment may be exerting a different kind of pressure on young women, in that it implies (much in the same way derogatory labels do) that there is a hierarchy in how to best be a woman. That is, if one does not emulate a 'riot grrrl' by being loud and proud, one is not fully embracing her womanhood.

So, if we are simply replacing old restrictions with new ones, where do we go from here? In the final section of my review, I will describe how I framed my research, and the particular usefulness of asking young women about their earliest understandings of desire.

### **The Current Research Question**

In roughly the last twenty-five years, there has been extensive research done attempting to understand girls' and women's sexual experiences, from their own perspectives (e.g. Attwood, 2007; Burns et al, 2011; Daniluk, 1994; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Griffin, 2000; Hensel et al., 2010; Hearn et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2008; Kitzinger, 2000; Levy, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2005; Regnerus, 2007; Shucksmith, 2004; Tolman, 1999; Tolman, 2002a; Tolman et al, 2005). However, many of these studies focus mainly on current romantic and/or sexual relationships, the participants' present experiences and perceptions, or a specific aspect of their social world that affects the development of their sexuality, such as identifying as a lesbian.

Less has been written about young women's earliest recollections and understandings of their sexualities and desires (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Ussher, 2005; Wansley, 2007). I believe that in focusing my research in this area, I will be contributing a perspective on female sexuality to the research that will broaden our knowledge of the messages, memories and experiences that are particularly resonant and salient for young women as they began to develop a sexual identity, or at the very least, began to develop ideas about what it means to be a sexual being. Therefore, my aim has been to gain a greater understanding of the answers to these questions: 1) how do young women recall their first experiences of sexual desire; and 2) how do they perceive, and make meaning of, these experiences in terms of the development of their sexual selves? I would like to end my review of the literature on adolescent female sexuality with a quote from Tolman's

(2002a) *Dilemmas of Desire* that powerfully elucidates why I am interested in conducting this research:

Girls live and grow up in bodies that are capable of strong sexual feelings, bodies that are connected to minds and hearts that hold meanings through which they make sense of and perceive their bodies. I consider the possibility that teenage girls' sexual desire is important and life-sustaining; that girls' desire provides crucial information about the relational world in which they live...that girls and women are entitled to have sexual subjectivity, rather than simply to be sexual objects. (Tolman, 2002, p. 19).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will present my paradigmatic assumptions, and the rationale for using a qualitative method of inquiry, specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2012). I will also outline how I used this methodology to explore the themes that were elucidated by my participants on the topic of emerging sexual identity and early experiences of sexual desire. Next, I describe the methods I employed to gather my participants, as well as the interview structure. I also explain the methods I used to gather and analyze the data, as well as to document the results. Finally, I will discuss ethical issues that were considered within the data collection process and how I addressed them.

### **Paradigmatic Assumptions**

In deciding what an appropriate methodology for my study would be, I first had to examine my worldview to understand how my personal experiences and opinions would influence how I approached the data. I believe that it is important in gathering information about a phenomenon to analyze how people who offer first-hand accounts understand their experience. It is very appealing to me to learn how and why people think the way that they do, particularly in terms of how autobiographical events shape their worldview. I also believe that, in wishing to examine experience from a personal lens, the information I gather in speaking to my participants will always be socially shaped and dependent on context.

This belief led me to decide that in approaching my topic (young women's perceptions of their experience of emerging sexuality and early experiences of desire), I would use a social constructionist framework (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Social constructionism posits that an individual's worldview is socially shaped, both an influence on and influenced by their social world. The researcher must adopt a critical eye to how different social institutions and relationships affect the participant, and keep in mind that one of these relationships will be between the researcher and participant. As such, the researcher must be conscious of how the power differential may affect the research process, and do as much as possible to promote an egalitarian relationship (e.g. adopt an attitude of transparency and recognizing the participant as the expert on their own life). Also, it is essential to be aware of the many different contexts that shape the participant's perspective.

These many different contexts are enveloped in the larger construct of culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Morrow, 2005). Culture does not simply include racial or ethnic origin, it 'describes the way things are and prescribes the ways people should act' (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19). Therefore, the researcher must take into account the social messages the participant has received in terms of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and religion/spirituality. The current study was conducted in an urban centre in Saskatchewan, Canada, where there is a large Aboriginal community. A research report on the concerns affecting urban Aboriginal populations noted that a disproportionate number of Aboriginal peoples are situated in core areas within cities, as well as who experience poverty, homelessness and lack of educational opportunities (Hanselmann, 2001). Added to these contemporary concerns are the historical injustices that resulted in the subversion and suppression of Aboriginal culture in Canada and the United States (Tafoya, 2007). Traditionally, Aboriginal cultures view sexuality as a sacred part of life that is powerful, important and to be respected, in keeping with a holistic view of health and well-being. Unlike many European cultures, Aboriginal cultures viewed adolescent curiosity and interest in exploration of sexuality as normal and natural, including same-sex exploration in many tribes. This cultural history, along with the forces of racism and colonization in North America, speak to the likelihood that if any of the participants in this study had identified as being of Aboriginal descent, cultural background may have played a larger role in participant responses than was found with this population. Regardless, it remains important to be aware of the cultural context within which this study was engaged.

It is not only recognizing the dominant discourses perpetuated by society that is of interest to the researcher employing a social constructionist framework. It is also how the participant perceives and experiences these messages that the researcher seeks to understand, and to do so, s/he must ask the participant directly. Therefore, in focusing my research using this framework and with my particular goals in mind, it also becomes clear that my research question would best be answered using qualitative inquiry.

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

In conducting qualitative inquiry, the goal is to gain an understanding of the complexity of human experience, through the words and perceptions of participants

(Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This mode of questioning approaches the world holistically, meaning the researcher does not attempt to isolate one aspect of existence and draw conclusions from it. Instead, the approach is based on the belief that one cannot understand a phenomenon without examining all the ideas, beliefs and experiences that contribute to its development. Qualitative research is inductive, in that does not begin with a hypothesis and structure its data collection and analysis around either supporting or disproving the theory (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). This type of research is emergent, allowing flexibility in the data collection process to adapt to participants' insights and unforeseen areas of interest. There are many methodologies that can accommodate these standards, including ethnography, narrative inquiry, discursive analysis and phenomenological analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It is the last mode of inquiry, however, which I believe to be the best fit for my background, worldview and most importantly, my research question (specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis, developed by Jonathan Smith [2004]). I will now provide a brief description of the philosophical roots of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its particular suitability to my research question.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is based on the ideas of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, 20th century German philosophers (Smith et al., 2012). Husserl's methodology was a reaction to scientific positivism, which asserted that there was an objective truth that could be consistently, reliably measured with the application of the scientific method (Giorgi, 2006). Husserl argued that the human inner world is a legitimate and worthwhile focus of study, and the goal of a phenomenologist should be to gain an understanding of one's experiences by understanding consciousness and perception. In other words, the actual physical properties of an object are often less important to an individual than how he or she perceives that object.

One of the major elements within Husserl's research (in connection with the subjectivity of perception) is the concept of 'bracketing' one's assumptions before and during engaging in analysis (Giorgi, 2006; Smith et al., 2012). Bracketing is the process of compartmentalizing any preconceived notions of a phenomenon and setting them aside for the process of interviewing and analysis. Feminist inquiry would ask whether fully

'bracketing' one's own thoughts, feelings and previous knowledge of a subject is necessary or, in fact, possible (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Foster & May, 2003). However, in keeping with IPA framework, it was useful to continually check-in with myself as to whether my analysis was a reflection of what participants were thinking, saying and feeling, or a reflection of what I had read or personally believe, and in this way, bracketing can work with, not against, a feminist framework in research. In my research, this allowed me to approach the data as a 'naïve observer,' meaning that I analyzed my participants' responses as though they are completely new, as though I had no previous knowledge of emerging sexuality or early experiences of sexual desire. This stance was particularly important with my question of interest, because I was asking my participants to reconnect with a time in their lives when sexuality and desire were new and mysterious for them. I bracketed my assumptions by working closely with my supervisor to ensure my analysis reflected what is found in the source material, and not a by-product of any pre-conceived notions. I also kept a journal throughout the process of data collection and analysis to leave an audit trail of how I arrived at any insights. This allowed me to gain a clearer and more genuine picture of what the learning process was like for my participants as they discovered their sexual selves. This curiosity allowed me to remain grounded in the basic principles of phenomenology. However, to also incorporate the interpretative level of the research process, it is necessary to examine Heidegger's contributions to this methodological approach.

Heidegger began his career as a student of Husserl (Smith et al., 2012). He eventually chose to adapt what he had learned, however, and incorporate other elements into his phenomenological philosophy. Specifically, Heidegger believed that it was not enough to examine only the individual's perceptions and thoughts when attempting to understand their lived experience. He argued that to do so does not fully recognize the social aspect of the research process. Rather, he suggested that one should also analyze and attempt to clarify the researcher's role as a social being in the research process, as one who has their own feelings and beliefs that will inevitably influence participants' responses and the analysis process. This idea was termed 'double hermeneutics' (Smith, 2004)—that is, the researcher attempts to understand participants' experiences through their eyes, as well as analyzing how their (the researcher) personal experiences and thoughts will influence the research process. Heidegger questioned any claim to understand a phenomenon

without an interpretative stance, because it is not possible to be completely objective when engaged in the social process of research (Smith et al., 2012; Smith et al., 1999).

The element of reflexivity in Heidegger's philosophy is an important feature of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Specifically, there are three key components to engaging in this type of research, which are: 1) it is idiographic, defined as the study of individuals; 2) it is inductive, meaning that there is no a priori hypothesis, and 3) it is interrogative (Smith, 2004). Smith's approach is idiographic in that each case is analyzed independently of all others, as the researcher searches for dominant and recurring themes within a single transcript, then, if applicable, among the multiple transcripts of a single participant.

IPA is also inductive in its inquiry, in that the focus is not on verifying or negating a specific hypothesis or theory, but on remaining open to new avenues of inquiry that may be presented during the interview process (Smith, 2004). An example used by the author is a study in which he was interested in gaining women's perspectives on their changing identities in the transition to motherhood. His stance when he began the study was focused on intrinsic, individual feelings, and he had not considered the importance of the women's relationships in their lives. However, each participant mentioned numerous times the importance of their relationships in their lives and how it affected their experiences of becoming mothers. As a result, the researcher adjusted the interview schedule to accommodate the new information. Flexibility and reflexivity in the interview process is therefore very important in IPA, because it is necessary to be open to unforeseen insights by the participants. This stance helps to ensure that the researcher is seeing a true reflection of the participants' experiences, and is not imposing an agenda or preconceived notions about the phenomenon on the research process (Smith et al., 2012).

The third feature of IPA is that it is interrogative (Smith, 2004). This component links IPA with other literature in psychology, in that analyses of participant cases do not stand alone; they are linked with and compared to other studies which examine similar phenomena. For example, Flowers, Smith, Sheeran and Beail (1997), in their research on unprotected sex between committed gay couples, heard differing opinions from their participants about the reasons behind this choice than the prevailing discourse in previous research. Specifically, instead of this behaviour showing a lack of concern for their own or their partners' health, as was documented in health psychology, choosing not to use



protection (an increased risk) was an indication of trust and a desire for increased intimacy in the relationship for these participants. Therefore, by conducting the analysis through the lens of the participants' perceptions and lived experiences, the researchers gained a new, more nuanced insight into a hotly debated topic.

IPA emerged as an ideal method for my area of interest for a number of reasons. First, Smith et al. (1999; 2012) provided a clear framework with which to conduct the research and analyze findings, with flexibility to tailor the interview schedule to my specific research questions, and accommodate any concerns or ideas the participants offered in the interview process. Secondly, sexuality and desire are concepts that can have broad and varied meanings for different people, depending on their beliefs, experiences and backgrounds; phenomenology has been a useful lens through which to examine a deeply personal issue (Daniluk, 1994; Flowers et al., 1997). As mentioned above, the study conducted by Flowers and colleagues (1997) yielded rich and unexpected data regarding gay men's relationships, showing a behaviour that had been pathologized in other studies to be something the participants saw as a way to more fully commit to their partner, underscoring the importance of perspective in science and in life. Similarly, Daniluk (1994) uncovered complex and nuanced views of sexuality that emphasized the political and institutional influences that shaped the sexual self through phenomenological interviews with ten women, showing that the examination of individual lived experiences can lead to an understanding of broader societal contexts.

Thirdly, IPA is a useful methodology for my research owing to its emphasis on the double hermeneutic in data collection and analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2012). I had different experiences than my participants around sexuality, and even had we had encountered the same experiences, our perceptions of them would have been different. It was important for me throughout the research process to be aware of my own beliefs about and experiences with sexuality, and to attempt to bracket any preconceived notions about the phenomenon so as not to inaccurately emphasize some types of information or leave out others. As part of the research process, it was necessary to keep in mind that qualitative research is a social and dynamic process between participant and researcher, and to be sensitive and attentive to my participants' comfort levels with questions.

## **Role of the Researcher**

In conducting this study under an interpretative phenomenological framework, it was necessary for me to engage in an analysis of my analysis. As Smith and Osborn (2003) state, “the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world.” In the researcher’s process of sense-making, it is necessary to recognize that it will be idiosyncratic to a certain degree, and it is therefore important to ensure that in attempting to understand the participant’s world on a deeper level, interpretation remains rooted in the data. I, as a person with my own thoughts and feelings, was a part of the social construction of the research relationship. As a researcher, when moving into a more in-depth analysis that included more than just reporting on what was said, it is my responsibility to be cognizant and critical of my interpretation by continually questioning whether my analysis was supported by the words of the participants. I achieved this by recording my impressions, ideas and reactions to the data in a research journal, and working closely with my supervisor to ensure that my analysis was grounded in the participants’ experiences and not a reflection of my preconceived notions about the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 2005; van Manen, 1997). Further, as a researcher working under a feminist framework, it was important for me to continually be cognizant of the power differential that existed purely on the basis of my role in the research process. To that end, along with adhering to the principles of IPA in interviewing and data analysis (Smith et al., 2012), I utilized the ‘listening guide,’ as developed by Gilligan (1982) and Brown and Gilligan (1991). Brown and Gilligan (1991) emphasize the importance of recognizing that within academia, there are both personal and political elements to the research process that must be addressed by continually asking questions of oneself such as: “whose voice? In what body? Telling what story about relationships (from whose perspective and from what vantage point)? In what societal and cultural framework?” These questions are particularly important for my research questions, because the answers are inextricably tied to both body and gender.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

#### **Selection.**

I will first discuss the delimitations of my proposed study, or who I chose to include or exclude and why. I interviewed five young women (aged nineteen to twenty-five) regarding the meaning they assign to their early experiences of sexual desire. First, I limited my sample to participants who were fluent in the English language, to ensure that I could clearly understand what my participants' experiences have been. Second, five participants was a sufficient sample size to yield contrasting views and opinions in the research, as well as find interesting commonalities around the theme of sexual desire. The sample size was also consistent with IPA, as suggested by Smith et al. (2012). The authors suggest a sample of fifteen participants or less, as thick description and in-depth analysis are key elements to sound IPA research, and to expand beyond five participants for the purposes of a master's thesis was not practical.

I chose to limit my sample to female participants, as it has been found that the way females conceptualize, learn and communicate about sexual desire is qualitatively different than the way males do (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Levy, 2005; Link, 2009). As boys are required to handle their genitalia to urinate, earlier ages of sexual exploration and masturbation are reported for boys than girls, as well as different societal expectations for sexual expression (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009). Therefore, maintaining homogeneity in participant gender allowed me to gain a clearer picture of the essence of this phenomenon. I chose to interview young women who were eighteen to twenty-five years old because my research question involved both early experiences of sexual desire and how these experiences contributed to the development of their sexuality; as such, I felt that interviewing women who had had some distance from their early experiences and a sense of how these instances had contributed to the development of their sexuality would yield the richest data.

#### **Recruitment.**

In accessing participants, a purposive sample of five participants was recruited from a university campus, as it is a large population with many people who fit my recruitment criteria. Purposive sampling is necessary in qualitative research to gain the perspective of

participants who have experienced and have an understanding of the phenomenon (Morrow, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2005). I invited young women who were interested and fit the criteria to contact me via posters I had distributed across the University of Saskatchewan campus (see Appendix A), using an email address I had created for the purpose of the study. Though I had planned also to extend my recruitment to organizations with services directed toward women if I did not get the necessary number through the university, I received a sufficient number of responses to make further recruitment unnecessary.

Once participants contacted me, I asked them to confirm that they identified as female and to state their ages. I also asked if they felt they were in a current state of crisis due to trauma and would provide contact information for student counselling services if they felt that the research process may be upsetting and that counselling would be more helpful than engaging in research (see Appendix B and G). None of the participants identified as being in a state of trauma and all fit the criteria, so it was unnecessary to provide counselling information at that time, though the list of counselling services (see Appendix G) was provided to each participant at the end of each interview. A phone conversation was unnecessary, as all criteria were determined through email. If the participant fit the criteria as outlined in the selection design section, we scheduled a time for an interview. I reiterated the information as stated on the poster and that the data collection will consist of two one to two hour interviews, with a \$15 remuneration for each interview. I explicitly told them that their remuneration would not be revoked if for some reason they decided to withdraw from the study.

### **Interviews**

In conducting my interviews with participants, I engaged in in-depth interviews, what Smith et al. (2012) describe as 'a conversation with purpose' (p. 57). Interviews were conducted in my research office at the university. Both of the interviews with each participant were one to two hours in length, in order to obtain as much detail as possible while also allowing the participant to take their time and answer the questions at their own pace. I opened the initial interview by outlining the parameters of confidentiality (CPA, 2001), and asking them to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C) after going through the consent process thoroughly with the participant, which includes permission to

have the interview audio-taped. I began each interview by asking the participants to tell me about themselves (e.g. basic demographic information, some of their interests, some details about their friends and family). I chose to do this, not only to contribute to the 'thick description' (Giorgi, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Morrow, 2007; Smith, 2004) of my participants and their lives, but also to build rapport, an important component of phenomenological interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2012).

The topic of sexual desire is a deeply personal one, and I wanted to give my participants the opportunity to feel comfortable with me before we begin discussing the details of their experiences with and thoughts about sexual desire. Therefore, I began with a more general question about their perspective by first posing the question, "what does sexuality mean to you?" I then asked participants how they felt that messages through the media, friends and family, as well as messages through institutions such as schools and churches, had influenced their current perceptions of sexuality in general. From the broader topic of sexuality, I narrowed the focus to introduce the topic of their early experiences of sexual desire, by asking: "what does sexual desire mean to you?" Possible prompts for this question were: "what is your first memory of feeling sexual desire?; how did you know you were feeling sexual desire?;" After I asked the initial question, I allowed the participant to direct the flow of the interview as much as possible, with a general outline of my questions to provide possible complementary areas of discussion, should I feel a topic could have been explored in more depth (see Appendix D). This type of interview schedule is the semi-structured interview, the most common form of interviewing in IPA (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Semi-structured interviewing is useful because it allows the participant to describe their experiences in their own words, hopefully with as much detail as possible (Smith et al., 2012). Once the first interview was complete, I informed the participant that I would contact them again in roughly two weeks to schedule a follow-up interview, to go through themes that I had been able to bring out of the data. In the second interview, I checked with each participant that these themes were reflective of their experiences, and discussed any further insights they may have had (see Appendix E), also asking them to sign a data release form (see Appendix F).

### **Creating an egalitarian interview.**

As part of working under a social constructionist and feminist framework, an important part of the interview process was creating an egalitarian relationship between myself as a researcher and the participants. I wanted to ensure that they understood they were the experts in their own lives and that I was getting an accurate picture of their experiences by allowing them to direct the flow of the interview as much as possible, using their words instead of my own. As Smith et al. (2012) suggest, the participant “is the experiential expert on the topic at hand and therefore they should be given much leeway in taking the interview to ‘the thing itself’” (p. 58).

As much as possible, I tried to maintain a relaxed, open and curious atmosphere within the interviews, matching the pace the participants set and letting the questions flow naturally based on where the participants were taking the topic, in accordance with the practices of IPA (Smith et al., 2012). This meant at times that I adjusted the interview schedule either to accommodate new information or re-ordered my questions so that I did not disrupt the participants’ thought processes or the fluency of conversation. At various times each participant became focused more on other’s experiences or generalized statements about societal norms. At these times I used the interview schedule to re-direct the conversation back to how those things had influenced the participants’ own experiences of sexual desire and the development of their sexuality; for the most part the interview schedule was merely a rough guide.

I was somewhat surprised by the candid ease with which each participant was willing to speak about traditionally sensitive topics. All of the young women at various points within the interview process volunteered information of interest before I had to ask them about it, and even among the participants who identified as having abuse or objectification perpetrated towards them, there was little evident hesitancy or discomfort in responding to the interview questions. It should be acknowledged that all participants volunteered via poster recruitment, and thus obviously had a natural curiosity and interest in the subject. However, I felt it was necessary to comment on the openness that was present within these interviews, because each participant yielded rich data and useful insights into contextualizing and understanding this phenomenon.

## Data Analysis

In their paper *Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, Smith et al. (1999) provide a basic framework for the analysis of phenomenological interviews. Though the authors acknowledge that this style of research could be appropriate for a single case study, they choose to use an idiographic, case study approach to each individual participant's interviews as a first step of analysis, then to extend the model to a larger group in order to make comparisons and uncover connections between individuals. The authors suggest initially reading an individual's transcript carefully, as if for the first time (and not as the researcher who conducted the interview). Then, when reading through the transcript subsequent times, the researcher should begin to write in the right margin what he or she finds interesting about the phrases and idioms used by the participant, notes about significant pauses, changes in pace, laughter or sighs, as well as the personal thoughts of the researcher. Once this notation process has been thoroughly cycled through, in the other margin the researcher should begin to write emerging theme titles, key words that capture the essence of what is being said. This process is similar to Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method and the idea of open coding, but incorporates more personal thoughts and connections. Added to the methods of analyzing and interpreting that are part of the IPA methodology, I also incorporated the listening guide outlined by Gilligan (1982) and Brown and Gilligan (1991) to ensure that my analysis was informed by a feminist perspective that more fully exposed the cultural forces that influenced the development of participants' sexual desire.

Once the researcher is satisfied that the emerging theme titles have captured all the important points and insights the participant made, the researcher should then list the emerging theme titles on a separate page and look for connections between them, which will help to illuminate which themes group together and are powerful for the participant (Smith et al., 1999). The researcher should also make a list of keywords and notations as to where in the transcript he or she should be able to find these themes, such as 'resilience—4:39'. This would mean that the participant expressed sentiments relating to resiliency on the fourth page, on the thirty-ninth line. It is important throughout this process to continuously refer back to the full original text in order to insure that the connections reflect what was expressed in the primary source material.

Once these major themes have been grouped together and the significant connections have been understood, a 'master list' of themes can be made that are ordered in terms of strength of connection for the participant (Smith, Flowers et al., 2012; Smith, Jarman et al., 1999). It is not necessarily the number of times that a participant mentions something that makes a passage important, though that could be one indicator. Rather, the richness of a passage, in terms of emotion, emphasis or clarity of language, and the connection it makes to the phenomenon, can help to determine what would be considered a superordinate theme, and what are subordinate themes. At this point, themes that do not significantly reflect the participant's perspective or do not meaningfully connect with superordinate themes or the phenomenon of interest can be dropped or set aside. It is likely a good idea to keep a record of these themes, however, in case they are evident in other participants' transcripts and it is worthwhile making inter-individual comparisons in the write up of the results.

Smith et al. (1999) stress that this process is cyclical, and if new themes come up in subsequent interviews that are different than noticed in the first but are still salient, the previous transcripts should be analyzed again to determine whether the theme was also present there. However, it should be cautioned that a researcher using this method must be careful not to read themes into the transcripts, seeing connections that are not there. A useful way to guard against this is to go a step further and make a list of master themes for the group, which would then clearly demonstrate where in each transcript themes emerged, the strength and richness of each passage and the connections between each transcript.

There have been criticisms of the IPA research method, as some researchers feel that the methods proposed in IPA are not prescriptive enough to ensure consistent application of the methodology, are not rigorous or sufficiently representative of the phenomenological tradition (e.g. Giorgi, 2010). However, there are strong and well-reasoned responses to these criticisms. For example, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) agree that it is indeed possible to conduct 'bad' interpretative phenomenological analysis on a number of levels. If too much emphasis is placed on the idiographic level of analysis, and not enough attention paid to the interrogative level, the study runs the risk of being simply descriptive, which is not a true representation of the IPA tradition. The researcher



must avoid this pitfall by remaining cognizant of their aim to make connections with or distinctions from previous research, and to analyze how their data informs or frames the phenomenon as it has already been studied.

A similar issue that can arise when not consistently applying the principles of IPA is that the distinctive properties of the methodology will not be clear in the results (Larkins et al., 2006). That is, the goal and essence of this type of research is to understand the participant's perceptions and worldview, as well as the researcher's interpretations of the participant's cognitions, so the researcher must continually engage in the double hermeneutic stance. If one does this successfully, there is a clear distinction between IPA and other qualitative methodologies, such as discourse analysis, which engages with the conversation between the researcher and participant as the data in and of itself, and does not focus on what the participant or researcher may be thinking (Smith et al., 2012).

So, with these considerations in mind, I would like to revisit my research questions. I ask: 1) how do young women recall their first experiences of sexual desire?; and 2) how did these early experiences contribute to the development of their sexual selves? In asking these questions, I attempted to discover how sexual desire is first recognized, then understood and perceived by young women as they come to develop their sexual selves. As the researcher, I worked to understand why certain recollections were important, what was or was not salient and why.

### **Establishing the Quality of the Research**

Next, I will outline the parameters for creating valuable qualitative research presented by Morrow (2007). Though she likens these parameters to similar concepts in quantitative research, she cautions that qualitative research is not the same as quantitative research, and is not necessarily attempting to understand the same things quantitative inquiry is. However, for the purposes of clarity, Morrow states that there are four main areas of concern that should be considered in conducting qualitative inquiry and relates them to quantitative equivalents, which are: 1) transferability; 2) credibility; 3) dependability and 4) confirmability.

**Transferability.** Transferability roughly equates to generalizability in quantitative research, or the extent to which one can claim to know something about a population, based on information gathered about a similar population elsewhere. As Morrow (2007)

states, the small sample sizes that are characteristic of IPA studies and other types of qualitative inquiry, while yielding rich depth in the data, are potentially limited in the extent of transferability to other samples. However, Smith (2004) suggests that closely examining the personal accounts of a small number of participants in detail also allows us to make connections on a more universal level. He states, "...the very detail of the individual also brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity, and the particular case can therefore be described as containing an 'essence' ..." (p. 43). In my study, therefore, the main goal was to tap into the 'essence' of participants' experiences, knowing that each young woman has her own perspective, but also attempting to interrogate my approach by making connections to other literature and speaking to what my participants' thoughts, feelings and worldviews say about a fundamentally human experience. It is necessary to provide the reader an opportunity gain a clear picture of the participants' worldviews as part of rigorous IPA (Smith et al., 2012; Thorpe, 2012), and therefore 'thick description' of each participant was gathered, built through a combination of interview data, my own observations and consultation with peers and my supervisor. This assures readers that my interpretations are grounded in the data and provides an opportunity for them to understand how I arrived at my conclusions. The goal of qualitative research is not to make sweeping or global statements about a phenomenon, but rather to attend closely to the participants' experiences and through their words make connections to other literature (Smith & Osborn, 2003; van Manen, 1997).

**Credibility.** Credibility is akin to internal validity in quantitative research (Morrow, 2007), which means that in maintaining credibility, the researcher is gaining information that is a true representation of the phenomenon he or she intends to study, and a true representation of the participants' experiences. There are many ways that a researcher can ensure this is upheld, including: debriefing with peers, supervisors and the participants themselves (termed 'member-checking' [Marshall & Rossman, 2012]); employing 'thick descriptions,' which gives a detailed account of the participants' backgrounds, the phenomenon of interest and the context in which these experiences happen, as well as how thoroughly the data was assessed (Morrow, 2007); co-analyzing with participants (e.g. drafting a table of themes for each participant after the initial interview, then meeting with participants to check with them that my analysis has accurately reflected their experiences,

and also allowing them to expand on or qualify information already given); self-reflexivity; and ensuring a fit between the data and the emerging analysis through continual reference back to the source material.

The main strategies that I used to ensure that I maintained credibility were: 1) keeping a journal of my thoughts, interpretations and ideas throughout data collection and analysis to ensure a high level of self-reflexivity; 2) doing a follow-up interview with each of my participants to share thoughts and ideas on initial analysis, to ask any additional questions that arose from that analysis and to allow them to share any additional insights they had discovered after the first interview; and 3) maintaining close contact with my supervisor throughout data collection and analysis to ensure I am accurately analyzing the data and consistently applying IPA methodology.

**Dependability.** In qualitative research, dependability equates to reliability in quantitative research (Morrow, 2007). Dependability asks, if one were to follow the steps outlined by the researcher in the study, could one conduct another study in essentially the same way? This does not mean that one would achieve the same results. It is the nature of psychological qualitative inquiry to understand the perspective of the individual, and every individual's perspective is different; therefore, the results will be different. Unlike quantitative research, replicability is not a primary aim. However, if the steps of data collection and analysis are clearly outlined, other researchers who were not involved in the initial research process should be able to understand how the study was done, and how the original researcher/s reached the conclusions they did, even if the outside researcher has a slightly different perspective (which, in qualitative research, he or she likely would). To obtain dependability in a study, Morrow suggests leaving an 'audit trail' (e.g. make the materials used in data analysis available to other researchers, or the supervisor), a practice I adapted as a part of my research process.

**Confirmability.** The final element to consider in conducting 'quality' qualitative research is confirmability, which in quantitative research equates to "objectivity" (Morrow, 2007). The author acknowledges that qualitative researchers argue that an objective reality about a phenomenon doesn't exist; however, qualitative inquiry nevertheless strives to come as close as possible to an accurate representation of an individual's experience, and not merely to create a reflection of the researcher's own beliefs or 'pet theories' (p. 252).

Confirmability demands that the researcher create a cohesive picture of the research process, from the research question, to recruitment, to data collection, to analysis and finally write up, so that the reader can comfortably conclude that the researcher gave an accurate representation of the phenomenon. Morrow asserts that many of the steps taken to ensure thoroughness and accuracy in other areas would apply to confirmability, such as the use of an audit trail, a commitment to self-reflexivity and conferring closely with one's supervisor or peers, all of which I incorporated throughout the course of my study.

The use of an audit trail is important in that at any point in the research process, other researchers should be able to discern through my notes how and why I made the decisions I did (Marshall & Rossman, 2012). That is not to say that other researchers would necessarily come to exactly the same conclusions, but it should be apparent and logical to them how I made the inferences I did. I consistently made an effort to maintain this rigour in my research process through roundtable and private discussions with my supervisor and peers. An audit trail is also important in remaining centered in one's research questions and maintaining consistency in accurately representing a participant's lived experience (Smith et al., 2012). An audit trail allows the researcher to maintain a sense of the evolution of their thoughts and ensure he or she is consistently maintaining a phenomenological stance.

The principle of confirmability also particularly aligns with the phenomenological commitment to understanding the way the participant understands the world (Smith et al., 2012; van Manen, 1997; 2006). Van Manen (2006) points out that it is inaccurate to say that analysis ends when the write-up begins—rather, writing is part of the continually reflexive stance one must adopt throughout the phenomenological research process. In describing the results of a study it should be clear that both the descriptions of participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretations of them are rooted in the participants' thoughts and ideas, and the researcher has reflected on and understood their own position in the socially constructed research relationship.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In engaging in psychological research, it is always important to maintain clear ethical guidelines for the safety and well-being of everyone involved. In navigating the research process, I addressed the following areas with each participant.

**Informed consent.** In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board, I provided informed consent forms to all of my participants before any data collection began (see Appendix C). This included ensuring that they were aware of their right to withdraw at any time during the research process (until the final draft of my thesis is submitted), their right to confidentiality and the limits of confidentiality, that their data will be stored in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan for five years after the final draft of my thesis is submitted, and that they have a right to access their own data (e.g. transcripts) for review if they choose.

**Confidentiality.** I informed participants of their right to confidentiality and the limits of this agreement, which include having to inform someone of authority if they intend to harm themselves or someone else, or if a child is being hurt. I also informed them that they will be assigned a pseudonym as part of the research process, and any identifying data would be stored separately from their transcripts, both in a secure location. If any identifying data was revealed as a part of the interview process (such as names of places or people), it was altered to protect participants' identities. Further, they were advised that my supervisor has access to their information, but that she, like myself, follows a code of ethics adhering to the principles of confidentiality.

**Disclosure of abuse.** As part of the screening process, I asked participants to identify if they felt they were currently in a state of crisis as a result of past or current sexual abuse. If any potential participants had identified as being in a current state of crisis, I would have thanked them for their interest in my study and referred them to campus or (if desired) community counselling resources to assist them. However, no participants identified as being in a state of crisis, and as such this was unnecessary. However, after the initial interview was completed, I provided each participant with a list of counselling resources (see Appendix G), and recommended student counselling services as a support, as all participants were university students and entitled to this free service. In doing so, I ensured that should the issues we discussed have been upsetting to participants in some way, they would have access to support.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

My goal in communicating the results of this study is to provide the reader with an opportunity to learn, through the voices of my participants, how they understand and make meaning of their early experiences of sexual desire, and how these experiences contributed (and continue to contribute) to the development of their sexual selves. I aim to accomplish this by presenting the data thematically, consistent with the framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al. 2012). The themes and subthemes presented are supported by the words of the young women who participated in the study. I assigned a pseudonym to each participant in order to maintain confidentiality. When necessary, I also edited the quotes provided in this chapter to remove identifying information, in order to further protect participants' confidentiality and provided words in square parentheses to contextualize the quote (e.g. 'she [mom]'). Finally, repeated or throwaway words (e.g. okay, so, yeah, like, etc.) are replaced with ellipses (...) for passage clarity.

### **Introductions**

Over the course of the interview process, I had the opportunity to be a witness to the perspectives of five intelligent, complex and passionate young women. Each shared experiences characterized by curiosity, frustration, excitement and continued discovery. As part of the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis, it is important to provide thick description and contextualize the data (Smith et al., 1999). Therefore, I will begin this chapter by presenting a detailed account of each participant's perspective on their early experiences of sexual desire using excerpts from their interviews, followed by a description of the major themes that emerged within the interview process and through the interpretative phenomenological analysis, as supported by quotes from the participants of the study.

**Allison.** "Any way you look at my experience, I've had sex...pretty much at the beginning of the relationship, so... And that's like not...out of the norm for me, I guess, like I'm comfortable with that, I'm fine with that. Because yeah, like I said, I'm really good at reading people and usually I can tell if they're a good person." Allison is nineteen, confident and self-possessed. She has been in a series of long-term, committed relationships since she was fifteen years old. She credits a strong foundation in family, as well as relationships characterized by openness and trust, for her strong sense of self. "My whole life experience

has just stemmed from like, confidence, encouragement, reinforcement..." Allison has been aware of feelings of sexual desire from (she estimates) five years of age, and grew up in an environment where there were few, if any, pervasive positive and/or negative messages about sexuality or desire. As a result, she was basically able to explore her early experiences, including masturbation, with relative freedom. "I felt like really... overwhelmed... And it was all I could think about, and I—I didn't necessarily dream about like, having sex with them [movie characters], because I was like, really young... I don't know, just kind of like, butterflies...just really intense, though. Yeah, I'm a really passionate person, so...I can be obsessive over things...So I guess that was kind of an instance of that."

**Jamie.** "I'm hoping that what will come out of it [evolution of sexual desire] is that I will eventually just do things because I want to. Like safely, but because I want to, not because I feel either that I'm being pressured to by them [the partner], or I'm not doing it because of something holding me back that's really nothing to do with who I am as a person; it's everything to do with this like—like this strange judgment that I think is falling over me all the time...so I think that's what I'm hoping for in the future. I guess I'm on the pathway there...just kind of making steps toward that, really." Jamie is twenty-three, speaks expressively and paints her experiences vividly with her words. Jamie's formative experiences with sexual desire are a juxtaposition of strong messages from home that desire was to be stifled, and an equally strong sense within herself that these messages were at odds with her most authentic self.

I do think that years later, I would struggle with whether she [mom] was right about that, but I think my instinct, when I was that young, was that she wasn't, and that it was like, 'oh well, why don't you want me to see this?'

Through her innate curiosity and experiences within a peer group that communicated openly with each other about sexuality, Jamie found outlets to explore and develop this aspect of her personality and become more comfortable with ideas and feelings around sexuality.

I think up until...I had friends that I could kind of bounce those ideas off of, and be told, 'well, maybe you're not so weird,' and access to the internet, where I could find people who were dealing with the same thing, I think I always just thought, 'no something's different about me, something's different.'

**Erica.** “ The good things that come out of experiencing trauma as a child, at least what I’ve noticed in myself, has been the fact that I became very outspoken instead of going in. Like even at the beginning, when I wouldn’t talk about what it was that was upsetting me, it was little things. There were no small infractions that were allowed.” Erica is twenty-three, and speaks with confidence and conviction, displaying an intelligence bolstered by growing up in a home rich with classic literature and movies. Her journey in discovering and fully experiencing her desire has been hard-fought, after being sexual assaulted as a young girl. Her story is an illustration of the complexity and fluidity of sexuality and desire. Her thoughts underscore that attempting to fix a label to an aspect of the personality that is so nuanced may not be necessary or even helpful.

I’ve had experiences with both, like I had experiences with girls in high school, for the most part, and then after high school I dated boys. And I prefer men, I guess is what it would be now. But attraction to both is in existence, but I’ve never found a girl I would want to date.

Erica is acutely aware that the development of her sexuality did not occur in isolation from cultural context, and consciously challenges assumptions made about her sexuality because she is a woman, or because she experiences attraction to people on different points in the gender spectrum.

I’ve told lesbians that people don’t think their relationship is real and they’ve gotten really offended, but people think that they’ll get over it or that it’s not legitimate. Which is ridiculous...but part of it is because there are so many girls who think they’re being hot but they don’t feel like that. And I’ve talked to lesbians and when I tell them I’m with a man now they think...that I can’t have been really committed when I was with my girlfriend, so even in that community people still want to put you in boxes.

**Lauren.** “I’d like to think I was when I was a kid, just like comfortable and open, and... I don’t know, it was—it was fun. Like a hedonist, if it feels good, do it! I don’t know. Yeah, I’d like to think I’d be like that, but I don’t—obviously don’t know, because that’s not the case, but...I don’t know, I think it [the abuse] like, silenced... It killed something, that...free little being.” Lauren is twenty-four, with a sharp and ready wit and a deep empathy for others, which she shares as a volunteer on a crisis line. For Lauren,



molestation by a family member as a child, and a subsequent sexual assault by her first boyfriend as a teenager, has created a dissonance in her body, and has made the journey toward sexual subjectivity a difficult one. Trust in relationships is essential in order for her to be comfortable, but it is not easy for her to be open in exploring her sexual desire, and in fact she has rarely allowed herself to let down her guard in a relationship.

I had like, a really, really low sex drive. Now I think that that's just like a—but it also could be the person I'm with. Like, it could be a trust thing...cause I don't trust very easily and without trust, it's kinda hard to be open with someone like that...there's so many things that come into play.

Lauren spoke of sexuality as complex, and knows that these experiences did not only affect the sphere of her sexual life, but many areas of her well-being.

It's very confusing and complicated, it's not often easy to work your way through. Like there's so many aspects of it. I think like, it's different for everyone. Like if we were all sort of to unpack what we think sexuality is, and I think that's probably where a lot of the communication issues come from. Yeah, sexuality is very, very confusing. Complicated beast.

**Natalie.** “For me I felt like the process happened very slowly in my life. So whereas people—girls in my class were having sex and stuff and like, talking about sex, I didn't have sex with anyone until I was twenty-one, and to hear other people talk about it...they talk about losing their virginity at like, fifteen, sixteen. So, in that way I kind of think that I thought about it and experienced it and wanted it much later than everyone else...my first awareness came when I was maybe like, fourteen or fifteen.” Natalie is twenty-five, and has a calm and steady presence, speaking clearly and occasionally showing glimmers of a mischievous sense of humour in our interviews. Natalie is an avid reader, including a wide range of feminist literature, and like Erica, is very cognizant that her sexuality and experience of sexual desire does not exist in a vacuum.

I feel that women who had sex with men were treated poorly and were talked about behind their backs. ‘Did you hear this about her, did you hear this about her body,’ even, stuff like that. So of course that's going to make you wary to have sex with someone, even once you trust them, because it makes you distrust men, right, because that's all you hear.

Here Natalie clearly highlights the issue of trust in the context of sexuality and the experience of sexual desire. Added to Natalie's awareness of the societal restrictions she must push against, she also regularly experiences objectification based on her physical attractiveness, creating a barrier to her ability to trust and connect with others.

I think men just think they have free license to look at me, and say whatever they want to me...I'll walk down the street and people will yell things at me from their cars. So...that limits my life, because I won't go outside and go for a walk, because I don't want groups of men to yell something at me.

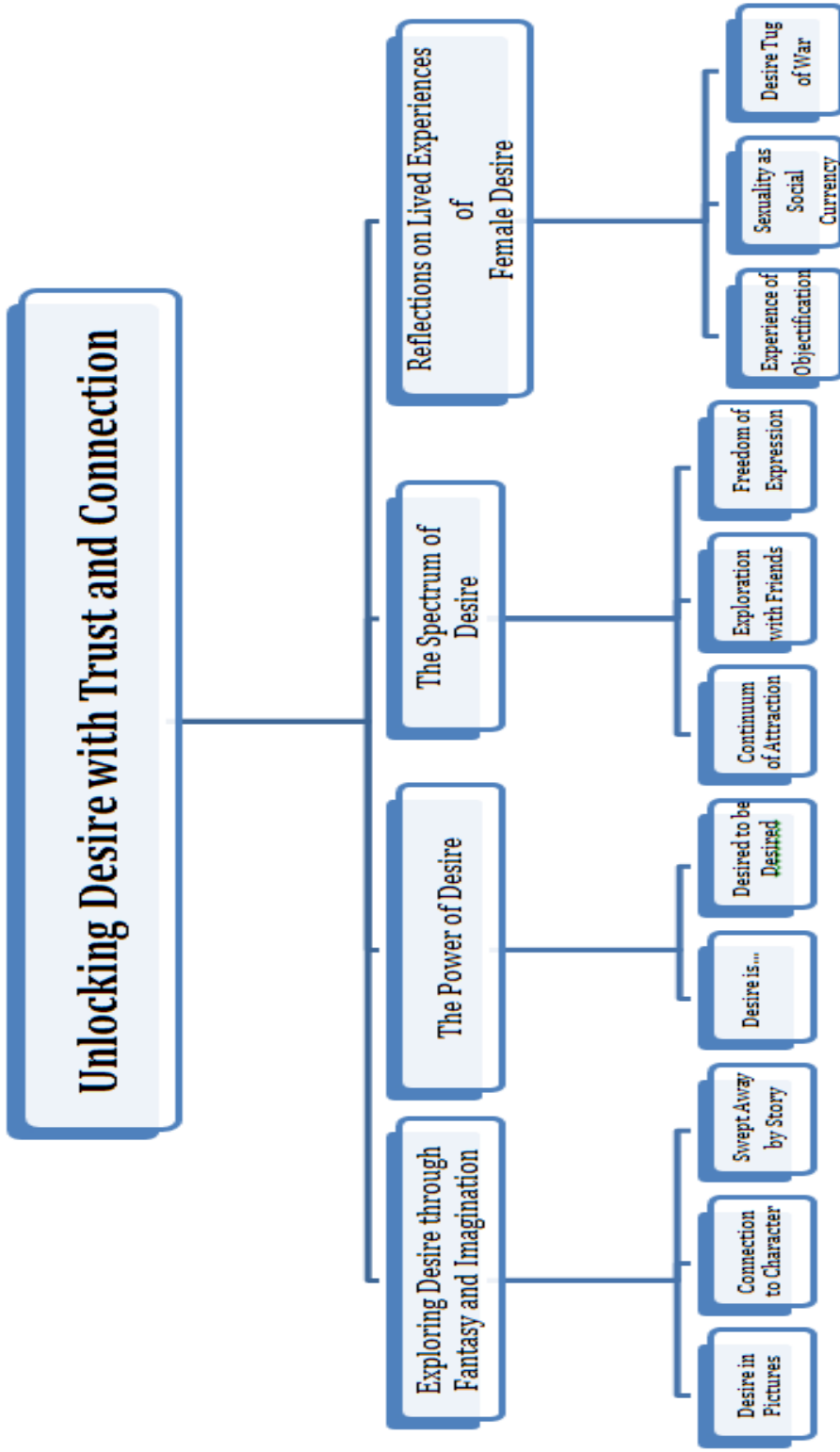
### **Early Experiences of Desire and the Development of the Sexual Self**

The participants related fascinating experiences with rich detail throughout the interviews and initially there were varied and seemingly disparate themes in their descriptions of exploring sexuality and desire. These themes were grouped and connected first within each individual's transcripts, and developed into tables of sub-themes for each person. Then, through iterative and in-depth examination of the words of these young women, it became evident that there were common threads through each of their lives that defined and bound their experiences together. These sub-themes were then refined, resulting in five superordinate themes. The most overarching of these themes was *Unlocking Desire with Trust and Connection*.

The four remaining themes were connected to this idea in various ways. The young women spoke of how their earliest recollections of feelings of desire were often in response to images and ideas that were revealed to them through movies, television, books, the internet and 'playing pretend' with friends, leading to *exploring desire through fantasy and imagination*. This theme details the ways in which the participants absorbed what they saw in the world around them to explore early feelings of arousal, attraction and desire, through *desire in pictures, creating connections with characters*, and becoming *swept away by story*. These learning experiences allowed them to develop meaningful connections with their bodies and trust in themselves, as well as trust in peers who were investigating the same things. Elements of *trust and connection* were also imbedded in their discovery of *the power of desire*. Though desire is a powerful experience, to qualify it with a single statement of what it meant to these women proved to be difficult. However, each participant had a salient metaphor that reflected their unique experiences when asked to

finish the phrase “*desire is...*” that hinted at how they connected to their desire. Participants also spoke of the *desire to be desired*, and how having this experience bolstered *trust and connection* with their partners. *Trust and connection* was manifested in the participants’ exploration of *the spectrum of desire*, with each moving along the continuum of sexual orientation at different points in their lives (*continuum of attraction*), and some testing the boundaries of physical intimacy in both male and female friendships (*exploration with friends*). Finally, the participants engaged in *reflection on lived experiences of female desire*. The young women questioned how best to maintain *trust and connection* in themselves and others when so often they are reduced to the parts of their sum (*experiences of objectification*). They pondered the freedom to navigate the development of their sexuality, in a society with so many negative (*sexuality as social currency*), and often conflicting (*desire tug-of-war*), messages on what it means to be a desiring woman. Below is a table illustrating the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Figure 4.1 Organization of Themes



## Unlocking Desire with Trust and Connection

Trust was the point around which all other themes spun for each participant, with the depth and nature of the connections they formed dependent on the trust they felt in themselves and in others. Unfortunately, stories in which their trust was betrayed often led to the severing of connections, and the silencing of desire in an environment where it was not safe to be open and genuine. However, when participants were comfortable, within themselves and with their partners, lived experiences emerged that spoke of fun, intimacy, meaningful development in their relationships and a deeper understanding of their own desires.

For Allison, her first long-term relationship, in which she lost her virginity, had a major positive impact on her confidence and how she approached future relationships. She described her relationship at sixteen, with a boy three years older than she was, as one where her needs and boundaries were always respected:

I just told him I wanted to wait, and he was like, totally fine with that, and there was no pressure at all...I was the one who initiated it when I lost my virginity. I was like, 'yeah I wanna do this' and he was very like, 'okay, are you sure? Are you okay?' Very kind about it and very concerned to make sure I was comfortable, and okay with it... Maybe we had sex after like, five months... I guess it was pretty soon into our relationship. But as a high school kid it felt like a really long time.

In this relationship, Allison was the one to set the pace and boundaries, and throughout her first time, her partner continually communicated that her comfort and enjoyment were important to him. In her words, 'it felt like a really long time' to wait, and once she had decided that this was a step she wanted to take, her connection with her partner and faith that this was the right decision for her at that point in her life were solidly grounded, allowing her to experience her desire as a sexual subject.

To varying degrees, each participant related an experience with a partner that enabled a connection with her own desire. For Natalie, a long-term relationship (whose fate at the time of our interview was uncertain), served as a stepping stone toward feelings that she hoped one day to experience:

I never had anything modeled for me about what a tender relationship might be [growing up]. So, but then I guess through my personal life, thinking through the

development of a very long relationship I was in, am in I guess a little bit still... I guess I grew up in that a little bit...that side of me just came out more, that tenderness or intimacy or trust, whatever the case might be. So, I'm more accepting of it; I'm not totally there yet, but I guess I'm on the way.

There is a sense here that while Natalie is proud of the steps she has taken, there is more to do and learn about herself before she can fully experience and communicate her desire. For Jamie, whose home environment was very restricting and discouraging in her early exploration of her desire, being in a first relationship where she was "hitting the same development stage at a very similar time" as her partner gave her the confidence to begin to come into herself:

I guess I never really would have thought of it that way, but it was very equal, you know? There wasn't any sort of one-sidedness to it, and um...because everything's new, as well...I guess it was one of the more sexually satisfying relationships that I've had.

This relationship created space for her to explore the connection with her body and her desire that she already had, with someone who was discovering with her.

For Lauren, an intimate relationship with a caring partner gave her an experience unlike previous instances in which "I'm always in my head." She comes to realize that "he actually cares that I enjoy it, so that's a big deal. But yeah, no I guess that's it...it's like your pleasure actually matters to the other person, it's not just their pleasure. Your pleasure makes their pleasure better." Through being with someone whom was invested in ensuring she feels pleasure in the sexual experience, Lauren did not have to think through having sex. She was in her body as an engaged participant, not in her head as a passive observer.

Though trust and connection in relationship were very important for each young woman, trust in and connection with their own bodies emerged as the often shifting sand on which the foundation of healthy and communicative relationships rested. In speaking with these young women, the idea that connection with a partner could meaningfully occur and lead to feelings of personal sexual desire without some degree of connection to one's own body became dubious. Erica came back into her body in stages after her sexual assault, and only allowed others to share in her experience when she felt confident that this was what she wanted. After briefly dating a boyfriend who "wouldn't take no for an answer"

Erica realized that she was not only uncomfortable entering into a relationship with a man at that point because of her assault, but that she wanted to seek out opportunities to explore her attraction to other women. Her first chance was with a friend whom she trusted, but “it was more so just that we both were experimenting, and she wanted to go and sneak in underage to the sex toy store, and things like that.” Her second experience was “more intense, more than just physical. There was an emotional connection, too, like we were together...we tried things like fingering, eventually we had sex.” Though she feels at this time that she prefers men, it was her early connection and trust with other young women, and willingness to experience the full range of her sexuality that allowed her to be comfortable at that time to be open to exploring her body and desires. In contrast, before Lauren was given the opportunity to fully reconnect to herself after her trauma in childhood, her first boyfriend forced himself on her at seventeen. Lauren “sort of shut down...separated myself from that experience, as well as that—like the sexual part, it was like, ‘you know what? For awhile, let’s just forget about it.’” The repeated trauma became a catalyst for a divorce from self, a time characterized by one night stands, in which “everybody is just fucking. In it to win it, it’s not for anybody else, it’s just for you.” In this passage, she chooses to use the aggressive phrasing of “fucking” to emphasize the disconnection and self-absorption that she feels was present in these exchanges, devoid of intimacy or trust. These encounters provided Lauren with the physical release she was seeking, but she believes it was “also not overly healthy,” admitting that “I think I was numb. I was numbing myself.”

A subtler, but perhaps equally as damaging, disconnection from the self was articulated by Natalie in speaking about the almost daily occurrences of objectification that are directed at her out in the world. In these instances, because the perpetrators are calling attention to her beauty, something that she as a woman is supposed to view as a compliment, Natalie feels that there is no outlet for her outrage as she is expected to respond with gratitude to someone else’s experience of her physical appearance, whether she asked for it or not.

People who will come up and say something to you, or yell something from their car, even if it’s something so nice and polite and it’s telling me that I’m just so beautiful, what do I care of your experience of my looks? You know? And I know that

sounds...a little hostile, but I mean... I don't even know how to say it, it's just that I get so frustrated with this topic and I feel like I can't talk about it, because it just makes me seem...like just an entitled, full of myself whatever, but this is just my experience in the world. And it does limit my life.

The effect of this experience is, to Natalie, insidious, because not only is she made constantly self-conscious, but she also feels she has no space to express her discomfort, lest she be viewed as “entitled” or “full of herself.” These feelings create a disconnection from her body, the vessel through which she is made one-dimensional.

The subsequent sections will present the myriad of ways that the participants have navigated the journey toward discovering their desire and taking ownership of their sexuality. Each participant is moving within spheres of influence that affect and are affected by their experiences in other spheres. At the core of each aspect of their movement toward sexual subjectivity is how deeply they experience trust and connection with themselves, and openness to trusting and connecting with others.

### **Exploring Desire Through Fantasy and Imagination**

Despite the many negative effects media exposure can have on young girls (e.g. Jones, 2012; Levy, 2004) the participants in my study spoke often of the ways they had used and absorbed media to learn about and explore their sexuality and desire. Books were a means of gaining information, for imagining and wondering (“is that what it's really like?”—Natalie), without having to ask another person and risk censure or judgment. Television and movies (and their characters) were in the realm of fantasy—faces, bodies and personas that taught these young women about attraction. The internet provided a breadth of information, exposing the participants to ideas and ways of being that may have otherwise been unknown to them, and teaching them that they were not abnormal or alone. Through media they discovered what they found intriguing or arousing, without having to deal with the immediacy of another person's wants and needs in the context of a real life sexual relationship. Stories, images and ideas were used as a means to connect with and explore their senses of themselves as sexual people.

**Desire in pictures.** For some participants, desire began as a sensation long before they knew what these feelings meant or why they were experiencing them. Before being able to accurately articulate how it was making them feel, pictures, and particularly scenes



in movies, were eliciting powerful reactions in these young women that they felt a strong pull to investigate. Jamie described an instance watching a sex scene in a movie her parents had rented, stating

I remember sneaking downstairs and putting it in and going to that scene, because I was like, 'what's this?' Because I got a feeling down there. It was very exciting to me, and I probably would have been only five or six, maybe at that time?

Despite strong admonishments ("Don't look! Don't look!") from her parents in the moment, Jamie felt compelled by the intensity of her feelings to investigate when she was alone, even risking defiance and "sneaking" down to watch it. Allison's earliest memories are also impactful and characterized by intensity.

I remember being like, really young, and watching movies, and developing these really intense...crushes, on these like, male characters in the...films, and I would just... I wouldn't tell anybody, but I would just be...obsessed with them, I would think about them [and masturbate] before I went to sleep, and I didn't necessarily...know what it meant.

Through these images, Jamie and Allison were given a glimpse into feelings that were exciting and powerful. They describe sensations that were rooted in body, and through masturbation, they began to develop a trust in and connection with their bodies and sexual selves at a young age, learning what attracted them and what sexual pleasure felt like in their bodies.

Self-pleasure through images was also a safe way to reconnect to the body, after trauma. Both Erica and Lauren describe instances in which having the opportunity to privately and safely explore their bodies and the things that aroused them, without concerning themselves with the wants and needs of another person, became a way to slowly re-enter their physical selves and re-establish physical arousal as non-threatening. Erica stated:

I knew what arousal was and things like that at probably twelve, ten, something like that, or between there, is when I figured out what it was, but I wasn't comfortable with a person until I was like, done high school...I think about grade eight, in there, there would have been masturbation and things like that, through movies, TV I

watched and things...just awareness of the body parts, and physical response to beauty, and things like that, both male and female attractiveness.

For Lauren, television provided both education and material that she found arousing, allowing her to satisfy her curiosity and explore her desire.

It was probably late night television that started that for me. Because I had a TV in my room, so I would watch the Sue... Sue Johanson...the sex show? So I would always watch that, and then... I don't know, I got curious and then I got (laughs) interested to see what it was like.

Through the medium of film and television, without immediacy and at their own pace, the participants made space to begin to re-take ownership of their bodies and re-conceptualize their sexuality as positive, for their own use and not at the mercy of another person to objectify or mistreat.

Interestingly, a number of the young women commented that it was not necessarily always explicit material that caught their attention or caused them to experience sexual feelings when watching movies. Jamie stated, "they don't even show it, in that movie, so I don't even know what I thought was going on, so maybe just the noises..." Lauren commented on the physicality of the people she saw in movies, the "really muscular—muscular men. But also women, how beautiful they were...oh yeah, I was definitely attracted to people in movies." Though each were drawn to different aspects of what these images represented, it would seem that the images the young women saw in these movies did not implant ideas of sexuality in their minds, merely piqued a curiosity that was already there.

**Connection to character.** Most participants also described developing a 'crush' on a particular movie or television character, becoming attracted to aspects of his or her personality that the young women identified as being a trait they would look for in a partner in real life. Erica spoke of the impact that the character of Edward Scissorhands had on her as a young girl, saying that she was attracted to:

the genuine nature and the kindness, he's a very innocent character and everything like that. I've seen the movie lots since, and I no longer find him attractive... but I still find him sweet! But I think that's a big part of it, I tend to like character a lot more than anything else.

Interestingly, Erica also described the anger she felt at a friend who declared she wanted the character to be her boyfriend. In Erica's mind, this did not fit, saying, "No! It doesn't work that way, he's with her! You can want to be her [Winona Ryder's character], but you cannot want to be his girlfriend, it doesn't go that way." Her friend was allowed to insert herself into the story, but not to take Johnny Depp's character out of it. Erica's attraction was rooted in the fantasy that the movie created, and she had no desire to disrupt that fantasy in any way. She was so strongly attracted to the pairing that she viewed even someone else's imagined disruption of that dynamic as upsetting and unacceptable.

The emotional connection that the participants felt towards these characters also came as a progression for some. Allison, for example, described her infatuation with a character from the popular show *Corner Gas*, saying

I used to love, love *Corner Gas*, but one character that I had the biggest crush on was Fred Ewanuick, who played Hank? I always thought he was so hot, and at that point, yeah, I would print off pictures of him and put them in my locker...I'd just spend all my time, like I would just watch *Corner Gas* all the time, and...look up other roles that he was in and just like, dreeeam about him...that's maybe a later development... it was kind of just a little fantasy, you know, it was never... and maybe that's why it was positive for me, because it wasn't like there was any pressure at all, you know, it was always just in my head.

Allison's physical attraction had deepened to include interest in the character's personality and having a greater understanding of the person she was interested in, while at the same time maintaining a distance by focusing her attention on an idealized character that had no potential to move into the sphere of her everyday life. This allowed her to continue to 'dream' about him privately without having to deal with the real world feelings and reactions of another person. For Jamie, the characters that she experienced in movies sparked her imagination and manifested itself in role play, allowing her to 'try on' more adult roles without having to experience any consequences because of them.

I think it was...something I was always quite aware of...because of watching movies and that sort of thing. I remember, even probably as young as like, eight or nine, um, like joking around with my sister...I was like, 'okay you'll act like the boy on the date and I'll act like the girl!'

**Swept away by story.** For some of the participants, the opportunity to create the images in their own minds from the words on a page was one of the most interesting and powerful ways to discover what spoke to and attracted them. This medium allowed them the chance to let their imaginations conjure up the way the lead characters looked and sounded, and wonder how it would feel to be in their position. Natalie described the impact that reading *Gone with the Wind* had on her as an adolescent, musing:

I remember reading *Gone with the Wind*, and Rhett Butler would always like, sweep up Scarlett? And so, I guess you think that reading that, that the man is supposed to come and be like, so powerful, and then—and the woman just kind of is there, to swoon, and... So maybe that. I don't know if that's the very first, but I remember reading that book, and thinking it was so hot n' heavy, you know?

To Natalie, the characters in that book represented powerful physical attraction and passionate romance. The medium of the printed word allowed her space to wonder, 'is this what it's really like?' and to let her imagination create her own version of Rhett Butler. Natalie notices Rhett's impulse to "sweep up" Scarlett, a very physical, dramatic and powerful action in which the male is taking control of the situation.

As an interesting note, at the time that the data for this study was being collected the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* was still a major topic of conversation and in a number of interviews the subject of its popularity was mentioned. Lauren had not read it, but was considering whether she should. "I've never read it, but I like the kinky, like, weird, stuff. Again, curious, I just want to know!" Natalie had an interesting insight into why it may have become so popular among women. "I guess probably too because men are very visual, whereas women are more...Women tend to use words more, so I could see why men would watch pornography, women would read a book." This thought may speak to Lauren's interest in reading the story. Unlike pornography, which is visual and already has a physical representation of what the woman looks like and experiences, reading the book would allow Lauren to use her imagination to ponder what she would think and feel in the position of the female character, and whether some of the "kinky stuff" she wanted to know about would appeal to her in a real life relationship.

For each young woman, the life of the mind provided an opportunity to wonder, and engage in an examination of what attracted them and why, and as Jamie stated "it was like

access to that without have to—maybe without having to tell somebody.” In a society where women and girls who are interested in learning more about their sexual selves still run the risk of being victimized, *exploring desire through fantasy and imagination* is an opportunity to make a connection to their desires without censure or judgment.

### **The Power of Desire**

For every participant in this study, sexual desire is a powerful force. That does not mean it is easy to articulate, easy to accept or easy to experience without anxiety. Without exception, when asked how they would define sexual desire, the participants answered with a furrowed brow, pursed lips and a long pause. They were being asked to define the indefinable, and each (after some thought) had a unique and powerful description for what the phenomenon meant to them (*desire is...*). One of the commonalities that revealed itself across the breadth of experiences was a certain energy that was felt when in the midst of having that sensation, which was evident in each description.

Another aspect within the theme of *the power of desire* was the *desire to be desired*. Each participant spoke about being in possession of the potent knowledge that they were desired by another person, and the gratifying effect that it could have on their own experience of desire. However, even within the seemingly straightforward thought that being found attractive or interesting by another person was something that would make their own experience of desire better, there was an underlying uneasiness in expressing this thought. What did that say of their own perspectives on self-worth? Shouldn't they know that they are desirable women without having to be told? In the following section, an attempt will be made to elucidate more clearly the complexity of *the power of desire*.

**Desire is....** This sub-theme emerged spontaneously early within the interview process. As each participant was asked how she would define desire, she struggled to quantify something Lauren said was “elusive...like, what is it?” However, when asked to describe some of the feelings they experienced when they knew they desired someone, each young woman provided fascinating metaphors and examples of metaphors they could equate with desire. Each was unique and created a deeper and more meaningful picture of desire in their lives than a strict definition would, so I began asking the participants what their metaphors for desire were. The responses were both surprising and enlightening.

When I asked Erica her thoughts on the subject, her metaphor underscored the importance of trust and connection in her relationships to fully experience desire and enjoy her time with a sexual partner.

Sex is like a conversation, and desire is kind of like, what you talk about. I think that's some of why I need to get to know somebody, to trust them, because if I know what a person sounds like, the kinds of things they like to talk about, then I know what to expect and how to respond, because I know what they're doing and what they want. And when you're with someone, you shouldn't be thinking about like, the grocery list or, ah, what's on TV or whatever. I don't understand people who multitask! You should be there, with them, immersed in the experience. That's why I don't get people who instruct each other in bed. You should have already talked about that, you should already know, so you can just be there with them. And I'll try different things sometimes, but like (*laughs*) if I start talking about baseball and you don't like baseball, I'm not going to keep talking about baseball! We'll switch to another topic!

Erica's metaphor speaks to a deep knowledge, trust and intimacy with one's partner. She is confused at the thought of giving instructions, because the openness and connection she expects in her relationships would allow her to sense that if she was doing something new that her partner did not enjoy, and she would stop without having to be asked.

Allison's metaphor for desire connected meaningfully with her biggest passion in life—music. Her words also reflected the immediacy and intensity with which she identifies her desire:

If I'm really attracted to somebody and I know them a little bit, usually I like—it's like hearing a song. You hear like, the first ten seconds, and you know if you'll love it or not, love the band, just based on their sound. You see like, little glimpses of somebody and you know if you have a little crush on them pretty immediately.

Allison knows what she is interested in and what attracts her, and so needs little time to decide whether the decision is the right one for her. In knowing that she likes a band "just based on their sound," she already knows about what type of music she enjoys, all that remains is to determine whether the "sound" fits with her taste. So too with people. She is confident that she can trust her intuition, and acts on it.

Like Erica, Lauren experiences desire more gradually, thinking it would be “weird” to have desire for someone occur abruptly:

It’s almost like an orgasm. Like, if you don’t work your way up to it you can’t get there. So, for me it’s starting, like even in the first stages of feeling that desire, and that arousal. If it doesn’t come gradually, then it’s just, I don’t know, it’s weird. Much as would be the case in becoming physically intimate and reaching orgasm, it takes time for Lauren to be sure that her attraction has developed into desire, that there is a deeper element at play than just the initial attraction that she wants to explore.

Natalie’s description came readily, and has a sense of enjoyment in doing something others may see as taboo or something to resist:

It’s like...craving a chocolate bar. You know that feeling? It’s just like... I really want a chocolate bar, and I guess you can talk yourself out of it, but it’s better to just eat the chocolate bar.

Her metaphor is both sensory, and with an awareness that she may be flying in the face of convention and sensibility. In Natalie’s words, one can sense that part of the thrill is knowing she shouldn’t and doing it anyway, that it is in fact “better” to do so.

Jamie’s description of desire reflects her early and powerful connection with her body, as well as the tension that characterized her early experiences of exploring her arousal in her body, pleasure and frustration:

I thought it was almost like um... getting tickled or something, like... Oh, that feels nice, but like, it’s funny and...sometimes desire was affiliated with like, anger or frustration, for me. And I just remember getting really frustrated with like a toy or something, and then feeling the same feelings I would feel when I was sexually aroused. And now that I’ve read some psych stuff I know that they’re kind of connected in a weird way...maybe that was part of it, too, because being tickled, same thing, happy and angry at the same time.

In Jamie’s description, she illuminates the tension underlying each metaphor for desire, an excitement that has yet to be explored, a physical and emotional connection that is intense and immersive. If the desire is fulfilled, there is pleasure, if not, there is frustration. Jamie further emphasized the strength of her feelings by providing another salient metaphor, saying “I think that it was just basically like, I couldn’t rationalize with it, it was like an

addiction, almost.” In this passage, there is an element of struggle and helplessness in attempting to stifle her experience of desire. Desire “was like an addiction,” a powerful force that she could not “rationalize with,” despite her repeated attempts to do so.

**Desire to be desired.** This sub-theme was also offered by the participants, and spoke to being seen by their partner as a subject, not an object, while knowing that their partner was also attracted to them. Within this theme there was at times hesitancy in expression among participants about whether or not wanting to be desired by another person was not perhaps showing a dependency on the opinions of others or showing a lack of self-worth. However, the overarching sense was that being desired by someone they desired heightened their experience.

While Allison acknowledged that others’ interest in her did affect her attraction towards people, she expressed a slight sense of dismissiveness towards it, suggesting that the novelty would eventually wear off if feelings were not truly mutual.

When somebody’s like, constantly complimenting you and just being like, ‘oh, you’re great, you’re so amazing,’ blahblahblah, it’s like, you start to like, become a little bit attracted to them, I think, but sometimes it’s mostly because they like you, and that fades.

Jamie spoke of her experience early on with boys at school being driven by their attraction to her, which greatly increased her own experience of arousal and desire. She believes that this has possibly carried over into her adult life, and worries that this may not be “super-healthy.”

Okay. Like, I would say, well, for me, personally, anyway, it’s the idea of being wanted, and I think maybe that’s part of what drove a lot of maybe my early interactions with guys and that sort of thing is that I really got aroused by the idea that somebody would find me attractive and that they—they wanted me, so—so sexual desire for me is often associated with that, often associated with some other person... Which is probably... I don’t know how super-healthy that is, but...

In reading this quote more closely, one realizes that it may not be Jamie’s desire being associated with that of another person that could be problematic. Instead, it is the possibility that she feels her desirability (and the level of her ability to feel desire) may be



dependent upon another person's validation of her physical attractiveness. If she is not judged as desirable, her own ability to desire is compromised.

Natalie's account is similar to Allison's assessment, that it is the mutual admiration that creates the heightened experience. It is not only that the other finds her intelligent, attractive or a good listener, it is that she feels the same way about them and thus:

...if you know that someone thinks that you're smart, or someone thinks that you're pretty, or someone thinks that they can talk to you, it makes you like them more.

Because... I don't know, it's flattering, so it makes you like them more. And when you feel those things towards them, like they're good-looking, or they're smart, you can talk to them, then you're going to have a...better sexual experience with them.

And when seen through this lens, it can be argued that the *desire to be desired* is actually a search for greater degree of trust and connection with a partner. Being seen as attractive in this sense is not an appeal to vanity as much as an assurance that each person in the sexual experience is valued and respected.

### **The Spectrum of Desire**

In the vast and complicated array of sexual behaviours, orientations and expressions, many try to quantify and simplify desires in an attempt to make this area of life not quite so confusing and ever-changing. In the beginning of this research process, it seemed sensible to ask participants where in the community of sexuality they situated themselves (lesbian, straight, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.). However, as research progressed, it seemed that none of the participants felt that they fit neatly into one category or another, either at the time of the interviews or throughout their development. The experiences that they related seemed to speak of a continuum of attraction, dependent on situation, time of life and chemistry. Jamie articulated the complexity of reconciling the development of her feelings with how to express them to others, stating:

I feel like I really don't know, and I think that's what got me really confused, cause like, I don't know... I felt like I really did just like girls, it would just come naturally, you know, like there's a qualifying thing for being interested in the same sex that like you have to just know it, and go for it.

Friendships, too, were fluid at times, with levels of physical intimacy changing in a night and back again. Participants explored and discovered desire together with people

that they trusted and cared for, but did not necessarily wish to enter into a romantic relationship with, leading to exploration with friends. In these instances, physical intimacy with friends was seen as enjoyable, but not invested with the same emotional weight as a romantic relationship. As Allison described it, “random make-outs like, usually happen with certain guy friends, and...they’re cool with that, and I’m cool with that, but still I always consider them as just a friend.”

Also within *the spectrum of desire* was the degree to which each participant felt she had *freedom of expression* of her sexual desire. This theme starkly highlighted the link between trust and connection in self and relationship, and level of *freedom of expression*. For participants who had experienced a breaking of trust and/or a disconnection from self and others, *freedom of expression* was often compromised. Lauren stated,

I was generally pretty open. And then I dunno. Well, he really messed with my head. And then after that [sexual assault] I was like... I dunno, like cold, or like dead inside, a little bit...it’s weird. Not that extreme, but you know what I mean? It’s just a lot harder to...Feel anything for people.

### **Continuum of attraction.**

All participants expressed some degree of attraction to women. Whether it was an appreciation of female bodies and beauty, wondering what a physical relationship with a woman might be like, engaging in physical experimentation with female friends or actually having been in a sexual relationship with a woman, none of the young women in the study identified as strictly being attracted to men. Through discussing participants’ experiences, participants also communicated the complicated and sensitive nature of exploring female attraction within the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual/two-spirited, queer/questioning) community, and people who challenged the legitimacy of their attraction.

An interesting perspective was brought forward by Allison, who described herself as heterosexual but nonetheless experienced sexual desire when watching some same-sex pornography with women, albeit only very specific types.

It just started because I would see it and I would just realize that I—I think I tried having ‘me time’ [masturbation] with that and I realized I liked it, or whatever... there’s like, girl porn that I’m just like, ugh! Gross! You know, the really like, staged,

weird stuff. But then I saw this one video, with these two girls and it was very like, beautifully, artistically filmed, and they were just like, pleasuring each other and it was just like, whoa! This is kind of stimulating my artistic side...my creativeness. Allison again identifies a link between her passion for art and experiencing sexual desire. For her, sexuality can also stimulate her imagination as an artist and help her to become more creative, or creative in different ways. There is also a distancing from the “staged, weird stuff” that is not designed to showcase beauty. This indicates that is not enough to see two women being intimate to cause Allison to experience sexual desire, her artistic self needs to be inspired in some way. Allison also indicated that she was satisfied to have this aspect of her sexuality remain a fantasy, commenting that “I don’t think I’d ever act on that.”

Another nuance introduced into the conversation around sexual orientation is the problem of not having the security that a label can provide in the LGBTQ community when one is unsure how she feels. Jamie described a situation in which she was provided the opportunity to explore the possibility of a same-sex relationship, and the backlash that resulted.

I had a friend that was bi who asked me out on a date, and I was like, well you know what? Sure. And I wasn’t really interested in her, and we went out and I wasn’t really sure how to act, and she told me after, she was like, ‘Jamie, I just don’t think that you’re bi enough for me.’ And after that it was just like, ‘Phew, I guess I’m—you’re the person who makes that judgment.’ And I just immediately thought, no, I guess I’m not...but those feelings didn’t go away. So I think I’m still kind of feeling that out.

In her uncertainty around her feelings, Jamie accepted her friend’s assessment that she “wasn’t bi enough” as “the person who makes that judgement” because the friend is an established member of the LGBTQ community and Jamie is not. This statement caused Jamie to ignore her own inner experience, and the possibility that the bad date had more to do with Jamie’s lack of attraction to that particular friend than her capability to experience attraction to women overall. And indeed, it seems that the former is closer to the truth, because “those feelings didn’t go away.”

In contrast to the problem of being seen as “not bi enough,” Erica has been thrust into situations where her experience with women led people to believe that she feels attraction to all women on some level. The expectation is that she should be open to engaging in physical intimacy with another woman simply because it is another woman.

People hear that I’ve been with a girl and think I should want to be with all girls. I’ll be at a bar and my friend will be like, ‘oh it’s my birthday! Make out with me, make out with me!’ and she doesn’t understand that I don’t want to do that with her, because I don’t get that vibe with her. And it will be really awkward and I will give her a kiss because there are like five other friends watching and it’s like, ‘okay, happy birthday, now stop.’

This interaction hints at a sense that same-sex attraction is somehow qualitatively different than opposite-sex attraction. It would be reasonable for a woman to refuse to “make out” with a man because she “doesn’t feel that vibe” with him, but Erica’s identified attraction to both genders somehow does not lead her friend to realize that attraction would also be a factor in her willingness to kiss another woman.

Participants also at times came up against the idea that their engaging in physical intimacy with a woman would be done purely for the benefit and arousal of a male partner. Erica challenged this assumption with her partner, asking him if he would be prepared to deal with the consequences of what may become a competition in their relationship.

A boyfriend I was with, he asked me if I would do a threesome and I was like, ‘are you sure you want to do that? Because what if I’m doing stuff with her—or, I’m with her and I like her, what’s going to happen?’ And...we never did it. And I don’t really understand that [threesomes], because people seem to think that those feelings aren’t real or that you can’t feel both, or that it’s just a phase, or guys think that it’s just for them and that it’s a show for their benefit. And...but the thing is that some girls will do that, that they’ll behave that way in public but not in private, and it’s because people are watching that they do it.

She illustrates the complication that some women do, indeed, behave counter to their genuine attraction in front of an audience, and the confusion that this introduces into her own life. Because the possibility exists that same-sex physical intimacy is engaged in as a display under the male gaze, the legitimacy of her own genuine feelings is called into

question. Further, the threat that the introduction of another person into a monogamous relationship may represent is not (at first) seriously considered.

It would seem that these women engage in a range of experiences with other women that are not easily labeled, or necessarily even easily understood. Their feelings and willingness to explore these feelings do not remain static, but nonetheless enrich and deepen their experience of sexual desire and their understanding of sexuality.

### **Exploration with friends.**

In discovering their sexualities, participants also looked within their circle of friends to explore what felt good, to learn about others' bodies and to talk about their experiences with people they trusted. The peer group provided trust and understanding in an area of life that was exciting and new, but often fraught with anxiety and uncertainty.

Jamie's peer group had a powerful positive impact, reassuring her and affirming that she was not strange or deviant for experiencing sexual desire and wanting to know more about it. She began to feel a 'safety in numbers' as she realized many of her friends felt the same way she did, and embraced these feelings as normal.

I think in large part it had to do with having friends who, you know, as we kind of grew up through that stage together, we all kind of reinforced each other, in terms of... No one made fun of each other within that group at that time for wanting certain things, or...like, we would have these movie nights and...we would always end up, you know...somebody would be kissing somebody, or you'd be kind of, boyfriend/girlfriend for the night, kind of thing...it was just a safe space to start feeling like everything was okay...I guess we all kind of thought, 'well, if there are this many of us that are interested in this, or whatever, then it must be kind of normal.'

In Jamie's peer group, not only was she able to share her curiosity and interest with people who understood and supported her, but she was also allowed to explore that side of herself physically with someone she trusted, a "boyfriend for the night" who would not expect the emotional investment of a romantic relationship. With a group who would not make fun of each other for "wanting certain things," she found a connection with other like minds, and so began to be able to trust herself, as well.

Erica also experienced another level of reconnection with herself after her trauma with a friend with whom she could explore her sexuality safely. A relationship with a boyfriend who would not respect her needs (“he wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I ended it”) proved uncomfortable and unsafe, and an opportunity for Erica to open herself to another aspect of her sexuality with a female friend.

So after I stopped seeing the guy, I would have started seeing one of my friends who was a girl, it was more so just that we both were experimenting, and she wanted to go and sneak in underage to the sex toy store, and things like that.

In this instance, like Jamie, both Erica and her friend were interested in “experimenting” with their physical and sexual selves without need for the status of a defined relationship, or the worry of being in a position “where I would be dominated,” a fear Erica still felt toward men at that point in her life.

*Exploration with friends* proved to be a meaningful experience that bolstered confidence and allowed the participants to learn about themselves and others in an environment that was safe and accepting. This theme also illustrated that for some young women, friendships have boundaries that are flexible and could mean different things at different times.

### **Freedom of expression.**

The importance of trust and connection in the experience of sexual desire is clearly illustrated in the sub-theme *freedom of expression*. Without trust in one’s body and connection to one’s desires, one cannot openly communicate or participate in a sexual relationship as an equal partner. Without trust in and connection with one’s partner, even if a person is in touch with what she desires, she will not feel safe to be honest with her partner about them. Each participant identified these elements as important in fully experiencing sexual desire and sexual subjectivity, though each was at a different point in their journeys toward acceptance of their bodies and expression of their desires.

In discussing the reconnection with her body that Erica worked toward after her assault, an interesting distinction appeared. She has not only become comfortable in her skin, she has become uncomfortable with the idea of misrepresenting her physical self in any way.

And then I became uncomfortable with it [make-up] because I didn't like the idea of it not being my body. Same thing with padded bras and things like that, it's just—I had them for a little bit, about the same time and...that's just because women have voluptuous breasts. And then...I stopped, and got just as many compliments. And so, it was like, okay, so I don't need that, and that was something that somebody else must have told me I needed, and so I got rid of it.

In using padded bras and make-up, Erica feels she is presenting a version of herself that is inauthentic, and becomes uncomfortable. Her comfort in her skin is such now that she recognized that using beauty tools that masked her actual appearance meant she was using someone else's standard of beauty, so she "got rid of it" and made her own.

For Natalie, the quest to be comfortable in her body is still a struggle. Her experience of objectification coupled with the sense that she does not measure up to a standard of beauty creates a dissonance that makes it difficult for her to trust herself or others. Next to women who "just look like women, you know, and that's everywhere," Natalie feels that she appears "very blah...and no one would take a second glance." Intellectually, based on how she has been responded to and what she has been told by others, she knows that this is not how others experience her appearance, but the underlying uneasiness remains. The core issue comes to the fore when she says thoughtfully, "in my mind I feel I am attractive, and I am pretty, but... I don't know. I feel if someone saw me totally vulnerable, they wouldn't think that anymore." In this statement Natalie has revealed the essence of the obstacle she faces in fully experiencing her sexual desire. In order to feel comfortable in an intimate situation, she needs a connection with her body that is not based on others' assessments of her physical beauty, so that she can understand and communicate her desires. In order to effectively do so with a partner, she must trust that in being vulnerable enough to honestly communicate her desires their connection will remain strong. In order to achieve this, Natalie states what she thinks she needs in a partner.

You know, I'd like to get to a point where I'd be just accepting of who I am, and what I look like, and not imagine away my flaws, or imagine, 'oh, if I looked like this then that would be perfect.' You know what I mean? So I think that, and just being able to have a comfort level, and be able to feel vulnerable...I need a partner who is—I don't

want to say this because it sounds dumb —who is like Rhett Butler, who is going to come in and take control of the situation, because I do have a very strong presence, sometimes, so I want someone who's gonna like, overpower that a little bit...so, almost forces me to be vulnerable, but it's okay.

In this passage, there are some similarities to the tension that the participants communicated in the sub-theme of *desire to be desired*. In being “forced” to be vulnerable in a situation that is still “okay,” to be in her body rather in her head (where her anxieties about her physical appearance silence her desire), Natalie would be giving up control in order to be vulnerable enough to fully experience and communicate her desire. However, notice the key distinction—she would be giving up control, not having it taken from her. She would be choosing to *trust and connect* with her partner in allowing him to control the situation.

In Allison's life, connection to body and trust in self has informed every aspect of her relationships, with herself, her friends and her significant others. She attributes much of this strength to connection and communication that she had with her parents, and particularly her mother, growing up.

I didn't ever talk to her about sex, and I didn't talk to her about masturbation, but I would talk to her about friend problems, and stuff like that...I definitely think it's come from...my parents being like, so supportive. And so I do have a really good confidence now, and I have a good like, body image...I think my mom taught me a lot of really good, important lessons. Just like, how to talk to people, how to diffuse a situation that you're involved with, like what to say, and how to handle it...and that started at a very young age.

Though they did not speak at any great length about sexuality, the lessons Allison learned at home about healthy communication, dealing with conflict and having confidence in herself carried over to her romantic relationships and the boundaries she would set within them.

Like Allison, Jamie had some foundational connections early in her life that bolstered a sense of confidence in her body and her ability to communicate her desire, though these connections with significant others, mitigating messages she received at home.



I think, probably the biggest impact was that I never felt in either of those relationships that I was a sexual object at all. Like there was never an expectation at all that I was going to service their needs, or anything like that. So like, that stereotype that always got thrown at me, like, well, girls don't like sex...you're basically doing a guy a favour. And I never felt like that. So that—like, I think that had a really wonderful impact on—on who I think I'm becoming, as a sexual adult, is that I don't feel that obligation, ever. And when I do feel it, I know it's wrong.

For Jamie, her first experiences in relationship were with partners who valued and respected her, and had “no expectation at all that I was going to service their needs.” As a partner, she was able to assert her equal right to experience sexual desire and pleasure, and have her natural sense of herself as a desiring woman appreciated. These experiences in turn helped her to build a strong foundation of trust and connection, through relationship, with herself.

Lauren's road to sexual subjectivity and owning her desire actually has more in common with Natalie's experience than Jamie's. Lauren, like Natalie, has repeatedly experienced outside forces treating her body as an object. Within the interview process, she described key moments in which it was communicated to her that it was unsafe to trust others, and that to connect with her body may be dangerous.

Well, when I was younger I was molested...it was not well received by my family, cause it was another family member. And then actually, my first boyfriend... The first time we had sex I didn't want to, and he continued anyway. So, and then I told my current boyfriend that, and...people don't generally respond well to that, because they don't know how. Unless they've had training, which not many people have. Um, so I told him...yeah, and then he like, tried to have sex with me like, right after and I was like, 'oh, you're confused about the way this works, that's actually not appropriate.' ...yeah he just really did not respond well.

In each of these instances, Lauren was reaching out and being vulnerable with someone she trusted, and in each instance this trust was betrayed. At times an almost immediate and direct link was made between being vulnerable and having her boundaries violated or her body objectified. Seen in this way, it becomes clear why she finds it very hard to make a

connection with the most vulnerable parts of herself, or to share that with anyone else. Thus, in moments when she is having sex with her boyfriend, she describes her reaction as:

...it's always being in my head, like always. Even thinking about things that are completely unrelated to what's happening. Like making lists in my head...I just shut off, I just shut down, you know, that part. So I—like, I think it's my—I'm the reason my body doesn't react...but I think that it's because I'm constantly in my head...I'm not, like feeling it, I'm thinking it, um, or, like I said I'm just totally detached and thinking about something unrelated.

In Lauren's sexual experiences, she describes herself as barely even present in the moment with her partner. She also places the blame on herself, and not her experiences, for her difficulty in connecting to her partner and her desire, though her previous experience has also told her that being fully vulnerable and making a connection with her partner (both past and current) can lead to a violation of her trust and boundaries. However, Lauren has had instances in her past in which she felt a genuine connection with her body, her partner and her sexual desire, and these moments have allowed her to glimpse the potential of what her future could hold, given the right circumstances. When asked how she would like to see her experience of sexual desire evolve, she said:

I would like to see myself just like, break through and be a beast, like oh my god. I feel like I have so much pent up sexual energy, that it just needs to be released, one day...Sad to say I don't see that happening with my current boyfriend. But I do know that, so I guess that's—there's the awareness thing that I have...I would like to see it get a lot better, obviously. Yeah, cause I know how good sex can be, I just don't have a lot of experiences with it that way...

### **Lived Experiences of Female Desire**

It could hardly have been expected to complete a research study on young women's early experiences of sexual desire and the development of their sexual selves without a discussion of how this phenomenon is perceived and constructed within Western society, and how young women experience living within its structure. There were many different ideas that arose within the interview process, and these were grouped by their relevance and power into three main sub-themes. This process was inductive, in that the analysis of each young woman's story became the basis upon which to draw further reaching

connections in the sub-themes. The first encompasses the reduction of a woman to only her body, or even her body parts. The participants spoke often not only of their own experiences of objectification, but of those they had observed being enacted on their friends, classmates, and entire cultures, leading to the emergence of the sub-theme *experiences of objectification*. Added to the possibility of being objectified for the way they looked, the young women described the societal pressure that is placed on them based on their actions, in the expression of their sexuality. If they behave in a way that does not fit within the social script of being an object, that is, other than being pure and passive recipients of the male gaze, they risk being devalued, leading to the sub-theme of *female sexuality as social currency*. It was also communicated through the interview process that desire was anything but simple. In the quest to achieve authenticity and subjectivity in relationships, both with themselves and others, the young women described many pitfalls that could lead to disconnection and a breaking of trust. Some described the judgment they felt (and still feel) for being a desiring woman. Erica commented that “that is something that as women we are not supposed to do, we are not supposed to initiate. But at the end of the day we still have some of those animal instincts.” Added to those ‘animal instincts,’ they highlighted the hypocrisy of living in a highly sexualized society, in which they often feel pressure to live up to a standard of beauty as sexual objects, while suppressing and denying their own desires, creating a *desire tug-of-war*.

### **Experiences of objectification.**

For the young women in this study, experiences of objectification occupied a peculiar place in their consciousness. In some ways it was so commonplace and expected as to seem like white noise. Jamie spoke of the “typical slut-shaming thing that goes on with... You know, if you watch certain movies, or TV shows. I don’t even really remember watching anything that had—those undertones are just always there so you don’t even really notice.” Images and messages of “slut-shaming” were so “typical” that they barely make an impact, giving the impression that these women are unaffected by the often two-dimensional and derogatory way that females are portrayed. However, when one considers the struggle and uncertainty that are present in so many of the participants’ stories about their relationships, with themselves and with others, one wonders if the effects of these messages are more subversive than they are non-existent. And there remains a sense of

frustration in some of the participants' words at the distrust with which female sexuality is still viewed. Lauren described one of the ways in which a woman can still be made to feel that her sexuality is not her own:

Like we were watching a documentary, in Women and Gender Studies. And one of the men was saying...the reason that in places like India and stuff that women have to cover themselves is because, I don't know, in some old tome it was written that women's bodies are known to incite riots. And so it's this deeply ingrained sense of women's sexuality and desire and sensuality needing to be covered until the man wants it.

Here she illustrates an extreme example of the utility of objectification in patriarchal society. By framing female sexuality (which is situated and represented as her physical body) as so powerful and dangerous that to uncover it would "incite riots" by men who cannot control their urges, it implies female modesty is a matter of safety, both her own and the public's. And lest we question the applicability of this example to Western culture, consider Jamie's comment about "slut-shaming." In this practice, much like the above example, a woman openly expressing her sexuality and her desire often exposes herself to ridicule and derision for not conforming to the socially acceptable script of women as virginal, with the implication being that by being an openly sexual person, the woman is deserving of "slut-shaming."

In Natalie's life, the impact of the societal discourse around sexuality has significantly impeded her ability to trust and connect with others, particularly men, in that: if I wanted to go out and start a [new] relationship with someone, how could I even do that? Because everyone—I would just think would want to just fuck me and then leave me. And then be proud to say that that's what they did. So I don't really—I don't trust anything that a guy would say, because they would do anything to get what they want.

Her experiences of objectification have led Natalie to feel that her only value to men would be as a sexual conquest. Having been repeatedly reduced to an object through the focus people have placed on her physical beauty, it has become a hindrance, because Natalie fears that her trust in someone would be betrayed when she discovered that they only wanted to "fuck me and then leave me."

The experiences of objectification these women describe indicate that that threat of having the self reduced to the body creates barriers to trust in others and connection to the self.

### **Female sexuality as social currency.**

In terms of the impact that society and authority figures have in developing young women's opinions and ideas about sexuality and desire, the effect can be lasting, and potentially harmful. Jamie, for example, was once told by a doctor to be wary of having too many sexual partners, lest her options for a marriage go down. The reverberations of this experience were lasting.

I totally fell for it, like totally fell victim to that, where it was like—to the point where it's illogical, to the point where today I'm like, 'as long as I've had sex with them before, I'm allowed to go and have sex with them again, it doesn't matter. As long as I'm not doing it with somebody new, even if they treat me better or whatever. I don't want my numbers to go up!' Yeah, like I realize that irrationality in myself, but like I'm like, 'do I want to waste a number with this guy?' The currency in my head is really messed up.'

Here the tension and conflict within Jamie about her desire is illuminated eloquently. She states that she 'fell for it,' that is, others' negative evaluations of her sexual behaviour, choices and expressions of desire. She recognizes that this is not her truth, and she has been duped, on some level, into believing it. Yet, on another level, there is now a running tab in her head of the number of men she has had sex with, and as that number goes up, her worth goes down. While it could be argued that she is using caution to protect herself from experiencing arousal without the richness or meaning of trust and connection, she is also denying and quieting her emotions and her body, stifling her desire and cutting herself off from new (and potentially better) experiences in reaction to the expectations of others. Responding to what has been a part of her identity from an early age comes with the risk of harsh judgment and loss of connection.

Allison stated that she avoided many of the issues and pressures that are associated with sexual reputation in the peer group by spending most of her time with her boyfriend because "everybody else just cared about partying and boys." However, she describes one instance before she got into a serious relationship in which her reputation was threatened

and gossip began, not because of anything she did, but because of something a boy said she did:

He grabs me and kisses me, and that was it. But I was like, 'oh my god, maybe I'll date him, this is so exciting!' and whatever. And the next day at school he didn't talk to me or anything, and I would think, 'okay, that's weird,' I would try to say hi to him. Anyway, he put on Facebook all of this terrible shit that he said that we did. And I was like, 'oh my god, none of this is true!' It was just totally—it was so bad. So I never went to another party after that, until grad week, really.

Allison's experience illustrates the tenuous nature of the female sexual reputation. In this instance, all it took for her to be publicly shamed and her reputation to be damaged was for someone to say she had committed sexual acts, even though it was not the truth. This experience then led her to avoid future parties, or else risk being maligned simply by being there. Natalie clearly elucidates the risk inherent in a society that frames female sexuality as social currency:

...even if I was to go have sex with somebody who I liked and who liked me, that would still be in the back of my mind, I'd think, 'oh my god, this is someone whose had sex with me and he has power over me because he can say whatever the hell he wants about me and everyone will believe him because he's the man and I'm not. Like I said, I'm not an accurate witness to my own experience.

### **Desire tug-of-war.**

The theme of *desire tug-of-war* began to reveal itself in the way the participants spoke about the dissonance they felt between societal expectations (which in objectifying them insisted on simplifying their roles, e.g. Madonna vs. whore) and the complexity of their actual lived experience of sexual desire. They talked of the specific scripts through which they felt women (and they themselves) were allowed to explore their sexual desire. And they wondered why there existed a double standard around sexual desire, in which men were expected to seek it out and pursue pleasure, whereas women were chided for doing the same.

Erica described a formative experience she had in reading the books of Ayn Rand as a teenager in discovering the richness and complexity of the female characters. Their strength and unapologetic trueness-to-self left a lasting impression:

Like Dominique and the 'I might look like a wallflower in this setting, but it's because I'm gathering information. And I'm acting out over here because I'm being strong because I can be. And it doesn't mean that I have to be the whole time, or that I'm weak the whole time, but a woman isn't just one thing...

In this passage, Erica's description echoes Natalie's wish for her future relationship, and the nuances that can exist in being authentic in relationship. Erica identifies Dominique's strength as admirable, but also acknowledges that "I don't have to be the whole time," much as Natalie identified giving up control in relationships can at times be okay.

Another issue that arose in the discussion around the tension between societal messages and lived experiences was the limited, specific ways women were told they could express their desire. Far from creating space to allow genuine expression that was unique to their own lives, "expressing desire" became "expressing desire by men's rules." Lauren stated:

I think women are—I think it's men's rules, that women can express their desire. Through like, man-themed things, like porn. Generally more—well, not generally, one hundred percent more directed towards males, because they are the main consumers of porn. But so if a woman is like, 'yeah, I like porn,' then she's cool, to men, right? Because she's sort of like one of the guys, but sexy.

By becoming "one of the guys, but sexy," women can show that they are interested in and curious about sex and arousal, but only through "man-themed" activities. They are subverting traditional culture and being "cool" by being like men, but they can only subvert so far before they risk upsetting the status quo and receiving backlash.

The final area within the sub-theme of *desire tug-of-war* is that of the double standard in sexual expression. Many of the participants described having pleasurable sexual experiences in which they were in touch with their desire, felt respected and were enjoying themselves. However, if ever they attempted to own those feelings and be open about them, they faced judgment and censure. Jamie described instances in which experimentation within her group of friends (consisting of both boys and girls) often brought disapproval down upon the young women in the group, but not the young men, because only the girls were behaving "inappropriately":

I didn't understand why the double standard had to exist like that. I thought, you know, we're all interested in doing these things because they feel good, and... I get that there's, you know, a certain inherent danger to it, but why—why add this connotation to it of wrongness to something that we are obviously enjoying?

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the lived experience of sexual desire and the development of the sexual self for five young women. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is “concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event,” such as sexual desire, and is based upon the belief that a phenomenon can be understood through in-depth interviews with people who have experienced the phenomenon. Through the interview process and analysis, five super-ordinate themes emerged: *unlocking desire with trust and connection*, *exploring desire through fantasy and imagination*, *the power of desire*, *spectrum of desire* and *reflections on the lived experience of female desire*. Of the super-ordinate themes, *unlocking desire with trust and connection* was the thread through which all other themes were connected, and of the four remaining themes, there were eleven sub-themes to explore, which included: *desire in pictures*, *connection with characters* and *swept away by story* (within *exploring desire through fantasy and imagination*), *desire is like...* and *desire to be desired* (within *power of desire*), *continuum of attraction*, *exploration with friends* and *freedom of expression* (within *spectrum of desire*) and *experiences of objectification*, *sexuality as social currency* and *desire tug-of-war* (within *reflections on the lived experience of female sexual desire*). Participants discussed the many different people and forces that had both helped and hindered them in the discovery of their sexual desire and the development of their sexual selves.



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The intent in engaging in this research was to explore how young women perceived and experienced the early development of their sexual desire and how it contributed to the development of their sexual selves. In this chapter, a summary of the findings of this study as well as comparison and connection to existing literature will be made. The strengths and limitations of the research, implications for counselling practice and directions for future research will also be discussed.

While there has been considerable research on the experience of desire and sexuality in young women (e.g. Attwood, 2007; Burns et al, 2011; Daniluk, 1994; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Griffin, 2000; Hensel et al., 2010; Hearn et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2008; Kitzinger, 2000; Levy, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2005; Shucksmith, 2004; Tolman, 1999; Tolman, 2002a; Tolman et al, 2005), there has been less focus on how these young women's earliest experiences of desire have helped to shape the development of their sexuality (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Ussher, 2005; Wansley, 2007). As such, the intent of the current research was to illuminate how young women absorb and make meaning of their earliest experiences of sexual desire and how this contributes to the development of their sexual identity.

Within the interview process with these participants, stories of fantasy and exploration with themselves, partners and friends began to weave into a pattern of stories of connection. In discovering their desire and developing trust in themselves and others, the overarching and unifying theme of *Unlocking Desire with Trust and Connection* revealed itself. One of the avenues of exploration that provided rich and meaningful opportunities for discovery, early exploration and trust in the body became the theme of *exploring desire through fantasy and imagination*. A third theme, *the power of desire*, explored the potency of the experience of desire for these young women and how being wanted by another person could positively influence their own feelings of desire. This finding is consistent with the literature (Daniluk, 1993; Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2013; Tolman, 2002), in that feeling desired and appreciated in relationship has been linked to greater sexual satisfaction. In speaking of the spectrum of desire, participants related stories of attraction and exploration that highlighted the complexity of sexuality and desire. This theme underscored the importance of trust and connection in feeling comfortable and able to

explore desire. The final theme that was a major focus for the participants was their *reflections on lived experiences of female desire*. To varying degrees, each participant commented on the conflicting messages that were communicated to them as desiring women, and how these messages affected their lives. These themes and their connections to existing literature will be detailed in the following sections.

### **Unlocking Desire with Trust and Connection**

In speaking with the young women in this study, the theme of *unlocking desire with trust and connection* unified their lived experiences. This overarching theme helped me to understand that desire was a more complicated, layered and meaningful aspect of their lives than any one element involved in the phenomenon would suggest. Desire is not just physical arousal, nor is it simply romantic love or a longing for intimacy with another person. Desire is all of these things for the participants, as well as a connection to and communion with one's own body, an ability to feel, understand and (at times) act on this knowledge to express one's sexual self.

While collecting the data and engaging in the analysis, it became clear that there existed multiple continuums of experiences and feelings. Though every participant identified the elements of trust and connection as essential to feeling safe and enjoying their sexual experiences, the levels varied to which each felt that they were at a point in their lives that they felt these liberties in their bodies and minds, and in relationship with someone else. Past literature has found that women with higher degrees of agency, equality and open communication experience greater levels of sexual satisfaction in their relationships (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2013), as well as safer sexual practices, such as consistent condom use (Schick, Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2008). This was reflected in the words of the participants, with those who felt that they had open communication with partners and a strong sense of their desires (Erica and Allison) characterizing their current satisfaction with their sexual lives as high (though at the time of data collection Allison had stated she wished to take a break from relationships and be on her own for a while). Erica identified as having a high sex drive, and wished to maintain this, commenting that her ability to express herself in her relationship was a key ingredient in her satisfaction with her current situation. Both participants described instances of frank discussion with partners about boundaries, and both had experimented with self-

pleasuring to learn what they enjoyed and subsequently to ask for it in relationship. Jamie's sense of trust in her ability to recognize and communicate her desires was strong. She expressed a hope that she would stay true to her feelings and learn from some of the instances in which she had not been open, or had let the opinions and judgments of others overrule her own desires. Along the continuum of trust and connection, Lauren described a lower sex drive and at times an active disconnection from her body when with her partner. She spoke of a desire to rediscover a more open and curious version of herself, knowing that at one time in her life she had found a genuine interest and enjoyment in sexual exploration and learning, both with herself and with others. She seemed to be in anticipation of a time in her life when her comfort with her body might be restored in an opportunity to connect and communicate with a partner invested in her pleasure. Natalie, like Lauren, had experienced disconnection from her body and sexual self, but unlike Lauren, had not yet had a fulfilling sexual experience in which she had felt truly vulnerable and in touch with her desires. As such, Natalie's descriptions of sexual desire were coloured by anticipation and the potential for sexual satisfaction in relationship, but a lack of real-world experience, and thus the importance of sex in her life at the time of the interview was low. She stated that she wouldn't care if she did not have sex again for "a long time," but also wondered if she was on some level "waiting for the right person to open that up for me."

### **Exploring Desire Through Fantasy and Imagination**

An interesting and somewhat unexpected finding in this research process was the importance of story, fantasy and imagination in the exploration and development of early experiences of desire. There are many studies that examine the effect of media on young people (e.g. Chandra et al., 2008; Garner et al., 1998; Levy, 2005; Pardun, L'Engle & Brown, 2005; Ward, 2003), often with a focus on its negative impact. However, it was difficult to find literature that examined how the consumers themselves viewed media, and particularly difficult to find literature that examined media as a useful tool in the exploration of desire (Kapurch, 2012; Siemens, 2006). When I began the interview process, though I realized the importance of remaining aware of my assumptions, I nevertheless had an expanse of reading behind me that detailed the deleterious effects that the media can have on women's body image (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Ward, 2002) and the

pervasiveness of objectification (Garner et al., 1998; Szymanski et al., 2011). However, when I began speaking to participants and asked about the influence of media on the exploration of their sexual desire, the memories and stories the questions elicited were rarely of self-consciousness, comparison or shame—rather, the young women spoke of curiosity, excitement, imagination and the safety of private fantasy. The mediums of film, television and literature were seen as exciting and dramatic avenues for exploration and wondering. Each participant’s experiences were unique and salient, the beginnings of the discovery of their sexual selves.

Siemens (2006) examined teenage girls’ experiences of music listening and romance. She found that the participants described powerful and meaningful connections to the music that they listened to, relating the words and music to events in their lives in an attempt to understand and fully experience their emotions and feel that they were not alone. The young women also identified the experience of listening to songs as private, intense and deeply personal, evoking thoughts and feelings that were not easily shared with other people. The current study reflects some elements of this phenomenon, in that the participants described many of their fantasies about movie or television stars and characters in books as something they did not share with others, instead exploring what attracted them and why, when they were alone. However, the focus of romance in the previous study led mainly to descriptions of the young women’s mental and emotional world, whereas in the current study’s focus on desire, there was also a distinctly physical element in the participants’ stories.

Kapurch (2012) also studied the emotional impact of media on young women (through internet message boards and text) when she examined the use of melodrama in popular fiction, specifically the *Twilight Saga* and *Jane Eyre*. The author noted that the appeal of these coming-of-age stories rests in the reader’s ability to identify with the main characters’ inner turmoil as they struggle to create an identity. Further, these novels also present stories of heightened drama and romance, with undercurrents of temptation and sexual desire. These ideas were reflected in the experiences of the participants in the current study, who perceived their own reading to be an introduction to material that was “hot n’ heavy.”

## The Power of Desire

Within the lived experience of sexuality and sexual desire, participants described a strong pull to explore and to know, a fascination that was rooted in the inner world, around powerful and complex feelings.

One of the interesting aspects within this theme was the language that participants used around desire. Researchers have examined the use of metaphors in many different spheres of life, and the subjects of sexuality and desire are not exceptions. Deignan (1997) noted in a study examining a variety of literature (e.g. books, magazines and journals) that in speaking of desire, people often utilize language that emphasizes its strength (e.g. elemental analogies such as 'desire as fire'), a powerful force over which the desiring person has little control (e.g. "fell hopelessly in love"). This was reflected in the current study often, with participants using descriptors such as "craving," "orgasm" and "addiction" around their feelings of desire. All of these words indicate potent sensations and giving in or over to the experience. It was interesting also to note that the pace in the interviews often increased as participants spoke faster and more animatedly in relating their metaphors than at other times.

Further, it is not only the strength of the feelings participants described in their use of metaphor that was reflected in the literature. Manning (1997) found that romance and desire metaphors also often speak to the reciprocity and connection that people wish to find in their experiences. As an example from the current study, if one examines Erica's metaphor of "sex [being] like a conversation, and desire [being] like the topic," the description reflects an engagement with another that requires each person to be participating and contributing, with reciprocity and connection in the experience.

In terms of the *desire to be desired*, as previously observed, this construct also alludes to a search for reciprocity and connection with a partner, a recognition and appreciation of one's own attributes and value as a sexual partner. Significantly, there were other elements in the *desire to be desired* in other research that were not reflected in the current study as strongly. For example, Tolman (2002) found that in the *desire to be desired*, there was not only the element of being appreciated by another, but also the sense of empowerment that that can create within the sexual dynamic. In the knowledge that she is wanted by another person, a young woman can be emboldened to be more assertive in

the relationship because she knows her own sexual power. This is in contrast to the uncertainty some of the participants in the current study described, wondering if their *desire to be desired* threatened the independence of their experience.

### **The Spectrum of Desire**

As participants described their sexual histories, they revealed the ever-changing and complex nature of their sexual feelings and experiences. Many researchers have found, particularly when engaging in qualitative research, that attempting to delineate or strictly categorize sexual feelings and attraction is incredibly difficult. For example, both Ussher (2005) and Griffin (2000) explored the complexities and nuances of female relationships, questioning the narrow and restrictive categories within which friendships among girls are defined. They argued that the passionate and intimate nature of many female friendships are often ignored or trivialized under an assumption of heterosexuality. Though physical intimacy should not (by the same token) be assumed to be indicative of lesbianism or bisexuality, neither should genuine attraction be dismissed as a possibility. Further, Weaver et al. (2011) explored the phenomenon of “friends with benefits” among young adults and found that the traditional scripts of monogamous dating have made room for more casual “hook up” scenarios. The idea of fluidity in attraction to different genders, as well as physical boundaries in friendship, was echoed in the voices of the participants of this study, who described exploration with friends along a continuum of attraction in which kissing, cuddling and touch with friends was normative, and was at times intentionally engaged in with the aim of exploring their own sexuality. All described a level of same-sex attraction, and an intimacy in friendships with both genders that was not always strictly platonic. Seen through the eyes of the young women of this study, attempting to define what desire is (and by extension, is not), became very complex, indeed.

*Freedom of expression* revealed itself to be a sub-theme of great importance within this research. This construct also existed along a continuum for the participants, each at a different point in the journey toward trust and connection in self and others. It is the ability to know and express one’s sexual self that in many ways propelled feminist researchers to begin studying and seeking out the perspectives of young women on this topic. Most notably, Fine (1988) identified “the missing discourse of desire” and began to examine the role of sexual agency in young women’s connections with their bodies and feelings, and the

degree to which they feel free to express themselves. In the current study, twenty-five years later, while participants freely and openly engaged in the intellectual discourse of desire within the interview process, the openness of the discourse between the participants and their bodies, and the participants and their sexual partners, had varying levels of clarity. Experiences of open communication and equal opportunity to express their desires led to a strengthening in sense of self and confidence. Conversely, incidents of trauma and a lack of positive experiences to buffer that trauma often led to stories of stifling or silence. Much as Tolman (2002a) and Tolman et al. (2003) observed in their research with young women, experiences of violation and messages of desire as unsafe or wrong create a dissonance and distrust in the body that breeds distrust in anyone who may act on that body.

### **Lived Experiences of Female Desire**

For participants in this study, the experience of desire is a symbiotic relationship between their thoughts and feelings, and the structure of the culture in which they live. Though all participants related instances of experiencing desire, the degree to which they felt the ability to express and act on that desire varied. They noted that the prevailing discourse on how they as women are “supposed to” enact their roles as sexual people was mainly in the position of object rather than subject. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006), in developing the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI), found that the greater degree to which young women reported subverting these gender norms (that is, claimed their sexual subjectivity), the higher levels of enjoyment they reported. The authors found three factors of importance on the FSSI: 1) sexual body-esteem (the degree to which women place value in their bodies regardless of external validation); 2) sexual desire and pleasure (which includes both entitlement to and efficacy in achieving pleasure); and 3) sexual self-reflection. Further strengthening this finding, Schick et al. (2008) found in a survey of 424 women attending college that both sexual motivation and feminist beliefs were positively correlated with level of sexual satisfaction they felt. Specifically, the authors found that those who reported that they engaged in sexual intercourse for their own reasons (e.g. ‘I wanted to,’ ‘I thought it would feel good’), reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction and more consistent condom use. Perhaps most interestingly, those who reported that they

subscribed to a feminist ideology were most highly correlated to reports of sexual satisfaction.

In the current research, though there was much discussion around feminist ideologies and a unanimous agreement that participants have a right to sexual pleasure, some respondents related an uneasiness around expressing some of their desires when the risk in seeking connection could include giving up control in some way. The uneasiness did not come from the threat of doing something physically that they were uncomfortable with, however. Rather, it was the worry that the willingness to give up control indicated an acceptance or agreement with dominant cultural stereotypes of women as submissive, which would therefore make them 'bad feminists.' In searching for pleasure and their subjective selves, there were pitfalls not only in subverting traditional norms and risking being seen as a 'slut,' but also in not properly adopting new norms and being perceived as weak or lacking confidence in their bodies or desires.

There were other features within this research that, despite approaching the interview process with bracketed assumptions (Smith et. al, 2012), produced surprising results. For example, when examining the socio-cultural influences on how the participants perceived their experiences of sexual desire and the development of their sexuality, the effects of religion and formal education in school around sexuality were minimal. None of the participants in the current study identified as belonging to a religious denomination of any kind, and none communicated a sense that religion had either adversely or positively affected their experience of sexual desire or the development of their sexuality. Of the five participants, Lauren was the only one to have attended Catholic school, but felt that her experience receiving religious messages around sexuality were minimal, and much less impactful than the messages she received from her peers and her own personal experiences. Regnerus (2007) noted that simply being aware of religious messages is not enough for them to be meaningful, however. In order for Biblical and religious ideas to carry weight in sexual decision-making, it is often accompanied by having these ideals espoused at home, among peers and at school. For Lauren, the influence of her mother's educational and open stance about sexuality left a stronger impression than any one societal institution.



As previously mentioned, school and the educational curriculum also had little meaningful impact on the participants' feelings of sexual desire and the development of their sexual selves. Most described messages that were either too late to be useful, vague or non-existent. Jamie expressed satisfaction with her school's managing of communication around sexual development. She noted, however, as Lauren articulated in regards to religion, that the messages she received from home came earlier and more strongly than anything she remembers from school. Participants stated that they believe schools should take an active and consistent stance in speaking to students about a wide range of topics around sexuality. This belief reflects findings by SIECCAN (2009), showing across Canada that the majority of parents and students alike (82% and 95%, respectively) believe that schools should be a strong resource for sexual education. It is interesting to note that three of the participants in the current study related an awareness of sexual feelings in their bodies well before puberty, some as early as five years old, which is also supported by findings in developmental research (Link, 2009). This suggests that there may not be a time that is 'too early' to begin speaking with children about their relationship with their bodies in a developmentally appropriate manner.

The importance of having discussions about sexuality and sexual agency is underscored by the seriously detrimental impact of child sexual abuse (an event that reverberated across the lives of two participants in this study). Child sexual abuse is a crime that often depends on the confusion and shame of young victims who are told by adult perpetrators that they (the perpetrators) are the ones who have power and control over the child's body and that the fault somehow lies in the way the child is behaving or reacting (Olafson, Corwin & Summit, 1993). These authors detail a long and disturbing history of medical and psychological professionals rooting the reactions of traumatized patients in inherent neuroses rather than as a result of abuse. If a dialogue begins early emphasizing that no one has a right to touch children without their consent, that curiosity is natural and nothing that they do or say in the exploration of that curiosity justifies unwanted touch, the shame and secrecy that pervade the subject of child sexual abuse will lose some of its power. And as the SIECCAN report (2009) indicates, both parents and children believe that schools and teachers should be involved in conversations with children and adolescents about the development of sexuality.

## **Strengths of the Research**

There were a number of strengths in this study. First, research has shown that often in the study of female sexuality, the areas of focus and conclusions drawn by policy makers (Fine & McClelland, 2007; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999), institutions (Daniluk, 1993), schools (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Rahimi & Liston, 2009) and parents (O'Sullivan et al., 2001) do not necessarily reflect the thoughts and feelings of the young women themselves. Therefore, as in the current study, it is extremely important to engage in research that creates space for young women to articulate their experiences and perspectives. This research demonstrates that though there are many cultural aspects that influence the development of sexual desire and sexuality, the way people absorb and interpret these messages may not align with what is expected.

Secondly, Tolman et al. (2005) also noted the powerful impact that the first-hand accounts of people who have had direct experience with a phenomenon can have on the development of public policy. In using IPA to examine this phenomenon, it was possible to not only to get first-hand accounts, but also to engage in attempting to understand these experiences through participants' eyes. As such, in allowing the participants in the present study space to reflect on early experiences of sexual desire, and in turn through examining and interpreting these experiences with a rigorous qualitative method, a contribution to the literature can be made on impactful messages in the initial development of sexuality. Further, by engaging in the double hermeneutic stance characteristic in IPA (Smith et al., 2012), the role of the researcher is clearly included in analysis and the effect of the researcher-participant relationship is examined so as not to ignore the social constructionist paradigm the research exists under.

Thirdly, though there were many similarities between participants in this sample, there was also diversity in terms of experiences of objectification and trauma, allowing an examination of the impact of abuse on how young women interpret their experiences of sexual desire and the development of their sexualities. As was found in previous research, the experiences of sexual violation and objectification can have a significant impact on how women feel and express sexual desire and intimacy (Daniluk, 1993; Rellini, Elinson, Janssen & Meston, 2012; Thorpe, 2010; Tolman, 2002a). The current study, with its focus on early experiences of desire, allowed an opportunity to hear through the words of the participants

such as Lauren and Natalie how experiences of trauma and harassment can disrupt the trajectory of sexual development in women who initially had a strong sense of their bodies and comfort in expressing desire. Conversely, abuse can serve as a catalyst for a young woman to reclaim her body and her experiences of desire, as Erica described.

Finally, this research provided an opportunity for the participants to gain a greater understanding of their experiences and what they wished to see for themselves going forward in life. All of the young women remarked that they had found it interesting and enlightening to examine their experiences in such depth. Many commented that they realized something about themselves through the research that they had not recognized before. For some, it gave greater clarity regarding the role that sexual desire played in their lives right now, and what they wanted for themselves in the future; still others expressed the hope that their experiences would allow helping professionals an opportunity to better understand how to relate to and assist young women in learning about sexuality.

### **Limitations of the Research**

In considering the limitations of this study, I first must acknowledge that in recruiting on a university campus there will likely be a population consisting of young women who have a minimum of a high school education and a socio-economic status that allows university attendance, thus limiting the diversity of the sample. As Tolman (2002a) observed in *Dilemmas of Desire*, poverty and different educational opportunities can create very different views on the role of sexual desire and sexuality development. Another potential limitation due to the specificity of a university population could be the exposure to information and ideas that encourage questioning of social norms, such as Women and Gender's Studies classes. It may be a limitation insofar as the transferability of the sample may not extend to women who have not had the opportunity to examine the issue in as much depth. Further, though it was not my intention to limit the population of this study to a particular ethnic background, all volunteers for the study were Caucasian, thus leaving little room to discuss the cultural differences that may exist in regards to experiences and expression of sexuality.

In limiting my recruitment to females for this study, the perspectives of men, transgender, transsexual and two-spirited individuals on sexual desire and sexuality development were not included. As Morrison, Ryan, Fox, McDermott and Morrison (2008)

observed, what is perceived as “normal” sexual behaviour is different for men than women, but there are relatively few studies that examine male or queer experiences of sexual desire, intimacy and the development of the sexual self (e.g. Flowers et al., 1997; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Sanders, 2008). However, in the interest of maintaining cohesiveness within the sample, and as men and women have different physiological and cultural forces affecting their experience of sexuality (Laan & Jansen, 2007), I determined it would be best to limit the study sample to women.

Finally, it may also be considered a limitation that some of the thoughts and ideas that the women shared were retrospective in nature, and therefore would likely differ in some ways from the way they would have described their experiences at the time. However, it was part of the structure of this study that the participants should have some time and space to reflect on how these experiences contributed to and affected the development of their sexual selves; many times the experiences they were describing were still very much affecting them today.

### **Implications for Counselling Practice**

In this section, I will address the implications in this research for counselling practice, 1) by discussing the theoretical framework under which this topic could be meaningfully explored; and 2) by detailing why this research could be useful for specific populations.

#### **Theoretical framework.**

As the focus of the current study was not based around a specific ‘life problem’ (such as addiction, depression, anxiety or abuse), I believe it would be best to focus on the theoretical framework upon which working with clients on issues surrounding sexuality should be based, feminist counselling theory. Throughout the interview process, discussion about sexuality and sexual desire was about having these experiences as a woman, and how cultural messages and social scripts affected their lived experiences of desire and the development of their sexuality. The techniques and ideas employed within feminist counselling would be appropriate for clients at any point on the gender spectrum, because this framework is based around questioning norms and assumptions rooted in gender and sexuality (Corey, 2009). Therefore, this framework would be particularly well-suited to

clients who are struggling with connecting to or expressing their sexual desire for any number of reasons.

Firstly, a hallmark of feminist therapy is the development of an egalitarian relationship, and therefore the therapist is making clear that they are not in a position to tell the client what to do or how to live (Corey, 2009; Foster & May, 2003). Rather, the therapist is a partner in discovery and invites the client to develop a vision of what they would like to see out of the client-therapist relationship. Further, therapists who adhere to the principles of feminist counselling also at times engage in self-disclosure to create a sense of equality with the client. Note that this self-disclosure is done carefully and with purpose. It does not shift the focus from the client's issues—instead, it allows the client a chance to see a real-life example of someone who has dealt with some of the same issues in a constructive manner and created positive change. In the context of sexuality and sexual desire, self-disclosure could, if undertaken purposefully, have the advantage of lifting some of the secrecy, shame and isolation that may surround the subject for the client.

Another important element in feminist counselling is the analysis and challenging of gender role norms (Corey, 2009; Foster & May, 2003; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Schick et al., 2008). For both women and men, the restrictions that gender norms place on behaviour can have detrimental effects on sexual expression and experience of pleasure. One of the methods feminist counsellors use to challenge clients to examine gender roles is bibliotherapy, in which the clients are given a variety of materials that engage in a discussion about gender, from nonfiction, educational videos and journal articles to films, self-help books and novels (Corey, 2009). Through these media, clients can begin to question the dominant discourses around issues such as body image, domestic violence, the “glass ceiling” and sexual harassment.

Therefore, engaging in counselling within a feminist framework would provide many opportunities for growth and connection with clients who are working through issues related to sexual desire and the development of their sexuality. With a focus on egalitarianism and the challenging of gender norms, therapists and clients could work together to determine the best course of action in helping clients achieve sexual subjectivity.

## **Populations.**

The possible applications of this research in counselling practice are numerous. Firstly, the importance of *unlocking desire with fantasy and imagination* introduced fascinating possibilities for counsellors working with youth who are struggling to shape their identities but meaningfully connect with characters or themes introduced in movies, television and books. An interesting example is the idea of group cinematherapy with young women detailed by Bierman, Krieger and Leifer (2003), in which the authors conducted therapy by showing films and then using the themes, characters and metaphors within the film to explore client issues. This type of counselling would be particularly useful with youth in allowing the practitioner to use media as a conduit to connect with his or her clients in a meaningful way. It also gives the clients an opportunity to share elements of their lives and interests without initially having to appear too vulnerable in a situation with an authority figure. This would be especially helpful when exploring issues surrounding sexuality, which participants in this study described as private and not something that was easily shared. Exploring issues in development of sexual identity with adolescents could also be extended to bibliotherapy (Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young & Money, 2005), photovoice (Smith, Bratini & Appio, 2012), or music therapy (Sharma & Jagdev, 2012) in the same way, by using characters and themes that strike a chord with clients to explore issues that they are working through sexually.

In describing the theme of *unlocking desire with trust and connection*, the participants described the paramount importance of communication and openness within relationship for experiencing and expressing sexual desire. This idea has direct application in marital and sex therapy. For example, Batool and Khalid (2012) found when examining the level of emotional intelligence of in eighty-five married couples in Pakistan that marital contentment was highly correlated to higher levels of emotional intelligence. In the same vein, trust and connection within the sexual relationship is important, and a therapist could utilize the findings in this study to emphasize the power of freely and openly communicating both partners' sexual desires to ensure that each person's sexual subjectivity are respected and nurtured. This idea was supported by Galinski and Sonenstein (2013), who found that perceived equity within the sexual relationship in which both partner's desires were being considered was correlated to higher levels of

relationship satisfaction. There were more measures for women than men indicating they experienced dissatisfaction at being under-benefitted in the sexual relationship, and more measures for men than women that indicated they experienced dissatisfaction at being over-benefitted, which could suggest that the role of women as sexually subservient in a sexual relationship could be changing. This was supported by the current research, with participants often expressing that their most enjoyable experiences were ones in which their pleasure was valued.

A further implication that this research could have for counselling is the treatment of clients who have experienced sexual violence. In working with women who have been assaulted, Briere and Jordan (2004) note that the effects of the violence are far-reaching and complex, and include the direct victimization effects, which can be “intrinsically injurious, psychologically and physically, and often produce acute trauma symptoms” (p. 1254). The authors also highlight victim-specific variables, such as lower socio-economic status, previous psychological disorders, fewer innate coping mechanisms, a history of family violence and a genetic predisposition as factors that contribute to the level of resiliency survivors of assault experience. Characteristic of many women who have experienced molestation and sexual assault, Erica and Lauren described a “shutting down” of their bodies after the experience of assault that led to a disconnection from their desire. However, whereas Erica was given support after her disclosure and engaged in a reconnection with her body, Lauren’s repeated trauma, lack of familial support and subsequent disassociation from her body created lasting reverberations that continue to affect her today. The authors caution practitioners not to attempt to distill a survivor’s ability to cope with the after-effects of abuse down to a singular attribute, such as innate coping mechanisms, but instead to view the after-effects of trauma as interconnected.

Another interesting artifact of this research was its applicability to issues within the LGBTQ community. As previously detailed, the *continuum of attraction* that participants described indicated that sexual orientation was not an attribute that was easily kept to a static category (e.g. men vs. women) or fixed level (e.g. lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual). This information could be very useful in counselling clients who are struggling with defining their sexuality. Matthews and Salazar (2012) and Conner (2003) note that in counselling people in the LGBTQ community, often the process of coming out can be

difficult and can occur in stages, beginning with coming out to oneself. Counsellors can be an accepting outlet as clients work through the anxieties associated with this process, and (as was found in the current research) it is key to stress the importance of acknowledging and celebrating steps toward becoming more open among supportive people in clients' lives. Conner (2003) suggests that another important role that a counsellor can play as clients come to understand more about themselves and their feelings is to gently challenge negative conceptions that clients may have about the LGBTQ community, and in turn, damaging cognitions about themselves. The current research found that as participants expressed greater acceptance of their same-sex attractions as a normal aspect of their life experiences, they described greater confidence. This is in support of Matthews and Salazar's (2012) suggestion for an integrative model of counselling for LGB youth (they do not include transgender, transsexual or two-spirited clients as they are facing issues of gender more so than sexuality). The authors suggest a model of counselling that includes:

(a) understanding the stages of sexual identity development; (b) helping the client deal with internalized homophobia and self-esteem and self-acceptance issues; (c) working with family, cultural, racial, and religious issues; (d) being aware of the school and peer environment; (e) assessing prior counseling experience; and (f) finding access to an LGB support network. (p. 99).

This model addresses the many and varied aspects of the coming out experience, and acknowledges that coming out is a process that takes time and continued support. The current study's findings support this counselling model as well, in that the participants' experiences also reflected the importance of understanding, trusting and connecting with one's own desires.

### **Future Directions for Research**

Learning to understand and accept one's own sexuality is an important part of development across the lifespan. There have been many fascinating and ground-breaking studies done on the subject of sexuality and its place in young people's lives (e.g. Hensel et al., 2011; Matthews & Salazar, 2012; O'Sullivan et al., 2001; Regnerus, 2007; Tolman, 2002a). However, given the prevalence of child sexual abuse (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Thorpe, 2010), the continued objectification of women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Levy, 2005; Szymanski et al., 2011), and the ongoing struggles people face in the journey toward



their most authentic sexual selves (Attwood, 2007; Burns et al., 2011; Daniluk, 1993; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Flowers et al., 1997; Kitzinger, 2005; Patrick & Breckenbach, 2009), there are many areas of study that deserve further scrutiny. Minority groups continue to be underrepresented in the sexuality literature, such as sexual minorities (Conner, 2003; Griffin, 2000; Ussher, 2005), ethnic minorities (Champion et al., 2009; O'Sullivan et al., 2001) and those with disabilities (Sweeney, 2007).

A paucity within the literature which is of particular importance within Canada is the lack of literature on First Nations sexualities (Tafuya, 2007; Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo & Bhuyan, 2006). It would be useful to engage with this population for a number of reasons, particularly to hear from First Nations people themselves in the realm of qualitative literature about how cultural attitudes about sexuality affect their experiences of sexual desire, as well as how racism and other forms of discrimination affect how they view themselves as sexual people. A final note on further directions for research would be to expand the literature on male experiences of sexual desire and sexual development. Though it continues to be of great importance to ensure that the voices of women are heard and respected in the literature, there are relatively few examples of research involving the personal reflections of men on their experiences of sexual desire and the development of a sexual self, particularly through the lens of unlocking desire through trust and connection (Flowers et al., 1999; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Sanders, 2008). Though there are significant differences between how men and women are treated and perceived on the basis of gender and sexuality, it is a worthwhile avenue of exploration to investigate the commonalities of wants and needs between women and men. When we continue to dichotomize sexuality into male vs. female, them vs. us, conquest vs. connection, we de-legitimize a range of experiences and nuances in human experience that could lead to understanding and greater trust. In a world where objectification and violence continue to be pervasive, it is necessary to stop thinking about these issues as women's issues, and start thinking about them as human issues that lead to a breakdown of trust and connection that can only be solved with the realization that they affect everyone.

## **Conclusions**

Within the literature there are relatively few studies focusing on early experiences of sexual desire and its contributions to the development of the sexual self (Bay-Cheng et

al., 2007, Ussher, 2005; Wansley, 2007). In conducting this research, it became clear that allowing young women to speak about early messages that were impactful to them about sexuality, and how their experiences of sexual desire influenced the perception of those messages, was an important avenue of exploration. In attempting to understand not only what was impactful, but also why it was meaningful to them, a clearer picture came into focus of the things that matter in the sexual lives of young women, according to the women themselves. A true ownership of the sexual self cannot occur simply through the experience of arousal, attraction or romance. Sexual subjectivity emerges through unlocking desire with trust and connection, not only with a partner, but with the self, an acceptance and celebration of body, mind and spirit. Throughout the journey of this research, I was continually inspired by the young women who participated in my study. Though each was at a different point in their journey toward sexual subjectivity, and despite events in their lives and messages that tried to convince them otherwise, each of them held the deep conviction that they had a right to sexual desire and subjectivity as part of their lived experience as passionate, intelligent and strong women.

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## Appendix B—E-mail Screening Script

Researcher: Thank you for your interest in this research project. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how young women experience and make meaning of sexual desire. I would just like to confirm that you meet the guidelines for participating in this study. Are you female? Are you currently eighteen to twenty-five years old? If you feel that you may be uncomfortable speaking about your early experiences of sexual desire and would like counselling regarding issues of sexual abuse or trauma, please contact Student Counselling Services at 306-966-4920. If you would prefer to access services outside the university, I can provide a list of counselling services throughout the city.

Thank you. Now that we've covered the participation criteria, I would like to set up a time for us to meet so that I can learn about you and your experiences. I have an interview room at the University of Saskatchewan campus available, please let me know if you need directions and/or bus tickets in order to meet. At our first meeting we will go over informed consent. We will meet for about one to two hours. Following the first interview, we will meet one more time in order to review your transcript and talk about themes that were found in your interview. This meeting will last the same amount of time, about one and a half hours. Prior to the first interview, I would like you to think about what sexual desire means to you, and how your early experiences with desire informed the development of your sexuality.

\*If the participant does not meet the criteria for participation, she will be thanked for her interest, and will be given information for other research opportunities.



## *Participant Consent Form*

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**Project title:** Female retrospectives of early experiences of sexual desire and the development of the sexual self

**Researcher:** Nicole Espeseth  
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**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. The purpose of this research is to understand how adolescent girls make meaning of their early experiences of sexual desire and how that understanding contributes to the development of their sexuality, that is, their thoughts and beliefs about themselves as sexual people. This information could help counselors, other helping professionals and adolescent researchers understand what young women feel is important to know about their experiences of sexual desire.

**Procedures:**

To participate in this study, it would be necessary to meet with me, in person, for two separate interviews. The style of the interviews will be conversational in nature and the topic will be your early experiences of sexual desire, and how you feel those experiences contribute to the development of your sexuality. The interviews will be held at a convenient time and location, possibly the University of Saskatchewan. If you need transportation to and from these interviews, I will arrange that for you. Both interviews will be approximately 90 minutes. The first interview will be audiotaped and transcribed, so that I can have an accurate record of the conversation. After the first interview is transcribed, I will analyze the interview, and then we will arrange the second meeting, to discuss my analysis and any other thoughts and impressions you may have. Anything that you do not want to include will be removed. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

**Potential Risks:**

Some of your experiences may be quite personal and sensitive in nature. It is possible that you will experience some feelings of discomfort when you tell me about them. It is very important for you to know that you are free to decide what you will or will not tell me. You may choose what questions you want or do not want to answer, and you may turn off the tape recorder at any point in the interview. After any of the interviews, if you want to talk about the thoughts and feelings you are having, I will give you a list of counselors in your community that you may contact.

**Potential Benefits:**

Your involvement in this study may give you a greater self-awareness. As well, your experiences will enrich the research on adolescent sexuality and early experiences of sexual desire by adding to my understanding of these experiences as I describe them in my study.

**Compensation:**

In consideration for your time and involvement, you will be given a \$15 honorarium for each interview.

**Confidentiality:**

During the course of the study, all audiotapes will be stored in a secure location to assure confidentiality. The individual who transcribes the audiotapes will also store the audiotapes and transcribed data in a secure location and maintain confidentiality of all the data you have contributed to this study. The results of this study will be published in a Master of Education thesis, and portions of this thesis may be used in subsequent academic publications and/or conference presentations. You will be given a pseudonym to ensure your privacy. As well, any information that might identify you will not be included in the final report.

**Storage of Data:**

Upon completion of the study, my supervisor will securely store all the data, including the audiotapes, transcripts, and consent forms, in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan. This data is kept for a minimum of five (5) years.

**Right to Withdraw:** (see consent guidelines section 10)

Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you wish to withdraw, all your data will be destroyed. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until results have been disseminated in the final thesis defense. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

**Follow up:**

To obtain results from the study, please email me (Nicole) at [studying.desire@usask.ca](mailto:studying.desire@usask.ca), or you can access the overall results of this study through the General Office of the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education in the fall of 2013.



**Questions or Concerns:**

Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office at ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

**Continued or On-going Consent:**

You will be reminded of your rights (to confidentiality, to withdraw, to access information) at the beginning of the follow-up interview, and provided an opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_

*Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Date*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Researcher's Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix D—Interview #1 Guide

Date/Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Participant Pseudonym:

\*Because the format of this interview is designed to elicit descriptions of the participants' perspectives, feelings and ideas about emerging sexuality and the development of their sexual selves, this guide is only meant as a loose framework for the interview process

Questions:

1. What does sexual desire mean to you?
  - a. What is your first memory of feeling sexual desire?
  - b. How did you know you were feeling sexual desire?
    - i. How did you know it was different than friendships, or 'just a crush'?
2. How did you recognize or understand that it was sexual desire?
  - a. Did you talk to anyone about it? What was that conversation like?
  - b. When you first started experiencing these feelings, how did that affect how you understood messages about sex?
3. How did your early feelings and experiences with sexual desire affect your views of sexuality?
  - a. How did they affect your view of yourself as a sexual person?

## Appendix E— Interview #2 Guide

Date/Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Participant Pseudonym:

Questions:

1. I've prepared a table of themes in which I tried to summarize your experience with sexual desire. I'd like to discuss it with you and give me your impression, and tell me if there is anything you would like to change in it. Also, if there was one thing you would like me to know about your experience with this interview process and what we talked about, what would it be?
2. Finally, I would like to sincerely thank you for your participation in this study. I've really enjoyed hearing your ideas and perspective on early experiences of sexual desire, and your insight has been very valuable in helping me understand more about it.

Appendix F—Data Release Form

**DATA/TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed with the researcher a table of themes from my personal interviews in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the table of themes as appropriate. I acknowledge that the information accurately reflects what I said in my personal interviews with Nicole Espeseth. I hereby authorize the release of this information to Nicole Espeseth to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G—Counselling Services

**Allyson Clarke** - Crossroads Therapeutic Solutions.

617C Main Street, Saskatoon, SK S7H 0J8

306-665-6661 or toll-free at 1-877-393-6661

**Jeanette Ambrose, R.Psych** (Connections Counselling, Consulting & Training)

306-249-4244

**Jim Arnold, Ph.D, R.D.Psych** (Chartier Arnold Brock Shimp & Associates)

**Bette Brazier, Ph.D.**

Phone: 220-0926

**A Better Way Professional Counselling Services**

Phone: 664-2409 / 910 Queen St., Saskatoon, SK

**Heather Brenneman, Ph.D, R.D.Psych**

Phone: 343-1502

**Deborah Bryson-Sarauer** (Family Service Saskatoon)

Phone: 244-0127

**Eunice Cachene, BSW, RSW** (Professional Psychologists & Counsellors)

**Joanne Cadrin, M.S.W.** (Professional Psychologists & Counsellors)

**Phil Carverhill, Ph.D, R.D.Psych**

912 Idylwyld Drive N., Suite 206, Saskatoon, SK

**Brian Chartier, Ph.D, R.D.Psych** (Chartier Arnold Brock Shimp & Associates)

**Lynn Corbett, Ph.D, R.D.Psych** (Saskatoon Health Region)

**RossAnn Edwards**

Phone: (306) 652-7771

**Family Counselling Centre**

Phone: (306) 542-3121

**David Jackson, Ph.D, R.D.Psych**

Phone: (306) 222-7297

**Audrey Kinzel, Ph.D., R.D.Psych**

Phone: (306) 281-3424

**Brenda McCarty, M.A.** (McCarty Counselling Services)

Phone: (306) 280-9940

**Prairie Haven Therapy & Family Healing Centre**

Phone: (306) 373-9260

**Ed Risling, R.P.N., B.S.W., R.S.W.** (Prairie Therapists & Trainers)

**Barbara Sanderson, R.Psych, CCC** (Located in Rosetown, SK)

Box 2079, Rosetown, SK; S0L 2V0

**Jennifer Schenn-Visentini, B.S.W. R.S.W.** (Crossroads Therapeutic Solutions)

**Lana Shimp, Ph.D, R.D.Psych** (Chartier Arnold Brock Shimp & Associates)

**Rachel Subchyshyn, M.Ed, CCC** (Professional Psychologists & Counsellors)

**Della Yaroshko, M.S.W.**

Phone: (306) 343-1328