

*GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS: DISCOURSE, POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINISM,  
AND MEDIA PRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN*

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines presentations of women in the media through Foucauldian critical discourse analysis in order to explore dominant ideas of gender and femininity embedded within D/discourses that constrain the lived experiences of women. Specifically, this study explores the television show *Girls* as a text presenting particular knowledge of femininity. By engaging in an interpretive analysis of the ways femininity is presented in both public and private presentations of gender in *Girls*, I reveal how women make sense of past and negotiate future public performances of femininity in private. Further, I deconstruct a specific scene of *Girls* to reveal hidden meanings of femininity and expose how performing docility conforms with normalized expectations of being a woman. This study uses a poststructural feminist lens to critically inspect the suppressed meanings of gender within the text of *Girls* and offers hope for opening up multiple meanings of femininity within the D/discourses of gender and media.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	3
Discourse: Talk, Texts, and Enduring Systems of Thought .....	4
Critical Discourse: Discourse and Power/Knowledge .....	8
Social and Historical Meanings .....	8
Knowledge and Power .....	9
The Discourse of Poststructuralism and Gendered Subjectivities .....	13
Gender, Discourse, and the Media .....	18
Discourse and Media .....	20
The Media as a D/discourse .....	21
The Media and Power/Knowledge .....	22
The Media and Gendered Subjectivities .....	24
METHODS .....	27
Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis .....	29
Interpretation .....	32
Deconstruction .....	33
<i>Girls</i> .....	35

<i>Girls</i> as a Text.....	38
Interpretation of Text .....	38
Deconstruction of Text .....	40
FINDINGS .....	42
Interpretive Findings of Femininity .....	43
<i>Girls</i> in Public.....	44
Sexually Confident yet Dependent .....	45
Silenced Voices.....	54
<i>Girls</i> in Private.....	58
Questioning Femininity .....	59
Voicing Opinions .....	65
Staging the Public in Private.....	78
Deconstructing <i>Girls</i> .....	88
Love Is a Strategic Game.....	91
Docile Bodies Win the Game .....	94
Real Women Are Docile Objects.....	96
Resistance to the Docile “Lady”? .....	98
DISCUSSION.....	102
D/discourse and Presentations of Femininity .....	103
Media as a D/discourse .....	107
Implications and Conclusion.....	110
REFERENCES .....	117

## INTRODUCTION

Women are in a bind. Throughout Western history patriarchy has continued to serve the interests of men and suppress those of women. Many feminist scholars have showed how women are continually suppressed by ways we come to know ourselves in relation to the ways we have organized our world. For instance, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), Trethewey (1999), Calas and Smircich (1991), Sotirin and Gottfried (1999), and Martin (1990) along with others study the marginalization of women in the workplace. However, many of these effects fall on interpersonal and organizational level contexts without much concern for the role of media in this problem. Since “The problem of mass communication is its domination as a supplier of knowledge and its pervasiveness as a producer of social realities” (Hardt, 2004, p.133), I argue that the role of the media must be considered as an issue of the marginalization of women. Throughout the short history of mass media, the role of women within media organization and presented through media have been sequestered. Since women were absent in this field, presentations of women and about women were always in relation to men and often “the content of the media distorts women’s status in the social world” (Tuchman, 1979, p. 531). The media, and specifically scripted entertainment television programming, which I will continue to refer as entertainment media, create and (re)produce meanings of gender that can become naturalized and normative. Subjectivities of gender are then constrained. As Weedon (1997) asserts,



Gendered subject positions are constituted in various ways: by images of how one is expected to look and behave and by rules of behavior to which one should conform which are reinforced by approval or punishment, through particular definitions of pleasure which are offered as natural and imply ways of being a girl or woman, and by the absence within particular discourses of any possibility of negotiating the nature of femininity and masculinity. (p. 95)

By studying the media with a concern for gender, interpretation and deconstruction of media presentations of femininity can be helpful to de-naturalize language and open up room for multiple meanings to be made. In this study, I first present relevant literature on the subjects of discourse, critical discourse, and poststructuralism with a concern for gender issues in society. I then make an argument that the media can be seen as a relevant issue related to the concern of poststructuralist feminist scholars interested in discourse. By defining the media as a realm of discourse, I study how entertainment media simultaneously enables and constrains the identities of women. Specifically, by studying one popular television program, *Girls*, and employing methods of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, interpretation, and deconstruction I explore the complexities of discourse, gender, and media to expose the constitution of gendered subjectivities in society.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past few decades, communication scholars have become increasingly interested in the concept of discourse. Foucault (1972, 1980) investigates discourses by looking at historical regulations of particular discourses such as sexuality and looks into the knowledge and power that is embedded within discourses. Hall (1997) asserts that the world as individuals experience it is created through language. To Hall and Foucault, language orders and organizes the world in particular ways, which produces the objects of knowledge. By understanding language, understandings of the world and experiences in the world can be meaningfully talked and reasoned about. Realities are constructed through language, which Hall, including the ideas of Foucault, describes as a discourse that produces a system of representation. Knowledge of the self and the self in relation to the world emerges in common forms of talk, text, and social practice. Individuals come to know themselves in certain ways based on the available discourses. If a discourse is not available, an individual will not come know him or herself in that particular way (Foucault, 1978, Weedon, 1997). Discourses thus arrange and normalize the social world and social practices (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

While Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) state that the field of discourse is so diverse that what discourse means can change from scholar to scholar, they offer a model of discourse that extends from micro/local contexts to grand/mega Discourses. Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) elaborate on this idea and include three orientations to discourse: object,

becoming, and grounded in action. Specifically, the grounded in action orientation attempts to view micro and macro discourses as in conjunction with one another and states that meanings form and emerge in interactions. In other words, micro discourses and macro Discourses are mutually constitutive in the meaning-making process. This perspective of discourse is a useful lens for investigating issues of power and gendered subjectivity and can be extended to examine how the media (re)presents gender in terms of discourses.

In order to study the ways television entertainment media influence (enable and constrain) gendered subjectivities with a strong focus on discourse, I first review discourse as a lens to viewing the world through language and embedded systems of meaning. I then add a critical perspective to discourse as a way to aid in seeing enmeshed power/knowledge relations that are a part of discourse. I follow with a review of poststructuralism to refine discourse in terms subject positions and gender/femininity. This literature provides a backdrop to re-introduce television media in terms of discourse, power/knowledge relations, and how media presentations are potentially problematic for presentations of women within the realm of entertainment media.

### **Discourse: Talk, Texts, and Enduring Systems of Thought**

Discourse is usually understood as talk, texts, and social practices along with the larger meaning systems that guide the way a specific society uses language to make meanings and coordinate collective action. According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), there are two ways to understand discourse and the theory that guides it. The first is language and the second is meaning/knowledge. Language and meaning/knowledge are two separate subsets of the same point, both guide each other in a system of meaning

making (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Similarly, Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) explain language and meaning as two types of discourse. Everyday talk, texts, and social practices (language) are one type of discourse. The larger ideas and meanings behind our talk and texts (meaning/knowledge) are considered enduring systems of thought and are another type of discourse. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) label the two branches of discourse, “d” discourse for everyday talk and text, and “D” Discourse for enduring systems of thought that guide and are embedded in everyday talk and texts. I will continue to refer to these two meanings of discourse by using a lowercase *discourse* for talk and text and a capitalized *Discourse* for large-scale system of meanings.

Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) expand on Alvesson and Kärreman’s (2000) separation between discourse and Discourse to describe *discourse* as the talk, texts, and social practices individuals engage in routinely. Talk refers to the active process of conversations, greetings, and interactions. Texts are more concrete than talk is. Letters, books, video, pictures, clothing, and almost anything that can be considered locatable represent texts. Texts can also be seen as the “done” of conversations. Anything that can be referred back to can be considered a text. Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, and Robichaud (1996) explain texts as the “matter” of conversation. Social practices can be considered the everyday, mundane interactions and practices that are part of the social world. Meeting someone for the first time, buying an item from the market, and saying goodbye are all social practices that can be considered part of a discourse. Again, when being studied, talk and social practices, which are fleeting moments, turn into a text that can be examined multiple times and returned to. Many scholars have studied talk and social practices as texts. For instance, Horan (2011) analyses texts to interpret how women

instrumentalize gender to construct identities. Prividera and Howard (2006) examine the interconnectedness of gender and race in representations of women in the military as seen through interviews and reports on news media. Foucault (1978) studies the texts surrounding the discourse of sexuality. Studying texts becomes useful for exploring the power and value that is enmeshed within practices of language use. Language orders the social world, looking at language through texts can expose the larger Discourse and power relations behind discourses. Talk, texts, and social practices make up discourse and are continually being created.

The other aspect of this theory is *Discourse*, which have been labeled enduring systems of thought or large-scale systems of meaning. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) label Discourse as “the stuff beyond the text functioning as a powerful ordering force” (p. 1127). As such, gender, capitalism, freedom, and democracy among many other ideas can all be regarded as Discourses. These ideas guide the way in which individuals talk, and in turn, talk is consistently re-creating and transforming the meanings that are part of a Discourse. Discourses order the world in particular ways that become naturalized and normal (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Foucault, 1972). By naturalizing the world, particular Discourses drive individual’s subjectivity, sense of self, feelings, thoughts, and orientations to the world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). In this view of Discourse, the establishment of power/knowledge is made consistent and normalized. Discourses enable individuals to know and act in the world in specific ways, this knowledge can be enabling and at the same time constraining. Discourse structures society and social practices, and it is here that discourse shapes and creates knowledge of the world and how to live in it. To reveal Discourses, scholars look to texts. Prividera and Howard (2006) look at media

texts in order to gain insight into the Discourses of gender and nationalism. Wang (2012) looked at texts to see the embedded meanings of motherhood.

Taking a “grounded in action” approach to Discourse/discourse offered by Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) to fully understand how Discourse is enacted, one needs to understand and look to discourse, because each aids in informing the other. This orientation to discourse offers a way to understand the interrelatedness of discourse and Discourse, which declares that Discourse/discourse are mutually constitutive. Discourse shapes the way individuals talk and the social practices they may engage in. In turn, that talk and engagement can continually reshape, reconstruct, and possibly transform the Discourses that institutionalize society. “Through crafting and recrafting... discourse, ... [individuals] shape the very institutions that shape them” (p. 17). I propose using the term *D/discourse* as a way to represent the simultaneity of discourse and Discourse. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) state that discourse “affects, (frames)” Discourse (p. 1131). Both D/discourses are being represented and used in an all-embracing fashion. D/discourse is everywhere and continually being created, recreated, and changed. D/discourse shapes the order and knowledge individuals have about the world. Understanding D/discourse as mutually constitutive informs how many realms of D/discourse play out in the social world. Taking a grounded in action orientation is useful in understanding the Discourse of gender. Not only is gender enacted through language, practices, and texts but it is also informed by larger ideas on how women should be and how men should be. This mutually constitutive approach is needed for studying D/discourses of gender because it offers a comprehensive vantage point for investigating meanings that emerge from D/discourses.

### **Critical Discourse: Discourse and Power/Knowledge**

Various scholars studying discourse take a critical perspective with an interest in the relationship between power and discourse. For instance Hall (1997), embracing the ideas of Foucault, states, “discourse is concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning...discourse produces the objects of knowledge and nothing which is meaningful exists outside discourse” (p. 44). Two themes of critical discourse emerge in the literature; the social and historical meanings that individuals inherit from the past, and the relationship of power/knowledge in regards to discourse, and both are related to how meanings become a normative force and are naturalized as a result of power, domination, and hegemony.

#### Social and Historical Meanings

Throughout history, specific discourses had social and historical meanings that were created to serve other purposes and people at the time (Foucault, 1980). Not only do these meanings serve particular interests in history, these meanings endure and individuals are born into pre-existing meanings and inherit them from birth. At the same time meanings can enable certain knowledge, it also suppresses other knowledge from being known. Privileging one meaning over another normalizes knowledge of a subject (Weedon, 1997). For example, Foucault (1978) calls attention to the history of the discourses of sex and sexuality. Foucault asserts that in the Victorian bourgeoisie the discourse of sex and sexuality were open and public. An open discourse stood with the subject of sex, “it was a period when bodies ‘made a display of themselves’” (p. 3). After this, family consumed sexuality and the discourse of sex was one in the same with reproduction. The discourse on sex was naturalized to that of the family and the private

bedroom. No longer was it appropriate for sexuality and sex to be discussed publicly. Discussion of sex in the public sphere was repressed, and Foucault suggests that the repression of sex coincides with that of capitalism. If sex is repressed, it is because it does not occur simultaneously with that of labor. When labor is being highly organized and valued, it is impractical to push a discourse forward that welcomes pursuits of pleasure. The meanings that were created by repressing sex serve particular interests, capitalism.

By making sex a forbidden subject, and only acceptable in matters of reproduction, it became normal and natural to treat sex in that way. It created a “sameness” in society. It also created a constraining discourse for people who did not abide by the normal discourse. The discourse of sex and sexuality was constraining and at the same time enabling. It enabled a society to focus and value labor, which built structures, created objects to benefit society, and advanced the quality of living. It also constrained an entire population to be suppressed and to treat something that was once thought of as natural as now abnormal, strange, and isolated. The privileging of meanings aids in a naturalization of knowledge. Dominate meanings become invisible, unquestioned, and the normal way in which to act and think. When meanings are not questioned, they become hidden. Privera and Howard (2006) state that the power of a discourse to naturalize language, knowledge, and meanings resides in invisibility, which connects knowledge with power.

### Knowledge and Power

Many who embrace critical perspectives follow Foucault’s (1970, 1980) work equating power with knowledge. There are particular ways of coming to know something and each way of knowing is power-laded. It enables and constrains individuals in certain



ways and organizes our knowledge about the world. The flaw with an ordered way of knowing is that one does not notice how they are ordered. The order becomes invisible because it becomes naturalized and transformed into a common sense understanding of the world. Foucault (1980) conceptualizes power as a system that is enacted through everyone but not localized in any individual, aiding in the naturalization of meanings.

Foucault (1970) calls for finding out how order and structure came to be the way it did by introducing the four similitudes, or forms of resemblance, that are traditional ways people come to know. Foucault's four forms of resemblance are: *convenientia*, *aemulatio*, analogy, and sympathies. *Convenientia*, *aemulatio*, and analogy relate things based in proximity, similarity, or a reflection of likeness. Sympathy has the ability to transform or alter the identity, and create and maintain sameness in things. The four similitudes act as a knowledge structure that creates and maintains sameness within the world. Foucault states that knowledge in the forms of resemblance comes from discovering and interpreting their "signatures" or their sign, symbol, mark, or language (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Signatures make things visible whereas resemblance keeps them hidden or invisible. "Resemblance was the invisible form of that, which from the depths of the world, make things visible; but in order that this form may be brought out into the light in its turn there must be a visible figure that will draw it out from its profound invisibility" (Foucault, 1970, p. 26). It is both the resemblance and the signature that form what is known. The ability to know something depends on knowing the words (signature) capable of expressing a certain knowledge. Therefore, we know the world through language. Language creates a break of subject/object; it keeps things together, separate, and creates ways of knowing things as the same and/or different. In this,

language equals an ordered knowledge, which also equals a mode of being or doing in the world (Foucault, 1970, 1972; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Individuals are born into a society where these knowledge structures exist, and once people come to know themselves in a particular way that has been naturalized by a discourse, they also come to know the world and themselves in relation to that world. Consequently, “Knowledge is always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice” (Hall, 1997, p. 47). When language is regarded as the creator of knowledge and knowledge as a carrier of meanings, it also carries the power to enable and constrain human possibilities. This way of understanding can have consequences for how we study relationships between discourse and gender that directs attention toward gendered subjectivities.

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) assert that discourse constitutes gender. Gender is sometimes overlooked for something individuals have but not something that individuals are actively “doing” together. Providing four frames in which discourse relates to organizing and gender, Ashcraft and Mumby explain that the discourse of gender organizes and (dis)organizes meaning structures that hold power to individuals. “Women and men ‘do gender’ in various settings, ‘crafting selves’ that (re)produce and/or resist gender difference and relations of power through...discourse” (p. 10). The knowledge of one’s gendered self is actively co-constructed through discourse and inherited through D/discourse. Trethewey (1999) states that women learn a feminine mode of being well before they are aware of it. “Not only do women learn to ‘throw like a girl,’ they also learn to sit, stand, walk, tilt their heads... and comport themselves like a girl....*women’s* bodies are socialized into moving in a feminine...manner” (p. 424). To Trethewey, the

Discourse of femininity is to be fragile, immobile, and domesticated. Thus, acting in a free and open fashion reads masculinity and opens a female up to objectification. Sotirin and Gottfried (1999) study the control and resistance of secretaries and state that the D/discourse of a secretary is enmeshed in power relations that position a secretary as a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman (p. 59). Women who identify with the discursive realm of “secretary” are usually identified by the idea of secretary and not the material condition that they are placed. Thus, it is the knowledge of professionalism or of a particular role in society that becomes enabling and constraining.

D/discourse orders the world and the way society functions within that world in particular ways that can become natural and unquestionable. While Foucault (1972) argues that nothing can have meaning without discourse, Wodak and Meyer (2009) explain that through discourse, people create both a social and material reality. The world is filled with many objects and individuals can only have knowledge of these objects if they have meaning attached to them. This meaning arises from the discourse, not the objects themselves (Hall, 1997). When it is realized that D/discourse creates knowledge, and that knowledge is inextricably related to power, it can be more fully understood how discourse and Discourse work together simultaneously to normalize power relations in society. Discourses like gender and sexuality can only be meaningful within the discourse about them. Foucault claims that it is only within a specific discursive formation that Discourses could appear as a meaningful construct. Thus, a critical discursive view on gender is helpful in locating the normative force of D/discourse. A poststructuralist viewpoint can further reveal how D/discourses are marginalizing and constraining for women by attending to issues of identity and subject positions.

### **The Discourse of Poststructuralism and Gendered Subjectivities**

Poststructuralism is utilized as a way to conceptualize the relationship of discourse, social institutions, subjectivities, and focuses on how power is exercised and the opportunity to open up room for change. The common focus for scholars studying poststructuralism is on language (Weedon, 1997). “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, or subjectivity is constructed” (p. 21). Language is part of a D/discourse and subjectivities are a subject position within a discourse. To Foucault (1978, 1980), subjectivities and subject positions are defined when an individual locates him or herself in the position of a particular discourse and thus become ‘subjected’ to that discourse’s meanings, knowledge, and power. Subjectivity is produced within a wide range of available discourses. Individuals will orient themselves in different subject positions within the same discourse. It is within language and discourse that meanings are a constant site of struggle over the power to make a meaning become the dominant meaning. According to Trethewey (1999), poststructuralism asserts subjectivity as site of friction. This friction and conflict is both enabling and constraining, and part of the process of change while upholding the status quo.

The idea of subjectivity is complex. Typically, “Subjectivity is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). According to poststructuralism, subjectivity is constantly being negotiated, constituted, and reconstituted in discourse every time an individual thinks or speaks. Martin (1990)

studies subject positions of women within stories and claims that multiple meanings and interpretations can be made from a subject position. Again, subject positions refer to a position within a discourse that is both subject to and subjected by the meanings, knowledge, and power of the discourse. However, it is regularly the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity that come from conflicting D/discourses and positions within those D/discourses. D/discourses in this sense are competing ways of giving meaning, organizing society, and offering a range of modes of being within a D/discourse. Since D/discourses are competing for meaning, not all will be regarded as equal. D/discourses will become dominant and hegemonic while others are marginalized and treated as unimportant. These D/discourses have continually being created and (re)created throughout history, from the Victorian age to women's suffrage, individuals inherited D/discourses through birth. Individuals are born into a society where structure and order already exists. These structures are grounded in experience and create a common sense understanding of the world. Common sense understandings of the world tell people how to act and what is natural, true, or normal for a boy, girl, woman, or man. This leads to a struggle over fixed meanings of gender roles to become naturalized. "In the language of poststructuralism this can be described as a battle for the signified—a struggle to fix meaning temporarily on behalf of particular power relations and social interests. This fixing of the signifier 'woman' or 'man' relies on the simultaneous fixing of subjectivity in a particular discourse" (Weedon, 1997, p. 95). "Common sense" tells society what is normal and language distinguishes and gives meaning to what is accepted as normal and what isn't. The power of common sense comes from its claim to be obvious, unquestionable and therefore true. "It looks to 'human nature' to guarantee its version of

reality. It is the medium through which already fixed ‘truths’ about the world, society, and individuals are expressed” (p. 74). These truths are expressed through realms of discourse such as the education system and the media, where young girls become discussed as compliant and docile, while young boys are known to be rowdy and adventurous. Not only does this discourse carry on through childhood, but it also sets up future social dynamics within patriarchal societies. The concern with fitting in to a socially defined and accepted “normal” guides society to accept dominant meaning formations, such as current views on gender and femininity.

According to Weedon (1997), women often find themselves subject to dominant definitions of femininity that do not align with the ways in which they define their interests as women. When meanings become fixed in society, it creates a natural way of being female within a D/discourse, however it is also possible for more than one subject position to be offered from a D/discourse. There can be no control without resistance. Foucault (1978) states that while there may be a dominant subject position within a D/discourse, there will always be other subject positions implied and the possibility of reversal. Reverse discourse aims to speak on its own behalf and for the subjectivities, which it gives meaning to. It also demands that to be recognized as natural it often redefines and represents the subject position in the ways in which it was marginalized in the first place. (p. 101). Foucault (1978) calls competing discourses “tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations” (p. 107). Force relations are relations of power that are embedded and organized in certain forms in society through class, gender, race, and age. Social institutions such as the media allow for certain subject positions to be privileged over others. However, D/discourses allow for alternative subject positions

to exist and resist the dominant subject positions. For D/discourses to allow for an area of resistance, it has to at least be in transmission. For resistance to occur, the discourse has to be available and knowable. Without an alternative discourse, individuals could not know alternative meanings or be able to resist dominant meaning systems, even if the discourse is marginalized and in conflict with dominant meanings of gender and femininity. "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978, p. 101).

Although language and subjectivity have historically been acknowledged through common sense understandings of the world, these understandings are far from homogenous. If language transmits knowledge of the world and how individuals fit into the world, the problem is that it consistently appeals to experience. The typical ways one comes to understand him/herself is the problem. There is a need to reconsider how individuals came to know themselves in the first place. What is meaningful to an individual depends on the D/discourses available and how those D/discourses assist in interpreting the world for that individual. "The plurality of ways of interpreting experience ensures that interest groups put a great deal of energy, time and money into promoting certain views of the world. Masculinity and femininity are cases in point" (Weedon, 1997, p. 76). To maintain a dominant D/discourse, other D/discourses that give meaning and understanding are marginalized and treated as unnatural or unimportant. Language does not reflect common sense and experience; experience and common sense are constituted in language. Since there are many ways to interpret meaning, there cannot be one fixed meaning that constitutes truth. At best, any interpretation made is temporary,

comes from the D/discourses that produce it, and open to opposition. When women oppose a particular subjectivity within the D/discourse of gender, it is done from another subject position within the D/discourse of gender. As Weedon explains, “Everything we do signifies compliance or resistance to dominant norms of what it is to be a woman” (p. 83). The types of subjectivity open to individuals privilege certain power structures in society such as science, common sense, religion, and rationality. All of these benefit “truth” and a patriarchal society. If language is a site where meaning is created, then it is also the site where alternate meanings can be made and possibilities for change can occur.

Foucault (1978) asserts that when one speaks he/she assumes a subject position within a D/discourse and becomes subjected to the power of that D/discourse. He contends that the confessional operates through a speaking subject comes to know him or herself through reflection of the D/discourse. The confessional mode is the form in which subjectification and power takes place (Weedon, 1997). When individuals confess and consent to a subject position, they are enabling/constraining themselves to a particular mode of being. Nadesan (1997) declares that dominant D/discourses are put into place and confession is a practice individuals use to relate, fit in, and become realized within society. Normalized views of gender and subjectivity address “individuals’ heightened insecurities about their identities and their abilities to meet the standards of institutional judgment” (p. 208); thus, when confessing, the individual becomes a subject of a normalized D/discourse. For feminist scholars, this is often seen as a discourse of patriarchy embedded in ways we come to know society and the self as a woman within



society. The media plays a significant role in helping to constitute the ways individuals come to know gender.

### **Gender, Discourse, and the Media**

Feminist scholars are often interested in the discourse of patriarchy, which is embedded in the ways individuals come to know society, the world, and the self as gendered in relation to society. In regards to discourse, many scholars study how gender and discourse are related. For instance, gender identities constructed in organizations have been studied by numerous scholars including Trethewey (1999), Nadesan (1997), Collinson (1988), and Dougherty (2006). While these studies reveal the relation between gender and discourse, the media is rarely a focus of interest. In the same regards, many scholars have studied the relationship of gender and media.

Tuchman (1979) studied the representation of women in the media and sexism that is prevalent in the media. Tuchman (1978, 1979) suggested that television neglects to focus on woman's experiences and focus women as a man's silent and docile counterpart. In the early days of television women were shown in very particular ways: "Ads continue to portray women in the home and men outside it" (Tuchman, 1979, p. 532). The sequestered images of women presented on mass media were reflected in the limited positions of power women could hold in various media organizations. Men dominated roles such as producers, executives, writers, directors, and creators. Men's voices were being heard and produced in the media, which left little room to present femininity in various ways (Tuchman, 1979). McCracken (1993) studied women's magazines and how young women are taught to be both childish and sexually alluring through messages and meanings created in magazines, again this presentation of femininity focuses on women's

relationships to men and does not focus on women's lived experiences. Other media scholars have studied the portrayal of femininity as well, such as Bogt, Engels, Bogers, and Kloosterman (2010), as well as Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) who study adolescent gender stereotypes in the media. Similarly, Zeiger (1996) reviewed media images of motherhood during times of war and the construction of gender identity. Although there is a breadth of media studies focused on gender and the presentation of women, D/discourse is rarely focused on or used as a method to examine both the language and texts presented through media, and the power-laden assumptions that are embedded within the texts. In this study, I aim to bring a D/discourse perspective to extend the study of issues related to gender and television media further by investigating presentations of femininity.

This study specifically focuses on how D/discourse *and* television entertainment media co-construct meanings of gender and subjectivities. This study thus focuses on gender in the form of femininity from a poststructuralist viewpoint in a way that interconnects media and D/discourse. Specifically, this study embraces a grounded in action orientation to D/discourse that views discourse and Discourse as mutually constitutive, a critical discourse perspective to recognize how meanings are enmeshed in power/knowledge relations that become normalized and natural and contribute to reality production, and finally a poststructuralist view of gendered subjectivities. I reconsider entertainment media as a D/discourse and argue that discursive approaches to entertainment can reveal complex ways the media contributes to gendered subjectivities. Specifically, I study scripted television to other forms of entertainment media due the ways in which television presents ideas, images, and information about femininity.

Television is a unique form of media to explore these issues. A television show is reoccurring and presents ideas that have the ability to become maintained and normalized. When one character is presented the same way every week, knowledge of that character and how it relates to how media viewers know the world and the self in relation to the world. Television also has multiple ways it presents gender. First, when the characters talk and interact with each other, viewers see everyday interactions and may internalize them. This sets television apart from magazines since television is constantly in motion. Television is also much more than the characters on screen. Everything that fits within the frame of a television screen has been planned out and anticipated. The wardrobe, set location, lighting, camera angles, and props are all mediums of how gender is presented and further sets television apart from other entertainment mediums. As such, scripted entertainment television, which I will refer to as entertainment media, has many discursive elements that need to be considered when exploring media and gender.

### **Discourse and Media**

D/discourse is useful in understanding how meanings are created and maintained. By studying D/discourse, one can understand power, knowledge, gendered subjectivities, and identity. I expand the study of discourse to the realm of media and reinterpret media as D/discourse. Weedon (1997) asserts that the media is a realm of discourse. The media pushes certain discourses and suppresses other discourses. This enables certain meanings to be made while suppressing others. Media also draws on large-scale systems of thought to aid in meaning making for their viewers. Examining how the media is both a discourse and Discourse will aid in understanding how the media creates knowledge of the world that carries power over gendered identities.

### The Media as a D/discourse

Media and particularly entertainment can be considered a *discourse* as well as a *Discourse*. First, entertainment media fits into a *discourse* by the qualities in which it tells stories to an audience. As the media acts as a storytelling agent, the stories and discourses that unfold in the media are forms of social texts and talk (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

The set, costumes, cinematography, and scripts that actors follow are all examples of social texts that constitute media as a discourse. The words that actors say on screen from scripts and improvisation is talk that takes place in the media. As actors portray conversations or interactions, they are portraying talk that takes place within a discourse.

Secondly, *Discourse* is also portrayed and enacted through the media. Enduring systems of thought or large-scale meanings are constructed within a system of language. Yang (2008) suggests that there lays a discursive layer to the media that provides cultural support for the production of meaning. Discourses are meaning formations that are simultaneously created and recreated through talk and text but also guide talk and text. By making media a discourse and using the grounded in action orientation, the media also becomes a Discourse that perpetuates large-scale ideas such as gender, sexuality, and femininity through talk and text. Media that extends certain Discourses will have a specific language and text that is enacted to deliver and organize meaning. Since individuals are born into a world where particular D/discourses already exist, these meanings give them knowledge of the world and how to communicate within the world (Weedon, 1997). Embracing a mutually constitutive understanding of *D/discourse* and how both are simultaneously created through language, it can be seen how it affects beliefs, definitions, ideologies, and many taken for granted issues, especially when

presented through the media in two ways, by focusing on power/knowledge and gendered subjectivities.

### The Media and Power/Knowledge

The relationship between discourse, knowledge, and power is attached to simple everyday encounters. Since language orders what is known and creates a split of same and other (in terms of knowledge structures that are naturalized in society and other knowledge structures that are marginalized and treated as unimportant), it creates and maintains a distinction between knowing the self as a subject position within a normalized D/discourse, and knowing the other as different or not in the same or similar D/discourse. When entertainment media co-creates individual's knowledge about the world through D/discourse, it is taking *a* meaning about something (such as gendered identities/subjectivities) and transforming it to *the* meaning. Hall (1977) suggests that, "language, the medium through which human culture...is transmitted also becomes the instrument through which it is 'distorted'" (pg. 320). Entertainment media creates a dominant meaning formations through the ways in which it uses discourses, such as language and texts that distort, hide, and marginalize other modes of being. When entertainment media presents gender in one way it is suppressing all other ways of knowing gender. By suppressing all other meanings of gender, it is privileging a gendered subjectivity and suppressing conflicts of gender (Martin, 1990). Due to modes of production that keep structures in place certain presentations within the media remain fixed. Hall (1977) asserts that ratings, messages, and popular culture that are monetarily led lend to ideas that control social phenomena. As such, the "ruling class" creates and maintains ideas and this can be seen through the media. Similarly, Marx states, "The

class which is the ruling material force is at the same time its ruling intellectual force... has control over the means of mental production so that...the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx, 1965, p. 60). Thus, meanings produced by those in positions of power, which within media organizations have historically been men (Tuchman, 1978, 1979), create and maintain the dominant ideas presented in the media. Thus, women are subjected to the D/discourses of femininity and gender expectations in entertainment media. In other words, the subject position of gender is realized in relation to entertainment media’s D/discourse. D/discourses, as presented by entertainment media, create normalized/naturalized meaning formations that are maintained through the suppression of competing meanings. Individuals can only be or do in a way that the language (signature) expresses. If it is outside the realm of language, then individuals will not even conceive of thinking, talking, or knowing in other ways. As McQuail (1977) states:

There is a provision of a consistent picture of the social world which may lead the audience to adopt this version of reality, a reality of ‘facts’ and norms values and expectations...We learn what our social environment is and respond to the knowledge that we acquire. In more detail, we can expect the mass media to tell us about different kinds of social role and the accompanying expectations. (p. 81)

Media scholars studying television explain how it carries ideologies by presenting appropriate social roles and expectations. In this study, bringing a D/discourse perspective further brings insight into the ways entertainment media co-creates knowledge of the world and the self in relation to the world. This perspective shows how individuals cannot conceive of acting in a way that the media precludes from the D/discourse.

### The Media and Gendered Subjectivities

The media supports particular D/discourses and modes of being that concern femininity. These D/discourses determine and constitute suitable modes of being and subjectivities feeding on media subscribers' interests, regarding them as a gendered subject with a set of accepted expectations on the nature of gender. "No representations in the written and visual media are gender-neutral. They either confirm or challenge the status quo through the ways they construct or fail to construct images of femininity and masculinity" (Weedon, 1997, p. 97). The media has a fixation with presenting stories that are sensational and deviant (Schudson, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). When the media presents society with a story that is aimed to be unnatural, deviant, and isolated, it is at the same time making a statement on what is and should be considered natural, normal, and common. The media also deems what is labeled as a 'public interest,' which holds what is natural and normal in a discursive struggle over meaning. Entertainment media serves women a D/discourse of what is 'real,' airing television programming that portrays reality, a true nature, and real-life circumstances people face within society. This documentary style of programming assumes that this is the truest form of reality, and the camera is simply capturing what happens without any prior directions and instructions from those on camera. Entertainment media serves another D/discourse to women that include a pre-written, fiction-based portrayal of women in society that is still based in realism. Entertainment media of multiple genres offer a "slice of life" aspect of realism that offer what life is supposed to look like for all who tune in. As media subscribers, individuals are invited to accept what is presented as authentic and placed in a position where D/discourses are acted out as part of everyday life. Actors portray experiences that

are constituted in language and create a way of knowing the world and the self in relation to that world. However real a television show, ad, or movie may seem, in actuality it is only one presentation of a D/discourse. Entertainment media constructs “realism” and “reality” through “conscious and unconscious choices about what is presented as normal or deviant, and a range of technical devices help to realize a hierarchy of values within the narrative” (Weedon, 1997, p. 99). Entertainment media offer understandings of how typical people think, react, and behave, which become maintained and reproduced. This preserves assumptions of gender and femininity and what is considered natural in society.

Gender as seen on entertainment media can have implications for how individuals view gender in their own lives. People organize and identify their view of “self” within the realm of D/discourse. So when an ad or a media portrayal of gender is seen, it changes from becoming *a* way of seeing and doing gender to *the* way of seeing and doing gender if individuals internalize the discourse of the ad and identify with it (Butler, 2004). This can be potentially problematic for gender roles by suppressing alternative ways of presenting gender. By viewing gender as a Discourse and making the channels (television) gender is performed through a discursive practice, gender and performances of gender become communicative. This viewpoint adjusts attention on language and how language creates gender and how people become subject to certain gender roles. Many scholars have studied how women are in a bind, either through D/discourse or the media, but rarely both. Television programming broadcasts to millions of people on a weekly basis. When a program is aired and viewed, a D/discourse is also presented and subject positions are created and embedded in power relations. Therefore, I argue that the role of the media must be considered if we are to understand how subject positions are created.



By embracing D/discourse and media (and media as a D/discourse) with a poststructuralist view on power/knowledge and subjectivities, I study how entertainment media (as a D/discourse) co-constructs women's subject positions and simultaneously enable and constrain the ways in which women can come to know themselves. As a poststructural feminist scholar interested in discourse, I am interested in the discursive practice of gender and how those practices are embedded in our culture (and language). Consequently, in this study, I explore the popular television program *Girls* to gain insight into presentations of women. Below I explain the methods I used in order to pursue this study.

## METHODS

Engaging in this study requires a method that embraces the ways language and D/discourse not only reflects but also creates knowledge and meanings (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Scholars have gained insights into social and organizational phenomena by examining and interrogating social texts and practices. A study of D/discourse often involves a critical focus on talk, texts, and social practices that recognize how the meanings of discourse are always inherited from socio/historical/political meanings entangled into everyday life. To gain insights into the political struggle over meaning, many scholars have studied how individuals constitute subject positions and knowledge of selves within D/discourse. For example, LaFountain (1989) studied how subjectivities are constituted and maintained through the discourse of sex therapy.

However, the study of discourse also requires embracing a concern for material manifestation of power through language use. Wodak and Meyer (2009) explain that without discourses, social realities would not exist and extend the idea that D/discourse constitutes material reality. As they explain, “Discourse theory deals with material realities, not with ‘mere’ ideas. Discourses may be conceptualized as societal means of production. Discourses are not ‘mere ideology’; they produce subjects and reality” (p. 37). Consequently, when this view of discourse is adopted, gaining insights into material realities and ideologies involves studying the ways individuals come to know their world and sense of self through D/discourse. Further, this approach predisposes that

D/discourses are not value free, but rather that every discursive act is enmeshed in power relations. According to Link (1982), discourses can be defined as “an institutionalized way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power” (p. 60). Since individuals are born into a world where D/discourses already exist that co-produce common sense knowledge of the world, it becomes natural that knowledge legitimizes certain meanings at the expense of other meanings. Consequently, studying D/discourse requires being critically sensitive to the relations of power institutionalized through language use. Furthermore, when entertainment media is understood as a D/discourse that perpetuates certain modes of being ‘female’ at the cost of others, it makes a claim to truth about gender and sexuality. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) argue that the meaning assigned to anything is determined through a discursive process that “constrain its ‘polysemic’ potential for competing or subversive meanings” (p. 57). Thus, to understand how power/knowledge is created through media as D/discourse and reveal its potential implications for women in contemporary society, it is necessary to engage in critical discourse analysis blended with interpretation and deconstruction.

As such, in this section I review specific critical discourse analysis methods as a useful approach for studying the media as a D/discourse. I then review my approach for data gathering by offering an interpretive approach to identifying and understanding the possible D/discourses embedded in media. I then explain deconstruction as a useful way to critique the interpretations of D/discourses and expose taken-for-granted and arbitrary meanings and reveal the multiple ways a text can be interpreted. I then review *Girls* as the particular media program I focus these methods of inquiry on to gain insights and critically analyze the D/discourses of gender as presented in the media.

### **Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) requires interest in “naturally occurring” language that happens in a larger context such as conversations and speech acts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Scholars embracing CDA often focus on the interaction of language instead of grammar and sentence structure because it is interaction that constructs meanings. Many who utilize the methodology of CDA tend to study “real” interactions between people that are locally occurring and emerging (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As such, the main focus of CDA is to analyze the meanings within the interaction of language.

Although many scholars utilizing CDA tend to study local, emerging interactions among people, I suggest that CDA can be extended to the realm of media. When entertainment media is viewed as a D/discourse as argued above, CDA can be used with the same intentions as scholars studying texts. By studying entertainment media texts, I align myself with many of the same interests CDA entails. When television presents to viewers a “slice of life” reality in the form of episodes, it creates something that viewers can relate to. By viewing television as a presentation of something that could be real, the interactions within television episodes have the potential to actually happen in the material world. Although I am aware of the scripted nature of television, I have an interest in the “naturally occurring” language that television can provide as well as the interaction that happens between characters within a television show. Since characters are mostly a permanent fixture on television shows, and episodes are reoccurring and follow a story line, the interactions and conversations they have fall within a larger realm that is continuing, instead of a one-time situation. It is something that can be followed and

makes sense. The non-verbal behaviors within television shows (that are also read as texts) are present as an area of study as well. Television brings information that is verbal as well as visual. The cinematography as well as the wardrobe choices, lighting colors and positions, camera movement, and character blocking are all non-verbal cues that are part of the interactions between the characters on the screen. When viewing television as a discourse that is comprised of a text, the methods of CDA become useful to analyze the text presented. Specifically, embracing a Foucauldian approach to CDA can be particularly useful when investigating what is presented on television through methods of CDA.

A Foucauldian approach to CDA is a specific form of analysis that aligns with the aim of CDA questioning and critiquing discourses. Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (FCDA) does this in two ways. First, it reveals the “contradictions within and between discourses, the limits of what can be said and done, and the means by which discourse makes particular statements seem rational and beyond doubt, even though they are only valid at a certain time and place” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 36). This happens through descriptive interpretations of the text (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Secondly, the analyst needs to be aware that critiques that are made about a D/discourse are also made within its own D/discourse. Every D/discourse is political and power laden and every critique that I make can be critiqued from another point of view. I am a woman interested in media portrayals of womaness, and when conducting research my interest in femininity and the fact that I am a woman play a part in the interpretations I make. When analyzing the media to find D/discourses that constrain gendered subjectivities, I am not

doing so without putting my own beliefs and values, which are power-laden, into my critiques.

The ideas and schools of thought that I align myself with are also products of a discourse and I fully recognize that while investigating gender in the media, I am doing so with a bias toward the D/discourses of gender, power, knowledge, and oppression. FCDA asserts that the “power of discourse” lies within the range of subject positions that are known, which means that there is simultaneously a range of subject positions that are not known. “As flows of knowledge through time, discourses and (subject positions) determine the way in which society interprets reality and organizes further discursive and non-discursive practices” (p. 37). D/discourses determine the modes of being one can take and not take. Another focus of FCDA concludes that while FCDA contests the full agency of a subject, it does not mean that the subject does not exist. The gendered subject position just has limited agency that presents itself through the power that enables or constrains within a given D/discourse. I argue that the media presents D/discourses and modes of being that become realized for the viewers that watch them. These mediated D/discourses enable women to act in certain ways and constrain them from acting in other ways. D/discourses from the media constitute individual and collective subject positions that determine a limited set of action for all subject positions subscribing to that particular D/discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). From this perspective, it is not the subject that creates the D/discourse but the D/discourse that constitutes the subject (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

When studying a piece of media D/discourse from a poststructuralist feminist lens, I interpret the mediated text using methods of FCDA, then deconstruct the language

and D/discourse to gain an understanding on how gendered subjects are developed through the media, and expose the multiplicity of meanings that can be made. Taking on a poststructuralist feminist approach, I reject objectivity and universal 'truth.' Instead I promote the notion of fragmented identities that are subjective, fluid, and have the ability to change given the placement in history and D/discourse (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For media producing D/discourses that co-construct identities, this means that individuals may have many identities and modes of being in different points in time. It also becomes important here to embrace my own subject position and realize that when studying media I am doing so from a perspective that embraces femininity and multiple ways of being. This causes me to have a critical edge when exploring texts that present gendered subject positions.

Engaging in FCDA requires identifying discourses as embedded within the text and then critiquing the discourse to reveal the hidden and masked meanings presented and potentially materialized through the text. The following sections review my interpretive approach to identifying and understanding D/discourse within texts and then deconstruction as a critical technique for revealing and exposing meanings within these D/discourses.

### **Interpretation**

Before critiquing or questioning the D/discourses embedded in media presentations begins, the first step is to identify D/discourse through interpretation. Interpretation begins with thoroughly understanding the discourse (text) that is presented (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Through interpretation, texts are usually explored and categorized in themes using repetition of D/discourses that appear in the texts regularly.

Along with categorization, interpretation proceeds by recognizing patterns. Spiggle (1994) explains that interpretation “occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning, as in deciphering a code” (p. 497). However, because interpretation does not merely happen when researchers look at a phenomenon, theory has a large role in how interpretations are shaped. Theory is used as a lens to guide what researchers focus on and what becomes important (Deetz, 1992). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggest that when researchers leave their site, theory needs to be brought back into the process. Taking on gender subjectivities in interpretations of entertainment texts, I do not leave my theory behind when reviewing media. The interpretations I make are made with an interest in femininity, poststructuralism, and D/discourse. Alasuutari (1996) states that “being theoretically informed means that one is reflexive toward the deceptively self-evident reality one faces in and through the data, able to toy with different perspective to it, and that one is open to new insights about everyday life and society” (p. 375). By using methods of interpretation to conduct FCDA and find repeating, patterned meanings of texts that become normalized, insights can be made into discursive texts that then can be critiqued using deconstruction to reveal the arbitrariness of these presentations and reveal the possibility for multiple meanings.

### **Deconstruction**

By using deconstruction as a technique to critique interpretations, deconstruction (and reconstruction) can highlight suppressed meanings, and potentially show how discursive texts can reify inequalities. According to Martin (1990),

Deconstruction can be defined as an analytic strategy that exposes, in a systematic way, multiple ways a text can be interpreted. Deconstruction is able to reveal



ideological assumptions in a way that is particularly sensitive to the suppressed interest of members of disempowered, marginalized groups. (p. 340)

Using deconstruction exposes meanings that have been suppressed and makes the “other” visible. As reviewed above, meanings become normalized and unquestioned through D/discourse, deconstruction is a practice that can help show these normalized meanings as strange and brings them to the forefront for critique and question. Calas and Smircich (1991) state that deconstruction helps to understand dominant assumptions that hide “the play of textual signification where words are meaningful...because of the existence of an oppositional term over which each apparently ‘self-standing term’ stands to differentiate itself from the other, and become meaningful” (p. 569). In line with the poststructuralist view on fragmented identities and multiple meanings of texts, deconstruction focuses on multiple interpretations that can be made from a text and undermines objectivity and “truth.”

Deconstruction and researchers using methods of deconstruction support the multiplicity of meanings that can be made from a text but never state that one interpretation is necessarily better than the next (Martin, 1990). When engaging in the process of deconstruction, reflexivity and subjectivity are needed and shown in the writing of the research. By taking this stand with deconstruction, it reveals the “I/eye/ideology of the deconstructor as well as the deconstructed” (p. 341). Thus, a more personal voice is often used with deconstruction methods as opposed to traditional scientific writing to acknowledge the limitations and biases in a researcher’s perspective.

Deconstruction can be an extremely useful approach when examining gender and subject positions that are constrained. Patriarchy in society often serves the interests of

men leaving women's interests marginalized, contradictory, and silenced all signs of suppression. Although feminism makes a truth claim that women's interests have been hidden to favor the interests of men, deconstruction does not make or support any truth claims (Martin, 1990). Thus, it is important to recognize that while conducting deconstruction with gender and feminism in mind, deconstruction can also be turned in on itself from an opposing perspective. The point of using deconstruction is to reveal suppression and open up the opportunity for multiple interpretations to be made that all hold equal amounts of legitimacy. I take a particular text presented in the media, and pull it apart to explore the hidden meanings and tensions that are present within the text but never explicitly stated. These methods of FCDA through interpretations and deconstruction are directed toward the particularly popular entertainment program, *Girls*.

### *Girls*

I have studied the first season of HBO's series *Girls* to gain insight into the ways entertainment media create and (re)produce meanings of gender that can become naturalized and normative. I have chosen *Girls* because it is a popular show that, as the title implies, predominantly displays the lives of young women. Numerous awards including a Golden Globe for best television series, an Emmy for outstanding casting, and a Peabody award mark *Girls*' popularity. *Girls* was also one of the highest-rated debut shows in 2012. *Girls* portrays many situations that normally are not talked about on cable or network television; this may be due to the fact that *Girls* airs on HBO where there are less restrictions for what can be shown and said. For instance, nudity, sex, abortion, drug use, abandonment, and heavy partying are all covered within the first season. As such, this show provides a greater area of study concerning femininity than

many other shows on cable or network television. The show, first airing in 2012, is about four young twenty-something women who live in the Brooklyn, New York area. The show focuses on Hannah, an aspiring writer who has just finished college and is navigating her way through the “real world.” She is suddenly blindsided when her parents cut her off financially and she is truly on her own. Hannah’s three friends, Marnie, Shoshanna, and Jessa are all negotiating living through their twenties as well. Marnie, Hannah’s best friend, and an art gallery assistant wants to have her own gallery someday and is portrayed as the rational, logical girl with a type-A personality who knows what she wants in life. Shoshanna, who is obsessed with *Sex and the City*, is still in college and hasn’t experienced some “big things” in her life. One of these things is losing her virginity and Shoshanna fears that no man will want to be with her because she has waited too long and men won’t “want that responsibility.” Jessa, a bohemian British girl, and Shoshanna’s cousin, is a world traveler and is the free spirit of the group who doesn’t abide by the “supposed to” nature of womanhood. Together these four characters are the heart of the show. *Girls* is primarily about navigating life as a female in her twenties and handling the bumpy, confusing, and taxing transition of being a girl and transforming into an independent woman.

Only the first season of *Girls* was chosen to study due to the limited amount of time it has been on the air. *Girls* started airing in 2012 and has only completed one season in the time of this study. I have downloaded the first season in its entirety to gain access to the material. By having the text downloaded, I have access to view each episode as well as repeat individual episodes. The first season of *Girls* contains 10 episodes that are

approximately 30 minutes long with no commercial interruptions. This provides about five hours of content that have been studied.

*Girls* provides an interesting text to study because this show is created/written/directed by and stars Lena Dunham, who is, a twenty-something “girl.” The show presents young women navigating their way through life and is geared toward an audience of girls/women navigating their way through life as well. *Girls* is different than other programming that would be categorized in the same genre due to the content it presents. First off, *Girls* is aired on HBO, which allows Dunham to present her characters in more precarious situations than on network or cable television. Secondly, Dunham takes that opportunity and creates rawness to the show and tells “real” stories that include sex, nudity, cursing, and drug use. Presented as a “slice of life” reality to its viewers, the material on *Girls* covers “real life” situations that many twenty-something women continually find themselves in. The “reality” that *Girls* provides is useful in examining gendered subjectivities of women. The scripted nature of any television show, but especially *Girls*, already has an existing understanding of what viewers are meant to see. Television shows are a fruitful area for studying D/discourses because media has the power to dictate what is visible and what is hidden. In other words, countless time and money has gone into the messages and meanings that are presented, which means that Dunham and her producers want us to see what is presented and not something else. Studying entertainment media, I am concerned about entertainment media presenting D/discourse that privileges one way of being female and suppresses other ways. By studying *Girls*, I have engaged in FCDA, combined with interpretation and deconstruction.

### ***Girls* as a Text**

*Girls* becomes a text when it is scripted, recorded, and aired on television.

Following a theoretical background in D/discourse, a text is the “done” of talk. Since *Girls* is a scripted, recorded, and aired television program it can also be considered the “done” and completed version of talk, text, and social practice. Every line, wardrobe choice, character interaction, and gesture was not only preconceived and written before shooting, but also directed and edited to make a complete text. Although many scholars employing methods of FCDA study conversations and interactions between people, I use FCDA to study entertainment media texts. FCDA has an interest to de-mystify ideologies and power through studying D/discourses (which in large, are texts) (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), and invites media texts to be studied to examine the power that lies within the D/discourse. “Discourses exert power because they transport knowledge on which collective and individual consciousness feeds. This knowledge is the basis for individual and collective, discursive and non-discursive action, which in turn shapes reality” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 39). When individuals watch *Girls*, the knowledge of what a girl transports to the viewer and, in turn, shapes reality. Although I am not concerned with viewer interpretations of *Girls*, I am concerned with dominant D/discourses that are perpetuated in entertainment media that have the ability to constrain presentations of women. It is the D/discourses that are repeated within entertainment media that I am concerned with. To further examine how portrayals of women can be constraining, interpretation of *Girls* as a text is needed.

### **Interpretation of Text**

Interpretation calls for an in depth understanding of what is being studied (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Conducting FDCA provides for an interpretation of the text that is presented in *Girls*. I interpreted the text of each episode with a lens that interprets the text through ideas of gender, power, and poststructuralism. Two sets of data were studied during and after the process of interpretation, the actual show and content of *Girls*, and my fieldnotes. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) claim that fieldnotes follow two concerns. First fieldnotes are concerned with “describing and interpreting the symbolic (i.e. textual) qualities of communication” (p. 155). Secondly when writing fieldnotes, researchers are also producing fieldnotes that will be interpreted by other researchers. Thus, reflexivity becomes important not only with methods of FCDA but also with taking fieldnotes about texts. Fieldnotes also provide a place to write down thoughts and interpretations as they occur and to keep them “fresh” in memory so they may be used as a source of evidence and data for final claims (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). To interpret the text of *Girls*, I watched each episode in order of their original airdate five times through and took fieldnotes during each episode. I interpreted not only the words the actors were saying but the entirety of the text as well. This included the camera angle, the wardrobe, and the set design. After fieldnotes were taken for each episode, I studied my fieldnotes alongside the scenes they were about in *Girls*. This brought me to specific episodes and scenes that were re-watched along with more fieldnotes taken. After a thorough examination of the text and fieldnotes, I examined prominent normalized D/discourses of gender that are presented in *Girls* and provided an analysis to try to determine how *Girls* defines womaness. I then critiqued my interpretations of the text by engaging in methods of deconstruction.

### Deconstruction of Text

Once I interpreted the patterned meanings in the text of *Girls* through methods of FCDA, I then critiqued interpretations of gendered D/discourses using deconstruction from a poststructuralist feminist viewpoint. Deconstruction is used as a technique to critique D/discourses to reveal hidden, power-laden meanings. This part of the analysis serves to show the suppressed nature that women face when presented through entertainment media. Even though well-intentioned mediated content is created, it can still reify inequalities for women who are presented within the mediated sphere. Martin (1990) states that the conflict between womanhood and manhood is often “hidden ‘between the lines’ of what people say and do” (p. 340). Deconstruction will expose alternative ways a text can be interpreted. “Deconstruction is able to reveal ideological assumptions in a way that is particularly sensitive to the suppressed interests of members of disempowered, marginalized groups” (p. 340). Deconstruction offers the ability to analyze a power system that is enacted through societal means but cannot be located in one particular individual (Foucault, 1980). When subjectivities are produced by D/discourses, their center of power is usually invisible and unchallenged; by employing deconstruction, subjectivities can be exposed, as well as the power and knowledge that keeps them in place. Deconstruction rejects all claims to objective “truth” and even undermines objectivity by creating an emphasis on suppressed conflicts and allowing for a multitude of interpretations of a text to open up multiple meanings and modes of being, which are in line with a poststructuralist approach.

Taking a poststructuralist feminist viewpoint on gender allows one to see how gendered subject positions are constrained by D/discourses. Applying what D/discourse

is to the realm of entertainment media is needed to see how women are represented and how meanings of womanhood come to be enabled and constrained. By using a Foucauldian sense of critical discourse analysis, which includes interpretation and then using deconstruction, a media text can be interpreted and then taken apart to reveal hidden and suppressed meanings and open up room for multiple meanings to be made. Feminists as well as media scholars can be interested in this study because it aims to provide an understanding of the relationship of media and gender that is unique to both fields. Many feminist scholars have discussed how women are constrained and marginalized, I suggest the consideration of entertainment media be examined with interests of gender and D/discourse. By examining entertainment media and specifically *Girls*, I hope this study will open up and promote multiple, fragmented modes of being for women, as well as help reveal media as discursive constructions of gendered subjectivities.



## FINDINGS

This study explores the complex ways of knowing femininity to reveal power-laden meanings within the D/discourses presented in *Girls*. Using a poststructural lens to examine presentations of femininity through the D/discourses of gender and media provided findings in two main areas. First, through Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, I explored the construction of gendered subject positions through D/discourses of gender and femininity presented in *Girls*. Specifically, I watched the first season of *Girls* and took fieldnotes during each episode to interpret not only the texts that were presented within the show but also the texts of my fieldnotes as a way to gain insights to the ways femininity was presented. I also further examined the meanings of texts by deconstructing the D/discourses being presented to reveal hidden meanings embedded in the texts.

I will present these findings in two sections. First, I will present my interpretations of presentations of femininity that were revealed through the text. Interpretations of the texts were used to consider how femininity and gender is presented, constructed, maintained, resisted, and possibly constraining for the lived experiences of women. Interpretation analysis of *Girls* revealed that femininity is presented in different ways when the women in *Girls* are in public and private situations. Second, I offer a deconstruction of one specific text from *Girls* to critique interpretations and highlight suppressed meanings within the text. Specifically, I deconstruct one particular text

labeled “the ladies” that stuck with me as I was writing fieldnotes. At first, the text just seemed like a casual conversation with close friends, but upon further interrogation this text implicitly was about the ways women should be and why, which puts the experiences of women within a limiting D/discourse about them. Through deconstruction, the text is taken apart to show how discursive texts can reify inequalities for women and possibly open up multiple ways a text can be interpreted. Within the next sections, I review the interpretive findings from the first season of the show, followed by a presentation of my deconstruction of one scene from *Girls*.

### **Interpretive Findings of Femininity**

Through a critical discursive analysis of the scripted lives of four twenty-something girls living in New York City (as presented in *Girls*), femininity is presented in many ways. Femininity is most saliently presented when the girls are interacting in public with others, and in private moments among themselves. As such, femininity emerges in relation and through the scripted talk and interaction that takes place. The on-screen texts of wardrobe, camera angles, and cinematography also present femininity in specific ways. Through Foucauldian critical discourse analysis of the first season of *Girls*, three main findings about the presentation of femininity emerged that when combined provide insights to the public/private expectations of femininity in society. The first finding emerges from exploring the ways women perform femininity and how presentations of “womaness” are presented in public, in women’s relationships with men, co-workers, acquaintances, and strangers. The second finding emerges from exploring the ways the women of *Girls* perform femininity in private, either alone, with each other, or with family members. The third finding emerges when the public and private

presentations of femininity are placed into conversation, revealing how they are interconnected through normalized ways of understanding femininity and being feminine. Combined, these findings reveal a relationship between public and private performances of femininity and a public/private dichotomy recreating a power-laden patriarchal D/discourse that simultaneously subjects women to the knowledge of “womaness” in public and enables women to maintain, question, and possibly resist this D/discourse in private. When presenting these findings below, I will first give a thorough introduction to the text that is interpreted by giving background information that is needed to understand the plot of the scene. I will next present the text (language or talk) as it appeared within *Girls* with necessary fieldnotes and on-screen camera angles and character movement. Next, I will discuss the visual texts that go along with each example such as wardrobe, camera angles, lighting, and overall cinematography. Finally, I will review the ways women are presented and provide my interpretation of each text.

### ***Girls in Public***

My aim when embracing Foucauldian critical discourse analysis was to reveal oppositions within D/discourses, limits of action and speech within D/discourses, and how discourses become unquestionable (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Through interpretations of power-laden texts, and reflexivity of my own beliefs (informed by my own subjectivity), I interpreted the texts of *Girls* through a feminist poststructural lens to reveal portrayals of femininity that are heavily political. In *Girls*, the four main characters find themselves enabled and constrained through the D/discourse of gender. This emerges strongly through interactions in public. Within these findings, the idea of being in “public” is discussed in terms of whom the women are with during interactions

and how femininity is presented during interaction. Thus, being in “public” becomes less about where these interactions may take place. For instance, interactions with men take place in private apartments but are still considered public due to the ways in which femininity is presented and the people they take place with. Through Foucauldian critical discourse analysis of *Girls*, two main presentations of femininity in public emerged. First, women are presented as sexually confident individuals who become passive and dependent in the presence of men. The second way femininity is presented in public is when women’s voices become silenced and discursively closed in the presence of men or high-status individuals.

#### Sexually Confident yet Dependent

Presentations of femininity in public are presented in *Girls* when women simultaneously express confidence with their sexuality, while being incapable of being completely feminine without a man. Within the episodes of *Girls*, the main characters are presented as sexually confident in the sense that they are open about their sexual bodies and experiences. However, the sexual confidence presented on-screen is often juxtaposed and contradicted with needing a man to be a legitimate woman. In other words, women’s legitimacy in the world is in relation to men. In the episode, *Vagina Panic*, Jessa is scheduled to have an abortion and all four women plan to accompany her to the appointment. The scene that follows is about Hannah’s sexual confidence and need to be validated by Adam, the man she is currently sleeping with, but not dating. After a discussion with Adam, Hannah decides that while at Jessa’s abortion appointment she will get herself tested to maintain her sexual health. The following conversation with Adam reveals this contradiction by showing Hannah performing femininity in a way that

maintains confidence in her sexuality while also seeking approval from a man she is not monogamous with.

Adam: Where are you headed?

Hannah: I, um—I'm just going home to get my cell phone charger, and then I'm going to a job interview, and then um...I'm actually accompanying a friend to her abortion. So that's what I'm doing.

Adam: Shit. That's kind of a heavy fucking situation.

Hannah: Is it really? I feel like people say it's a huge deal, but how big a deal are these things actually. I don't know.

Adam: Right. Yeah, it's just an abortion. That's silly.

Hannah: No, I'm not saying that. I just mean, what was she going to do, like have a baby and take it to her babysitting job? It's not realistic.

Adam: Oh shit, fucker. I never thought of it that way, but that's a good point.

Hannah: I mean, I guess I don't really know, because this is the first abortion I've ever been to, so.

Adam: No, you don't say.

Hannah: I really hope you didn't find that flippant, because I did not mean that abortions aren't a big deal. I just mean that I have very little sympathy for people who do not use condoms, because that is how you get pregnant and that is how you get diseases.

Adam: Well, I don't know what it is about me, but girls never ask me to use condoms.

Hannah: Girls never asked you to use condoms?

Adam: No.

Hannah: What do you do?

Adam: I do what I'm told.

Hannah: We always use condoms.

Adam: Do we?

Hannah: Yeah, we used one last night.

Adam: Oh, yah, I guess we do.

Hannah: Hey,

Adam: Oh, you're totally freaking out right now. You have total freak-out face.

Hannah: I'm not freaking out right now.

Adam: Yes, you are.

Hannah: How would you even know what I look like freaking out? You've never seen me freak out.

Adam: It's okay. I'm totally fine, okay? And you're totally pretty.

Hannah: Okay.

Visually, this scene shows Hannah in the hallway and Adam in his room. Hannah is fully dressed getting ready to leave and Adam is shown lying in his bed, only dressed in underwear. Having a discussion about sexuality puts Hannah in a compliant position and Adam in a position of power, mostly because Hannah is more emotionally invested in Adam and the feelings have not been reciprocated. This conversation is taking place in Adam's apartment, which is furnished with wood, saws, hammers, and nails, all of which Adam is shown continually working with. His apartment is in a state of disarray with items placed haphazardly. The lighting in Adam's apartment is darker, with curtains filtering the natural sunlight and replacing it with a darker, dull light that makes it hard to see a lot of detail with clarity. The factors of Adam's apartment work together to show that Hannah is in a foreign space, one in which a woman looks out of place. Hannah is also shown in a dress, which clashes with the saws, hammers, and pieces of wood shown behind her. Hannah's femininity is thus highlighted inside Adam's apartment.

The presentation of Hannah's femininity seems strong, yet very compliant.

Hannah's confidence and willingness to speak about sex seems to be in opposition with

wanting a man's approval. In this scene, Hannah is very vocal about the way she views Jessa's abortion and her stance on condom use. However, when Adam notices that she is worried about her sexual health since both know he doesn't wear condoms with other women, Hannah absorbs her feelings and closes off the conversation. By saying, "How would you even know what I look like freaking out? You've never seen me freak out." Hannah is adjusting the way she presents her femininity to be more compliant with what Adam may expect, or to seem like she is "okay" with the information Adam just disclosed to her. Further, when Adam tells Hannah that she is "totally pretty," Hannah silences her worries and "freak-out" about this situation and just replies with an "okay," showing that Hannah's femininity is entangled in relations of power with not only Adam but the idea of male approval and acceptance, something Hannah needs to feel legitimized.

The tensions between being sexually confident and the needed validation from men is continued when the story line is picked up in the next episode, *All Adventurous Women Do*, when Hannah discovers that after a visit to the gynecologist she has tested positive for H.P.V. She receives the phone call while in the presence of Adam at his apartment. After getting off the phone, she has no time to privately process this information when Adam asks her about the phone call.

Adam: Who was that?

Hannah: That was my gynecologist.

Adam: What did she say?

Hannah: She was calling with some news about my vagina.

Adam: Was it good news?

Hannah: I have an S.T.D. I have H.P.V. I have H.P.V.

Adam: What does that do?

Hannah: I don't really know. It can cause warts, and you don't have to worry. I don't have those, but it can also cause cervical cancer, so that's why I have to get my cervix scraped out next week.

Adam: Fuck, I'm so sorry. (Gives Hannah a hug.)

Hannah: Are you sorry because you gave it to me?

Adam: What? (Backs away out of the hug.)

Hannah: I'm pretty sure you gave it to me. You're the only person I've been having sex with. It is not prevented by condoms.

Adam: Hold your roll. I didn't give it to you.

Hannah: Well, how do you know?

Adam: Because I got tested and I don't have that.

Hannah: You got tested? When did you get tested?

Adam: Last week. My best dyke friend works for a dick doctor and I don't have that shit.

Hannah: Are you sure?

Adam: Yeah, I'm sure. So now you owe me an apology.

Hannah: Okay, I'm sorry. I mean, you have to know that seemed like a natural assumption, and I was freaked out, and—are you angry with me now?

Adam: Just annoyed, yeah.

Hannah: Will you still have sex with me?

Adam: When it's appropriate, sure.

The text presents Hannah being faced with a difficult situation in the presence of Adam. In my fieldnotes regarding this scene, I wrote that this scene might be presented very differently if Adam was Hannah's boyfriend. The casualness that Adam and Hannah have makes this scene seem very cold and stiff. There is a sense of vulnerability in



Hannah's presentation of femininity because Hannah is not in a relationship with Adam and has not yet initiated another intimate relationship, further echoing the need of male approval that Hannah seeks. By looking at the visual texts within this scene, we see that while Hannah is talking to Adam she is wearing no pants, and has make-up smeared on her face from sleeping. Keeping poised while in underwear and smeared mascara, Hannah struggles to present a certain type of adult womaness while having to have a serious talk with her sexual partner. Again, femininity is presented as being sexually confident in this scene, yet is simultaneously dependent upon men. Specifically, although Hannah was just told she has H.P.V., she is very open with this information and willingly discloses information about her sexual health to Adam. However, she is simultaneously searching for acceptance and to not be alone in having an S.T.D. When Hannah asks Adam, "Are you sorry because you gave it to me?" her femininity is still being presented as confident but also in tension with the acceptance from a male. When Adam very strongly opposes Hannah's suggestion, Hannah immediately apologizes and seeks out additional approval from Adam by asking, "Will you still have sex with me?" presenting that femininity and even sexual confidence is always in relation to approval from a male counterpart.

Another moment where femininity is presented as sexually confident yet in need of male acceptance emerged in the episode *She Did* where Jessa gets married to Thomas-John, a man she has only known for a couple weeks. In a previous, episode Jessa takes Marnie to a swanky bar to comfort her and Thomas-John sends them drinks. They all start talking and later go to his apartment for an almost three-way. Jessa seems very disinterested in Thomas-John and leaves with Marnie. After disappearing from her

apartment that she shares with Shoshanna for a week and only staying in contact via text, Jessa's story-line picks up in *She Did* when she sends a text to her friends stating, "Please come to the most important party of my life. 7:00 p.m. Sharp. Dress real nice and come." After much speculation from Hannah, Marnie, and Shoshanna, everyone shows up to an empty venue that looks like a place that holds events regularly. A man named Thadd gets up on the stage and the following takes place.

Thadd: I'm sure you're all wondering what you're doing here, or who you're going to be doing it with. (Laughs.) Boys and girls this is a mystery party. And I think we can all agree that the greatest mystery in this life is love.

(Music starts and Thomas-John appears on stage and Jessa walks to the stage from the back of the room.)

Thomas-John: As some of you may have already guessed, we're getting married.

Jessa: We are.

Thomas-John: Jessa, the first night we met, truthfully, I thought that we were gonna have a threesome with your friend Marnie. (Addressing Marnie.) What's up Marnie? But we didn't do that. When you left my house that night, I felt more energized than I had for years. I thought to myself, that if I ever saw that crazy bitch again, I would make her my fuckin' wife.

Jessa: Thomas-John, when you came to my house with flowers, I was prepared to call the special victims unit. Not only did I find you very creepy, but I found you also really boring. But for some reason, I agreed to have dinner with you. And you asked to move tables twice and I was even more revolted. Then you started talking about what you did, about travel and finance, and I thought, "this man's brilliant in a way that I have never known."

Thomas-John: Thank you.

Jessa: I appreciate your adventurous spirit, your desire to learn, and everything you don't know about.

Thomas-John: It's a positive. Shit.

Jessa: Yeah, I love you.

Thadd: And now with the power vested in me by a website that I found on the Internet...I now pronounce you man and wife.

Jessa: Ahh!

Thadd: You may kiss the bride.

Thomas-John: (Lifting Jessa's veil.) Free the bird.

They kiss and the guests cheer

Jessa: Is it garter time?

Thomas-John: No. No.

Jessa: Oh come on, please!

Thomas-John: Oh, fuck it.

Jessa: (While taking off her own garter and tossing it into the crowd.) Your dreams are not what you thought they'd be. (The garter then lands on Shoshanna, who has a look of surprise on her face, then the garter falls to the ground.)

The visual text of this scene shows Thomas-John and Thadd in a suit standing under a flowery archway on the stage. When Jessa walks out and navigates her way through the crowd (there is no aisle), she is in a short, thigh-length, white, bohemian style dress with blue heels, hair down, and a flower headband with a veil. Traditionally, she can pass as a bride, but by the normalized D/discourse of what women wear at their weddings, she is barely following the stereotype with the short summer dress she wears. As the guests enjoy the reception, we find Hannah and Jessa in the bathroom together. Hannah asks Jessa, "Like, you feel like a real adult now?" and Jessa replies with a long pause and says, "Mmm...yeah...kinda." In my fieldnotes, I contemplated this statement. At first, I felt that this statement was equating marriage to adulthood. However, when Jessa replies with "kinda," she is not fully agreeing with this idea of marriage and adulthood. What I felt Jessa was really saying was that although marriage is what many women are told to aspire to, in reality the lived experience of marriage is much different.

Getting married is seen as almost a rite of passage for becoming an adult for young women, and marriage acts a D/discourse into how to view womanhood. By getting married, and following the normalized D/discourse of marriage, Jessa transforms her knowledge of self into a wife and sees herself as growing into womanhood. When Thomas-John pulls Jessa's veil back and says "Free the bird," it's almost as if he is making a bigger statement about women's identity in relation to men by saying women aren't free, legitimate, or whole until they are married or at least know their identity as being in relation to a male-counterpart. This scene reveals how women are frequently taught to aspire to marriage and to know themselves in relation to others. Being the center of attention at her wedding, Jessa performs femininity in relation to her husband Thomas-John. No longer is she known as a girl or a woman, but now she is known as a wife. As such, this new label identifies her as in relation to a man, which carries power-laden assumptions of identity that relate to gender and sex. Throughout *Girls*, Jessa is known as the woman who does not need a man, and has even said, "I wanna have children with many different men of many different races" (*Vagina Panic*). Even when she met Thomas-John she found him "boring" and "creepy," however, she still gets married to him. Thus, femininity is presented as existing in the tensions between adulthood and confidence and being legitimized by a man by coming to know the self in relation to a man.

The women in *Girls* present femininity in a way that suggests women are sexually confident while simultaneously dependent upon a man. The main characters do this in a way that presents "sexiness" and confidence to attract males to later get their approval. Marriage as presented on *Girls* suggests that women need men in order to be legitimized

as women. Women are presented as sexually confident, yet always striving for approval from men, revealing femininity as known always in relation to men, and eventually women come to know themselves as a sexual gift, wife, or mother. The next presentation of femininity in public also carries on the pattern of males being present when women perform femininity in public and how women's bodies are taken advantage of and used for male pleasure in the public world.

### Silenced Voices

The second theme of femininity performed in public that emerged in the text was that the women's voices are silenced, their opinions hidden, and their bodies exploited, when in public and especially among men. One example of silenced voices is captured within the episode *Hannah's Diary* when Hannah's boss massages her neck and touches her breasts. The scene opens up with Hannah sitting quietly in her office and her boss, Rich, coming into her office. Hannah has just started a new job working in an office and isn't catching on to much of the daily work that needs to be done. Rich walks into the office, presumably to talk to Hannah about work related manners but quickly the conversation turns to small talk, and acts of sexually harassment.

Rich: Hannah. What are we going to do with you?

Hannah: I really apologize, I thought I had a better handle on Windows, and I am more of a Mac girl, but if you give me an hour with the manual.

Rich: I'm just giving you a hard time. I know you'll get there.

Hannah: Thank you so much. (Hannah goes back to studying the manual while her boss walks around her desk and behind her chair.)

Rich: You look tense.

Hannah: Oh, no, I'm good. I'm just a hunchy person naturally.

(Rich puts his hands on Hannah's shoulders and starts to massage her shoulders and neck. The camera shows Hannah in a medium shot with Hannah's face and the boss's hands on her shoulders. Hannah's face displays a look of surprise, nervousness and anger. Although the focus is on Hannah, this unwarranted and socially unacceptable advance silences her.)

Boss: mm.

Hannah: Thank you

Boss: (Sigh.) Okay, now, just lean into the pain. (Starts to put more pressure on Hannah's neck and Hannah's face grimaces with pain.) My wife and I took a Reiki healing course and Club Med. Fascinating stuff. Okay. You need to sit up a bit straighter. (Rich puts a hand on her forehead and eyes while keeping one hand on her back.)

Hannah: Yeah, my mom tells me that all the time.

Rich: And open up the solar plexus. And just breathe. You feel that?

(Rich moves his hand from Hannah's face to Hannah's chest and starts to move his hand in a circular motion, touching Hannah's breasts. The camera is still in a medium shot with Hannah's face showing shock and disbelief that he is touching her.)

Hannah: I do.

(At this point the camera is looking out of Hannah's office to find a female co-worker walking by, stopping to see what is going on in Hannah's office, and realizing that Rich has his hand on Hannah's breasts. She rolls her eyes and keeps walking.)

Rich: Oh, much better. Much better. That's really much better.

Visually, Hannah is seated the entire time and the boss is standing and walking around her. In my fieldnotes I wrote that this made me incredibly disturbed, nervous, and upset when watching this scene and I felt that Hannah was trapped and vulnerable. Being seated makes Hannah immobile. Rich is blocking the door with his body and when he walks around Hannah's desk to stand behind her he puts Hannah in a position of vulnerability, which suggests that Hannah is in a submissive position while Rich is in an authoritative position. The camera angles show a close-up of Hannah's face with Rich's

hands on her shoulders and then on her breasts. With the camera focused on Hannah's face, the episode is giving her a chance to say something and to stop the interaction. However, Hannah is silent. The way the two are positioned already puts Hannah in a constrained subject position of what she can say and do. Further, the blocking position of the scene plays on the power relations of employee and employer as well as woman and man with Hannah being in a lower (seated) position and Rich being in a higher position.

This scene shows Hannah being dominated in the interaction with her boss. Not only is her voice silenced but her body is also being acted upon, making Hannah a passive object. When Hannah remains silent after the camera gives her an opportunity to speak, femininity is presented as still and hushed. This text presents women as silenced, powerless, and docile in public. I remember thinking and writing in my notes that Hannah almost seemed afraid to speak up. What keeps women from talking, sharing, and speaking up in public? This scene presents a relation of power between men and women (and employer and employee) that situates women in a bind and often leads to complacency. Women have a lot to lose when speaking up, and for Hannah she could lose her job, which could lead to her losing her apartment, and the life she wants in New York. Later in this episode, after the workday is over, Hannah confronts two female co-workers in the restroom about the incident with Rich.

Hannah: Hey Lesley.

Lesley: Hey Hannah. How's your first week of work going?

Hannah: It's good. It's been good. Listen, I'm just wondering if there was anything specific you thought I should know about Rich.

Lesley: Mm. He touch you?

Hannah: Yeah, like my breasts a little bit.

Lesley: I know. Rich massaged Hannah.

Chastity: Oh, yeah? You'll get used to it.

Hannah: What?

Lesley: Look, I know it's gross, but he's really nice, and he got Tommy health insurance.

Chastity: He doesn't complain if I come in or if I don't and stuff. And he paid for my sister to go to camp.

Lesley: Oh, and he got me an iPod for my birthday.

Chastity: That was very nice of him.

Lesley: I know. It's a Nano.

Hannah: So you've never said anything about it?

Lesley: No, never.

Chastity: Why?

Hannah: Wow! Okay.

The interaction with Hannah's co-workers presents women as compliant and expected to keep their true emotions and opinions hidden from public view. By asking two women that have worked with Rich longer than Hannah, Hannah seeks guidance on how to perform not only her job but also her femininity. This scene especially shows the enabling/constraining position of women. Although Hannah was sexually harassed and constrained as a woman by being unwantedly touched by a man that is in a relational position of power with Hannah, she is also enabled to now be late for work, ask for favors, and maybe get a nice birthday present. By "getting used to it," Hannah can exploit her body for her benefit. The cost of that exploitation is that Hannah's body is being taken advantage of and her thoughts on her boss, as well as her lived experiences, are



hidden, ignored, and marginalized as she and her co-workers choose to remain silenced by not talking about this with other men and Rich.

This scene shows a complicated public presentation of femininity that transforms femininity into docility in front of men who represent relationships of power. Women are performing femininity while enmeshed in relations of power to presentations of masculinity. Thus, women are presented as sexually docile objects that serve the interests and needs of men, and rewarded for the silence offered about these unwanted relationships. Women therefore come to know themselves as one way in public, the way they should act in accordance with social structures in place that regulate women's bodies, behaviors, and speech. However, in private, women possibly resist the normalized D/discourse of gender and sex.

### ***Girls in Private***

By embracing Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, my aim is to question and critique D/discourses by revealing contradictions within and between D/discourses. As such, the public and private presentations of femininity as presented in *Girls* shows women performing femininity in similar and different ways in private than was presented in public. I considered private presentations of femininity as being those performed alone or among other women, specifically close friends and family. As such, private interactions are typically defined as moments when the four main women are together, completely alone, or with family members, and how they interact in those moments. Importance is then on whom the women are with, rather than being defined by where interactions take place. Thus, private interactions may take place at a public park when Jessa, Shoshanna, and Hannah are together. In private, the pressure of conforming to

normalized D/discourses of gender and sex slightly fade away and although many normalized D/discourses become maintained, at times these D/discourses become questioned and resisted. Although women are still subjected to multiple D/discourses when speaking, they are more enabled to question existing orders of power in private. Further, women's voices are no longer silenced by the presence of men in private and opinions can be more fully voiced and realized. Through the text of *Girls*, women are presented as negotiating what it means to be a woman by maintaining and resisting normalized D/discourses of femininity, gender, and sex. Private presentations of femininity are presented as either questioning seemingly fixed meanings of the nature of femininity or actively voicing what it means to be a woman. Questioning what it means to be a woman and act female emerges through many of the episodes of *Girls*. The four main characters often question how to act, feel, and be as a woman in a world that is messy, especially for single, twenty-something women living on their own. *Girls* also presents femininity in private as women questioning themselves and the other women. Many times this leads to voicing opinions about others and especially men to gain advice from close female friends or simply to be heard. The acceptance and approval of each other as well as men carries over from public to private and is discussed as a major concern for the women when in private.

### Questioning Femininity

Throughout *Girls*, private situations explicitly lay out how to be female for the four women. Whether that is equating marriage to adulthood and womaness or how women should act in certain situations, social scripts that are part of dominant D/discourses prescribe how to know the world and the self as gendered. In *Vagina Panic*,

Jessa, Hannah, and Shoshanna meet up for frozen yogurt in a park before Jessa's abortion appointment. While all sitting together, Jessa asks Hannah a question about her relationship with Adam and the following conversation about what it means to be female in the dating world happens.

Jessa: So this guy is making you bananas? (Talking about Adam.)

Hannah: I've never experienced anything like it. The thing is I have absolutely no sense of how he really feels about me because when we're together, he's so there and he's so present. And then he disappears for two weeks and doesn't answer any text messages, and I feel as though I invented him.

Shoshanna: Did you invent him?

Hannah: If I'd invented him, then I wouldn't have a giant bruise on my ass.

Shoshanna: Pause. I have something to contribute here. (Shoshanna holds up a book.)

Jessa: "Listen ladies: A tough love approach to the tough game of love."

Hannah: Okay. I'm going to admit that I have hate-read that book.

Shoshanna: Oh, my god! It, like, totally changes your perspective, right? Okay, "If a man doesn't take you on a date, he's not interested, point-blank. 'Let's meet up with friends' is not a date, it's a date for him to decide whether you're truly good enough to date, and that's unacceptable ladies."

Hannah: There has to be exceptions to that rule.

Shoshanna: "Sex from behind is degrading, point-blank. You deserve someone who wants to look in your beautiful face, ladies."

Jessa: What if I want to focus on something else? What if I want to feel like I have udders? This woman doesn't care what I want.

Hannah: But here's my question, who are "the ladies"?

Shoshanna: Obvi—we're the ladies.

Jessa: I'm not the ladies.

Shoshanna: Yeah, you're the ladies.

Jessa: I'm not the ladies.

Shoshanna: Yes, you are. You're the ladies.

Jessa: You're being unfair. You can't force me to be a lady.

Shoshanna: I'm not forcing you to be a lady. You're just—okay. I'm a lady, she's a lady, you're a lady, we're the ladies.

(The camera cuts to Jessa and Hannah walking.)

Jessa: Fuck that silly little fucking book.

Hannah: I told you, I just read it in a weird moment of desperation at the Detroit airport.

Jessa: How could you even finish a book like that? That book is so idiotic; I couldn't even read it on a toilet.

Hannah: It might be pink and cheesy, but there's actually some very real wisdom in there, about how to deal with men and—

Jessa: That woman is a horrible lady.

Hannah: Why is this bothering you so much?

Jessa: I'm offended by all the "supposed tos." I don't like women telling other women what to do, or how to do it, or when to do it. Every time I have sex, it's my choice.

Jessa, Hannah, and Shoshanna are all shown on a park bench sitting side-by-side.

Visually they all look like equals. No one is shown higher than anybody else, they sit on the same bench, and they are all eating frozen yogurt. Within the show, all three of these characters are also currently single. Although Hannah is seeing Adam, it is not monogamous and there is no "label" on what their relationship is or might be in the future. Marnie, on the other hand, is in a relationship at this point and she is not present for this meeting. All three of these women also do not currently hold employment, which is why they can meet up in the middle of the day, and another reason Marnie is absent. This reveals that Marnie is not equal with the three other women and Jessa, Hannah, and

Shoshanna are presented in a different context within the scene. They are talking about being single and expressing their opinions about men and relationships, opinions Marnie might have but are different since she is in a committed relationship at the time and the other women are not. The fact that Jessa is getting an abortion later in the day doesn't seem to startle any of the girls visually, although the conversation does reflect that Jessa isn't the common idea of a "lady" and she is negotiating who she might be based on common understandings of femininity.

This text also reveals resistance by Jessa on how to be a lady, what a lady is, and who is and isn't a lady. Jessa seems to not identify with common sense understandings of what femininity and being a "lady" might be. Jessa isn't American and has different ideas of D/discourses such as femininity, sexuality, and gender but she also questions understandings of what it might look like to be the "lady" that Shoshanna is talking about. Jessa is also getting an abortion later in the day, which has made her stop and reflect on who she is and where she might be headed as a woman. Resisting definitions of what is and isn't okay for men and women to do together by saying, "What if I want to focus on something else? What if I want to feel like I have udders? This woman doesn't care what I want" reflects Jessa's questioning of femininity and possibly opens up new meanings for what femininity might be and mean for women. Jessa also questions Shoshanna's common sense understanding of what 'the ladies' are by saying "You're being unfair. You can't force me to be a lady." By questioning this understanding of femininity, Jessa also puts Shoshanna in a position to be reflexive about her own perceptions of femininity and further opens up reflexivity to possible viewers of *Girls*. Questioning and resisting common sense understandings of sexuality, gender, and

femininity in private presents femininity as something that isn't stable and is not a "supposed to." This presentation of femininity leaves open the possibility that femininity can mean more than one understanding or way of knowing what a woman is or can be.

Another example of questioning femininity is shown again with Jessa. In the episode *Hard Being Easy*, Jessa receives a message from an old boyfriend who is in town and decides to meet him in the park. After talking about his new girlfriend, Gillian, for a while Jessa states, "You're so keen on Gillian and yet you're calling me." Her ex-boyfriend replies with, "I'm really happy with my girlfriend," to which Jessa asks, "Really?" In the next scene, we see Jessa and her ex-boyfriend bust into Shoshanna's apartment (where Jessa is staying) where they have sex. Shoshanna is in the apartment but neither Jessa nor her ex seem to notice her and Shoshanna hides behind the curtain of her closet to let them have privacy. After they have finished, the man tries to kiss Jessa but she pulls away and says, "What about Gillian?" to which the man leaves the apartment. After he leaves, Shoshanna laughs and reveals herself and Jessa looks very surprised and says the following.

Jessa: Oh, my God, Shoshanna. You're a batshit little perv. I knew you were crazy, but fucking perv?! Oh, my God! Okay, so just so you know what you just saw, that was me showing that I cannot be smoted. I am unsmotable. You should probably write that down by the way.

Shoshanna: (Whimpers and looks completely shocked.)

Again Jessa is presented as a woman resisting the normalized D/discourse of femininity. In this scene, Jessa is shown as an active participant in her womanhood. As a woman, she has just made a discursive statement about her sexuality. She enjoys sexual encounters and chooses when, with who, and where to have sex and does not simply wait

for men, but actively seeks them out. This text also shows the difference in presentations of femininity by having Shoshanna present as well. Shoshanna is a virgin and Jessa is having sex with an ex-boyfriend. I wrote in my fieldnotes that this scene shows a more “normalized” (re)presentation of femininity in Shoshanna and a critique to the normalized presentation in Jessa. Jessa goes against the status-quo of normal ways to be a woman. Shoshanna’s shock shows that she wouldn’t act the way Jessa has. Further, Jessa’s actions show that she isn’t the same type of woman as Shoshanna. Telling Shoshanna that she is “unsmotable” tells her that Jessa can get the man she wants, when she wants, and send them packing when she’s done. In my fieldnotes I wrote that Jessa’s behavior seemed more like that of a man in this particular scene. Following the D/discourse of masculinity and femininity, it has become normalized for men to be subjects and women to be objects. Within this scene, Jessa is presented as a woman who acts upon a man, which turns that D/discourse around and presents both femininity and masculinity in different ways. Jessa is presented more actively because she is not emotionally tied to this man and just wanted to use him for sex. This presentation of femininity further makes a statement of how women’s needs are thus relegated to the private and hidden in the public. This text presents femininity as women fulfilling their sexual needs, not being emotionally connected to men, and not feeling bad for it. Femininity as presented in private by Jessa resists dominant understandings of gender, sex, and the way women should act. Resistance is shown in private through interactions with other women on who is a “lady,” how women should act, and what they might be. Explaining she is “unsmotable” in the presence of the virgin, Shoshanna, marks an attempt to resist the fixed meanings of femininity. Along these same lines *Girls* presents

femininity in private as not being silent but rather voicing opinions to their selves and to the other women.

### Voicing Opinions

Private presentations of femininity as shown in *Girls* presents woman contemplating their femininity, relationships with men, employment, their selves, and their relationships with other women. In private the four main characters express their opinions and thoughts verbally. Women are shown verbally negotiating what it means to be a woman, friend, girlfriend, and employee when in private. After going to a book release party in the episode *Leave Me Alone*, for Hannah's college acquaintance and rival, Tally Schiffrin, Hannah seems to feel a little unaccomplished since she has not been published yet. Thinking that Tally is a horrible writer, she contemplates why success has come to Tally and not herself. Changing her usual writing style and content, she goes to a reading and completely misses the mark with her new style. Feeling a little lost and left behind as a writer she returns to the apartment she shares with Marnie and finds Tally's book on the kitchen table. She confronts Marnie about the book and their friendship, and both women voice their opinion on friendship and each other.

Hannah: (Hannah enters the apartment and finds the book on the dining table; she walks to Marnie's room and stands in the doorway.) Wait, so you actually bought Tally Schiffrin's book?

Marnie: It was a book party, so I bought the book.

Hannah: Well, you don't like it, do you?

Marnie: She is a really good writer. You know? She captures something really true about the uncertainty of being our age. I cried twice.

Hannah: Well, are you getting your period?

Marnie: You know, I'm not. So...



Hannah: What are you doing?

Marnie: Just uh throwing out some old clothing I've been wanting to get rid of for a long time.

Hannah: Maybe you should give it to charity, or...

Marnie: I don't think poor people need to wear my shitty old stuff on top of everything else.

Hannah: Well, I love that dress.

Marnie: This one?

Hannah: Yeah, I love it.

Marnie: Really?

Hannah: Don't throw it away. It's great.

Marnie: You can have it. (Throws dress at Hannah.) I don't know what size it is though. Might be tight. (Leaves room and walks to the front door.)

Hannah: Okay...Marnie, I did the stupidest thing at that reading.

Marnie: I'm kind of doing this right now. Could we talk about it later?

Hannah: All right, yeah. Are you mad at me?

Marnie: No Hannah. Not at all. (Leaves apartment to go to trash shoot in the hallway.)

Hannah: (Follows Marnie to the hallway.) Cause you kind of seem mad at me.

Marnie: I pay all the bills in this apartment. Does that not give me, like, one night off from talking about all of your problems?

Hannah: Okay. Wow.

Marnie: As it happens, I'm not always in the mood to talk about you.

Hannah: Okay. Wow. (Both walk back inside the apartment.)

Marnie: You know, I didn't even want to go into this, but you pushed me like you push everyone about everything!

Hannah: I push everyone?

Marnie: (Opens refrigerator.) Why do you always eat my yogurt? Don't look at me like I just said something awful because I really didn't. Oh, my God. (Marnie walks back to her room.)

Hannah: (Hannah follows Marnie, stands in her doorway). You think we only talk about my problems? Like why do you think that? (Marnie rolls eyes at Hannah and looks completely annoyed).

Marnie: Because we *do*.

Hannah: That's not true Marnie, we only talk about *your* problems. It has always been that way. Seriously. We talk about what's right with Charlie, then what's wrong with Charlie. Now we talk about how you're never gonna meet someone. 'Cause it's like you think meeting a guy is the main point of life, so we have, like, a summit everyday to make a game plan.

Marnie: Okay, you just flipped this around in a really crazy way. I am the one that has the right to be mad here, okay? I'm taking a very brave chance discussing my feelings.

Hannah: Well, you should maybe bring things up while they're actually happening and then we could avoid these overwrought conversations.

Marnie: Okay, then I don't want to talk about it anymore.

Hannah: Well I do.

Marnie: Well, now I don't.

Hannah: Well, now I need closure, okay?

Marnie: You are *so* selfish. This is why you have no friends from preschool.

Hannah: Uh, I have a lot of friends from preschool. I'm just not speaking to them right now.

Marnie: No but you judge everyone and yet you ask them not to judge you.

Hannah: That is because no one could ever hate me as much as I hate myself, okay? So any mean thing someone's gonna think of to say about me, I've already said it *to* me, *about* me, probably in the last half hour!

Marnie: That is bullshit, because I could literally think of a million mean things that have never once occurred to you.

Hannah: Oh yeah? Like what?

Marnie: Well, I wouldn't do that. (Walks to bathroom to brush her teeth.)

Hannah: (Follows Marnie and stands in doorway.) Seriously, say one. Honestly Marnie, you are so obsessed...

Marnie: Oh, my God!

Hannah: ...with success and who's who and what they have and how they got it. Like, I was looking at Tally Schifrin the other night and I thought you probably wish she was your best friend. It's pretty transparent. So you can tell everyone to tune in and hear your best friend on "Fresh Air."

Marnie: I like being around people who know what they want.

Hannah: People like you? 'Cause what do you want besides a boyfriend with a luxury rental? Seriously, that's where your priorities are. You have always been this way and now it is worse.

Marnie: No, you know what? *You* are worse. I can't take you anymore. You think that everyone in the world is out to humiliate you. You're like a big, ugly fucking wound!

Hannah: Adam says you are teetering on the edge of psychotic misery, but you're smiling so wide that no one can tell. You are the wound.

Marnie: I am not the wound, you are the wound!

Hannah: You're the wound.

Marnie: You're the wound!

Hannah: You're the wound!

Marnie: Stop saying that. I am not a wound. You are a wound.

Hannah: Maybe we're over-analyzing this and the issue is just that I've got a boyfriend and you don't and it's as simple as that.

Marnie: (Throws toothbrush at Hannah and walks out of the bathroom to living room.)

Hannah: That's awesome, that is a really mature way to deal with your fucking feelings! (Screaming, and throws toothbrush back at Marnie.)

Marnie: I would back the fuck off if I were you!

Hannah: Oh, I'm fucking terrified. Seriously, I mean I'm not but I probably should be, since you've been batshit crazy since Charlie broke up with you.

Marnie: Yeah? Well, you've been crazy since before I even met you. You've been crazy since middle school when you had to masturbate eight times a night to stave off diseases of the mind and body.

Hannah: Okay, that is my most shameful, painful, private secret, okay? And it might sound like a joke, but it is not fucking funny to me! And that is why I told you not to tell anyone!

Marnie: I didn't tell anyone! I would never do that! I am just telling you now! I would never tell anyone that! I am a good fucking friend! Unlike you! You are a bad friend!

Hannah: Maybe that's not what's important to me right now. I don't really give a shit about being a good friend. I have bigger concerns.

Marnie: You know what? Thank you. That is all I needed to hear. I'm done.

Hannah: What is that supposed to mean?

Marnie: I do not want to live here anymore, not with you.

Hannah: Yeah, well, I don't want to live with you anymore, either, and I am not just saying that because you said it. I was thinking it, but I did not want to say it because I am a good friend and you are a bad friend!

Marnie: Fine!

Hannah: Great!

Marnie: Awesome!

Hannah: Very good! (Both go to their room and slam the door, camera stays on shut doors for a couple seconds and the scene fades out and credits start.)

Within this text Hannah and Marnie express their thoughts and feeling about each other, their long-standing friendship, relationships with men, and their view on how each other sees the world. Visually, this scene takes place in Hannah and Marnie's apartment, a place that is home to both of them and a place where they feel safe. Thus, a reason Marnie didn't need to hide the fact that she bought Tally Schifrin's book, even though she knew Hannah holds hostile feelings toward Tally and her being a published author. When Hannah comes home, Marnie is in pajamas and is sorting old clothing to get rid of.

Marnie is always shown impeccably dressed and when Hannah sees her throwing away her nice, expensive clothing she makes a comment to give it to charity. In my fieldnotes I wrote that Hannah is almost making a statement on what “good” people do and saying that Marnie isn’t “good.” Marnie offers to give a dress to Hannah but says, “it might be tight” almost retorting with a comment about Hannah’s body type and what type of woman Hannah is. The way that Hannah stays in the doorway of Marnie’s bedroom and the bathroom shows that she is not invading Marnie’s territory. Within this argument Hannah gives Marnie space and does not step into her room; my fieldnotes state that this suggests that Hannah can say what she needs to because she isn’t in Marnie’s room, but if she was in Marnie’s room she would have to censor what she might say. The shared areas such as the bathroom and the living room show both women not censoring their speech. It was interesting to see how the blocking correlated with what could possibly be said within the text. Nonverbal rules accompanied the verbal within this argument to show how femininity is presented in relation to each other and the rules that space play in talking and voicing opinions.

This text also reveals and presents how men fit into presentations of femininity in both private and public situations. Hannah states that Marnie’s main concern is that she won’t be happy or whole until she finds a boyfriend by stating, “We talk about what’s right with Charlie, then what’s wrong with Charlie. Now we talk about how you’re never gonna meet someone. ‘Cause it’s like you think meeting a guy is the main point of life, so we have, like, a summit everyday to make a game plan.” Hannah voices her opinion about relationships and critiques how she thinks Marnie sees the world. Hannah also says that, “‘Cause what do you want besides a boyfriend with a luxury rental? Seriously, that’s

where your priorities are. You have always been this way and now it is worse.” In private femininity is presented in a way that women can freely say what they want to or feel they need to say. The way Hannah talks about Marnie’s perception of the world is heard by Marnie and not defended. Honesty is welcomed, even if the climate is hostile. The need for men brings the conversation back to how women might stage and plan interactions with men to keep their femininity perceived in a certain way publicly. If Marnie and Hannah talk about relationships and what is right or wrong with Charlie and future relationships Marnie might have, then they are planning how femininity should be performed in public, by speaking about it privately. The need for male approval or to be in a relationship with a man to identify as a woman is an idea that transcends both public and private presentations of femininity and tells women that a man is needed to fully feel like a woman and be a woman. As such, the recurring theme of the need for a male tells women that the identity of a woman is always in relation to a man.

Being a woman and reflecting upon oneself is also revealed as part of the private presentation of femininity within this text. Both Marnie and Hannah reflect upon themselves as women and voice their findings about themselves and each other. Marnie states that Hannah judges everyone but does not want anyone to judge her and Hannah replies with, “That is because no one could ever hate me as much as I hate myself, okay? So any mean thing someone’s gonna think of to say about me, I’ve already said it *to* me, *about* me, probably in the last half hour!” revealing that in private, without anybody present, women criticize their appearance, personality, body type, and become extremely hard on themselves. Reflection takes on a voyeuristic quality, where women put themselves in the position of other people looking back at themselves and create voices

for those people to criticize themselves. In this sense, self-reflection is removed from the self to the D/discourses that enable and constrain what can be said about a woman and women see themselves through the eyes of others that keep D/discourses in tact. Both women also call each other a wound, which suggests that something wrong, broken, or infected and is exposed in each of them and hasn't healed. Being a wound reveals that something is sick with each woman and in their relationship to each other and further allows for reflection. Throughout this text women's voices are expressed and heard. Private presentations of femininity reveal that women can be loud, and say things without worrying about consequences that might be present in public. In private, women can lift the silence that holds them back and express themselves for better or worse. Another private presentation of femininity tells women to reveal things to their close friends to either get advice or sympathy from them.

In the episode *All Adventurous Women Do*, Hannah and Shoshanna have a moment to discuss what their "baggage" is and how that affects their identities as women. Hannah stops by Shoshanna's apartment to change and ends up staying to watch T.V. and talk. In this scene both Hannah and Shoshanna reveal what their baggage is and get advice from each other on how to handle relationships and life experiences with their baggage.

Hannah: Thanks for letting me change here, Shoshanna.

Shoshanna: (Sitting on couch wrapped in a blanket, watching T.V.) Mm-hmm.

Hannah: Do you know where Jessa is? Do you know when she'll be home?

Shoshanna: Um. Probably not till late. She has a job now.

Hannah: Okay, I guess everybody has a job now.

(T.V noises of crowd gasping with surprise.)

Shoshanna: Oh, my effing “G,” no.

Hannah: What are you watching?

Shoshanna: “Baggage.”

Hannah: “Baggage”? What’s “Baggage”?

Shoshanna: It’s, like, my favorite show on the Game Show Network. No, she didn’t.

Hannah: Oh, Marnie and I don’t have cable. So I haven’t seen that.

Shoshanna: (Looks up at Hannah.) Shut up. No way. Get over here now. (Hannah walks over to sit on couch with Shoshanna.) Okay. So, there are three contestants. Today they’re girls. And this guy Danny is looking for love, and they each have three suitcases—a little one, a medium one, and a big one. And in them they have, like, their secret baggage and they reveal it. And if it’s super freaky, he eliminates them. –Okay. Like this one chick-

Hannah: The black one or the blonde one?

Shoshanna: Yeah, the black one. Her littlest baggage is that she spends over \$1,000 a month on her weave, which host Jerry Springer thinks is “un-be-weave-able.” Her medium baggage is that she plans her wedding after the first date, and her biggest baggage is that she pokes holes in condoms.

Hannah: Whoa!

Shoshanna: Mm.

Hannah: That’s a crazy thing to do.

Shoshanna: I know. What would you put in your baggage?

Hannah: I don’t know. I feel like—

Shoshanna: So like, for me, I think that my littlest baggage would probably be my I.B.S. and my medium baggage would be that I truly don’t love my grandmother.

Hannah: Like, you don’t love her at all?

Shoshanna: Mm-mm, (shakes head).

Hannah: So then what would your biggest baggage be?



Shoshanna: That I'm a virgin. Obviously.

Hannah: Yeah, but that doesn't count because soon you're gonna have sex and then you're gonna forget you ever didn't have sex and then you're gonna have to pick a new baggage, so it doesn't count.

Shoshanna: I hope so. What's yours?

Hannah: Let's see. My littlest baggage is probably that I am unfit for any and all paying jobs. My medium baggage is that I just bought four cupcakes and ate one in your bathroom. (Shoshanna nods head in agreement.) And my biggest baggage is that I have H.P.V., which I found out today. So.

Shoshanna: Oh, my God. Do you have warts?

Hannah: No, I don't have warts, but, like (lowers voice to whisper) I haven't looked deep inside myself, but I don't see any warts.

Shoshanna: Oh. It's like, much less bad then. Jessa has H.P.V.

Hannah: She does? She never told me that.

Shoshanna: Yeah, like a couple strains of it. She says all adventurous women do. (Lowers her voice to a whisper.) Do you know who gave it to you?

Hannah: (Whispering.) Okay, I thought it was the guy that I am seeing, but he's gotten tested, so now I think it was Elijah, my boyfriend for the last two years of college.

Shoshanna: Mm-hmm. Who broke up with who?

Hannah: Okay, he broke up with me because he needed "space." But then he called me every day for six months crying, so...

Shoshanna: You have to tell him.

Hannah: About my H.P.V.?

Shoshanna: Mm-hmm (nods head).

Hannah: Yeah, but it doesn't have any symptoms for guys, and also it would open a lot of old wounds for him. Like, I think he's still in love with me.

Shoshanna: Yeah, but it's like totally the responsible thing to do. And sometimes you have to break a few eggs to do what's right. You know what I mean? Like, do you really want all of his future lovers to suffer the same disease that you have? No offense.

Hannah: Yeah, but I thought you said it's not that big a deal.

Shoshanna: No, it's totally not that big a deal, but it's still like—I mean, I just, like, in the S.T.D. world, it think that's kind of courteous.

Hannah: Do you have to do it in person?

Shoshanna: Um. I don't know. Like, what are the other options?

Hannah: I'm just worried that if we see each other, we're gonna end up having sex.

Shoshanna: But, like, that's okay because you both already have H.P.V.

Hannah: God, that's a really good point.

Within this text, Shoshanna is shown at her apartment, which is safe space for her to reveal her “baggage” to Hannah. She is wrapped in a blanket on her couch and invites Hannah into her space to share this information. The television show that Shoshanna is watching aids in bringing up the topic for discussion between the two women. Talking about baggage reveals that women discuss their femininity privately. Subjects such as sexually transmitted diseases, things that happen during sex, relationships with men, appearance, body image, dieting, and family can all be discussed with honesty in private. By discussing subjects (baggage) that wouldn't be talked about normally or in public both women can not only get advice but also talk about what bothers them as women. Shoshanna's virginity being her biggest baggage reveals that without having sex she is missing some part of her identity as a female. This further reveals the idea that women need a man in order to fully be a woman. Women are expected to be sexual beings for the pleasure of men, and Shoshanna is worried that no man will want her if she is a virgin and has no experience. The apprehension shown with Shoshanna also reveals that there is a certain timeframe in a woman's life where she is expected to lose her virginity and

Shoshanna has waited past that date. As such, Shoshanna's actual baggage is revealed, it's not the fact that she is a virgin but the possible associations that go along with being a virgin at twenty-one, and that men and women might only see her as a virgin and other facets that make up her identity. Being able to get reassurance from Hannah, someone who is not a virgin, not only aids in Shoshanna's anxiety about sexuality but also reaffirms a D/discourse about women and sex that made Shoshanna nervous in the first place. The D/discourse on sex and gender permeate both what can be done in public and what can be said in private.

Hannah's baggage reveals some of the problems women face in public. Hannah exposes her body image by stating that her medium baggage is "buying four cupcakes and eating one in the bathroom." Women's diets seem to be a major focus of their identities. The way women look has become very power-laden. What attractive and sexy means has become fairly normalized and stable from the representations of women in media. Hannah's body is a different type of body than people are used to seeing on television. In *She Did*, she states, "I am 13 pounds overweight and it has been awful for me my whole life," revealing that when women are overweight it becomes more difficult for them to perform femininity than it might be for women who are not overweight. Although *Girls* presents women of different body types, in private femininity is presented as hiding in the bathroom to eat a cupcake and saying that an extra 13 pounds has made life incredibly hard. This baggage is even placed more important to Hannah than her inability to get a job, further making a statement that women's bodies are more important than their careers. Since Hannah's body is not something that she can hide, she retreats to eating desserts in private rather than in public, revealing that women's bodies are judged

before their ability, personality, and what they have to say. Shoshanna's head nod of agreement only affirms that the bathroom is a decent place to hide the shame one should feel about buying four cupcakes and eating one.

As seen with both women in this text, sex becomes something that is discussed in private situations. Hannah's biggest baggage is that she has H.P.V., which is new information for her and discussing this with Shoshanna can help her process how she should now see herself as a woman. Within the normalized D/discourse of sexuality, having an S.T.D. is seen as a bad thing and something people should be ashamed of. For women, it can imply that one is sexually promiscuous and becomes broken somehow. Along with getting diagnosed with H.P.V., Hannah has also been diagnosed with the stereotypes that accompany sexually transmitted diseases. However, Shoshanna shares Jessa's view on having H.P.V. "all adventurous women do," which makes Hannah see the world a little differently. Again, Jessa is resisting normalized ways of thinking and introducing a new perspective on how to be a woman.

The conversation between Hannah and Shoshanna reveal that women negotiate normalized D/discourses in private that constrain them in public. The private presentations of femininity as seen on *Girls* show women talking to each other, and to themselves to get advice and to simply be heard. Talking about topics in private that would not normally be brought up public shows that there is a safe discursive place in private encounters, where in public these topics might be met with judgment and prejudice. It also seems that when in private women can be less strict with what they say, wear, and look like in their overall presentations of femininity. Although normalized D/discourses are still present, in private women can question and critique what it means

to be a woman and act feminine. There is no watchdog (other women or men) monitoring femininity in private and so women are able to say and do things with more freedom. Private presentations of femininity enable women to step away from the performance of femininity and reflect, negotiate, and reject what femininity is “supposed” to be. The private/public dichotomy of presentations of femininity are not completely separate. As seen in *Girls*, many times the four main characters privately stage, and contemplate past and future interactions they have had or will face in public. Further, the private and public worlds are connected by D/discourses that guide knowledge of the world and the self to the world.

### **Staging the Public in Private**

Placing public presentations of femininity in conversation with private presentations reveal an important relationship that further shows how femininity is presented in the show. Public presentations of femininity in *Girls* shows women being sexually confident while simultaneously in need of the approval of men, and being silenced. However, in private, women are seen questioning public presentations of femininity and voicing their alternatives. In private women also criticize themselves for not being woman enough, or being too much woman and what that may mean. Both public and private presentations of femininity are connected through the D/discourses of gender, sexuality, and femininity. This is seen when women contemplate femininity privately and then present it publicly. Butler (2004) states that gender is always a performance both in public and private and that gender is not performed alone, we are always doing gender with or for someone else, “even if the other is only imaginary” (p. 1). For women, expectations of gender and femininity aid the performance in both the

public and private realm. Within *Girls*, women are seen planning out or staging public interactions while in private. They do this through controlling the public interaction by privately planning what they will wear, what they will say, and how they might act. As such, the interconnectedness of private and public presentations is further discussed and interpreted.

Within the texts, *Girls* presents women that have a tough or hard exterior in public. Heartbreak, bad news, and stress at work do not get to the main characters in public. This is partially because the women in *Girls* plan out public interaction while in private. By planning out what could possibly happen in private, women may be seen as more in control in public encounters. Thus, women are presented as reserved, and in control of their bodies, words, and actions in public. This presentation of femininity in both public and private is seen most clearly with Marnie. Within *Girls*, Marnie's storyline is about the transition of being in a long-term relationship to being newly single. Marnie goes through a break-up with her boyfriend Charlie after he finds Hannah's diary and reads what Hannah really thinks about their relationship. After reading this information Charlie confronts Marnie in front of a crowd at a concert where Charlie is performing (*Hannah's Diary*). While on stage Charlie introduces a new song (entitled Hannah's Diary) and starts to sing the words that Hannah has written as notes for one of her essays. Once Hannah and Marnie figure out what the song is really about, Marnie throws her drink on Hannah and leaves the venue. What is seen here shows the beginning of how Marnie starts to plan out future interactions with Charlie.

Charlie: Wow. Thank you all very much for coming. My name is Charlie.

Ray: And I'm Ray, and together we are Questionable Goods.

Crowd: Yeah!

Charlie: This next song is—it's a new one, so bear with us. It's our first time playing it. And it is for my g-friend Marnie, and for her friend too, Hannah. And this is called "Hannah's Diary."

(Hannah and Marnie are surprised and touched that Adam and Ray wrote a song about them.)

Shoshanna: Good name.

Charlie: A-one, two, three.

(Music playing softly.)

What is Marnie thinking, oh? She needs to know what's out there, what is Marnie thinking, oh? How does it feel to date a man with a vagina? Doesn't she want to feel an actual penis?

Shoshanna: Is this a love song?

Ray: This is the bridge (Ray pulls out Hannah's Diary and holds it so Charlie can read out of it).

Charlie: "Marnie has to stop whining, and break up with him already. Of course it'll be painful, but she's already in so much agony, stuck in a prison of his kindness. Just because someone is kind doesn't mean that they're right. Better to end it now and cut off the limb and let the stump heal. He'll find someone else, someone that appreciates his kind of smothering love."

(Charlie starts to strum his guitar louder and faster until he ends the song and unplugs his guitar.)

Thank you very much for all coming out. Everyone have a great fucking night.

(Charlie and Ray exit and Ray puts the diary on his seat.)

Marnie: You're such a fucking bitch! (Throws drink at Hannah.)

Hannah: Aah!

Jessa: Fucking hell. That was fucking awesome.

Hannah: I think I'm gonna puke. (Camera fades out to black.)

Visually, this scene puts Charlie in a dominant position over Marnie. Charlie is on stage, and shown higher than the rest of the audience and is the only person (besides Ray)

that the audience is facing. The camera is pointed at an upward angle to show Charlie and a downward angle to show Marnie, Hannah, Shoshanna, and Jessa, further showing the dominance that Charlie holds in this situation. The lighting of the scene supports the dominance of Charlie and shows a spotlight on Charlie and his band member Ray and a dim blue lighting on the four girls within the crowd. He also has a microphone, which allows his voice to be heard over Hannah and Marnie's voice, further putting him in a position of power. The blocking of this scene leaves Marnie and Hannah silenced in terms of them talking to Charlie but not silenced in talking to each other. Although Marnie is hurt, she does not express her feelings in public and leaves the venue as the scene ends. This text presents femininity as very controlled and manipulated when displayed in public. Marnie does not display her emotions and controls her presentation of femininity while in public. By throwing a drink on Hannah, Marnie also displays her alliance with Charlie and not Hannah. Although Marnie did not write what was in the journal, the journal was filled with information that Hannah acquired by observing Marnie and Charlie's relationship and by having private conversations with Marnie about her relationship. Although there were aspects of the journal that were true for Marnie, she still aligns herself publicly with Charlie, echoing the need for male acceptance discussed earlier while presenting her femininity as controlled and 'put together' in public.

The situation between Marnie and Charlie spans multiple episodes and after a conversation with both Marnie and Hannah, Charlie breaks up with Marnie and takes the coffee table he made for her from the apartment and leaves in a fit of anger (*Hard Being Easy*). Later in the episode *Hard Being Easy*, Marnie plans to intervene and stop the breakup to get back together with Charlie. In a breakfast conversation with Hannah,



Marnie states, “I’m going to get him back. I’m going to put on my party dress and my sorry face and I’m going to get him back.” This conversation presents women staging out their interactions in public by planning them in private. By putting on a “party dress” and a “sad face” Marnie is planning the interaction and the emotional responses she wants received publicly. This text reveals how women constrain and hide their emotions so others will perceive them in a certain way, perhaps in the common sense understandings of femininity that have been normalized and maintained. Femininity is thus presented as a staging event between the dichotomy of public and private where women perform their femininity in very particular ways, which include contorting their bodies, and controlling their language.

Marnie and Charlie’s storyline is presented again in the episode *Welcome to Bushwick a.k.a The Crackcident*, where two weeks after the break-up Marnie, Hannah, Jessa, and Shoshanna go to a large party in an abandoned warehouse. Charlie’s band is performing at the party and after seriously discussing the decision of whether or not to go talk to Charlie after his band is done playing, again staging a public presentation of femininity, Marnie goes to speak with him.

Marnie: Hey

Charlie: Hey. Mm-mmm. It’s nice to see your face.

Marnie: Yeah, I thought it might be. Nice set.

Charlie: Thank you.

Marnie: It’s just nice to see that you’re playing. You know, I know you didn’t think you were doing that enough.

Charlie: Yeah, right. No, actually, we’ve got some really great things lined up.

Marnie: I’m really, really happy for you Charlie.

Charlie: Thanks.

Marnie: I mean, all I ever wanted for you was to be able to find satisfaction outside of our relationship.

Charlie: Oh.

Marnie: It's good to see you.

Charlie: Yeah, yeah. No, you too. You look great.

Marnie: This feels very, like, cordial and grown-up.

Charlie: Yeah, right. Well, it's—you know, it's mature.

Marnie: Yeah.

(An unknown woman jumps into Charlie's arms.)

Audrey: You were fucking awesome.

Charlie: Shh. Shh. Thank you.

Audrey: You were amazing.

Charlie: Um, Marnie, this is Audrey.

Audrey: Hi. It's nice to meet you. How good was he? It was your first gig, in like, forever and you guys rocked it.

Charlie: Hmm, gig.

Audrey: I'm so impressed.

Marnie: Um, sorry, what is going on?

Charlie: What?

Marnie: What—what is going on with this? (Points to Audrey.)

Audrey: I don't understand.

Marnie: It's been two weeks.

Charlie: Uh, yeah.

Marnie: This happened in two weeks?

Charlie: Uh, yeah. No, I guess we—we just meet and sort of clicked.

Audrey: I'm sorry, who are you?

Marnie: You've never heard of me?

Audrey: No, should I have? Are you like one of those "real housewives"?

Charlie: Oh.

Marnie: You are a sociopath.

This interaction shows Marnie's planned dress, smile, and exchange with Charlie being interrupted by the presence of Audrey, and some of the private ways Marnie would act displayed in public. The "mature, cordial, and grown-up" behavior is now replaced with name calling and yelling. This text further presents women as being in control and therefore being able handle messy situations with composure. By discussing whether or not to go talk to Charlie with Hannah, Shoshanna, and Jessa, Marnie was staging her interaction beforehand and trying to control the possible variables in her future interaction with Charlie. *Girls* presents women as being in control of their bodies, words, and interactions. As such, if women aren't in control it becomes difficult to be in public. This is seen in *Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too* where Marnie is shown alone in her apartment, in private, dressed in pajamas, with no make-up on, and her hair undone in the middle of the day. This becomes in contrast with the public presentation of Marnie as she is always shown as a very done-up woman with everything in order. However, in this scene she is sprawled out on the couch and the camera is pointed from behind Marnie. Visually, viewers can see over her shoulder as she clicks through pictures on Facebook of Charlie and Audrey together in Rome. As she clicks through each picture, she provides commentary such as, "Ew, gay, what?" Marnie has come to define herself by her relationship with Charlie and know herself as girlfriend, now part of her identity has been removed. This scene presents femininity as women being identified by their relationships

with others and how this can change the public and private presentation of femininity. Marnie's knowledge of herself had been in relation to Charlie and for many women identity is known in relation to a male counterpart and titles such as girlfriend, wife, daughter, sister, and employee are used to address a woman's self-knowledge. When one of those titles is removed, women have to come to know themselves in new ways. For Marnie, her identity as girlfriend is gone and her private presentation shows her identity as 'girl on couch Facebook stalking her ex-boyfriend,' which suggests her need for the acceptance and approval of a man.

The transition of Marnie's identity from girlfriend to single is shown in both public and private. The need for the acceptance and approval of a man, and in Marnie's case Charlie, plays a role in how she performs femininity in both the public and private sphere. The need for Marnie to look, talk, and act a certain way in public suggests that there are consequences to her public presentation. By controlling her public presentation she is trying to not only save face, but also trying to get the attention of Charlie to possibly get him back. Again, in both the public and private realm, men play an important part to how women choose, and sometimes don't choose to present femininity.

The staging that Marnie goes through in private to present herself in a very particular way publicly shows that women control their femininity by contorting their bodies, dress, hair, makeup, expression, language, and movements. Another example of "controlling" or "staging" public interactions privately is seen in the episode *The Return* when Hannah returns to her parents' house in Michigan and is invited to a benefit for one of her classmates that has passed away. Before the benefit Hannah stops at the pharmacy to pick up a prescription for her mother and runs into an old high school classmate who is

now the pharmacist. He asks her to be his date for the benefit and Hannah accepts. While getting ready in her childhood room, she tries on different dresses trying to pick out which one she will end up wearing and looks at herself in the mirror and gives herself the following pep talk.

Hannah: You are from New York, therefore you are just naturally interesting. Okay? It is not up to you to fill all the pauses. You are not in danger of mortifying yourself. The worst stuff that you say sounds better than the best stuff that some other people say.

The visual texts of this scene show Hannah trying on different dresses from her closet, indicating that she is wearing clothing that she has had since high school. The clothing that she is wearing, the people who are going to be at the benefit, and being in her hometown suggests that Hannah is going back in time to a place where she had a hard time accepting herself. Thus a reason she needs to give herself a pep talk. The insecurities that Hannah is talking to herself about reveal that when in private, femininity is again presented as staging future interactions that might be held in public and addressing potential flaws others might notice. If Hannah is worried about leaving long pauses with unfilled conversation, she is “fixing” that potential situation by using the excuse of being a New Yorker and being “naturally interesting” stating that Michigan residents might be naturally boring. The fact that she does live in New York also makes a statement about how New York femininity is different from Michigan femininity and how they might be presented in both public and private situations. Maybe, because she does live in New York, her Michigan friends might expect her to be more interesting and she has to present her femininity in a way that is in accordance with what she might think they think about her.

The staging of public presentations of femininity in *Girls* shows women that there is indeed a “right” way to act in the presence others. In public, women are sexually confident for the acceptance and validation of men. Women also are silenced in public encounters with men and shown as docile sex objects. However, in private women question and critique the existing order of how to be feminine and are un-silenced to express their opinion and critique of femininity. The interrelatedness of both the public and private show how the Discourses of gender, sexuality, and femininity play into every day language use, texts, and social practices (discourses) of women. The subject position of women within normalized D/discourses put them in a bind. Through my interpretation of both public and private presentations of femininity, women are presented as objects while men are presented as subjects. Thus, women are presented as acted upon and the only time they are shown as active subjects is in private, which tells women their place is behind closed doors, where their lived experiences are treated as unimportant and thus relegated to private discussion.

Overall, placing public presentations of femininity with private presentations reveals how women (in *Girls*) contemplate their legitimacy and lived experiences in private and adjust their public performances of femininity to maintain or possibly resist the status quo. For instance, although Jessa is seen resisting dominate ideas of femininity in private, in public she gets married and conforms to the idea of women needing the approval of men. Public and private encounters set the stage for how women present themselves within the world. In private, women talk about the Discourse of gender in ways that maintain or possibly transform their presentations of gender, sexuality, and femininity in their lived experiences publicly. Yet, in public the women perform

femininity in terms of larger socio-political Discourses of gender that presents a particular material reality with real consequences for the women in the show. As such, many times women are constrained and subjected to the power of Discourses such as gender, patriarchy, and sexuality and women thus purposefully constrain the ways in which their femininity is portrayed in public. Consequently, the private performances of resistance to gender norms juxtaposed with public constraints to gendered performances demonstrates an interconnectedness of both private and public presentations of femininity, revealing how both are embedded within a D/discourse of gender that simultaneously enables and constrains the ways women perform femininity. Specifically, the public presentations of femininity in *Girls* demonstrate how women, although presented as sexually confident, are constrained and docile in relations with men. Similarly, private presentations of femininity in *Girls* demonstrates how women resist dominant/docile ways of knowing femininity in private, yet actively engage being constrained again in private. To further explore the D/discourse of femininity, deconstruction is a helpful way to expose hidden meanings within the presentations of femininity and show alternative ways a text can be interpreted to open up multiple meanings of womaness as seen through the text of *Girls*.

### **Deconstructing *Girls***

The previous interpretations of the text using Foucauldian critical discourse analysis was done to examine both public and private presentations of femininity. To further investigate the text of *Girls*, I use deconstruction to uncover hidden meanings within the text to expose relations of power that are often hard to locate. Deconstruction offers multiple ways a text can be interpreted. Eagleton (1976) states that deconstruction

works by revealing what is not said. “It is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make ‘speak’” (p. 34). Thus, deconstruction focuses on constrained or suppressed meanings that lie in-between what is said and focuses on the multiplicity of meaning that a text can have. Subjectivity and reflexivity are needed to engage in deconstruction and more personal voice is needed from the author (Martin, 1990). During this section of deconstruction I will use a more personal voice to acknowledge my own interpretations (and limitations) of using this method. Within *Girls*, many presentations of femininity are presented in public or in private. However, both public and private presentations of femininity play off one another and inevitably show the tensions women face and how women are enabled and constrained in both spheres. What remains silent in presentations of femininity become the power-laden assumptions of gender that are difficult to locate since many times power is enacted though everyone but not localized in any individual (Foucault, 1980). When femininity is presented in certain ways through the text, what becomes taken for granted and natural about women (and about men) becomes important because it makes a truth claim about gender, sexuality, and women. Deconstruction supports, as well as undermines, all claims to truth and “it is essential to acknowledge before proceeding that...deconstruction in turn can be deconstructed from an opposing point of view” (Martin, 1990, p. 341). The poststructuralist feminist viewpoint I use to deconstruct the following text allows me to undermine and support certain points of view, and open up endless ways the text can be deconstructed. What I hope to gain by engaging in deconstruction is revealing hidden or masked power



structures embedded within the discursive text and an opportunity to open up multiple meanings of femininity.

Within the text of *Girls*, women are consistently presented in relation to men. Whether the male be a boss, boyfriend, or acquaintance women are shown acting differently in the presence of men than they are either by themselves or with other women. In *Vagina Panic*, Shoshanna, Jessa, and Hannah get into a conversation about who is a lady, and what ladies should do, say, and be. Although this text is interpreted above, it seemed particularly salient to me because although this scene is meant to be comedic, and push a story line forward, it makes explicit truth statements about how to be a woman. However, what it doesn't say further makes a statement that relies on normalized D/discourses that have become common sense understanding on how to be a woman. To deconstruct the following text, I have first presented the entire text without comments, interpretations, or deconstruction. I will then deconstruct the text to reveal meanings not explicitly stated.

Jessa: So this guy is making you bananas? (Talking about Adam.)

Hannah: I've never experienced anything like it. The thing is I have absolutely no sense of how he really feels about me because when we're together, he's so there and he's so present. And then he disappears for two weeks and doesn't answer any text messages, and I feel as though I invented him.

Shoshanna: Did you invent him?

Hannah: If I'd invented him, then I wouldn't have a giant bruise on my ass.

Shoshanna: Pause. I have something to contribute here. (Shoshanna holds up a book.)

Jessa: "Listen ladies: A tough love approach to the tough game of love."

Hannah: Okay. I'm going to admit that I have hate-read that book.

Shoshanna: Oh, my god! It, like, totally changes your perspective, right? Okay, “If a man doesn’t take you on a date, he’s not interested, point-blank. ‘Let’s meet up with friends’ is not a date, it’s a date for him to decide whether you’re truly good enough to date, and that’s unacceptable ladies.”

Hannah: There has to be exceptions to that rule.

Shoshanna: “Sex from behind is degrading, point-blank. You deserve someone who wants to look in your beautiful face, ladies.”

Jessa: What if I want to focus on something else? What if I want to feel like I have udders? This woman doesn’t care what I want.

Hannah: But here’s my question, who are “the ladies”?

Shoshanna: Obvi—we’re the ladies.

Jessa: I’m not the ladies.

Shoshanna: Yeah, you’re the ladies.

Jessa: I’m not the ladies.

Shoshanna: Yes, you are. You’re the ladies.

Jessa: You’re being unfair. You can’t force me to be a lady.

Shoshanna: I’m not forcing you to be a lady. You’re just—okay. I’m a lady, she’s a lady, you’re a lady, we’re the ladies.

There are many different ways to read this text. At first glance, many viewers might just see this as a “regular” conversation between friends. Based on the normal ways in which women interact with each other, this text could be read as a normal afternoon in a park. However, other viewers might see this text and agree with either Shoshanna or Jessa’s views on femininity and womanhood. Some viewers might feel uncomfortable about this text and not know exactly why. By using deconstruction, I aim to reveal the hidden meanings of what the text is saying; in other words, what the text is saying without explicitly stating it.

Love Is a Strategic Game

The first part of the text describes Hannah's relationship with Adam.

Deconstructing this text reveals love as a strategic set of moves that enable them to keep the relationship maintained because it satisfies both Hannah's and Adam's needs (that are created and maintained by a Discourse). This scene shows love in strategic terms as each relational participant is performing in ways that serve their individual needs. For Hannah, Adam's presence serves as the means to legitimize her identity as a woman—something of value because a man is willing to be “present.” For Adam, Hannah's presence serves as a body for pleasure, an available sex object. In both cases, each seems to strategically perform to get to those wants. For instance, strategy is being used when Hannah says, “I've never experienced anything like it. The thing is I have absolutely no sense of how he really feels about me because when we're together, he's so there and he's so present. And then he disappears for two weeks and doesn't answer any text messages, and I feel as though I invented him.” Within this text, each participant in the relationship has to know how to “play the game” to their own advantage. For Adam, he has to listen and be “present” in order for Hannah to feel safe and ultimately to use her for his pleasure. For Hannah, she has to be available to him when he texts her in order to keep him in her life and feel legitimized by his presence. If each were to fail, the relationship would dissolve. The idea of being in a relationship and not being alone has become so embedded in this text it shows that Hannah cannot be “complete” without being in a relationship, so much so that who she is in a relationship with is no longer important.

Further, the notion of relationship as strategy is seen when Hannah protects her identity as a woman in relation to a man. By not answering Hannah's texts, it shows that

the relationship between Hannah and Adam is on Adam's terms, and Hannah has willfully let it be that way. Traditional ideas and D/discourses about women are at play within the text in presenting Hannah as a woman that needs to be in a relationship to fully identify as a woman. Hannah's identity as either a woman in a relationship or as a single woman is what is really at stake in her relationship. This reveals how women have been socialized throughout history to think that they cannot manage day to day on their own and need their identity to be legitimized by the presence of men. By shifting into adulthood, young women look at what their supposed to do next and the "supposed to" of being complete by being with a man is informed by D/discourses that have been maintained and keep women suppressed. By following the naturalized view of growing up, it becomes a common sense understanding that young women need to find a man, "before it's too late." Thus, the race against the clock is focused more on what women should do, and not the relationship itself. As such, this is not a relationship but a calculated set of moves that reify the D/discourse of womanhood. Deconstructing the first part of this text reveals the need for a male counterpart as a natural idea that has remained unquestionable for women. That need plays a part in relations of power that keep men enabled and women constrained.

Furthermore, when Shoshanna asks, "Did you invent him?" I feel as though she is really asking if this is how men really are. Shoshanna is the inexperienced woman in the group when it comes to men, and she doesn't know if this is how relationships really work or if this is some relational anomaly. When Hannah replies with "If I'd invented him, then I wouldn't have a giant bruise on my ass" she is telling Shoshanna that this is how relationships work, and this is what "real" men do. By having "evidence" of a

bruise, it demonstrates the physical presence of a relationship, a relationship that confirms Hanna's femininity. The realities of relationships are messy. The trade-offs in Hannah and Adam's relationship become real. Adam contacts Hannah whenever he feels like it (usually every two weeks) and Hannah lets this happen to keep Adam in her life. Hannah lets Adam have "rough" sex with her and in return Adam listens to Hannah and is "so present" in order to do the whole thing over again in two weeks. In this sense, Hannah is a sexual object for Adam to use and bruise. This is a reality of their relationship. To play the "game of love," women let men use their bodies for sex and men let women use their bodies for listening. Exposing this text as presenting love as a strategy reveals the only reason Hannah has a bruise on her backside is because she has to be submissive to Adam in order to stay in a relationship with him to maintain her "womaness." Deconstructing this text reveals relationships as a strategic game and results in Hannah having "absolutely no sense of how he really feels." The game of relationships continues in the next segment of the text when the women discuss the D/discourse of "the lady."

### Docile Bodies Win the Game

Further deconstructing the "game" texts reveals women as always deficient and needing to adapt and change. In order to win the game, women need to be docile. For instance, the text also describes more of what women should and shouldn't do to maintain a D/discourse of femininity. Contributing to the conversation about Hannah and Adam's relationship, Shoshanna gets out her copy of *Listen ladies: A tough love approach to the tough game of love*. Not only does the book's title contribute to the idea of relationships as a game, but it maintains the D/discourse of women first being

expected to find a man, and second being able to “play” the game of love, which includes making all the “right” moves by looking a certain way to win the game. The idea of love, marriage, and relationships is then brought down from this grand idea of love, and finding a soul mate, to saying the right thing, looking a certain way, and engaging in strategy to ultimately win and gain a man. The idea of the “winning” in the game of “love” also assumes that women aren’t fully women until they are known in relation to men, such as a girlfriend, or wife. In other words, their identities aren’t legitimized until they can be known in relation to a man.

Although many women would like to reject the idea of love as a game, it’s hard to do given that many of the ways women come to know the world are embedded into D/discourses that don’t get questioned and seem completely normal. Hannah maintains this thought by admitting she has “hate-read” the book. Even though she doesn’t like what the book might mean for women, she reads it to gain information the book has to offer. The book’s ideas have penetrated Hannah’s thoughts about men and even though she might not realize it, Hannah is playing into the game in her own relationship. Shoshanna’s delight in the book comes from the book (as a D/discourse) telling her what she was doing wrong as a woman and how to fix it. This also assumes that men don’t have to change and that the problem in relationships lies with women. Women are flawed in some way and need help to fix these flaws in order to gain a man. Men are not flawed, or at least not as flawed, and don’t need to change behaviors, dress, or appearance to date a woman. This leaves men enabled and women constrained. This D/discourse also puts a burden on women to feel that their bodies are always something that needs improvement. The statement that the book has “changed her perspective” also tells women that they are

doing womanhood wrong and need to change something about their femininity in order to be “better.” This not only limits femininity to certain ways women should be, but also closes off multiplicity and fragmented ways to present and perform femininity.

### Real Women Are Docile Objects

In addition to love being a strategic game that needs to be won by changing how a woman performs femininity, deconstructing this text further reveals women as docile and in need of being “chosen” to be legitimate. “If a man doesn’t take you on a date, he’s not interested, point-blank. ‘Let’s meet up with friends’ is not a date, it’s a date for him to decide whether or not you’re truly good enough to date, and that’s unacceptable ladies.” This text thus tells women that they should be submissive and passive with men, because it assumes a man needs to do the choosing and a woman should wait to be chosen. It assumes that women need to wait around, and make themselves look dateable in order to be asked on a date and interact with a man. Further, this text makes a truth statement that men ask women out, and that men are active in choosing what woman they want. This truth of dating not only objectifies women, but also makes the role of women a silent and passive one. Not only does this text put women in a passive subject position but assumes that all women are inherently good. Within this text, the idea of a date is also meant to woo women. Men are put in a position to show a woman what he has to offer, this again puts women as passive participants in the dating process. The text also assumes that women are already “truly good enough to date” and that it is unacceptable for men to think twice about that. Not only does this contradict the idea that women need to fix themselves to win a man, but it assumes that all women want to date a man. By being docile objects that are available for men to do what they want with, this text tells women

that it isn't their choice to decide if they want a man or not. Some women simply don't want to date, some might not be "truly good enough to date" and some might not believe in the D/discourse about having a man to be happy, but again this text takes away the voice of women to say otherwise and places the idea of agency with men. Within this text, various truth statements about women are being made. By calling all women "the ladies," this text prescribes *the* way to be feminine. Further, the book within this text is saying that women who don't act in the prescribed way are having trouble finding a man (making another statement that the only thing that should matter to a woman is finding a man) are being feminine in the wrong way.

Along with the idea of women being docile objects available for men, the text makes a truth statement about how women should view sex. When the book states, "Sex from behind is degrading, point-blank. You deserve someone who wants to look at your beautiful face," it tells women that what is acceptable and unacceptable in bed. Calling any position where your partner cannot see your face inappropriate assumes that there are only a handful of ways to do sex properly and still remain a "lady." Something that isn't said here is what makes up a lady? So far, this text has said what a lady isn't, which includes active, enabled, likes sex from behind, likes to be alone, and able to ask a man out on her own. Hanna's bruise might then seem to indicate that she is not a lady, has been degraded, and remains actively docile by continually participating in the relationship game with Adam. Thus, this text is using a power-laden D/discourse that is taken for granted to say who and what a lady can be. By seeking out the silences within the text and reading in-between the lines, the statement on what makes up a lady becomes clear and keeps the interests of women constrained, hidden, and suppressed. Jessa resists



this D/discourse of “the ladies” and is met with more sustained assumptions of womanhood.

### Resistance to the Docile “Lady”?

The idea of “the ladies” becomes interesting to examine and look at what assumptions of femininity are being made when the D/discourse of “lady” is perpetuated and combined with ideas of men, sex, and womanhood. Furthermore, resistance to the notion of being a “lady” or challenging what and how is a “lady” reveals contradictions and tensions in the notion of what a lady is (and whether it can even be defined without a man). Even when Jessa’s resistance is made, it is met with the obviousness that we are all ladies because “we just are.” The difficulties in finding words for saying why one is a lady are epistemological and ontological questions that Shoshanna has trouble answering. How does a woman come to know the world as a woman? Further, how does a woman know what womaness is? Although “she just does” could be one acceptable answer, I argue that there is more at play here. Understandings of the world are created and maintained and become so embedded in the way we make sense of the world and the self in relation to the world that it almost seems trivial to question it. The common sense understandings of the world in relation to how to be a woman and how to perform womaness become naturalized. The D/discourse of being a lady becomes second nature to many women and when it is treated as natural, it constrains and suppresses other ways of knowing, and performing femininity. The way Shoshanna explains who is a lady reinforces the naturalization of gender and sexuality within lived experiences in women’s lives. Shoshanna states, “I’m not forcing you to be a lady. You just—Okay, I’m a lady, she’s a lady, you’re a lady, we’re the ladies.” This statement suggests that all women are

ladies, which actually does in some sense force the D/discourse of “being a lady” on Jessa. By simply implying that because you are born a female, you’re automatically a lady ignores how one comes to know gender and sexuality and assumes sameness in women. The normalized D/discourse of gender has been pushed on all women, and it is a D/discourse that many women have helped maintain without even knowing it. Questioning the D/discourse of “the ladies” opens up room to consider how this knowledge came to be, and what other opportunities women enable.

Overall, deconstructing this text reveals how the D/discourse of femininity, sexuality, and “the ladies” presents a sense of normalized femininity that because we are female we are expected to want and strategically pursue marriage, or some formal relationship to a man. As such, relationships are more important than ideas of love because women need to be in a relationship to feel legitimized. To play the “game of love” and win, women’s bodies need to be docile. Women are to be seen as passive objects, patiently waiting for a man to come along and choose us. Further, our dress, hair, body, and words are monitored not only by ourselves, but by other women as well as men in order to make ourselves more appealing. By remaining docile, and being chosen by a man, “real women” are thus docile women. Normalized D/discourses of femininity and gender tell women to focus on their identity as in relation to a male counterpart. It constrains how women come to know the world and the self in relation to the world. This D/discourse also becomes discursively maintained as common sense understandings of the world. Embedded meanings of femininity naturalize the ways in which women come to know themselves as feminine. Thus, other ways of being feminine or acting feminine get “othered” and treated as unimportant. Questioning the notions of what a woman is

exposes tensions that are often hidden and not expressed every day and also places definitions of femininity as always in relation to men. When Jessa questions common sense assumptions of femininity and “the ladies,” she opens up discursive space for femininity to be meaningfully talked about and opens up multiple ways to be a woman and perform femininity.

When initially reading the original text, some women might be unaware of the ways in which the text explicitly lays out femininity and being a lady. However, other women might react differently, either agreeing with Jessa’s disdain or being uneasy with the text altogether. Deconstruction reveals reasons for the uneasiness, by exposing the underlying assumptions at play within the text and trying to decentralize the power of a D/discourse and reveal the tensions and contradictions embedded in the text that are not explicitly stated. Although I provide possible ways to re-read the text by deconstruction, my interpretations are just a way to look at the text. Deconstruction is an endless process (Martin, 1990) and even through my poststructuralist feminist perspective I have left other interests out to focus on my interests as a woman.

The findings from the interpretive section reveal that women are presented differently in public and private interactions. Public presentations of femininity present women as sexually confident yet in need of the approval of men to legitimize their presence. Women are also shown being silenced by men and sexually objectified in public encounters. In private, women are enabled to question and voice opinions about the D/discourses that constrain them. Women also privately plan out future presentations of femininity that will happen publicly. Interpretation of the visual texts present in each episode aided in the interpretations and presentations made about femininity. Camera

framing and wardrobe presented women as silenced in the presence of men and using dress as a way to plan out public interaction. Furthermore, deconstructing the selected text reveals meanings not explicitly stated in the show. Specifically, love is presented as a game of strategy and in order for women to win the game and be legitimized by being in a relationship, women's bodies need to be docile in relation to men. Questioning the notion of what a woman is (or can be) exposes tensions in the ways femininity is presented in *Girls* and questions the ways in which women come to know themselves in relation to the world through the D/discourse of the show. In the next section, I discuss my findings in terms of the literature reviewed and the theoretical background from which this study is grounded.

## DISCUSSION

The findings in this study of *Girls* provide insights into gender, media, and D/discourse. Specifically, these findings show how ideas of both Discourse and discourse arise in the media. This includes how ideas of gender, sexuality, and femininity are part of media texts that are always connected and in relation to embedded systems of thought about the world and our relation to the world. The exploration of *Girls* helps to reveal how D/discourses are created, maintained, negotiated, and possibly changed within the various media presentations about them. In particular, these findings reveal how gender-based texts are related to the Discourse of gender and how the media presents both discourse and Discourse within its (re)presentations of texts. In addition, the findings of this study reveal media as a D/discourse in itself with specific implications for knowledge/power of femininity in society. Consequently, when the media becomes perceived in terms of being a D/discourse, the ways individuals come to know the world and the self in relation to the world is at stake in becoming naturalized and unquestioned.

As such, the findings of this study reveal D/discourse of media in two, interconnected ways. First, the texts of *Girls* present both the discourse of being a woman and the Discourse of gender informing these discourses. As such, the findings of this study are discussed as contributing to the idea of the D/discourse of gender being mutually constitutive. Second, the findings of this study are discussed in terms of the media being a D/discourse. Specifically, when *Girls* is considered a D/discourse, the texts

embedded within this media presentation create ideas of gender that become normalized and thus presentations of gender are normalized and stable. As such, in the following sections, I will discuss my findings in relation to D/discourse of gender within the media and follow with a discussion of my findings in terms of the media being a D/discourse. Combined, the findings of this study both extend the study of discourse to media presentations of gender and expose media as a D/discourse of gender.

### **D/discourse and Presentations of Femininity**

The findings of this study examine how femininity is presented through the texts of *Girls*. Through the findings, femininity is presented differently in public than in private and many times the main characters plan out public interactions in private. Through a poststructuralist feminist lens, the particular D/discourse I interrogate is the D/discourse of gender. Throughout *Girls*, gender is dealt with at both levels of D/discourse; through talk, texts, and embedded systems of meaning about gender and femininity. By keeping gender as a focus in the texts of *Girls*, the D/discourse of gender emerged through both aspects of D/discourse and is also a mutually constitutive D/discourse within the text.

Many times throughout the findings, women negotiated the notion of gender by engaging in talk. When Hannah's boss touches her inappropriately, she stays silent in the presence of her boss but she talks about her experience with other women. Discussing how to handle sexual harassment, gender roles, and presentations of femininity were all present in the text between Hannah and her co-workers. As such, negotiating lived experiences of sexual harassment through talk enabled Hannah to make sense of the interaction with her boss, and simultaneously constitute what it means to perform

femininity as docility. The presentations of talk, within the text of the script, is seen in both public and private situations. In private, women engage in talk to discuss many issues related to femininity. For instance, Hannah and Shoshanna talk about their personal “baggage” and how that can be constraining to their performances of femininity in public. Further, the text of “the ladies” reveals that when in private women negotiate gender, sexuality, and their own presentations of femininity through talk. Within these texts, talking about being a woman is the way that the women make sense of the world and their subject positions within that world. Discourses are thus reconstituted in the ways these women talk and interact with each other. Ideas of gender are talked about, negotiated, and performed within *Girls*. Although talk is considered a text in this study, the ways women are shown in conversation are important to study as a type of discourse in how ideas of gender are not only presented, but created, maintained, questioned, and possibly transformed in *Girls*. By airing weekly, *Girls* re-orders and re-enforces knowledge of women and femininity in society for viewers. Studying *Girls* is important because while it seemingly presents women in a new, contemporary way (sexually confident) at the same time it (re)presents women that are aligned in patriarchal ways that position women as docile and only legitimized by the presence of man.

Common forms of discourse also emerge through the visual texts: including wardrobe, lighting, set, camera angles, movement of characters, and everything that appears within the frame of the camera. These visual texts communicate ideas of gender and femininity in the way the text visually appears, and many times what is seen says more about gender than what is said in the script. The visual texts accompany the script by adding more context to meanings of gender, sexuality, and femininity. When the

camera shows a close-up of Hannah's face while she is being sexually harassed and viewers can see the discomfort and shock in her face while remaining silent, it becomes more of an impact for the overall meaning of what the scene is conveying and what meaning is being made from this scene. In this case, the visual text in the scene purposefully highlights Hannah's silence as a woman being acted upon by a man by having the camera intentionally focused and showing a close-up on Hannah's mouth, the place where she would voice her discomfort in the situation. The visual texts are also very noticeable in the scene where Charlie exposes the contents of Hannah's diary. In this scene, Charlie is on a stage with lighting and an audience oriented toward him, while Marnie is positioned within the dark lit crowd. Again, the visual texts within this scene aid in Charlie's voice being heard over Marnie's. Visual texts are an important area to study within Foucauldian critical discourse analysis since visual texts are part of the overall D/discourse being examined. Specifically, the visual presentations help articulate the subject positions of the women in *Girls*. The discourse of talk and text found within *Girls* aids in how the Discourse of gender is reasoned about and made meaningful not only to the women within *Girls* but also to the many viewers who watch *Girls* on a weekly basis.

Further, the findings of this study examine how Discourses of gender are present in *Girls*. With a focus on exposing D/discourses of gender and femininity embedded in *Girls*, the interpretive findings and exposed taken for granted assumption of gender and femininity are evident throughout the texts. As such, the findings of this study reveal normalized presentations of femininity as a confident, yet docile body, supports the mutually constitutive approach to D/discourse offered by Fairhurst and Putnam (2004).



Specifically, the findings of this study show how large-scale systems of meaning are present in talk and texts, which simultaneously aids in the women in *Girls* understanding presentations of femininity that are embedded in the normalized Discourse of gender. As such, these findings present how D/discourse shapes the order and knowledge individuals have about the world.

Overall, by simultaneously looking at both levels of D/discourse, a comprehensive vantage point is gained to see how gender is both enacted through language and how texts are informed by larger ideas on how women “should be.” For instance, gender, femininity, and womaness are all talked about through the texts of *Girls*. Within the text of “the ladies,” what it means to be a gendered being is brought into question and talked about between the characters. When Jessa, Shoshanna, and Hannah talk about what it means to be a lady, who is a lady, and what ladies should do, not only are they taking a D/discourse about gender and talking about it, but they are also negotiating and possibly transforming what this Discourse means within their own lives and if it aligns with their idea of femininity through their talk. By engaging in talk about gender, that talk can continually reshape, reconstruct, and possibly change the Discourses that institutionalize women. Taking the Discourse of gender and talking about what it means, or what it should mean then brings Discourse to a micro level of discourse. Examining the D/discourses present within the text of *Girls* reveals a knowledge of the world that is power laden and can be possibly constraining for gendered subjectivities. As such, the D/discourses that are present in media become a powerful storytelling agent that millions of viewers watch on a weekly basis. These D/discourses become normalized and many individuals watching media presentations of women don’t question why a

certain way of presenting femininity is shown and not another possibility. Thus, the role of the media as a D/discourse is discussed below to further explore how the discursive approaches to media in this study reveals complex ways the media contributes to gendered subjectivities.

### **Media as a D/discourse**

As a television show that has a large viewership, when viewers tune in to *Girls* to find out what is going to happen with major storylines they also watch how women perform femininity and thus how *Girls* presents ideas of gender. From what is written in the script, to the editing room, to the finished project, the media shows how to live in the world as a (gendered) individual. The media thus becomes a D/discourse that aids in creating and maintaining viewers' knowledge of the world. It does this first by the qualities in which it tells stories to an audience. As mentioned previously, the visual texts within media become a unique text that can be studied by both discourse and media scholars. Visual texts include wardrobe, lighting, cinematography, camera movements, character blocking, everything that fits within the frame of the camera, as well as the actual script the actors follow. The words the actors say from the scripts also become a text that remains distinct to media and scripted programming. As actors put on their wardrobe, say the words on their script, and move around the set, the ideas of discourse are enacted on screen. For instance, when Marnie and Charlie break up she tells Hannah, "I'm going to get him back. I'm going to put on my party dress and my sorry face and I'm going to get him back." When she gets to Charlie's apartment, she is indeed in a nice dress and acts apologetic. The writers and producers planned this entire on-screen interaction, have filmed it, and then present it for viewers to make sense of it. Wardrobe

coordinators put a lot of thought in planning out which particular dress Marnie's character should wear to Charlie's apartment, the director and producer put in thought to storyboard how each particular scene should look before they even shoot it, and actors put in effort to embody their character. The entire show of *Girls* is premeditated and meticulously thought over by a host of people that make decisions as to not only what viewers will see and what stories will be told, but how those stories are told and seen, and how women are presented, which is part of Discourse.

Discourses, as enduring systems of thought, are constructed through a system of language and texts, which *Girls* helps produce on a weekly basis. Yang (2008) suggests that within media there lays a discursive layer that supports the production of meaning. Within *Girls* meanings of gender, sexuality, and femininity are made through various texts and since *Girls* is a show about women, presentations of femininity and meanings of gendered subjectivities will be made. Producers, directors, and actors of *Girls* think out presentations of women constantly. Thus, *Girls* extends particular ways of knowing femininity by choosing to show women in certain ways over others. The Discourse of gender is embedded and revealed within the texts of *Girls*, making the media and its functions D/discursive.

This research looked at *Girls* to uncover meanings of gender through the ways women are presented to reveal how *Girls* creates and maintains a D/discourse of gender. Informed by Tuchman (1978, 1979), normalized meanings of women are created through showing dominant ways of knowing gender through the media that keep women shown in relation to men and keep women silenced and docile. Within *Girls*, the D/discourses of gender and sexuality present women as sexually confident and silenced in public due to

their need to be legitimized by a male counterpart. As such, though interpretation of multiple texts within the show, women are shown in need of a man. In order to get a man to notice them, women remain silenced and docile, while being sexually confident. Although being sexually confident may be enabling for women, their silence is still constraining. If women were portrayed as confident beings within *Girls*, docility and passiveness may not be shown and their silence may be transformed into a voice. The D/discourses created within the texts creates and maintains a way of knowing femininity and gender that become constraining subject positions for women. The media serves the interests of dominant meaning formations that hides and marginalizes other modes of being. By presenting femininity in certain ways, it suppresses other ways of knowing gender. Thus, subject positions become subjected to the power of the D/discourses of gender shown in *Girls* and individuals will not conceive of acting in ways that are precluded from this D/discourse.

As such, through media presentation of *Girls*, viewers see four twenty-something women living their lives in New York City. As a scripted show, *Girls* presents “real life” situations that women might perform in their daily lives. As such, *Girls* offers viewers the “slice of life” realism of what life looks like for twenty-something women. As McQuail (1977) states, we can expect “the mass media to give an order of importance and structure to the world they portray, whether fictionally or as actuality” (p. 81). This is due to presentations that are made repeated and consistent in the mediated realm. As actors portray experiences that are constituted in language, they create ways of knowing the world and the self in relation to that world. According to Weedon (1997) entertainment media constructs realism through the choices about what is presented as normal and what

is presented as peculiar. If individuals watching the show internalize the D/discourses of gender that are being presented through *Girls*, it takes *a* way to know gender and normalizes it to become *the* way to know gender, which is problematic for how individuals come to know themselves and others as gendered beings. Gendered subjectivities are thus constrained through the media and in this instance *Girls* presents femininity in certain ways over others. As such, this study of *Girls* reveals how media plays a significant role in the reproduction of gender normalization in society.

Overall, the findings of this study interpret the meanings of public and private presentations of femininity in *Girls* and reveals how the television show *Girls* is a discursive practice. The texts become communicative practices in which gender can be interpreted and deconstructed to reveal the ways in which gender is presented and the implications that has for viewers, women, and media makers.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

Within this study, I have interpreted and deconstructed presentations of femininity within the television show *Girls*. The interpretive findings show how presentations of femininity exist in a dichotomy of public and private, showing how women in *Girls* present themselves differently in public then they are in private. Further, deconstruction reveals suppressed meanings of femininity within *Girls* and shows how the discursive texts of media can reify inequalities of gendered subjectivities. Though *Girls* women are presented in public as sexually confident and silenced. Private presentations reveal women questioning femininity and voicing opinions on their subjectivity. Women are also shown privately staging and planning how they will be feminine in public presentations. Deconstruction revealed women's relationship to men as a strategic game

where women are able to win by being docile “ladies.” These findings have several potential implications. In particular, these findings have implications for women watching the show *Girls*, implications for those in the media industry to reconsider the ways they present gender norms, and implications for scholars of gender, D/discourse and media.

First, when viewers watch *Girls*, they are watching presentations of femininity that can be possibly enabling or constraining for the ways in which they come to know the world and the self as gendered individuals in relation to the world. As such, these findings have implications for viewers’ subjectivities being colonized by normalized discursive presentations of femininity in *Girls*. Not only do viewers see presentations of women in *Girls* but they also see how women are clothed, what women say (and don’t say), how women move, and how women interact with men. By showing women as silenced, *Girls* tells viewers of any gender and sex that women are silent, docile, and in a strategic game to gain legitimacy by being with a man. Not only do these presentations of femininity aid in coming to know the world, but they can become normalized and unquestioned, keeping the lived experiences of women suppressed and treated as unimportant. Thus, viewers that tune in weekly to *Girls* should be weary of the presentations of women they see on the screen and question these presentations. A critique to this suggestion could be to turn the channel or turn the television off. However, if *Girls* presents only one of many normalizing D/discourses of femininity, then if media subscribers turn the channel they still may see similar (re)presentations of women on the next channel. Viewers of the media have limited agency in choosing what to watch. When the media is considered a D/discourse it aids in ordering the ways in

which knowledge of the world is constructed. Thus, even turning off the television will not fully erase ideas of gender and femininity that are prevalent in reality and in the media. The burden of changing how women are presented in media comes down to the people that produce and create these images. The findings of this study can thus help reveal to viewers the potential consequences of unreflexively consuming the media. These findings might help viewers consider their role in the maintenance of gendered ways of knowing.

Further, this study has potential implications for those creating media. As Tuchman (1978, 1979) asserts, media organizations are responsible for presentations of women in the media and throughout history these organizations have been dominated and controlled by men. Although *Girls* has many women behind the scenes, presentations of media seem to be entrenched in dominant ideas of gender that marginalize the interests of women. As such, producers, writers, directors, cinematographers, wardrobe designers, set designers, and actors all collaborate in deciding how to present women on *Girls*. As shown through the findings, many times women are presented as docile and in need of a man to legitimize their femininity. By presenting women in these particular ways, it constrains other ways of knowing femininity. Although many of the people responsible for creating these (re)presentations of women take time and plan out how these characters will develop, the findings of this study show how neglecting to see women in new ways and present those ways to their audiences can help show alternatives and make them available to women as other possible ways of being. *Girls* creator, Lena Dunham, has been recognized for breaking down normalized views of body types by showing her own body in *Girls*' content. Dunham's character, Hannah, is shown nude in many episodes

and although the show does show alternative representations of body types, this is accompanied with a text that says this type of body is unacceptable. In *She Did*, Hannah states, “I am 13 pounds overweight and it has been awful for me my whole life” further maintaining the image of women as slim and fit. As such, the creators and producers of the media actively create knowledge of the world and the self in ways they might not even be aware of. These findings should help media producers become more aware of the possible consequences of unreflexively creating presentations of women (or anything). The media is a great storyteller that tells millions of people on a daily basis what the world is like and how to live in it. If multiple ways of knowing femininity are to be present in the media, it is up to the creators of mediated content to add these presentations. By adding new and different ways of being a woman or a gendered individual, not only will this lessen the constraints on femininity and gender roles but also bring legitimacy to previously “othered” ways of knowing gender.

Additionally, this study has potential implications for D/discourse, feminist, and media scholars. In particular, by considering the role of media a D/discourse, feminist scholars can gain unique insights into how gender is constructed, presented, and normalized through mediated texts and the discursive functions of media. Further, media scholars can also look to the media as a D/discourse to discover the communicative function the media provides on ideas of Discourse, power/knowledge, and subjectivities and study the media in nuanced ways that include a strong focus on D/discourse. Specifically, a rich focus on D/discourse provides an alternative perspective to gain insights into television media not offered by classic media studies by focusing on knowledge and subjectivities. When the media is viewed through texts, knowledge and



subjectivities emerge that become power-laden and constraining for women. As such, this study offers possible opportunities for scholars interested in Discourse, gender, and media to continue exploring these complex relationships.

Throughout this study, I realize that my interpretations and deconstructions are only *a* way to read the texts presented in *Girls*. I also realize that the interpretations I made were made through a poststructuralist feminist lens that seek out ideas of gender and power/knowledge, and that other interpretations can be made from different perspectives to see new outcomes. By using deconstruction, I recognize that my deconstruction can also be deconstructed and reveal the feminist, discursive, and mediated assumptions that I ground my study in. Further research that considers media a D/discourse could also be engaged in to reveal how the media aids in creating knowledge/power of the world, the people in it, and the self in relation to the world. More studies that challenge traditional ways of studying the media should be engaged in to critically explore not only the role of the media but the D/discourses perpetuated and privileged by the media. The intersection of media, D/discourse, and gender is interesting to consider in new ways that remain uniquely communicative.

This study examines presentations of women in the media through Foucauldian critical discourse analysis in order to explore dominant ideas of gender and femininity embedded within D/discourses that constrain the lived experiences of women. Language and D/discourse are heavily power-laden and enable certain meanings to be made while constraining other meanings. Thus, D/discourses such as gender and sexuality are maintained and treated as natural and the ways individuals come to know the world are entrenched in power/knowledge relations that keep the interests and subject positions of

women are constrained and treated as unimportant. To investigate D/discourses of gender and femininity further, this study examines media presentations of femininity from a poststructuralist feminist lens to explore the HBO television series, *Girls*. Using methods of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis and deconstruction, *Girls* is used as a text to interpret and deconstruct presentations of femininity to reveal hidden meanings and expose multiple ways the text can be read. Findings reveal that ways in which women are presented in public, in private, and how women are shown negotiating past and future public interactions. Deconstruction reveals that the text treats love as a strategic game in which women need to be docile and passive in order to be legitimized by a male. The findings from this study present a second type of discourse that is critically aligned and questions the presentations of women in *Girls*, which possibly can be used by viewers to question presentations of femininity that are shown in media and open up new and potentially enabling ways to understand femininity. Secondly, creators and producers of the media can also use these findings in order to consider new ways of presenting femininity. By presenting many different types of women and presenting them each with equal legitimacy, new understandings of women and femininity can be made that may lessen constraints on women.

According to Foucault (1970, 1980), there are particular ways of coming to know something and each way of knowing is power-laden and aids in ordering the world. The flaw with an ordered way of knowing is that one does not notice how they are ordered. Power becomes a system that is enacted in everyone but not localized in any individual, aiding in the naturalization of meaning. As this study explores, the power of the D/discourses of media, gender, sexuality, and femininity normalizes the knowledge one

has about the world and how to live in the world. The ways in which women are presented become hidden and embedded in power relations that keep women constrained. While some of the presentations of women on *Girls* can provide viewers with a critique of normalized femininity, a multiplicity of presentations of women can aid in the ways individuals come to know the world and the self as gendered in relation to the world that could possibly dismantle dominant meanings and open up room to change the ways women are presented.

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